

**Julian Bond Oral History Project  
“The Making of Julian Bond, 1960-68”**

**Interview with Frank Smith**

**Special Collections Division  
Bender University Library  
American University  
Washington, D.C.**

**2019**

## **PREFACE**

This interview is part of an oral history project entitled, "The Making of Julian Bond, 1960-1968." Unless otherwise indicated, the interviewer is Gregg Ivers, Professor of Government and Director, Julian Bond Oral History Project, American University.

The reader is encouraged to remember that this transcript is a near-verbatim transcription of a recorded interview. The transcript has been edited for minor changes in grammar, clarity and style. No alteration has been made to the conversation that took place.

Notes, where and when appropriate, have been added in [brackets] to clarify people, places, locations and context for the reader.

### **Biographical Note for Frank Smith**

Frank Smith, a native of Newnan, Georgia, was a leader of the Atlanta student movement while a student at Morehouse College from 1959-1962. Mr. Smith went to Mississippi during the summer of 1962 to work on the voter registration project organized by the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), intending to return to complete his senior year. Instead, he remained in Mississippi for six years, continuing his civil rights work, which ranged from voter registration to organizing workers and demonstrations throughout the state. In 1968, Mr. Smith moved to Washington, D.C., where he later served multiple terms on the D.C. Board of Education and the D.C. City Council for the better part of the 1980s and 1990s.

After leaving the D.C. City Council, Mr. Smith worked to establish the African American Civil War Museum in Washington, D.C, where he currently serves on the Board of Directors and as the Executive Director.

**Julian Bond Oral History Project  
“The Making of Julian Bond, 1960-68”  
American University**

**Frank Smith (14-JBOHP)  
March 20th, 2019  
Washington, D.C.**

**Interviewer: Gregg Ivers  
Secondary Interviewer: Cameron Burns  
Production Assistants: Audra Gale, Lianna Bright, Colleen Vivaldi**

**Code: Gregg Ivers [GI] Cameron Burns [CB] Frank Smith [FS]**

GI: Today is Wednesday, March 20<sup>th</sup>, and we are at the African American Civil War Museum in Washington, D.C. to conduct an oral history interview with Mr. Frank Smith for the Julian Bond Oral History Project, sponsored in part of the School of Public Affairs at American University. My name is Gregg Ivers. I am a Professor of Government at American University and Director of the Julian Bond Oral History Project. I am joined by Cameron Burns, a senior at American University, who will assist with the interview. Mr. Smith served as a field secretary in Mississippi for the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee from 1962-1968. Prior to his work in Mississippi, Mr. Smith was a leader in the Atlanta student movement. He will talk about his time in the civil rights movement, some of his more notable experiences and his relationship with and impressions of Julian Bond.

Mr. Smith, thank you so much for taking time to have this conversation with us. I’m glad we could do this at the museum you founded.

FS: My pleasure, Gregg. And I’m glad you brought this young man with you.

**PERSONAL AND FAMILY BACKGROUND**

GI: Let’s start out by having you tell us about your personal and family background.

FS: I was born in a little town called Newnan, Georgia, which is in Coweta County. Coweta County abuts Fulton County, which is where Atlanta is located. The plantation I lived on, by the way, had about twenty houses on there. Almost all of us were related by blood or marriage. It was kind of an interesting community because we all went to the same school, the kids all went to the same school. We walked to the same elementary school, and the elementary school was in a church. It was in the St. John Baptist Church. My first four years were at a school that was built by the church because the county, Coweta County, back in my day didn’t build schools for blacks. They built schools for whites but not for blacks. They had school buses for white kids and no school buses for black kids. They were taking

my daddy's tax money. He owned a little property, so they were taking his property tax money, his income tax, sales tax and all of that, then putting it into books and buses for white kids but no books and buses for black kids. By the time I was in fourth grade, or fifth grade they finally, because they knew *Brown vs. Board of Education* was on the horizon, that several suits had been filed by then, so did something called a consolidation of these schools, these church schools, into one school and they gave us an old school bus. For the first time I rode school bus. But it was an interesting community for me growing up and one that propelled me really out of high school and into Morehouse College and into the civil rights movement.

GI: Why did you decide to attend Morehouse?

FS: Well, by the time I finished high school – actually by the time I was in the fourth or fifth grade – I realized that if I made good grades in school and the teachers said nice things about me, and the girls would be nice to me, I didn't have to go to the field to pick cotton because I was doing well in school. My father knew I was going to do something one day. He said, "Look, as long as you work, make good grades and take care of yourself you'll be fine. I work every day. I'll pay for the food, I'll pay for the house, I'll pay for whatever transportation you need. You just do well in school, and we'll take care of rest." He had no money for college, so I had to get myself into college and pay my way through school. But it was something that was worth doing.

GI: And when you went to college in 1959, were any of the major events in the movement, the Montgomery Bus Boycott, the Little Rock crisis, inspirational to you?

FS: Right. Of course. Let's start first – when I was in the ninth grade a girl named Jessie Smith brought a *Jet* magazine to school that had the picture of Emmett Till in there. The lynching of Emmett Till. Jessie was a pretty girl and she had nice pretty legs. She was sitting over there on a bench and she was crying. And when a pretty girl cries everybody sort of pays attention. I went over to see what was wrong with her and she was looking at this picture, this photograph of Emmett Till and was crying. It was the first time I'd ever seen it. And it was my first thought, and I'm sure it was hers, too, that it could have been me. I'm sure she was thinking it could have been my friend or somebody. So that was my first thought that something had to be done to change the horrible situation that all of us grew up in.

Now, I was a black boy, a teenager coming up in Newnan, Georgia, in the days of segregation and learning how to act around white people was a survival skill. Your parents told you not to ever say anything back to them. If you're coming down the street and you see them coming down the street you get off the sidewalk, you get off the sidewalk. And, of course, you never engage in any kind of argument with them, stuff like that. You were taught a certain amount of fear because of the possibility of something happening to you. Now here I am looking at a *Jet* magazine with a photograph of somebody who has just been lynched, who was right about the same age as I was, a couple years older than me. But about the same age. It was my first awakening. I'm sure I vowed that day that if I ever got a

chance to do something about it I would. And that was 1955, I believe. Six years later I was in Mississippi with SNCC.

GI: When you grew up in a small Southern town in Georgia, did you interact much with white people or were you segregated away? I think for a lot of people when they hear segregation, they understand the rules but were you literally growing up away from white people? Did you interact with them at all? What was it like?

FS: Well, there was a certain amount of contact. Let me say this for you: I was not shooting marbles with white kids every day [smiles]. We weren't playing hopscotch and hanging out in bars and restaurants together. That was not the case. We didn't have that in my generation when I was coming up. But a certain amount of interaction with whites couldn't be avoided. If you went downtown to the movies, you bought a ticket at the same place and you went upstairs, and whites went downstairs. There was a certain amount of that. Of course, if you went into a department store to buy something or into a drugstore or something like that, a certain amount of contact was unavoidable. But I never went to school with any of them for any of my years. When I was at Morehouse, I don't think of any white students in my class. I had a couple of white professors at Morehouse and my first interaction with whites were whites in the civil rights movement in Atlanta – first, exchange students that were there at Morehouse and Spelman and then in the civil rights movement in downtown Atlanta.

## **JOINING THE ATLANTA STUDENT MOVEMENT**

FS: People ask me, "How did I get involved in this? Was I ever scared?" But if you were a young black kid more rural Georgia – and I don't know whether this was true in Julian Bond's case or not, he's a little bit different – but if you were a young black kid growing up in rural Georgia, learning how to act around white people was a survival skill. Your parents put the fear of God in you. That was their way of trying to keep you alive. So yes, I've had numerous lessons from my mom and my dad about things that had happened. Actually, I have a story about that. Once, when I was, I think, in the eleventh grade, I was driving. We never did own a car. My daddy drove a truck all the time. And one of my buddies – I always had buddies who had cars – so my buddy Eugene had a car and I borrowed his car periodically. Whenever I drove his car, I had to put some gasoline in it before I took it back to him, otherwise he wouldn't lend it to me anymore [laughs]. I was at the service station trying to pull a few gallons of gas in his car on my way home. You had to pay first. I came back to the pump, I'm pumping, and a group of white guys pull up to the pump behind me. One of them gets out of the car and says, "Hey, I need this pump." And I said, "Look, I'm about through, I got a little bit more, I'll be finished in a minute."

He said, "Did you hear what I said? I told you I want this pump." I said, "Wait a minute." I don't know what the hell I was supposed to do. I guess I was able to stop. But I managed to finish. And he ranted and raved a little bit and went back and got in the car. I didn't notice at the time, but another black person overheard this interaction between the two of us. I was about two and a half miles from home. By the time I got home, somebody called my house and told my father that I'd gotten into it with a white person. By the time I got home,

he was up. He was sitting in the window with a gun, too, by the way, because there was no non-violence in our household. When I got home, he was angry at me because he thought I had gone out there and brought danger on his whole family. Now, one of the advantages of the place where I lived was that this was a road, a dirt road, and we lived at the end of the road. You had to turn around to get back out of there, so we weren't too worried about the night riders coming. They would have had a problem getting out and would have to face my dad first. But first he was mad at me, and when he first said something, I didn't even know what he was talking about. And when he first said something, I didn't even know what he was talking about. For me, it was such a little incident and I didn't see anybody else around there, so I didn't know some other black person this apparently and called him from a pay phone. You lived in this danger all the time because people thought they could do anything to you they wanted to. Like Rosa Parks on that bus, they told her to move, she didn't move, and she ended up in jail. I guess this guy thought I was supposed to stop pumping gas and leave the rest my money on there so he could pump it into his car. But I wasn't going to do that. Besides, I had my buddy's car and I had to take it back.

You couldn't avoid a certain amount of it, but when you live that way and you get a chance to do something about it – it makes a difference. And I wanted to. Let me go separately to something that happened to me at Morehouse, one of the first civil rights demonstrations I went to in Atlanta – the first one I remember anyway. I was in a bunch of them. The first one I remember is we went to the Southern Bell telephone company to apply for an entry level job.

GI: What year was this?

FS: This was '60, the first year I was there. The spring of '60, 1960.

GI: Was this after the Greensboro sit ins?

FS: It was after the sit ins. Yeah. We go to this place – I remember it was in Southwest Atlanta someplace. We walked into this office employment office and we are well dressed Morehouse men, with our little spring ties on, our polished shoes and stuff [laughs]. We walk in and tell the lady we want to fill out an application for an entry-level job, and the lady says, "We don't hire black people. You all know that already, so what are we talking about here?" It was eight of us. So initially eight more people show up because it was an organized demonstration. And after a while we had about thirty-five people in there and we started singing freedom songs. Then she finally called the cops. It's my first arrest. I told the story over dinner up to my thirteen-year-old grandchild.

She said, "Well, Granddad, it didn't do you any good to go to school if you couldn't get a job or if the only job you could get was an entry level job climbing a telephone pole trying to figure out how you change these wires. Your parents were wasting their money and wasting their time." And I think this is really an important part, it's a teaching point for me because most people know the civil rights movement was us trying to integrate lunch counters or trying to integrate schoolhouses. But the reality is what made the movement powerful and made it go well with the public was the fact that we always thought that the

economics of this was important, and that those of us who were going to college one day wanted to practice that trade in a place where we could earn money like everybody else and use that money to support our families. We knew that if we didn't change society, it wasn't going to change by itself. If we could change it during our lifetime, it made life better for us and for our kids and our grandchildren. I think that's important for people to understand. We picked targets like that because we knew they were important symbolically.

And although we weren't ourselves necessarily interested in an entry level job at the telephone company, we knew that there were hundreds of other black people out there who were looking for jobs and who couldn't or wouldn't be employed just because of the color of skin.

GI: Let's talk about the formation of the Atlanta student movement. Let's talk about that day when Lonnie King shows the newspaper to Julian and says, "Have you seen this?" Do you want to take it from there and tell us what happened?

FS: Well, now I wasn't with Julian and Lonnie at that time.<sup>1</sup> By the time I found them they had organized a group of students at Morehouse College and they and other people were working with each other on other campuses. My roommate and I – actually, he had the room key – I had to go find him get to get back into the room and he was at the meeting. So that's the first time I ever went to one of the meetings. I got there and I was in the back, too, because I had to wait until the meeting was over, so I got to hear a lot of the presentation. Lonnie was always a very good organizer. He's going around the room and asking people what they thought.

When they finally get to me, I'm in the back. I don't know much about that part. I said, "Look, this is the most disorganized thing I ever saw." He [Lonnie] said, "Well, you're in charge of operations then. Get this organized and get these people downtown." I had no idea what he was talking about! But it was a group of young students who were trying to figure out how to do this. Nobody had ever done it before. Hey, we were the best and brightest of our generation. If we couldn't do it, nobody else could. And we figured it out.

## **MEETING JULIAN BOND**

GI: And was it at this time that you met Julian? Can we talk a bit about how you met Julian and how all that began?

FS: Yeah, yeah. Well, the one overall overarching thing that I always remembered about Julian was he was probably the first middle class black person I met. There was no middle-class black community in Newnan, Georgia. We were all poor or we were all just a little bit above poverty. And there was no real middle-class black person. I mean, Julian had read a bunch of books. His father was a professor. They lived off in Africa. He was the first person

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<sup>1</sup>. Lonnie King was interviewed for this project (01-JBOHP). Mr. King passed away on March 5<sup>th</sup>, 2019. He was the first chairman of the Atlanta student movement and is widely credited for organizing it.

I'd met who was actually an intellectual, who had read all these books and traveled and stuff.

My sort of introduction to him and, at the time, his father and his mother, I think, and his sister, they were all living together either on the Morehouse college campus or the AU [Atlanta University campus], one of those. So we got to see them a lot. We met a lot at their house and got to meet [the Bonds] and got to know them well. And, as I said, my first memory was that and he sort of kept that profile through the movement, too. He was always more intellectual and more of a thinker and trying to figure out how to fashion the message in a way that it made sense to everybody. But he was radical, way more radical than Lonnie King.

GI: How so?

FS: I think he had a better sense of how you make society change, how you get these people's attention and how you make them do things. Lonnie was like me, we were always looking for a fight, another target to go after [laughs]. But Julian was just not like that. I think I was probably more like Lonnie and that's the reason I think I succeeded him as the Chairman of the Atlanta civil rights movement. We were always looking for another fight, for another target to go after and Julian was always thinking, "How do we take advantage of what we have here now before we go on to the next target? We learn from this that we can take the next target and maybe try to get more out of these people along our way." It was good to have them there. Of course, he was always communicating with to the newspaper. See, he was a great writer, so he found himself a way to get involved with the newspapers.

## **HOW ORGANIZATIONS REFLECT THEIR LEADERS**

GI: One of the things that Lonnie mentioned to me when I interviewed him last July [2018] was that the different student movements that were coming out South, whether in Atlanta or Nashville or wherever it might be, they all reflected the people who were part of it. That the student movement of Atlanta was different from Nashville. He mentioned to me that in Nashville they wanted to love everyone to death but in Atlanta they wanted to nickel and dime everyone to death. Cam, this is something I think you'll find interesting as a young activist. Do you think that a student movement takes on the personalities of those who lead it and those who decide to get involved?

FS: Yeah. Actually, let me just say I had an experience different than both Lonnie and Julian because I eventually end up going to Mississippi as a full-time organizer, one of fifteen or sixteen people to go into Mississippi, into Blackwell County. I sat down in Atlanta with the leaders of SNCC, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, as we picked and chose counties that we were all going to go into and try to organize. I had the experience of organizing in a city, probably the biggest city in the South, and fighting the largest department store in the Southeast, Rich's. And then going into a very rural area after that, where you try to register voters one by one by one. I had experience in both. The Atlanta movement was very interesting because, at a point, we had, I'm sure more than three-quarters of the black population involved in this. I tell young people this about nonviolence,



the young people get impatient with nonviolence. Nonviolence has one very unique and overarching advantage and that is, if you have a nonviolent demonstration, really everybody can participate in this demonstration. You could be in a wheelchair, you can be deaf, everybody can participate. I'm at the African American War Memorial today. If I tried to put together a crack couple of military guys to go out on a mission, probably two people in my whole organization would qualify, maybe one. I might not be one of those [laughs] because everybody can't do it. You don't have the physical stamina, you probably can't carry a weapon, you probably can't fire accurately enough, you're always going to get left behind.

But with a nonviolent demonstration everybody can participate. And once you had a boycott to this thing of the downtown businesses, now all you've got to do is stay home [and not patronize them]. If you're scared, if you're too cowardly to go walk on a picket line, you can also stay home and call people. You start with your own family and you tell people this all the time. Start with your whole family. Tell your family not to go out there. Tell your cousin not to go out there. Tell people at your church not to go shop. You can organize a whole community because when this thing does finally happen, everybody's going to benefit from it. We're all going to get to go be treated with dignity in these various places. We're also going to be able to get jobs in these places where blacks who are currently either unemployed altogether or they're underemployed because they are stuck in low-paying positions that they're overly qualified for, but they can't move up because of the color of their skin. And so that makes it a very powerful movement.

I think that for young people, especially young people, get impatient with nonviolence. They want to go to violence. Nonviolence has a great advantage because you can involve everybody in this. You can make it a very large movement and also can also bring shame to people who do things to you because you're not doing anything to them. But I think it's powerful and it's something that young people I think today ought to think about because violence, this killing and stuff, is not going to get it done. We're ten percent of the population or twenty percent of the population. You're never going to overpower eighty percent who are better armed probably than we are and control all the other aspects of society, the jails and juries and all that stuff. You gotta be smart about what you do. But you've got to get people behind you and then you've got to make it happen.

## **THE FORMATION OF SNCC**

FS: Once Greensboro kicked off and people started demonstrating in these various college communities all around the country, it wasn't long before Atlanta had to take its place, too. We would like to think that we were leaders of that, but we really weren't. Many other schools had started this before we got finally got Atlanta all revved up. At that point, some smart people, including Ella Baker and others, decided that maybe we should meet to talk about what we were doing to coordinate our campaign. Initially, we met with Dr. Martin Luther King [Jr.]. That's what we were in Raleigh to do there and at Shaw University to meet with Dr. King. But we were going to become a junior organization, a junior SCLC

[Southern Christian Leadership Conference].<sup>2</sup> It was his idea and I guess it was hers, too, in the beginning. We got there and listened to him talk about four hours about what he was doing, and we didn't get to say a word.

So, after a while we finally asked if we could recess. We wanted to talk to each other see what we were going to do. We left the room and never came back. We formed our own organization because – Dr. King was about ten years older than we were at the time – actually he wasn't even ten years older than Lonnie because Lonnie was about six years older than we were. He had been to the Navy and back. He was older than we were, so he and Dr. King were closer in age than we were. But for us that seemed like a pretty old person and we just thought, "Well, you know what, this is not going to work. We're the ones who are going to be out there every day walking the streets, going to jail, picketing and stuff. We should be the ones to decide what we're going to do, what our targets are and where we're going to do these things. We shouldn't have to report to some organization of people just because they're older than we are to tell us which way to do this thing." So we formed our own organization.

GI: After the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee forms and then you're back at school, how did you all in the Atlanta student movement pick your targets? How did that work and how did you decide to kind of end with Rich's in the fall of 1960?

FS: Let me say one thing about SNCC [that] most people have forgotten about. We leave Raleigh and we decide we're going to have this organization and it's going to be headquartered in Atlanta. Atlanta is sort of the center. So why did they want to put it in Atlanta? Because we probably had the most middle-class organizations in the country. We had people who had money who were part of the movement there in Atlanta. Lonnie and Julian, I think, deserve some credit for this because I remember this lady named Mrs. P.Q. Yancey. Her husband was a medical doctor and he owned a hospital in Atlanta. She had an account at Rich's, one of those accounts we were talking about. Every two or three years she bought a mink stole there at Rich's, but she was not allowed to try this thing on in the store. She had not thought about this until we started talking to her about this. Mrs. Yancey was a tall, stately looking lady and a very attractive, light skinned woman. She was very dignified. We said, "Okay, I'll tell you what you do the next time you go in there. You try to try on one of those things."

She went in there one day as part of the demonstration and they told us you couldn't try this thing on. And she said, "Well, look, I've been buying these things here every year." And they said, "We don't care about that." She said, "I'm never going to buy another one." She tore her card up. She started a movement among middle-class people, and they became supporters of the civil rights movement. It wasn't just a group of students out there who

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<sup>2</sup>. The Southern Christian Leadership Conference formed after the Montgomery Bus Boycott to coordinate the effort of the various ministers and church-leaders who had been instrumental in leading that movement. Originally based in Montgomery, Alabama, the SCLC moved to Atlanta in 1960 when Dr. King became the associate pastor of Ebenezer Baptist Church, sharing the pulpit with his father, Martin Luther King, Sr., better known as "Daddy" King.

were doing something, sort of rabble-rousers making noise. We were talking about real issues here. We're talking about people being treated with dignity or not in these places. We were talking about whether people could work in jobs. We knew that there were people working in that department store, for example, who did all the displays for the windows. The person who does window display has a title, a professional title. There was a white person who had a title of doing this. She was being paid the money. There were three or four black women who were doing this who were part of the maintenance staff who were the ones who were actually building these exhibits in these windows. They were just not being paid for what they were doing because they were black. They were being kept in the second-class citizenship even in their employment. They were working a full day's work and getting partly paid for what they were doing.

This problem affected everybody. We also knew that if we could break Rich's department store, we could probably break the rest of the South. But that also enabled us to have more money in our bank account than most people. We got out of jail when we wanted to because people bailed us out. The first SNCC office was in Atlanta, Georgia, over on Auburn Avenue. The Atlanta civil rights movement, we paid the rent on the office. That's because we were the only group that had any money [laughs]. Nobody else had any money. They had a guy named Ed King, who was not related to Martin Luther King. A little short guy named Ed. I remember because I used to go there and pay the rent every now and then because they didn't have enough money to pay the rent [laughs]. One little office there with a bunch of books in it and two or three telephones. It didn't cost all that much. I tell SNCC all the time they don't remember that we paid the rent for that organization for the first several years because they didn't have any money to pay the rent for a SNCC office, which ultimately ended up in Atlanta and much better offices later on. But in the beginning, we kept it alive.

GI: How did you get over to Raymond Street?

FS: Well, I think the office in Atlanta eventually develops into a larger office. We started to raise money and run some big projects. The Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party, once we got that organization started over there in Mississippi, we engaged a lot of young white people who were our auxiliaries on these white college campuses. Many of them started to send money from their colleges. This is still true today. These student organizations on these campuses have student funds. In some cases, there are sizable amounts of money and they can support organizations that they want to. They actually supported us. We went back and forth to college campuses, they paid for our travel and stuff like that. Some of them made annual donations to our organization, so we were able to do a lot better.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup>. Mr. Smith is referring to the "Friends of SNCC" program when he talks about visiting college campuses for support. For more on Friends of SNCC, please see the interview with Betty Garman Robinson (12-JBOHP), who played a key role in administering this project during the 1960s.

## HOW TO ORGANIZE A MOVEMENT

CB: How did you and your colleagues in SNCC go about organizing, communicating and creating consensus to do the different projects that you all were able to do?

FS: Well, okay, let me first say that the sit in movement had a particular advantage, a particular technique. We knew, for example, and we would we would tell the press, that we were going to go to a department store today to sit in a lunch counter. We didn't just go out there on our own. We would call newspapers and tell them that we were going to be there at three o'clock to sit in at a lunch counter. The newspaper will get there. That sort of allowed that whatever happened to us didn't just happen to us in isolation. It could be shown on the local news and around and around the country. As I said before, we were all local people, we were local to at least Atlanta. In some cases, like Lonnie and Julian Bond, I was local to Newnan, Georgia, which was just thirty miles south. My people in Newnan got the same newspapers that they got in Atlanta and they got the same radio stations. You use the press as a way to sort of get your message out there. The other part of it is informal. The black community has always had its own informal method of communications, which is always fascinating for me to talk about because people have all kind of ways of getting the word out.

We joke about the barbershops and the beauty shops and the shoeshine parlors and the taxicab drivers and all these people. They talk all the time and they carry the news from one place to the next. And they're all sympathetic to your cause because they know whatever you might do, if you go sit at the lunch counter in a place where you're trying to buy a cup of coffee, no hoodlum should have a right to beat you while the cops are standing there watching you get beaten. Then, the cops are going to arrest you! They're not going to arrest the people that beat you. They're going to leave and let them go. They're going to say, "Well, if you hadn't been there in the way, they wouldn't have hit you with that cup of coffee," or "Well, if you haven't been there was your head in the way they wouldn't hit you with that cup of coffee or that billy stick or something."

The whole logic of policing and protection goes just upside down and the public really gets more and more sympathetic toward you. One other thing that I'll say about Atlanta and the picket line. We figured out after a while that [when] we put a picket line around Rich's department store, we didn't just stop African Americans from shopping in there. Most people will not cross a picket line because the word gets out, all kind of word gets spread out there. Some people say, "Well, if you go down there, they will snatch your bags because you're not in there." Or those picket signs had sticks on them, and they use the sticks to fight with them. All kind of stuff. Talk that gets out in the community can be totally different than what's going on actually down there.

But it all contributes to your cause because there's no casual Sunday afternoon shopping anymore. Ladies who are riding around deciding, "Well, let's go down to Rich's and see what they've got in there. Well, yeah, they have a picket line around that place. These people are down there singing these songs, they've got these sticks and I don't want to be bothered with that, so why am I going down there?" You have a direct impact on people

who identify with us because they know we've been mistreated because of the color of our skin. But you have an indirect impact among other people, well-meaning other people, too, who say, "Well, you know maybe they should let these people have a cup of coffee? What's wrong with that. You know, if they shop there and take their money why shouldn't they be allowed to try on clothes in the store?"

So well-meaning, reasonable minded people are starting to identify with you. Just by their actions they're helping you – their inaction because they're not shopping there and that helps you a lot. And then, finally, one year we organized – this is what made Atlanta famous, in my view, and different from other cities. For Christmas one year, we figured out that the department stores really make their money two or three times a year. Christmas, Easter and summer before school starts back. And that sort of coincides with student college activity. You'd get out of school for Christmas, you're out for Easter and you're out for the summer. In those times, we could mount a much greater picket line and much more effective boycott in those periods of time and not interfere with our schools.

We're trying to remain good students and also good citizens at the same time. But on a schedule that coincides [with protests]. For Christmas one year, we organized one of those campaigns to tell people don't shop. To give "cold gifts" for Christmas. Don't buy anything for Christmas. Recycle old presents. We had workshops to show you how to recycle dolls and recycle bicycles and things like that to get people not to shop. Lonnie told me that they saw something that Rich's said they lost eight million dollars in one of those years. And the man at Rich's was talking about dying and going to hell broke rather than integrate this place. So that became a battleground for us. Well, I guess we better to go down here and start this picketing line up so we can send this man to hell broke for this campaign.

We had the most effective campaign in the country, I think. We had the most organized, for that year, the most organized campaign in the country. I'll say that to Nashville and in all these other cities! We put a number on that town for that year and I think that's one reason why they caved in. This notion that they just one day changed their minds and decided it wasn't right, that they wanted to do something about it – yeah, right. That might have been some of it but most of it was because they were losing money because we were we had organized an effective campaign there to try to right a wrong, a historical wrong, that should have not have come this far in the first place.

Atlanta is the leader of the South. It has more money than any other city in the South. It has the better colleges and universities, black and white. I happened to have gone to one of those good universities there, Morehouse College. I know it's a good school. And it's no coincidence that Martin Luther King, who was the leader of our times, graduated from Morehouse. It should have been a leader. And it was not performing its duty as the leader of the South. It had the good newspaper there. It has not really, in my view, ever lived up to its role and it should do a better job of this. I've been working with them recently on the Cyclorama so we can get them out of this funk they've been in all these many years about the Civil War. It's a good time and there's always work to do but I think that the Atlanta civil rights movement was the most organized one in the country and the most effective in the country.

GI: Was there a sense of rivalry with Atlanta and . . .

FS: Of course! Of course!

GI: Nashville, other places . . .

FS: Of course! Of course!

GI: Was it a friendly rivalry?

FS: Oh, yeah, it was friendly. I mean, we all knew each other. We all knew that we were doing something. And I think we knew that by the time we got to '63 and '64 that we were doing something significant in the country and that it was going to be permanent change that we were looking at here. We knew that we were personally involved, and we knew each other, probably a couple of hundred of us all altogether. If you had the activists in all of the big cities combined, there's probably two or three hundred of us. By the time we're in year two and three and four [of the movement] we all knew each other, at least we knew each other's reputation. We'd been at meetings together. I remember two things. One, a guy named Charles Sherrod, who was in Albany, Georgia, saying that what we had was our bodies and we cared about each other, and that if one of us went down we pledged to take our bodies and put it in the place where the other person rested.

This actually became one of the real organizing points for SNCC in the long run because the purpose of violence is to try to scare people away. And if what you're getting by locking people up is more and more people coming to fill up your jail house, then maybe you're locking people up is counterproductive. It certainly worked well for us. We're getting more and more people to jail, more people involved. We get more and more national attention. Whatever boycott we put on or whatever is becoming more and more effective. It's certainly working for us. But it's sort of a reverse psychology because the whole purpose of violence is always to scare people to the point where they will cower down and give up whatever goals they had and whatever ambitions they had in the face of danger.

What SNCC did was to reverse that. We did talk openly about this and that we knew that we were putting ourselves in danger. We knew that, in some of these cases, particularly by the time I got to Mississippi, that the states had these lists of names of people that they were after. They had our tag numbers for all of our cars. They knew where we all lived. They tracked us through the state highway patrols and those various other outfits that they put together. And we were aware of that, but we also were aware that people were supporting us big-time. I'll tell you a quick story about this for your purposes, young man (referring to Cameron Burns, the secondary interviewer).

I just found this out a few weeks ago. When Dr. King got killed, I was in Mississippi. I had seen him the day before at the airport in Memphis, just a chance passing at the airport. I didn't even know if he knew who I was because I had not seen him in a long time. He won the [Nobel] Prize since the last time I saw him. He was very famous. But he called me across

the lobby to say he wanted a SNCC to come to Memphis to organize the young people, the young [Black] Panthers that he said were throwing rocks at the cops and didn't believe in nonviolence. I told him I moved to Washington, D.C. and I didn't do that anymore. I said, "I can't. I hung up my marching shoes." And he said, "Young man, don't ever hang up your marching shoes." The next day he was shot and killed.

I was talking to a lady last week who was teaching school in a little town called March, Mississippi at the time. She said the next day her kids' school – elementary school, too – decided that they were going to march downtown in this little town. She said she turned to her fellow teacher and said to him, "You know, if we let these kids march downtown without the assistance of their teachers, we will never be able to control them again. They will never have any more respect for us. We have to go with them. We can't let them go by themselves." She tells the principal, "We're gonna go with our kids." The principal says, "You can't do that. The superintendent said, "We need to lock this building down. We can't let these kids go." And she said, "The kids are going anyway. We're going with the kids." The teachers all marched out of the building with the kids." The superintendent said, "Tell them if they walk out, they can keep walking because they will never teach again in this county." They targeted these people and next day they announced they were going to fire all of them. She said all of the teachers in this county said if you're gonna fire them, you're gonna have to fire us."

So now you've got what started out as a demonstration with a bunch of kids their teachers just got fired. Well, now you got the whole damn county of teachers saying there will be no more school until you bring those people back on the staff so they can work in this building. I like to tell that story because people don't understand how powerful this movement was. In some of these places, we had what people might call a revolution. Virtually the whole community involved. Once you get kids marching their parents are going to get out there. These are elementary school kids. Their parents are going to come see about them. And then church members. If their preacher doesn't go see about them, he ain't gonna have no church! What good is going up there on Sunday, taking your money to him and when you get in trouble he will not come and see about you?

I think people really underestimated big time the amount of suffering that the African-American community endured for all those years, and how much courage these people had and how much they were willing themselves to defy authority, to try to change it in such a way that it made a difference. It went all up and down the land, from little kids to adults, to preaching communities and in other places like that. And that's how we change the South. Had we not been able to do that we never would have been able to accomplish what we did in the few years of the [movement]. The only comparable period for this was the Civil War. Four years of the Civil War, where you initially get these guys in the Union Army with these uniforms on. Then they passed those three amendments. There's is a comparison here where African Americans passed through the crucible of Civil War and then they get out and they get these three amendments. They get out to change society.

By the time of 1890, there's a hundred black colleges in the country. The 1960 civil rights movement is based in those black colleges that were created at the end of the Civil War.

And those black colleges are all the ones that are leading these movements. So the best and the brightest of our people, who've been who've been exposed to education, who have some sense that something good can happen to them, they also have the sense that it's their responsibility to make it happen, that they have to make it happen themselves. And then you get those people passed through the crucible of civil rights movement take over these big cities, like Atlanta and Washington, D.C. and change those cities. You see a big growth in the African American community, in income and college education. Things like that happen between 1950 and 2008, when Obama runs. It made a big difference to us here in the country. And I think we're just now realizing what the total impact of it was.

## **THE IMPORTANCE OF THE NEWS MEDIA**

GI: How important was the news media in helping you do what you needed to do? And was there a difference between how you worked with the black press compared to the white press?

FS: Well, the black press was always with us because they identified with us. They got treated badly. We show this movie downstairs [at the African American Civil War Museum], the video about Emmett Till. The black newspaper reporters say that the sheriff who was running the courtroom at Emmett Till's trial says, "There's only thirty seats in here. We got four reserved for the black press and you all got to sit right there. The rest of y'all gotta be outside." They got treated as badly as we did. The advantage was that if we could disappear into society they could disappear, too. But, yeah, it became so important that these mobs will attack the press first because if you have a camera out there and they knew there was gonna be a camera scene with them attacking somebody at a lunch counter or somebody making a video or a photograph, they attacked them first to try to get those out of way before they did their damage, before they did their dirt. So, yeah, the press was always in danger.

But hey, man, as we've seen with these war stories. there are some courageous people out here with the press. Their view is that this story has to be told, and that they had to put themselves in some danger to tell it, they will do it. It made a difference. We would have won in the long run anyway because our cause was just, and we had the people behind us. But having the press spread this story nationwide and worldwide made a big difference to us. I was reading something the other day about the end of World War II where John Foster Dulles, the Secretary of State, says that the Russians are beating us in this world game because the Russians are telling people that America is not exporting democracy. America is exporting white supremacy. All you gotta do is look at the way they are treating black people here in the United States. That's how they treat black people all over the world. He said basically this this thing is killing us.

America can't have a good foreign policy as long as this is happening. Of course, that's by the time the president issues an executive order desegregating the military as a first step because the military that's the outpost out there in the world is representing the United States. Who is carrying the flag and who's out there in these outposts and places talking about democracy? It's the military. The president desegregates [the armed forces] partly as



a result of the pressure that they were getting from foreign sources because these stories are being reported by the press. In the civil rights movement, the press was much more prevalent then. These news organizations had developed much more sophisticated procedures and methods and means, and they had more courageous reporters. We were able get the story out, primarily because of the press.

GI: Was it hard to get the white media, whether it was the *Atlanta Constitution* or *Atlanta Journal* in Atlanta or even later on to come in and pay attention?

FS: Well, when you think about it now, these local newspapers are in the pockets of the local merchants. Who pays for the advertising in the paper? Whose ads are in there? I'm sure Rich's was the biggest ad purchaser that the *Atlanta Constitution* had. They were going to make every story they wrote as sympathetic to Rich's that they could make it. It's hard to avoid the fact that these people are in jail and that they're in jail because they tried again to get a job there. But they did try to say that, well, "It's all 'outside agitators.' The people in Atlanta are all right. They know better. It's these outside people who are coming in here, these students are coming from all over the country and they get over here and they started this stuff, stuff they wouldn't do at home. They do it here." That was a bunch of crap. The leaders of the Atlanta civil rights movement were the in people from Atlanta. I succeeded Lonnie. I came from Newnan, thirty miles south of Atlanta. You *might* say I was an outsider. Yeah, I rode in there on the bus [laughs], but not that much of an outsider. They were deluding themselves about that.

We face this now. I was just in Atlanta recently. I was at the Atlanta History Center. They had a bunch of teachers over there talking about the Cyclorama. They told me that the that the State Board of Regents has issued something saying that the causes of the Civil War were, in this order: secession, states' rights, tariffs and slavery. Slavery could be no higher than the fourth of these things.

You say, "Okay." But teachers can teach these things and say all of these things were about slavery. "States' rights" was about right the own slaves. Yeah, but if you're taking a test, the State Board of Regents says there's only one answer to this question. What's the answer? The answer is states' rights. Any other answer is incorrect. You can put slavery there if you want at risk of your own peril. How do you get around the fact that the states are still passing these laws saying they want to protect these monuments that are built toward slavery and hatred. Even as the state policymakers are still today saying that slavery has to be so far down. Yet we all know that when Georgia voted to leave the Union, they said they were leaving the Union on the issue of slavery. We know that you can read the secessionist papers. I've read them myself. They're on my website.

In the face of all is evidence why are they still saying this? They're still saying this because it suits their purpose. And their purpose is to show themselves as somebody who was bloodied, but not bowed, whose cause was just, and that cause was just about secession and about something else. Slavery was just a minor part of it. The fact of the matter is when Sherman's army invaded the state of Georgia, Georgia had a million residents. Four hundred and thirty thousand of them were enslaved. Forty three percent of the whole state

was enslaved. For them, Sherman's Army looked like a liberation movement. But their opinion doesn't matter. Why should their opinion matter? Besides, they were enslaved. By the time Sherman's Army left Georgia, they weren't enslaved anymore. They were now free people. They were talking about forty acres and a mule and the right to vote. The world changed right under their footsteps, but they still haven't changed all these landmarks and all these various textbooks and stuff like that.

Let me just say this to you. When I asked about this, about why it was taking so long to change these things in Georgia, what they said was, "Well, we got a library of textbooks with this Lost Cause message in them. All the movies and all the videos have the Lost Cause." I was in a library in Americus, Georgia. They paid me a hundred dollars a week and they worked me like a government mule, so I had to speak in three high schools, none had air conditioning.

GI: This is recent?

FS: Yeah, this was two years ago.

GI: No air conditioning in these high schools?

FS: That's right. Well, they don't have any air-conditioned high schools here [D.C], most of them don't in D.C. – which is why we let school out in the summer, and the spring, too. I asked to see the library, because I wanted to see it. I go into the library – they don't even call it a library anymore. They call it a "media center." I go into the "media center" and there are about fifty books. I've got more books on this case here, about half as many books as they had in a whole library. I said, "What happened to the books?" They said, "Our kids have access to four million books on the Internet. They have all these portals where they hook up their computers." So maybe this next generation of blacks and whites will be able leapfrog all that Lost Cause misinformation and go out there and find the real truth and they'll be able to live a better life in a better world. You heard it from me, buddy. Hope springs eternal [laughs].

## **GOING TO MISSISSIPPI**

GI: How do you end up in Mississippi?

FS: So now we had a high watermark in Atlanta with the Rich's department store breakthrough, which I'm sure Lonnie talked about.

GI: And that's the fall of 1960.

FS: That's right. That's the fall 1960. We brought Rich's to its knees. I picketed that place so long as I could walk around block with my eyes closed. You count a hundred and sixty paces that way and turn right and go that way [laughs]. This was a handful of us. Frank Holloway, myself and Willie Paul Berrien and Ruby Doris Smith and her sister, and about twenty of us who were there almost every day. We had been keeping a picket line all the

time on the place. But then we finally got this breakthrough, which was not really much of a deal.

It was more symbolic than anything else because, by then, Rich's and all these places that we were putting these boycotts on, they were losing business. They were also laying people off. And it was last hired, first fired. And if they don't need you to wash dishes or whatever, they are going to lay you off because they don't have any business coming up in there. Some of them are just doing it out of spite. Rich's was also losing money and they were laying people off. By the time we got around to making a deal, there were a lot of people out there out of work who had just been laid off from their jobs. Any agreement that we made to hire new people, those who were laid off really didn't count because they had jobs before. We really didn't have much of a net gain except token people in the higher echelon jobs. But the public was pretty angry about this and quite honestly, I was angry about it, too. By then, Lonnie was on his way off to law school.

I inherited this mess that he had left behind back here in Atlanta and I wasn't very happy with it. In the meantime, we had come to the attention – I had, at least, because I was now the Chairman of the Committee on Human Rights. Bob Moses got out of jail over there in McComb, Mississippi. He came through there, I think, in the spring of '60 with a patch on his head. He told me that they had just locked him up in Mississippi and “we” – he used the royal “we” – that “we” had to go over there and try to do something to show that we're not gonna run out just because they hurt somebody local. Basically, what he was saying was we can't stir these people up and then leave behind. And I said, “Well, Bob, I've got my hands full here in Atlanta,” and he said, “Well, you got a middle-class movement over there.” And I told him I would come over for summer.

I went over in the summer of '60 and stayed over there for the whole summer. And then I came back [to Atlanta] in the fall. Some guy got killed in Durant, Mississippi, that they said we had worked with over there. They just killed him and dismembered his body. I agreed to go back in the spring of '61. I left college at the end of '61 to go back to Mississippi. And I stayed there six years, longer than anybody, longer than any of the SNCC staff that was assigned to Mississippi. I met my wife when I was over there and actually spent a year living in tents with one of my sharecroppers who had been evicted from a plantation. We finally got them a place to stay and got that straightened out and then I moved to Washington, [D.C.].

GI: Where in Mississippi did you go?

FS: My first assignment was in Marshall County, Mississippi, which is where I – I actually met Larry Rubin here in Washington, D.C – and we ended up being assigned to the same place in the civil rights movement. Marshall County, which is just south of Shelby County, which where Memphis is located. It's a little town, Holly Springs, that is probably forty or fifty miles south of Memphis, but it was a county that was seventy-six percent black. It was seventy-six per cent black when I went over there in '61. You could imagine during the time of the Civil War it was probably ninety percent black. Following the war, there had been a sheriff and we knew this in the county. I had not heard anything about African American

soldiers fighting in the Civil War before I went over to Mississippi. I learned that while I was there, and I met a man who was a descendant, which got me interested in this story.

The fact that it was so well-suppressed made it even more interesting to me because it just basically means that African Americans got no credit for their role in determining the outcome of the Civil War and for the passage of those three amendments, the Thirteenth, Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments, which changed the country, basically. It set America on a new path to citizenship and freedom and voting. But they got no credit for it. That's a great story for me. I got interested in this as a side and issue and then eventually in Washington, D.C. I get the chance to build a monument to them. You might say it all started somewhere in the Mississippi Delta, but it ended here in Washington, D.C [laughs].

So, yeah, that's where I went first. And then in the spring of '61, I believe it was, maybe '62, the spring of '62. It might not have been the spring. It was February, I believe, of 1962. Jimmy Travis was gunned down, along with two or three other SNCC people in Greenwood, Mississippi, and, as I said earlier, SNCC's policy was if you gunned down one of our people, somebody else has got to go take their place. This shooting took place, I think it was in the morning, around ten or eleven o'clock. About one o'clock they called me up in Holly Springs and told me everybody had to come to Greenwood because they just gunned down one of our people. Machine gun. Shot him with an automatic weapon, too. Shot up a car.<sup>4</sup>

GI: What was the explanation given?

FS: Well, we had to go. We could not leave these local people there just because somebody resorted to this kind of violence. We went down and started really organizing in the LeFlore, County, which is where the shooting took place in Greenwood. It was rough there. This was probably the worst year of my life in the civil rights movement. Up to then, I had been in Atlanta where there were no bombings and no shootings and stuff like that. And then in Holly Springs, where I was by myself, but I actually have a good organization. I mean, I was a target, I knew that because the sheriff sent people talk to me all the time and arrested me two or three times.

GI: Talk to you about what?

FS: About the fact that we were stirring up trouble and we were going to get ourselves killed. The sheriff never said I'm gonna kill you. He said, "You're gonna get yourself killed." Some guy, a black guy, told me that they had offered him money to kill me in Holly Springs. I said, "Obviously, you're not gonna kill me because you're telling me all of this." And he said, "I might. But not tonight."

Greenwood was the first time I faced really abject violence. They bombed our cars, they shot up our office, they dragged some little girl behind a car. I was in Greenwood when

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<sup>4</sup> Mr. Travis survived the attack, which was originally aimed at Bob Moses, the director of the Mississippi voter registration project. Mr. Travis continued his work in the civil rights movement, serving later on the Board of Trustees of the Mississippi Veterans of the Civil Rights Movement. He passed away in 2009.

Medgar Evers was killed. He was assassinated in Jackson. That was the summer of '63. It was pretty bad. Of course, later on that year the church gets bombed in Birmingham with the girls in it. We all go over there to this funeral. And then of course Kennedy gets killed. It just a parade of just all this violence that actually lets SNCC, by the way, to decide that we were going to do the Summer Project. That's how we came to the idea of the summer '64. I remember it well because the Mississippi staff voted this down the first time it came up.

GI: Why?

FS: We knew if you brought a bunch of people down there, including white people, there would a lot of women in this group. White women and black men together? That's like waving a red flag in front of a bull at a bullfight, man. So that was one reasons. The other one was that I think we were just beginning to get our feet on the ground as an organization where people in the community trusted us, they believed in us, they turned to us if they had problems. We also figured if we brought white people in, the more white people we brought in, they would just gravitate towards the white person because they think that's who is supposed to be in charge. But the fact of the matter was that these people reported to us, which turned out to be an interesting phenomenon.

On the other hand, the prevailing argument that Bob made, which turned out to be correct, was that look at all these people that had been killed already. Mississippi has got a list of all of us. And all these names on the list? They're working their way down the list. We won't survive another year here in Mississippi. They'll kill us all.

We have to open this thing up. We've got to bring the press in, bring in these outside people from these campuses. They have campus newspapers. They all have parents who cared about them. They all, by the end, had learned how to do press releases that talked about what we were doing in Mississippi. They were like the second guard. We were all assigned to them. When I got out of jail in Greenwood in June of '63, I went up to Carleton College in Minnesota to because it was my school. I went up there to speak to kids on the campus, to thank them for helping to send stuff down to us, for getting me out of jail [laughs].

GI: When you say that was your school, do mean that that was a school assigned to you. Can you talk about that a little bit, the "Friends of SNCC" program?

FS: Right. I give Jim Forman credit for this. I'm not sure who the guru was who put this all together, but I think Jim Forman and also some of the people in Atlanta. Julian probably had something to do with this because he was involved with the press releases and he and Jack Minnis were the ones who were doing the research and stuff.<sup>5</sup> But the person that I

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<sup>5</sup>. Jack Minnis served as the Director of Research for SNCC, which he joined after a stint as an attorney for the Southern Regional Council. Mr. Minnis is widely credited for producing papers and documents that established the ties between the Southern plantation economy and multi-national corporations and foreign governments, developing the narrative that the architecture of white supremacy went beyond the Deep South. Mr. Minnis also oversaw much of the research that identified counties and communities in the South that were most prone to violence and oppression by law enforcement and business interests and developed

remember of most then talking about it was Jim Forman, who talked about these campus organizations that were part of our auxiliary organizations. They were meaningful to us because they helped spread the word. You had to get these press releases out. People stayed up all night trying to get this stuff out to them because it wasn't easy. You had to do telex and typing and mimeographing and all that stuff to get this stuff out, but it worked. Bob's reasoning was, "Look, if we bring these people in, first of all, this story will become international. It will be something that the rest of the country has to deal with. They may get us, but . . . basically what he said was, "Well, nobody cares if they pick us out one by one. They're just dumb kids. It's news for two days and by the third day on they're on to something else."

It becomes an amazing story, quite honestly, because we end up with about a thousand kids in Mississippi. These kids will have to stay in homes of African Americans. They can't stay in hotels. Actually, it's too dangerous for them to try to stay in hotels, so they end up in the homes of African Americans. Those kids were going back home at the end of the summer. After six weeks, they were going back home. These parents, these people who put them up, are going to be living there. And now the cops got their addresses and their phone numbers and their employment and whatever else? So why would these people will do that? Because they knew what we all knew, and that is that they lived with this danger all the time. If we didn't do something to open this up to get some to outside pressure in there, they weren't going to survive. It turned out to be phenomenal summer.

GI: Do you believe that Freedom Summer succeeded?

FS: Yeah. I mean, yeah, it did. As a matter of fact, out of Freedom Summer the SNCC staff turns this into voter registration campaign. It's kind of interesting because a lot of the people came in from the North came in to do teaching programs. A lot of them were teachers who were organized to come in and do literacy work and civics work. All of this was sort of designed to get people ready for school because schools were being integrated and to get kids ready for them. But the SNCC staff, we turned them into organizing campaigns for voter registration. We put together our own voter registration form and we ran a mock voter registration campaign because we were trying to get parties names on petitions to submit to to the to the Democratic National Committee and to say these people want to vote. They were locked out of Mississippi elections because of the color of their skin. Mississippi had a little provision in the law that said if you were denied the right to vote you could actually put out a challenge ballot. We called this our "challenge ballot process." Our people voted for a different group of delegates to go to this convention. That our delegates should be seated just to keep the regular guys out.

So we get to the Democratic convention . . .

GI: And this is the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party . . .

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the "targeted" approach to voter registration by identifying the most densely populated black counties in the Deep South.

FS: Yes, and Fannie Lou Hamer does her famous "sick and tired speech." They don't seat us at the convention, but Lyndon Johnson and his people do promise us that they're going to pass the Voting Rights Act. This is how the Voting Rights Act actually started out at the convention in 1964. This is August of 1964. In 1965, Lyndon Johnson introduces the Voting Rights Act, a Voting Rights Act which repeals the poll tax. It repeals the literacy test and it sends federal registrars into the South. That was the feature that actually revolutionized Mississippi. The federal government sent federal registrars in, and they took our list of people that we had registered in these mock elections and went back and registered them as registered voters of Mississippi. That's what changed in the South.

The Voting Rights Act was revolutionary in my view because Mississippi never had any intention of ever letting these people register, even if they had even if they if they couldn't do a literacy test. They would have thought of something else. They were never going to let these people register to vote because Marshall County, as I said to you before, was seventy five percent black, and these people [referring to white segregationists] are still talking about black rule in the 1960s. Yeah, that's right. These people had been here since they were enslaved and they tried to make a living here, they're working hard, some of them even own property and many of them have been to college and won't even let them register to vote.

So now the federal government has made up its mind – and Lyndon Johnson said this himself – he said to Mississippi, "If you don't want us to register these people to vote, you register them. But make no mistake about it: they're going to be registered. Even if I have to send federal registrars to register them to vote, they are going to be registered to vote." He was a tough talking Southerner. That's about all the South really understands is tough talk. He not only talked the talk, he sent those federal registrars in to register people to vote. By the time I left Mississippi in 1968 there were over a hundred thousand blacks registered to vote. Blacks were running for office and getting elected to office down there in Mississippi and made a big difference in the state. But that's primarily related to the summer of 1964.

GI: Do you think the Johnson administration was more of a friend to the movement than the Kennedy administration?

FS: Well, if you look at the facts, I'd have say yes. The 1965 Voting Rights Act was a revolutionary piece of legislation, primarily because [of two] provisions. One, Mississippi -- and Georgia, too, had done this thing. I saw a report by this lady who wrote a book called, "One Person, No Vote." In her book, she said in one section of her book, that in 1946, I believe it is, right after World War II, Herman Talmadge in Georgia is telling the state legislature that black people, now that they've been overseas and fought in these wars, they think they're going to be citizens with the right to vote. About that time, Georgia had about 130,000 blacks registered to vote. The state legislature passes a law that says that everybody in Georgia has to re-register to vote. Everybody has to re-register. But if your grandfather voted, you don't have to re-register. You're grandfathered in. With this process they got rid of 130,000 African American voters. In two years, they purged 130,000 voters. Only three thousand blacks [were now] registered to vote the state of Georgia.

Now, this is a reaction to World War II. Black people had gone over there and given their lives. One of the people who had given their lives was my wife's husband. Jimmy D. Wheeler was a pilot in the Tuskegee [squadron]. He was bombing a train in Germany. And a plane went down and he died over there. They never recovered his body. They recovered some of his remains. He's buried in a cemetery in France today. He was fighting for rights that he never enjoyed here in the United States and he never could enjoy them. Here's a U.S. Representative, Herman Talmadge, telling people that they're going to take their rights away from these people because they know they're going to be more inspired and more persistent when they came back from World War II. He wanted to cut them off at the knees before they get any ideas. Everybody knew what the atmosphere was there, and Lyndon Johnson knew this too when he passed this bill. He knew that if he didn't if the federal government didn't act, these state governments were never going to do this because getting these people registered to vote meant a whole new guard of people were getting elected.

You see that today when you go back to these states. You have a generation of black people born in Atlanta who never been under anything but an African American mayor. Washington, D.C. had one for forty years. Jackson, Mississippi, has an African American mayor. Every major city Mississippi – Greenwood, Greenville, Hattiesburg – all have African American mayors. As these people take over these mayor's offices, as was the case with Maynard Jackson in Atlanta and with Marion Barry here in D.C. When Marion Barry was elected mayor of D.C., the police department was eleven percent black. By the time Barry left office the police bond was seventy eight percent black in D.C.

Now in D.C. the police department is a pretty good paying job. As a matter of fact, it was such a good paying job that most of the D.C. cops came from South Carolina. Before D.C. got home rule, it was being run by a congressman named [John L.] McMillan from South Carolina. McMillan was a redneck racist congressman from South Carolina. Ruled D.C. like it was a plantation. You could apply for a job in the D.C. police department in his office in South Carolina and he would write a letter so you a little preference coming in here. Most of D.C. cops came from down there. They brought their attitudes up here with them in a city that was seventy eight percent black. It was like an occupation.

When I first came to D.C., African Americans did not vote for any positions in this town. When I moved here in 1968, we had to have what they call a "Free D.C. Movement." I go from the Mississippi Delta, where we finally could vote now, to Washington, D.C. where we can't vote at all. You know that wasn't gonna last long before John Wilson, myself and Marion Barry and others, got busy here and got the right to vote for D.C. In order for us to get the Congress to pass something to take this thing out from underneath the congressional committee, we had to go to South Carolina to McMillan's congressional district. I took a bus down there with a bunch of people from Washington, D.C. We worked in this man's district to get him voted him out of office. He had more black people in his district than he realized. We got all those people organized and we voted him out. I didn't vote him out [laughs] but his voters down there voted him out.



There's been a fight up here for African Americans [and] it has amounted to a great deal of success. If you look at that last item in our exhibit downstairs here in the museum, I show in there that in 1950 there were 75,000 African Americans enrolled in college. By the time we get to 2008, there's 2.2 million blacks enrolled in college. There are only 250,000 seats in all the black colleges combined. I told people this in Atlanta. That's why Atlanta should be the leader. I said some of those better black colleges are located here in Atlanta. But today we've got 2.2 million African Americans enrolled in colleges that they couldn't even have gone to before the civil rights movement. They were barred from these schools. There were riots to keep these people from enrolling in college in these schools.

Now, you've seen a huge increase in the number of African Americans in school. I'm told that figure is now up to 2.5 million. I haven't looked at it since 2008. But we're going to look at it now. We bought the building [next door] and we're going to expand our exhibit, so I've got to bring these things up to date. I've got a Bill Gates scholar who due in here this afternoon. She's working on this for me. You see the same thing with African American income. African American income go up from eight billion dollars to almost nine hundred billion dollars to be dollars in 2008. That figure is greater than the GNP of Canada. That's right! That's a big increase. And you see the same increase in voter registration and that's how Obama gets elected president.

## **STUDENT ACTIVISM THEN AND NOW**

CB: Dr. Smith, what do you think the legacy of SNCC is for students today and what should activists take away from what you and all your colleagues did back in the movement. How should we go about organizing today?

FS: I end my exhibit here at the museum with the stories, these statistics that I just showed, and the election of President Obama. I think we have to believe that we can make a difference. In order for us to be willing to stay the course and make sacrifices and do all the things that we have to do to make change in America, we have to believe we can make a difference. I think this SNCC story – the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee story – is the story of that. Actually, sometimes when I think about it, on the one hand, it's a story that made a tremendous amount of impact in a short period of time, in a matter of three or four years. On the other hand, it also has an enduring during legacy which continues today. Some of the fights that we're still involved in, like voter suppression, is the same thing today as I just described in 1945 talking about Talmadge. Georgia is still suppressing votes and moving polling places and still trying to find ways to keep African Americans from voting, and progressive people and women from voting. We've made a tremendous amount of progress, whereas the legacy of some of those issues still around today. There's plenty of work to be done out there.

The other thing is that the civil rights movement left unresolved this issue of police brutality. Police brutality was around during the days of SNCC. If you think about it for a bit, the Black Panther Party started out as a party that led the fight to carry arms to defend themselves against the Police Department, the California Police Department and Oakland and other places against police brutality. The Nation of Islam had the Fruit of Islam, which

was organized for that same purpose. We didn't do much about police brutality in these cities because we thought that it would be taken care of by people who were working here. As time went on, this issue just sort of mushroomed to the point where now we have more African American men in jail than we do in college, which is just a tremendous problem.

There are some issues still there that we need to work on. But I think that the message, the lesson that young people should learn from SNCC, is that if you choose a cause that is worthy it has to be grounded in some sense of fairness, some sense of responsibility. In our case we were talking about rights that should have been guaranteed in the Constitution or the Bill of Rights or certainly in those three amendments that passed after the Civil War.

Those rights were ours. We earned them on the battlefields. They should have been ours in the first place. We were grounded in what I would call legal arguments that should have afforded us those rights. And I think most of all, we were correct about the fact that if most of well-meaning America found out that we were being treated so badly and injured so badly by these things, they were willing to join us to help push put the pressure on Congress to pass those amendments. Congress doesn't pass amendments until they get a lot of pressure from the public. To amend the Constitution is very difficult to do. For Congress to pass the Voting Rights Act, the Civil Rights Act to support those amendments it took a lot of support throughout the country.

By the time we come to that to those amendments, we've got a national movement, which I think is significant. But I think that the lesson that I would say that young people should remember is that you should find your colleagues, find your friends, find your supporters, organize yourself and stay the course. You can make a difference here in this country. And let me just say one last thing about that. Since we're talking a lot about Atlanta here, in that last election that took place down there [Stacey] Abrams won about fifty one percent of the black and white vote under fifty years of age. She just lost. What happened there was that age-category of people had such a low turnout that they weren't effective in terms of the results of the state. The older you get, the greater the turnout.<sup>6</sup>

We could ever get that young current generation of people, black and white, to vote on a more regular basis and to go out there see this as a real fight, we can change this out. We could flip most of these Southern states, we could flip Mississippi and Georgia for sure because we've had people run in statewide elections that got forty-seven and forty eight percent of the vote. If you get forty eight percent of the vote, you only need ten percent of the vote to win. So why can't they find that ten percent?

One way to get that is to get popular turnout up. There are some fights out there we can win, and we need to win them because these Southern states have a stranglehold on the rest of the country right now. There's so many of them. They came up together. They work

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<sup>6</sup>. Mr. Smith is referring to the 2018 Governor's race in Georgia. Ms. Abrams lost the election to Republican Brian Kemp, a white male, by approximately 55,000 votes (50.2% to 48.8% - .9% went to a third-party candidate). The Kemp campaign and the state Republican party was repeatedly accused of voter suppression and voter fraud by the Abrams campaign and independent observers.

together all the time. Sort of like the rest of those [places] in Georgia teaming up against Atlanta. They take all the money from Atlanta, the tax money and spread it out all over the state. They're happy to do that, and then they treat Atlanta like a stepchild. They're some fights out there that I know you can win and I'm looking forward to hearing good things.

CB: Thank you, Dr. Smith.

## **THE LEGACY OF JULIAN BOND**

GI: I'd like you to talk about Julian Bond legacy from the 1960s and the legacy left to the civil rights movement.

FS: Well you know I think Julian Bond is one of those profiles in courage that we don't talk about enough. I'm sure his legacy will be fine. The first time I went to Mississippi I went with Julian Bond. We were in New Orleans at a conference. I was I don't think I was chairman of SNCC at the time, but I was on the committee and we went to New Orleans for a conference together. Then we drove up from New Orleans back through Mississippi. We went through McComb, Mississippi. We stayed at a house that had been firebombed. Actually, he insisted on us sleeping in this lady's basement, so I guess it was a test of will [laughs].

And then we went through Jackson and back it to Atlanta, back to Morehouse. He was instrumental with SNCC in terms of the organization. He probably wrote most of the important documents because he was a gifted writer. I think even then that had learned that people had different skills and different capabilities. He had a gift of writing. He could write poetry and songs and all kinds of things. He employed that gift for SNCC, for the civil rights movement and did a great job for us. Then, of course you know he ran for office there in the state and the state of Georgia probably made a hero out of him because they refused to seat him because he didn't support the Vietnam War. The world will remember that SNCC was probably the only organization that supported Dr. King when Dr. came out against the Vietnam War. Everybody else abandoned him. The NAACP and the Urban League and all of the famous leaders came and said [they didn't agree. One of them said he thought that [King] had lost his mind or something. SNCC stood with him because we believed that people shouldn't be out there getting killed over issues at a time that they didn't have their own rights in the United States.

First of all, Dr. King was probably right that in order for us to remedy some of these needs that had to be take care of the black community the United States had to get out of that war. We were just spending too much money over there. We were with him on that. Julian, because he took a principled position, he was punished. As is often the case, in the effort to try to punish him they catapulted him into national prominence as a young, articulate, up and coming politician. Of course, later on he gets nominated – I think the first African American male to be nominated on a major ticket – for vice president. He's got his own legacy. He's got a son, Michael Julian down in Atlanta who is following in his footsteps on city council. I spent a half a day with him when I was there a few days ago. He's sounds like his daddy and he looks like his daddy a little bit. And he's got the fire in the belly, so his

legacy will be fine. Then, of course, [Julian] had a teaching career that spanned I don't know how many years. There is no better place for somebody with his background than to be able to spend his golden years in a classroom with young people who are challenging his intellect. And he's also teaching them things that that they probably wouldn't learn otherwise. He had a good life, a good legacy. I'm sure you'll have members smiling down at him.