

How did COFO activists develop local leadership?

In all their work, the young COFO organizers sought to develop local leaders and foster leadership skills among the people they worked with, regardless of social status or income. COFO activists in Mississippi made sure that everyone had a role to play in the movement.

“What we were trying to do was, starting with already existing leadership...cultivate additional local leadership, and cultivate community organization. Our argument was people have a right to have at least some say-so in the decision making that affects their lives. They have to take control over their lives. And that’s something that we can’t do for you...you have to take control of your life and make it better.... If you want to do that, we’ll help you as best we can.”

—Charles (Charlie) Cobb, SNCC field secretary, recollecting in 2012

Many local people became community organizers through their participation in voter registration campaigns and other movement activities. The movement in Mississippi depended on these local organizers. For example, Fannie Lou Hamer became one of the most influential leaders of the Mississippi movement. She was the youngest of twenty-one siblings in a family of sharecroppers from Sunflower County, and had very little formal education. Inspired by speeches she heard at her first mass meeting, Hamer attempted to register to vote in August of 1962. The white plantation owner she worked for responded by firing her and kicking her out of her home. A few days later, a group of whites fired shots into the house where she was staying. Undeterred, Fannie Lou Hamer got more involved with the movement. She took the registration test again, began to teach at Citizenship Schools, and eventually became a field secretary for SNCC.

How did local whites react to the movement in Mississippi?

Local activism challenged the common white assumption that African Americans were content with their place in society. Whites routinely blamed black activism on “outside agitators” and “communists” who came to stir up trouble. They refused to believe that the movement was an expression of discontent throughout the black community.

Black Mississippians who participated in the movement put their lives in constant jeopardy. Racist groups and individuals beat black organizers, intimidated local people, and burned down meeting houses in an attempt to stop the momentum of the movement and maintain white supremacy. White supremacists attacked and beat hundreds of civil rights workers in Mississippi; some activists lost their lives because of their work. While threats of violence deterred some people from joining the movement, it made others more determined to fight for their rights.

The vast majority of white Mississippians did not participate in violence against civil rights workers. But white Mississippians were under enormous pressure to uphold white supremacy. For example, a white family in McComb named Heffner was forced to leave town after they invited white civil rights workers to dinner.

Mississippi Heats Up

In the early 1960s, the U.S. government was more concerned with the Cold War than with black activists in Mississippi. Tension with the Soviet Union reached a boiling point in October 1962, when the Cuban Missile Crisis brought the two world powers to the brink of nuclear war. But events in Mississippi drew national attention and forced the federal government to confront the situation in the South. Below are three key events that occurred in Mississippi in this period.

Integrating the University of Mississippi: In 1961, a black Mississippi veteran named James Meredith decided to apply to the University of Mississippi to see if the school

The Federal Government in Mississippi

One of COFO's goals was to throw a national spotlight on the racial terror in Mississippi and compel the federal government to act. COFO leaders sought national attention to the systemic racism of Mississippi and federal protection from violence against activists. Because white supremacists could often act without fear of legal consequences in Mississippi, civil rights leaders wanted the federal government to deal with state and local institutions that denied African Americans justice and their rights. They believed that the federal government needed to enforce its laws and uphold the Constitution's Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments.

Although President John F. Kennedy consistently spoke in favor of civil rights, again and again he refused to order federal intervention when white mobs or local police threatened people in Mississippi. Kennedy wanted to protect the United States' international image as the leader of the free world and opponent of Soviet communism. He did not want to send federal troops into the South again (he had sent twenty-three thousand during the integration of the University of Mississippi), because it would call international attention to the racial faultlines and inequalities in the United States. Additionally, Mississippi Senators James Eastland and John Stennis, both strict segregationists, were powerful Democratic legislators. President Kennedy felt he needed their support to pass legislation and wanted to avoid angering them.

President Kennedy directed his administration to support the civil rights movement through voter registration, which he believed would be less likely to lead to violence and confrontation than direct action protests. In 1962, the federal government began supporting the Voter Education Project (VEP), which funded civil rights efforts to increase black voter registration. Through the Civil Rights Division of the Justice Department, the Kennedy administration also sent lawyers to counties across Mississippi to investigate and file lawsuits in cases of voter discrimination. These D.C. lawyers often faced county officials who refused to hand over records or judges who avoided speedy trials. Despite their willingness to fight in the courtrooms for fair voter registration, federal officials remained reluctant to offer African Americans protection from day-to-day violence.

would abide by the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision. When the university rejected his application, the NAACP, under the direction of Medgar Evers, filed a lawsuit against the university for racial discrimination. The U.S. Fifth Circuit Court ruled that Meredith should be admitted to the school. Many white Mississippians were enraged by the decision, and Mississippi Governor Ross Barnett promised to defy the ruling. Attorney General Robert Kennedy had to send five hundred U.S. marshals to Oxford, Mississippi to protect Meredith and allow him to enroll. A riot broke out on the campus when a white mob attacked the federal marshals. Two people were killed in the violence, and hundreds were injured. The Kennedy administration sent twenty-three thousand U.S. troops to Mississippi to stop the riot. The integration of the University of Mississippi made international news.

Leflore County: In 1962, in response to SNCC organizing, the Leflore County government decided to end a program that had provided food to poor families during the winter. SNCC asked for donations, and soon civil rights supporters in northern cities were shipping tons of food to Mississippi for SNCC to distribute. The movement had already begun to make inroads in Leflore, but the urgency of the food drive gave the movement a much-needed lift. The donations connected many new black Mississippians to SNCC, and the local government's decision to cut the food program highlighted the importance of blacks being able to vote. Organizers asked people to fill out voter registration forms before they received food. High numbers of new recruits began taking the voter registration test.

White supremacists responded by burn-

ing down black businesses and shooting at SNCC cars and offices. As tensions in Leflore County heated up in the spring of 1963, SNCC transferred most of its Mississippi staff to Greenwood, the county capital. When 150 black Mississippians marched through Greenwood, local police released dogs and arrested many of the activists.

The Kennedy administration filed a lawsuit against the city of Greenwood, demanding the release of all activists and an end to white interference with voter registration. But the U.S. Justice Department dropped the case after the federal government reached an agreement with the city to release eight SNCC activists. Although the federal government had helped get activists out of jail, many in the movement were angry that it did not stand up for voting rights. They felt the government had abandoned their cause. Even without federal assistance, the voter registration drive continued on through the spring, with twelve to twenty-four people attempting to register every day in Greenwood. Most attempts failed because officials denied or rejected the applications.

The Jackson Movement: In December 1962, the Jackson NAACP announced a boycott of Jackson businesses that refused to hire black employees. The group demanded desegregation of all facilities and fair employment practices. The mayor of Jackson refused to meet any demands and the boycott carried on into the spring of 1963. In May of that year, students and faculty from Tougaloo College, a black college in Jackson, held a sit-in at a segregated lunch counter downtown. They were attacked and beaten by a white mob as the local police and FBI agents stood by.

The event sparked marches, pickets, and other demonstrations across the city. Then on June 12, 1963, a member of the Citizens' Coun-



James Meredith integrates the University of Mississippi in 1962, with federal agents for protection.

Library of Congress. LC-DIG-ppmsca-04292.

cil shot and killed NAACP Field Secretary Medgar Evers at his home.

National NAACP leaders worried that the direct action protests in Jackson were too aggressive and costly. National NAACP Executive Director Roy Wilkins came to Mississippi to scale back the campaign. With support from the Kennedy administration, the national NAACP cut a deal with the mayor of Jackson—the city would hire six black police officers if the movement stopped all major marches. To the frustration of local activists, the original demands for desegregation and the end to racist hiring practices were not met.

What was the Freedom Vote?

By the summer of 1963, thousands of black Mississippians had attempted to register to vote with little success. Violent resistance to black activism was on the rise as the KKK reopened chapters throughout the state. COFO activists decided to try a new tactic in Jackson and Greenwood in order to generate national publicity and force the federal government to protect black Mississippians.

COFO used a little-known state law that said that those who had been denied the right to vote could cast a provisional ballot with a statement of the voter's qualifications. The qualifications would be considered later.

COFO did not expect the votes would ever be fairly considered. The votes were cast as a protest. It was also a way to show the rest of country that, contrary to white Mississippians' claims, black people were anxious to vote.

On the day of the Democratic primary, thousands of black Mississippians went to the polls. In some towns, crowds of whites blocked their way, threatening black voters while police arrested activists. But in Greenwood, between five hundred and seven hundred black voters cast ballots.

“Difficult to capture is the mood of the day—the air of jubilation at going to vote, and the infusion of spirit in the Greenwood staff.”

—Mike Miller, SNCC organizer, 1963

COFO considered repeating the protest during the general election in the fall, but decided that it would be too dangerous. Instead, COFO organized its own statewide mock

election called the “Freedom Vote.” Like the Democratic primary protest, the Freedom Vote would show that the Mississippi elections did not represent the thousands of black voters who were unable to register due to intimidation, fraud, and registration tests. COFO organizers and local Mississippians ran a campaign supporting Aaron Henry (the head of the Mississippi NAACP) for governor, and Rev. Edwin (Ed) King (a white minister involved in the movement) for lieutenant governor. In total, around eighty thousand black Mississippians cast ballots in the Freedom Vote.

Why did Mississippi activists debate whether to allow white students in the movement?

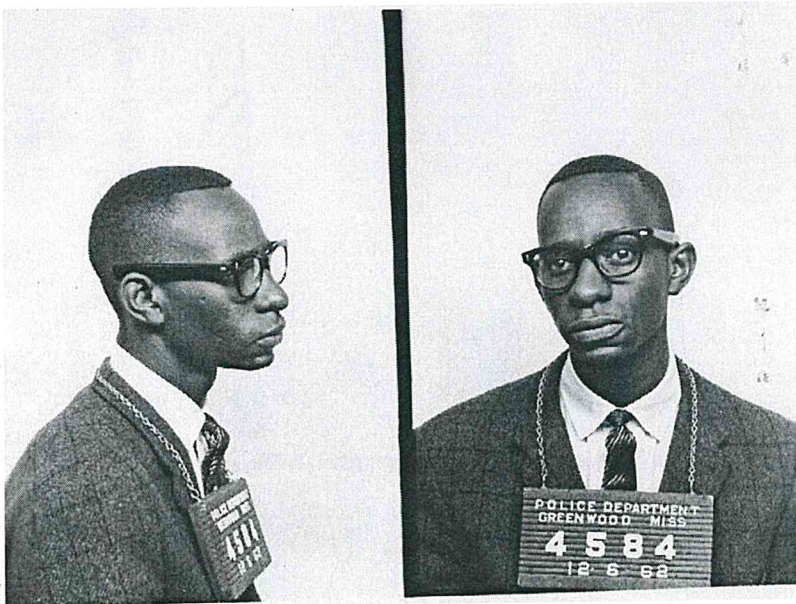
During the Freedom Vote campaign, a group of college students (most of them white) came to Mississippi to volunteer on the campaign. The national media only began covering the Freedom Vote after these college students got involved. Some COFO organizers felt that they should bring even more students to Mississippi the following summer.

“Bring the nation's children, and the parents will have to focus on Mississippi, our thinking ran. And if the parents raised their voices, the political establishment would be forced to listen.”

—Bob Moses, recounting Freedom Summer, 2001

The proposal for a Freedom Summer project involving northern college students sparked a tense debate. Many COFO workers opposed involving so many of these students, most of whom were white and had little experience in the South. They worried that it would take the focus away from local people and the goal of building local leadership. But most local people involved

Mississippi State Sovereignty Commission photograph. Courtesy of Mississippi Department of Archives and History.



Photographs of SNCC Field Secretary Samuel Block after his arrest on December 6, 1962. Throughout the 1960s, Block worked to register black voters in Greenwood, Mississippi, the capital of Leflore County and home of the White Citizens' Council regional headquarters. Imprisoned at least seven times for his civil rights activism, Block, a native Mississippian, was known for his perseverance in a region where the NAACP had previously closed its chapter due to white violence.

in the movement felt that the students could bring much needed publicity and protection to the voter registration work in Mississippi. As white violence increased in early 1964, COFO's leaders moved forward with the Freedom Summer project.

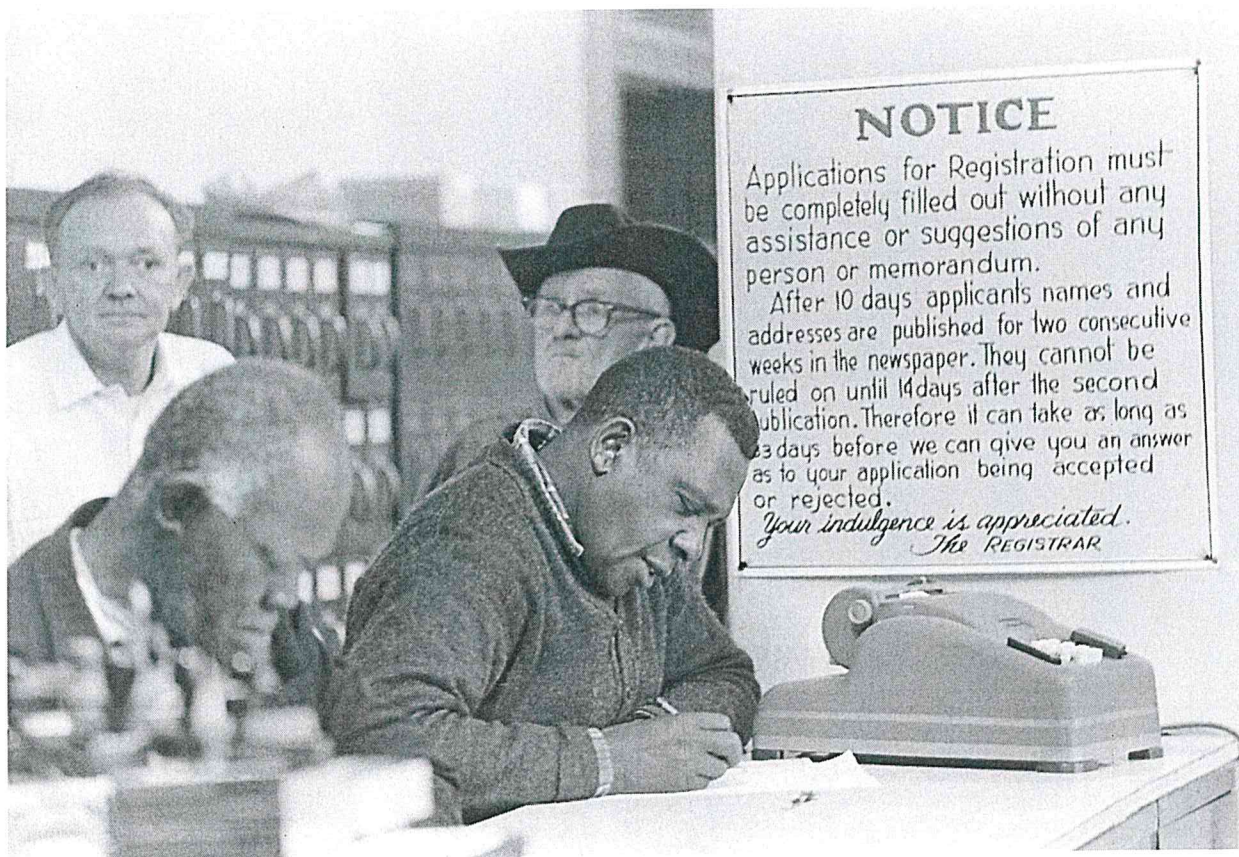
What happened to the Freedom Summer volunteers when they got to Mississippi?

The main goal of Freedom Summer was to register black Mississippians to vote. The project also focused on black education. In all, over eight hundred northern students participated. Although most of them were white, about 10 percent of the volunteers were black northerners. After training in Oxford, Ohio in voter registration tactics, nonviolence, and the

history of Mississippi, the volunteers began the journey south on June 20, 1964.

A day later, tragedy struck. A sheriff in Neshoba County, Mississippi pulled over a car carrying two white activists, Michael "Mickey" Schwerner and Andrew Goodman, and black CORE activist James Chaney. Later that night police turned the three men over to a mob of Klansmen, who executed the activists and buried their bodies in an earthen dam.

At least a dozen black Mississippians had been murdered in recent years, including Medgar Evers, Henry Lee, and Aaron Lewis, but only with the arrival of white student activists from the North did the country begin paying attention to violence against civil rights activists in Mississippi. The FBI dispatched



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Black citizens attempting to register to vote in Hattiesburg, a town in Forrest County, Mississippi, January 22, 1964. Like many counties across Mississippi, Forrest County applied special rules to keep black applicants from registering to vote. In July 1963, a federal court ordered the circuit clerk in Hattiesburg, Theron Lynd, to stop discriminating against African Americans. The court found evidence of Lynd assigning difficult portions of the Mississippi Constitution for black registrants to interpret and leaving his office before he could review applications. At the time of the court case, more than ten thousand whites in the county were registered to vote, versus only fourteen African Americans. In spite of the federal court order, Forrest County's discriminatory practices continued for several more years.

1964 Civil Rights Act

On June 11, 1963, President John F. Kennedy called for federal legislation that would desegregate all public spaces. While most movement participants supported the idea of a Civil Rights Act, many worried that the bill did not offer protection from police brutality or protection for black activists. At the August 1963 March on Washington, SNCC's John Lewis demanded a bill that would also protect black activists and provide relief for the poor people of the South.

“We must have legislation that will protect Mississippi sharecroppers, who have been forced to leave their homes because they dared to exercise their right to vote. We need a bill that will provide for the poor and starving people of this nation.”

—SNCC Chairman John Lewis, 1963

President Kennedy was assassinated on November 22, 1963. The new president, Lyndon Johnson, was determined to pass the civil rights bill. In the face of fervent opposition from white southern senators, President Johnson resisted compromises that would water down the bill and drew on his own experience in Congress to get the bill passed by both houses. Johnson signed the Civil Rights Act into law in July 1964. The bill prohibited segregation of public accommodations and employment discrimination. In the short term, the bill had little effect on Mississippi, which remained a highly segregated state for years to come. But the 1964 Civil Rights Act would prove to be an important piece of civil rights legislation that is still used in legal cases to this day.

hundreds of agents to the state, something it had previously refused to do.

“It’s tragic, as far as I’m concerned, that white northerners have to be caught up in the machinery of injustice and indifference in the South before the American people register concern. I personally suspect that if Mr. Chaney, who is a native Mississippian Negro, had been alone at the time of the disappearance, that this case, like so many others that have come before, would have gone completely unnoticed.”

—Rita Schwerner, wife of Michael Schwerner, summer 1964

The murder of two middle-class white students brought national media to Mississippi and forced the federal government to investigate. Despite the FBI’s presence in Mississippi that summer, racist violence against black Mississippians continued.

“We most certainly do not and will not give protection to civil rights workers. In the first place, the FBI is not a police organization. It’s purely an investigative organization, and the protection of individual citizens, either natives of this state or coming into the state, is a matter for the local authorities. The FBI will not participate in any such protection.”

—J. Edgar Hoover, director of the FBI,
July 10, 1964

During Freedom Summer, there were at least three additional murders, thirty-five shootings, and sixty-five bombings or burnings of black homes and churches. White business owners fired employees that participated in the project, and local police arrested over one thousand movement activists. Countless others were beaten.

Despite the threat of violence, Freedom Summer carried on, and COFO used the additional volunteers to expand its work into many communities previously unexposed to the movement.

Although black Mississippians had many reasons to distrust white people, most welcomed the northern volunteers with warmth and hospitality. The white students usually treated the local Mississippians with respect, and had a desire to learn from more experienced organizers. Although the presence of white students was a source of tension, by and large black Mississippians and northern volunteers worked well together with mutual admiration during the Freedom Summer project.



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August 1, 1964. Edie Black (right) teaches at a Freedom School in Mileston, Mississippi, a community of independent black farmers in the Mississippi Delta. The Freedom Schools taught academic subjects like math, English, science, and social studies that were often not taught to blacks in Mississippi schools.

What were the Freedom Schools?

After witnessing the inequality of the Mississippi education system, SNCC Field Secretary Charlie Cobb suggested using the summer project volunteers to improve black education in Mississippi. Throughout the summer, COFO staff and volunteers developed schools across the state to serve black students of all ages. One goal of the Freedom Schools was to develop young leaders for the civil rights struggle. The Freedom Schools were designed to empower black youth to be critical thinkers and politically active citizens.

“[The goal is] to fill an intellectual and creative vacuum in the lives of young Negro Mississippians, and to get them to articulate their own desires, demands, and questions...to stand up in classrooms around the state and ask their teachers a real question.... [This] will make it possible for them to challenge the myths of our society, to perceive more clearly its realities and to find alternatives and ultimately, new directions for action.”

—Charlie Cobb, 1963

By summer’s end, about 2,500 students were enrolled in almost fifty schools across Mississippi. The Freedom Schools opened young Mississippians’ eyes to new possibilities, and raised their expectations for a better future. The schools also showed that the movement could create its own institutions to support the black community in Mississippi.

What was the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party?

As part of Freedom Summer, COFO established its own multiracial party—the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party (MFDP or sometimes FDP). The goal of the MFDP was to represent the black citizens that were excluded from the all-white Democratic Party. It also hoped to represent poor whites, whose views were also not represented by that party.

Following the success of the Freedom Vote in 1963, COFO decided to challenge the all-white Mississippi Democratic Party at the 1964 Democratic National Convention in Atlantic City, New Jersey. They wanted to send the MFDP delegation to win political recognition for black Mississippians, and force the

national Democratic Party to acknowledge that the all-white Democratic Party in Mississippi did not, and therefore should not, represent Mississippi.

“[W]e can’t get past these people at the state level because they lock us out. But we just know that once we get to the national level, with all the proof that we have been locked out and the fact that we’ve had the courage to go ahead and create our own party, then we feel like we are going to get that representation that we’ve been denied for so long.”

—Victoria Gray Adams, SNCC activist

What was the political atmosphere in the United States during the summer of 1964?

It was nearly certain the Democratic Party would nominate President Lyndon Johnson to run for president at the Atlantic City convention in August 1964. Johnson, who had assumed the presidency after Kennedy’s assassination, wanted the convention to be a show of unity and support for his candidacy.

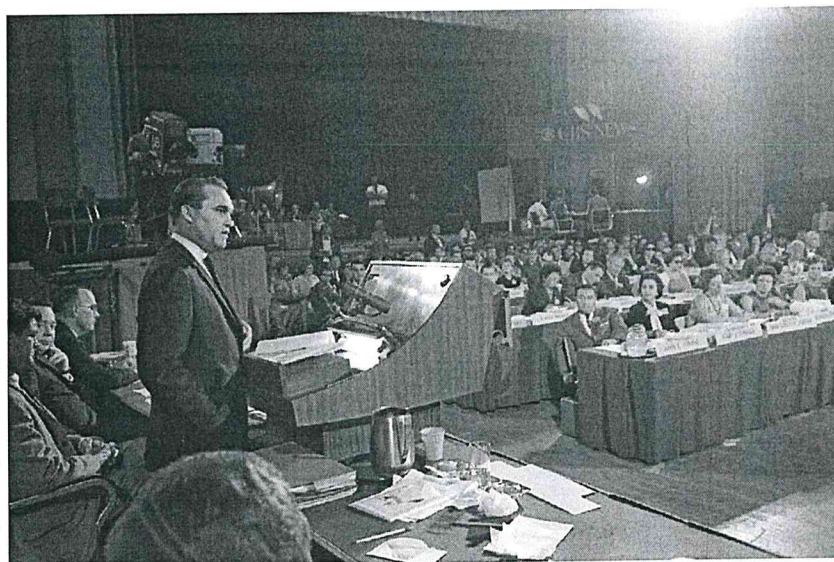
The country had rallied together following the assassination of President Kennedy. Nevertheless, as 1964 progressed, the racial

divisions in the country were gaining more attention. Freedom Summer had focused the country’s attention on the civil rights movement in Mississippi, but racial strife wasn’t limited to Mississippi or the South. After a white police officer shot and killed a young black man in Harlem, New York, violent protests erupted in July. Demonstrations and violence also spread to other northern cities as African Americans protested their treatment at the hands of whites as well as unequal economic and social conditions. And although 60 percent of U.S. citizens supported civil rights legislation according to polls, nearly the same percentage thought that the pace of racial integration was moving too quickly.

It was in this heated atmosphere that the Democratic National Convention began. Many sensed that a moment of change was looming and that the country was on the verge of a new era. Some hoped to provoke change, others wanted to prevent it. The MFDP had come to Atlantic City seeking justice and to bring attention to its cause. National civil right leaders believed that another term in the White House for Lyndon Johnson would bring progress for African Americans. The all-white Mississippi delegation felt betrayed by the Democratic Party they had supported for nearly one hundred years. And President Lyndon Johnson was

within reach of a dream: his nomination by his party for the presidency of the United States.

These competing forces would collide over four days at a political convention filled with drama and unexpected turns. The result would change the course of U.S. politics and history.



Alabama Governor George Wallace at the Democratic National Convention. Wallace was a strong opponent of civil rights.

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