

UNIVERSITY HONORS PROGRAM

SENIOR PROJECT - PROSPECTUS

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PROJECT TITLE: "The Civil Rights President and the MFDP Dispute. Did Lyndon Johnson Betray the Civil Rights Movement?"

PROJECT DESCRIPTION (Attach not more than one additional page, if necessary):

I am researching Lyndon Johnson's role and reasoning behind the deliberate "detrailing" of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party's efforts to be seated as delegates at the 1964 Democratic Convention in place of the all-white state delegation. Research will be done at UT and also at the Lyndon B. Johnson Presidential Library to explore Johnson, Hubert Humphreys, Robert Kennedy, Robert Moses, Fannie Lou Hamer, etc.

Projected completion date: August 1999

Signed: [Signature]

I have discussed this research proposal with this student and agree to serve in an advisory role, as faculty mentor, and to certify the acceptability of the completed project.

Signed: [Signature] Faculty Mentor

Date: 4/26/99

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University Honors Senior Project

**The Civil Rights President and the MFDP Dispute: Did Lyndon
Johnson Betray the Civil Rights Movement?**

By: Heath Clark

August 5, 1999

The Civil Rights President and the MFDP Dispute: Did Lyndon Johnson Betray the Civil Rights Movement?

Lyndon B. Johnson is heralded as the Civil Rights President. This title is deserved considering that during his term he is credited with the passage of such bills as the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965. There is, however, a troublesome paradox in the civil rights legacy of this President. This paradox surrounds Johnson's handling of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party's (MFDP) appeal to replace the racist Mississippi Democratic delegation at the Democratic National Convention of 1964. During this controversy, Johnson worked furiously behind the scenes to make sure that the MFDP did not get seated at the convention. Johnson felt his election was the best bet African Americans had for advancing their platform and he perceived the MFDP challenge as a threat to his election chances. His work behind the scenes was an effort to secure the election and to give civil rights four years of executive, legislative, and judicial privilege in Washington. In protecting his long term goal of a Great Society, however, Johnson betrayed the ideals of justice, equality, and democracy that his goal intended to protect.

There was no place in America where Johnson's vision for a Great Society was farther away than in Mississippi. Mississippi's entire society was constructed to keep the black population dependant to the white population. What rights blacks had won in the Civil War were reduced to memories when Reconstruction came to an end. When the state rewrote its Constitution after Reconstruction, disenfranchisement of the black population was at its very core.¹ The white establishment knew that political exclusion

¹ John Dittmer. *Local People: The Struggle for Civil Rights in Mississippi*. (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1994), p. 13.

was the key to getting African-Americans ‘back in their place.’ From there, blacks were reduced from active participants in the political and economic spheres of society to a status that was little better than slaves. As the twentieth century progressed in years, white Mississippi rebuilt the caste system that left it with near absolute authority over the state’s black population. As one white landowner told the black family he had just evicted, “Your food, your work and your very lives depend on good-heartedened [sic] white people.”²

The “good-heartedened white people” of Mississippi had thrust the black population into deplorable poverty. In 1960, the mean annual income for a black family in Mississippi was \$1,444, which was the lowest in the nation.³ The system of labor that dominated the Mississippi landscape greatly contributed to the poverty of the people. Most people were domestic laborers, sharecroppers, or independent farmers struggling to survive. Sharecroppers often got caught in a vicious cycle landowners used to keep them in debt. The cycle consisted of lending the sharecroppers money to plant, and paying only a fraction of the market price for the crops grown. There was little hope of escaping this cycle. A few did, but they were often the victims of violence. Reverend Isaac Simmons was one such victim. Reverend Simmons owned 220 acres of debt free land near the town of Liberty, Mississippi. In 1944, rumors that oil was discovered on his land prompted local whites to ask for his land, but he refused to give it up. A man named Noble Ryder shot Reverend Simmons three times and cut his tongue out in front of the Reverend’s son, Eldridge. Eldridge reluctantly gave up the land, and he filed

² Charles M. Payne. *I’ve Got the Light of Freedom: The Organizing Tradition and the Mississippi Freedom Struggle*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), p.2.

³ Doug McAdam. *Freedom Summer*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), p.25.

charges against Ryder and his accomplices in an effort to obtain justice. The men involved in the killing were promptly acquitted.⁴

In addition to the labor system employed to keep black Mississippians subservient, the educational system helped ensure they would remain so. It was designed to keep field workers available during planting and picking seasons, which meant that African-American youths did not go to school from March until November. Also, when they did go to school, the conditions were deplorable. In 1964, Mississippi spent \$81.86 a year on a white student and only \$21.77 a year on a black student. It is important to note that that is the average amount per student. In extreme cases, such as the town of Holly Hill, white students received \$191.70 and black students received \$1.26.⁵ Mississippi kept black students poor and ignorant as well as dependent.

As if this was not a sufficient check on the threat blacks posed to the status quo, white Mississippi hemmed them in politically. The most important step in this process was to take away their vote. In 1955, there were only 12,000 blacks registered to vote in the entire state.⁶ Various tactics were employed to prevent registration and also to remove those already on the roles. The poll tax and grandfather clauses managed to keep many away, but for those who attempted to register, there was the literacy test. Most of Mississippi's blacks were, at best, semi-literate, so this obstacle was formidable.⁷ The applicant was not only required to read, but also interpret one section of Mississippi's

⁴Dittmer, p. 15.

⁵ McAdam, p.25.

⁶ Dittmer, p.70.

⁷ Payne, p.115.

constitution.⁸ Since it was the responsibility of the registrar to determine if the applicant had given an appropriate response, very few blacks met the requirements.

If the institutional obstacles were not enough to keep someone from attempting to step outside the caste system, there were always threats of violent reprisals. In 1946, Mississippi Senator Theodore Bilbo made preventing the black vote the major issue in his successful bid for reelection. When urging crowds to prevent blacks from voting he would say “you and I know what’s the best way to keep the nigger from voting. You do it the night before the election. I don’t have to tell you any more than that. Red-blooded men know what I mean.”⁹ Unfortunately, the crowd knew and had known for some time what the senator meant. Between 1880 and 1940 almost six hundred blacks were lynched in Mississippi alone.¹⁰ Ten others were lynched between 1956 and 1959.¹¹ It was also known that there was no redress for these crimes. Any white person accused of killing a black person in Mississippi would walk. The local police often cooperated with Ku Klux Klan, and the judges were rarely sympathetic to victims of these crimes.¹² What happened in the case of Reverend Simmons would happen every time.

In addition to threats of violence, there were the threats of economic and legal retribution. If someone attempted to register to vote, the individual’s name was printed in the newspaper. Those who escaped violent attacks were likely to lose their jobs, be evicted or both.¹³ Also, those who stepped ‘out of line’ could expect to be arrested and fined for senseless charges and traffic offenses such as not yielding far enough in advance

⁸ Dittmer, p. 71.

⁹ *Ibid.* p.2.

¹⁰ *Ibid.* p.13.

¹¹ *Ibid.* p.79.

¹² Mary King, *Freedom Song: A Personal Story of the 1960s Civil Rights Movement*. (New York: William Morrow, 1987), p. 52.

¹³ Kay Mills. *This Little Light of Mine: The Life of Fannie Lou Hamer*. (New York: Dutton, 1993), p.48.

of a turn. The circumstances in Mississippi left the people with a “debilitating fatalism” and with little hope of improving their situation.¹⁴

This situation began to change, though, when the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) began voter registration programs in 1961. As Fannie Lou Hamer put it, “They brought every hope into the state of Mississippi.”¹⁵ There was finally an organization that told the poor sharecroppers and domestic laborers that they could vote and participate in society, and it was there to teach them how.

The catalyst for the hope that came to Mississippi was a young Harvard philosophy student named Robert Paris Moses. He came to the state in 1961 to work on voter registration. Moses began his civil rights work in Atlanta stuffing envelopes for the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC). His stay, however, was brief as he left at the urging of fellow SCLC staffers Ella Baker and Jane Stenbridge to battle disenfranchisement in the Deep South with SNCC.¹⁶ Moses and the SNCC staff spent two years of wearisome work trying to educate and register voters with little real success. In 1963 they decided to hold a mock election during the regular state election to showcase the potential power of the black electorate. Enduring violent reprisals from white Mississippi, over 83,000 people cast their “Freedom Votes” to elect NAACP staff member Aaron Henry governor, and white SNCC staff member Ed King to Lieutenant Governor.¹⁷ The Freedom Vote in 1963 laid the foundation for the events of the following summer.

¹⁴ McAdam, p.28.

¹⁵ Mills p.41.

¹⁶ Clayborne Carson. *In Struggle: SNCC and the Black Awakening of the 1960s*. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981), p. 26.

¹⁷ Dittmer, p. 200-5.

The summer of 1964, or Freedom Summer as it came to be known, focused on forcing a showdown between the federal government and Mississippi. SNCC wanted to compel the Justice Department and the FBI to become actively involved in protecting the rights of United States citizens living in Mississippi.¹⁸ To do this, Moses proposed bringing one thousand white students from prestigious universities and families into Mississippi to help with voter registration efforts and to teach in “Freedom Schools.”¹⁹ He hoped their presence would bring about the desired confrontation between the federal government and the Mississippi authorities. SNCC president John Lewis hoped that “out of this conflict, this division, this chaos, will come something positive.”²⁰

SNCC and those involved in Freedom Summer soon learned that any positive results that would come out of Freedom Summer would come at enormous costs. On June 22, 1964, as a group of volunteers preparing for Mississippi were being trained in Oxford, Ohio, news came that three project workers were missing from the night before. Andrew Goodman, a white volunteer from New York, James Chaney, a local black project worker, and Michael Schwerner, a white SNCC staff member, went to Philadelphia, Mississippi to check on the status of the Neshoba County project. When they failed to report in that night, SNCC veteran staff feared the worst. The three workers had been arrested for a minor traffic violation in Philadelphia, and were released later that evening. Shortly after being released from jail that evening, they were abducted by the KKK. They were beaten, shot, and buried in an earthen dam somewhere in remote Neshoba County.²¹

¹⁸ Carson, p.96.

¹⁹ *Ibid.* p.98.

²⁰ *Ibid.* p.99.

²¹ Dittmer, p.246-7.

The fate of the three workers was not known until August 4 of the same summer.²² Their disappearance, though, brought the media's spotlight onto the summer project and inequalities present in Mississippi. The extremely negative press was embarrassing to both the state and the nation. It was this bad press that forced the state and federal authorities to act. The state, as expected, was reluctant to act. Initially, the state accused SNCC of staging the workers' disappearance as a publicity stunt.²³ This was a typical response to reports of violence against civil rights activists. Activists were often accused of and charged with shooting into their own homes or bombing their own buildings. The governor also responded with indifference. Rita Schwerner, the wife of Michael Schwerner, tried to speak to the governor on two different occasions. The first was in the executive office, but when she asked to see him, the doors to his office were hurriedly shut and the governor conveniently disappeared. She later tried to speak with him at his residence. As Governor Paul Johnson approached, in the company of Alabama governor George Wallace, Rita stepped forward with Reverend Ed King and Bob Zellner. The Governor extended his hand to greet Zellner, but quickly pulled it away when he recognized Rita. The two governors hurried inside and the doors were locked. State troopers standing guard refused to even deliver a hand-written note.²⁴

What the state did was allow the FBI to investigate without interference. The attention surrounding the disappearance of the three workers compelled President Johnson to order the FBI to infiltrate the Klan and bring the murderers to justice, which

²² *Ibid.* p.283.

²³ Michael R. Beschloss, ed. *Taking Charge: The Johnson White House Tapes, 1963-1964* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1997) p.432. LBJ's conversation with Mississippi Senator James O. Eastland on Tuesday, June 23, 1964.

²⁴ King, p. 390-1.

they did.²⁵ The President and the Justice Department had previously maintained that protection of civil rights workers was not the jurisdiction of the FBI. In other cases of violence against civil rights activists, the FBI literally sat back and took notes as people were beaten and arrested. President Johnson made them take action, though, in the case of Goodman, Chaney, and Schwerner, and later in the summer he would do the same to serve his own needs.

The white volunteers brought the needed attention to the state, but they did not help improve the state's registration record. During the summer of 1964, over 17,000 blacks attempted to register to vote in the state Democratic Party, but only 1,600 were successful.²⁶ Mississippi had a long history of denying blacks the vote and justice, and the state did not seem deterred by increasing federal intervention. The prospect of bringing social changes to the state by using the state Democratic Party was hopeless. SNCC and the Council of Federated Organizations (COFO) turned to the MFDP to try to bring about the desired changes in Mississippi and across the nation.

The MFDP took root on April 26, 1964, in Jackson, Mississippi.²⁷ This predominantly black political party was closely associated with SNCC and COFO in attempting to mobilize the black population in Mississippi during the summer of 1964. The founders of the MFDP hoped that the party would become an alternative to the regular Democratic Party which showed no sign of embracing the African-American or his agenda. The white volunteers and the SNCC staff poured their time and energy into registering people into the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party, and through voter

²⁵ Beschloss, p.425. LBJ's conversation with Lee White, Associate Counsel to the President, on Tuesday, June 23, 1964.

²⁶ Carson, p.117.

registration campaigns across the state, COFO and SNCC funneled around forty thousand African-Americans into the MFDP.²⁸

The leadership of SNCC felt the MFDP was a tool that could be used to gain leverage within the political “structure” of America in order to gain accommodations for African Americans within the structure.²⁹ Also, through the MFDP, SNCC hoped to realign the Democratic Party and its liberals to build a political coalition of whites and blacks.³⁰ This coalition would build a political power that would strive to liberate both blacks and poor whites through political “aggitations,” [sic] such as voter registration and education campaigns.³¹ The most ambitious of the MFDP’s agitations was its plan to send a delegation to the Democratic National Convention in Atlantic City to challenge the seating of the lily-white delegation chosen by the state Democratic Party.³² The MFDP produced the desired results.

In selecting the delegates to represent the MFDP in Atlantic City, the rules of the National Democratic Party were followed precisely. The MFDP precinct and county elections were often held at locations where the state party had announced the delegate selections would take place. It was common for the state party to move the locations and cancel the meetings to prevent blacks from attempting to participate. The selection of the delegates and alternates started with precinct elections, then county, and culminated at the

²⁷ Interview with Fannie Lou Hamer, 2 September 1967. Emily Stoper, *The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee: The Growth of Radicalism in a Civil Rights Organization* (1968; rpt. Brooklyn: Carlson, 1989), p. 306.

²⁸ William L. O’Neill, *Coming Apart: An Informal History of America in the 1960’s* (New York: Times Books, 1971), p. 166.

²⁹ Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) Papers, 1959-1972 (U.M.I.) vol. 2, Staff Meeting Minutes; June 9, 1964, p.5.

³⁰ *Ibid.* p.4.

³¹ *Ibid.* p.5.

³² Alexander Bloom and Wini Breines, eds., *Takin’ It to the Streets: A Sixties Reader* (New York: Oxford, 1995) p.34.

state MFDP convention in Jackson. It was in Jackson where sixty-two delegates and alternates were elected to go to New Jersey for the Democratic National Convention. The election of the delegates did far more than simply choose who would get to go to Atlantic City. It was also a process that politicized a segment of the population that had not been allowed to participate in even the most basic of political freedoms. The farmers and domestic laborers who risked their very lives to try to vote learned how the political process worked. They became educated and empowered by their new knowledge. They took ownership in what they were trying to accomplish and embraced the ideals of equality, justice, and democracy, that for the first time, seemed within reach.

The white population also sensed the significance of what the MFDP was doing, and they reacted with the weapons that had worked for years: violence and the threat of violence. Municipalities across the state prepared for war. The mayor of Jackson, Allen Thompson, budgeted \$2.2 million dollars for the build-up of the city's police force. Among other things, he bought 200 new shotguns, added 60 more riot-trained police to his task force of 390, and prepared a detention center capable of holding 25,000 people. His most famous item was a "13,000-pound battlewagon" nicknamed Thompson's Tank.³³ Thompson told Newsweek magazine that his city was "going to be ready for them...They won't have a chance."³⁴ Those involved in Freedom Summer also experienced escalated violence from vigilante groups such as the Klan. During the summer of 1964 alone, there were four project workers killed, four workers critically wounded, eighty workers beaten, one thousand arrested, thirty-seven churches bombed or

³³ McAdam, p.28.

³⁴ *Ibid.* p.28.

burned, and thirty black homes or businesses bombed or burned.³⁵ The political exclusion and violence that continued throughout the summer failed to have the desired effect. Instead of deterring local blacks from becoming involved, it strengthened their resolve. Sensing the opportunity for justice, the MFDP, convinced of its righteousness, traveled to Atlantic City.

The battle over the seating was to be fought in the Convention Credentials Committee. The MFDP hired a longtime Democratic insider and president of the influential Americans for Democratic Action (ADA), Joseph Rauh, as their counsel. The leaders of the MFDP and Joseph Rauh anticipated a fierce battle with the Convention Credentials Committee over the seating issue and set forth moral, legal, and political reasons why the MFDP should replace the all-white delegation at the Convention. Those who testified on behalf of the MFDP were Aaron Henry, Ed King, Fannie Lou Hamer, Rita Schwerner, the NAACP's Roy Wilkins, and Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.³⁶ The moral reasoning hinged on the testimonies of Mrs. Hamer and Mrs. Rita Schwerner. Mrs. Hamer told the Credentials Committee of her expulsion from her home for attempting to register to vote, her arrest, and her beating from black inmates upon the orders of the white officers.³⁷ She told the committee and a national audience that she received all of this persecution because she wanted to be a "first-class citizen" and live as a "decent human being in America."³⁸ Mrs. Schwerner, the widow of Michael Schwerner, also hit an emotional nerve in the nation when she told of the total disregard Mississippi Governor Paul Johnson had for her loss and recalled his efforts to avoid speaking with

³⁵ *Ibid.* p. 96.

³⁶ *Ibid.* p.117-121.

³⁷ "Remarks of Mrs. Fanny Lou Hamer," Bloom and Breines, p. 41-2.

³⁸ *Ibid.* p. 42-3.

her. She also condemned the governor and the state for their unwillingness to investigate her husband's disappearance.³⁹

The legal arguments rested on the white delegation's refusal to conform to the party's national regulation requiring "openness to membership without ethnic or racial banners."⁴⁰ The state party blatantly ignored this regulation by continuing to hold white primaries in most parts of the state and continuing to administer the unfair voter registration tests. The MFDP also cited state violations of Title 18, Section 594 of the United States Code for using police arrest powers to intimidate blacks that wanted to vote.⁴¹ It was not unusual for those attempting to register to be forced into long lines at the courthouses. If they stepped out of line for any reason they could be arrested. In addition, the political debate centered on the Mississippi State Democratic Party's disloyalty to the National Democratic platform and ticket. Several state party members actually hoped to be thrown out of the convention. Many expressed contempt for the late John F. Kennedy, Lyndon Johnson, and the Democratic Party while supporting Republican opponent Barry Goldwater.⁴² Goldwater, a supporter of the use of nuclear weapons in Vietnam, opposed the Civil Rights Act of 1964, Social Security, and federally mandated integration.⁴³ He felt that an individual's right to discriminate and a state's right to segregate were integral parts of guaranteed liberty under the Constitution.⁴⁴ Also, some of the State party's ideas were quite extreme. One of the proposed ideas was the mandatory teaching of *Race and Reason* in public high schools. This exposition of racist

³⁹ "Remarks of Mrs. Rita Schwerner," Bloom and Breines, pp. 44-45.

⁴⁰ Bloom and Breines, p.34.

⁴¹ SNCC Papers, 1959-1972 (U.M.I.) vol. 1. Letter from John Lewis to Congressman Jamie L Whitten. p.1.

⁴² SNCC Papers, 1959-1972 (U.M.I.) vol. 2. Speech by John Lewis p.26.

⁴³ David Farber, *The Age of Great Dreams: America in the Sixties* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1994) pp. 98, 101.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.* p.101.

theories was viewed by many intransigent white supremacists as the authoritative work on race relations.⁴⁵ Other ideas floated by the state party Democrats were the involuntary sterilization of the parents of illegitimate children and the passage of a vague criminal syndicalism statute that would be used to suppress Civil Rights groups.⁴⁶

Given the moral, legal, and political reasons the MFDP had for being seated, the members felt they were an attractive alternative to the all-white Mississippi delegation. Many, such as John Lewis, president of SNCC, felt the MFDP had a legitimate chance to be seated.⁴⁷ Others, such as Fannie Lou Hamer, did not expect to be seated, but did expect *something* to be gained in Atlantic City.⁴⁸ That *something* that Mrs. Hamer spoke of was not mere acknowledgement, but justice in the courts, inclusion in the democratic process, and acceptance of the phrase “all men are created equal.”

Despite the federal governments repeated failures to guarantee justice in Mississippi, the MFDP found it hard not to get their hopes up in Atlantic City. One reason for this was that they knew that they were right. Unita Blackwell, a member of SNCC’s staff from Mississippi, “really thought [the MFDP] was going to get seated”⁴⁹ because of the truth of the message they brought to the rest of the country. The hope that their knowledge of the truth brought them also hinged on the naïve belief that America would correct societal ills once confronted with them. Also, counsel for the MFDP, Joseph Rauh, seemed to think their chances of being seated were good. He felt a fight over the seating of the MFDP was won *if* it reached the floor.⁵⁰

⁴⁵ *Ibid.* p.22.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.* p.22.

⁴⁷ Interview with John Lewis, no date. Stoper, p. 234.

⁴⁸ Interview with Hamer, Stoper p.306.

⁴⁹ Mills, p 115.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.* p. 111.

To get to the floor, Rauh devised the “eleven and eight” strategy.⁵¹ For a vote on the seating of the MFDP to go to the convention floor, eleven of the one hundred and ten credentials committee delegates had to vote in favor of such a motion. Once the motion reached the floor, only eight states were needed to support the measure for a roll call vote to be ordered. Such a vote required each state publicly support either the MFDP or the segregated state delegation. Rauh believed northern states with large black populations would be hard-pressed to support segregationists. Also, Rauh cited a 1944 precedent of seating both parties when delegation seats were in dispute.⁵² He knew if this compromise were offered, the regular delegation would walk out of the convention. Such a scenario would leave the MFDP as the lone representative of all Mississippi.⁵³

Giving credibility to Rauh’s optimism was early support in the convention for the challengers from Mississippi. Before the convention, states such as New York and Michigan passed resolutions in support of the MFDP challenge. The ADA and Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. did the same. Even more encouraging was the fact that twenty-five Democratic congressmen signed their names to a document which stated that “elementary justice” required that the MFDP be seated.⁵⁴ The truth of their message, the optimism of their counsel, and the initial support was enough to raise the hopes of even the most skeptical of MFDP delegates.

To Lyndon Johnson, however, the MFDP’s trip to Atlantic City was far from a moral crusade to benefit African-Americans. It was a trip that, if successful, would take African-Americans back to their status during Reconstruction by inciting political and

⁵¹*Ibid.* p 112

⁵² In 1944, two delegations from Texas competed at the Democratic National Convention to be seated. President Roosevelt said to seat them both. Mills, p. 117.

⁵³*Ibid.* p. 117.

social backlash that could halt and even reverse the Civil Rights movement.⁵⁵ Johnson feared the backlash might be severe enough to cost him the election, the support he needed in Congress for his agenda, or both. He felt that his agenda was crucial to the advancement of the African-American cause. Thus, he thought that seating the MFDP instead of the Mississippi delegation would harm and not help this cause.

The election of 1964 came at a delicate time in American politics, and Johnson was keenly aware of the situation in which he found himself. He inherited the presidency after John F. Kennedy's assassination, and this left him in Kennedy's political shadow going into the election. He also inherited Kennedy's cabinet which was hostile at best towards Johnson. Johnson told Texas governor John Connally that this tension caused him considerable "agony."⁵⁶ In addition to the political backlash Johnson received from the passage of the Civil Rights Act in June, there were pressures of the Cold War, Vietnam, and riots in American cities.⁵⁷ Even the traditionally Democratic South was beginning to look outside the party for answers to their concerns. The issues of race and desegregation had left the Democratic Party in an uneasy coalition between its northern and southern members. Southern states were still firmly entrenched in a segregated society, while their northern colleagues were pushing ahead with legislation and programs to bring the segregated way of life to an end. To have to take a public stand either way could be detrimental to what remained of party unity. Johnson felt the success of his agenda depended on pulling the country together and consolidating regional and racial support. To Johnson, the MFDP threatened to rip it apart.

⁵⁴ Dittmer, p. 286.

⁵⁵ Beschloss, p.526. LBJ conversation with Walter Reuther, president of the United AutoWorkers, on Monday, August 24, 1964. p.526.

During private Oval Office conversations, Johnson told Hubert Humphrey, John Connally, and Walter Jenkins that the South was the section of the country that worried him the most.⁵⁸ He was from the South, but the liberal politics he pursued tended to push the conservative Deep South away. The only thing he had to offer this part of the country was the campaign ticket of a Southern President and his choice for Vice-president, and even this had potential to alienate the South.⁵⁹ Carl Vinson,⁶⁰ a respected Southern Democrat, warned Johnson that the South could not handle another civil rights advocate when he learned of the rumor that Hubert Humphrey might get the Vice-presidential bid. Johnson felt the South, especially his home state of Texas, should support him. Johnson told Walter Jenkins that the prospect of begging for the Southern vote seemed to him like begging on the street for a cup of coffee.⁶¹ The MFDP controversy, consequentially, threatened to put the South out of Johnson's reach. He feared that if the MFDP was recognized, the South and several border states would vote in favor of Goldwater. Johnson desired and needed the support of the South, and they were already threatening to abandon him and the party. He explained to Hubert Humphrey that he viewed the recognition of the MFDP as Goldwater's "blank check" for fifteen Southern and border states.⁶² Johnson acknowledged to James Rowe that he would lose Mississippi and probably a couple other deep South States, but he wanted to protect his support in southern states like Georgia and Texas as well as border states like Oklahoma and

⁵⁸Beschloss, p.470. LBJ's conversation with John Connally, Governor of Texas, on Thursday, July 23, 1964.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.* p.469.

⁶⁰ Beschloss, p.472. LBJ's conversation with Senate Majority Whip and vice-presidential hopeful Hubert Humphrey on Thursday, July 23, 1964.

⁶¹ Beschloss, p.470. LBJ's conversation with Connally on Thursday, July 23, 1964.

⁶² Beschloss, p.517. Note: Carl Vinson was the House Armed Services Committee Chairman.

⁶³ Beschloss, p.531. LBJ's conversation with Walter Jenkins, Special Assistant to the President, on Thursday, August 25, 1964.

Kentucky.⁶³ Finally, he needed the cooperation of the South's congressional Democrats who chaired numerous key committees vital to his Great Society legislation. Johnson's acknowledgement of the MFDP would alienate the South even farther and end hopes of cooperation between him and the congressmen who opposed him.⁶⁴

The MFDP also brought Johnson grief from the North. Many Northerners were appalled at the treatment of blacks in Mississippi, and states such as Ohio, New York, and Michigan had large African-American populations who would not tolerate their states supporting Mississippi.⁶⁵ The Northern support for the MFDP, however, was far from unanimous. Johnson told Walter Reuther about the calls and letters he received in which he was reportedly "catching hell" from Northern constituents who felt that the "Negroes" had taken over the country and were running the White House and the Democratic Party.⁶⁶ If the Mississippi delegation was to be unseated by the MFDP, the impression in the North and the South would be that "the niggers kicked them out."⁶⁷ Johnson feared a mass flight from the Democratic Party from across the country. He told Walter Reuther that he wanted congressmen elected who would protect the Civil Rights Act of 1964 passed just two months earlier. A mass flight from the Democratic Party might have endangered the hard-fought bill.⁶⁸ It was clear that if the issue was brought to the Convention floor for a vote that Johnson would suffer political fall-out in the North, the South, and wherever the white population feared a "takeover" by African Americans.

⁶² Beschloss, p.516. LBJ's conversation with Humphrey on Friday, August 14, 1964.

⁶³ Beschloss . p.485. LBJ's conversation with James Rowe on Thursday, July 30, 1964.

⁶⁴ Mills, p. 114.

⁶⁵ Beschloss, p.516. LBJ's conversation with Hubert Humphrey on Friday, August 14, 1964.

⁶⁶ Beschloss, p.527. LBJ's conversation with Reuther on Monday, August 24, 1964.

⁶⁷ Beschloss, p.469. LBJ's conversation with Connally on Thursday, July 23, 1964.

⁶⁸ Beschloss p.510. LBJ's conversation with Walter Reuther on Sunday, August 9, 1964.

The extent and severity of the expected backlash, however, was solely speculative. For Johnson, though, speculation was all he needed to justify his actions.

While the foreseen political fall-out accounts for a great deal of Johnson's reluctance to support the MFDP, it cannot account for all of it. He also had some personal reservations and suspicions about the MFDP that helped justify his campaign against them. First of all, Johnson had been trying to get out of the shadow of his slain predecessor, but the late President's brother, Robert, always seemed to be breathing down Johnson's neck. Johnson was envious of Robert Kennedy's popularity and resentful of him being pushed as the Vice-presidential favorite.⁶⁹ He also knew that Kennedy did not like him, and Johnson always carried around a lingering suspicion of Kennedy. When the MFDP broke onto the scene, Johnson suspected Kennedy of starting the whole movement.⁷⁰ With no real evidence to support his suspicions, Johnson, during separate private conversations at the White House with Bill Moyers, Richard Russell, and Walter Jenkins, accused Kennedy of setting a trap with the MFDP to damage Johnson's chances of being elected.⁷¹ Johnson's suspicions were probably the result of Kennedy's known ambition to be president and Kennedy's dealings with Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. To show just how misguided Johnson was in his suspicions, it is important to note that Martin Luther King, Jr. had nothing to do with MFDP challenge until it reached Atlantic City. Nevertheless, these suspicions greatly undermined the credibility of the MFDP in Johnson's mind.

⁶⁹ Beschloss, p.470. LBJ's conversation with Connally on Thursday, July 23, 1964. Johnson, commenting on reasons for not wanting Robert Kennedy for Vice-President, said he "didn't want to have to kiss the ass of a Vice President." p. 485. LBJ's conversation with Washington Attorney James Rowe on Thursday, July 30, 1964.

⁷⁰ Beschloss, p.467. LBJ's conversation with John Connally on Thursday, July 23, 1964.

Another reason that Johnson was reluctant to support the MFDP was that he felt they were an extra-legal organization. He told Humphrey that there was “no justification for messing with the Freedom party at all” because they were “elected to nothing.”⁷² During the Convention, Johnson explained to Richard Russell that he felt that throwing out the “legally” elected delegates and the Governor of Mississippi would be the equivalent of depriving the state of representation.⁷³ He doubted the origins of the MFDP and denied the legality of its challenge. Johnson was hard pressed, however, to deny the legality of the MFDP considering their conscious effort to meticulously follow the guidelines of Democratic Party, an effort that the state party had no intention of making. Discrediting Johnson’s comments even further is the fact that he referred to the lily-white delegation as the “legally” elected delegates in spite of all of the rules they had broken to remain segregated. The establishment in Mississippi had denied blacks representation for years. Claiming that seating the MFDP would deny Mississippi legal representation highlights the bankruptcy of Johnson’s position. He, nevertheless, convinced himself that he could not back the MFDP.

Having denied the legitimacy of the MFDP, Johnson sent Vice-presidential hopeful Hubert Humphrey on a mission to secure the fate of the MFDP. The goal was to keep the seating controversy from coming to the floor of the Convention for a vote. Johnson knew the power of the MFDP’s message, and feared a floor debate would be the catalyst for the backlash mentioned above. Early in the struggle, Humphrey made little

⁷¹ Beschloss, pp.489, 525, & 532. LBJ’s respective conversations with Press Secretary Bill Moyer, Friday, July 31, Richard Russell, Chairman, Senate Armed Services Committee, Democrat of Georgia, Monday, August 24, and Jenkins, Tuesday, August 25, 1964

⁷² Beschloss, pp.515-16. LBJ’s conversation with Humphrey on Friday, August 14, 1964.

⁷³ Beschloss, p.523. LBJ’s conversation with Reuther on Monday, August 24, 1964. Richard Russell had also advised Johnson that MFDP conventions were held in only eighteen or twenty out of eighty-two Mississippi counties. p. 524. LBJ’s conversation with Russell on Monday, August 24, 1964.

headway with either the MFDP or the delegations of several Southern states. He suggested seating both groups, but Johnson would not consider it.⁷⁴ In the President's opinion, the MFDP must not be seated.

The actions President Johnson took to ensure the demise of the MFDP challenge were completely out of line with the principles on which his Great Society programs were supposedly based. In his memoirs, Johnson does not even mention the MFDP. His only reference to the 1964 convention paints the event as a "place of happy, surging crowds" where he was "warmed by the waves of applause."⁷⁵ This, in fact, was not the case. He was obsessed with the MFDP and went to unbelievable lengths to eliminate the threat they represented.

Long-time Johnson ally, Joseph Rauh, learned through experience what happened when someone did not bow to Johnson's wishes.⁷⁶ The President had two big cards to play against Rauh and he played them well. First of all, he had Democratic powerhouse Walter Reuther, who put enormous pressure on Rauh. Reuther was the president of the wealthy United Auto Workers (UAW) union. Joseph Rauh's biggest client was the UAW, and, consequentially, Reuther had the authority to fire him. Johnson was "furious" about Rauh being the MFDP's counsel and he told Reuther to "tell that bastard god damn lawyer friend of yours that there ain't going to be all that eleven and eight shit at the

⁷⁴ Beschloss, p.515. In response to Humphrey's suggestion of seating both delegations Johnson said, "You can't do that at all. There's no compromise." LBJ's conversation with Humphrey on Friday, August 14, 1964.

⁷⁵ Lyndon Baines Johnson. *The Vantage Point: Perspectives of the Presidency, 1963-1969*. (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1971), p.101.

⁷⁶ Rauh was Johnson's counsel in the controversial Senate election of 1948. He helped Johnson win the legal fight against accusations and evidence that Johnson had stolen the election. Robert Mann. *The Walls of Jericho: Lyndon Johnson, Hubert Humphrey, Richard Russell, and the Struggle for Civil Rights*. (New York: Harcourt Brace & Co., 1996), p.111.

convention.”⁷⁷ Reuther tried to get this point across to Rauh, and Rauh responded by instructing his boss to “tell [Johnson] that I’m an incorrigible son-of-a-bitch that you can’t control.”⁷⁸ Needless to say, Johnson did not receive this message warmly. Rauh was also the chair of the ADA, and the UAW happened to be a large contributor to this organization. At one point in the struggle, Reuther threatened to pull all UAW money out of Mississippi if the MFDP persisted with their challenge.⁷⁹ To all of the threats and pressures Reuther placed on Rauh, the general response he received was, “Walter, I just can’t give up. I believe in this, Walter. After all, I’m an employee of the UAW, but I’m not operating that way here.”⁸⁰ Johnson’s attempt to sway Rauh with his boss did not work.

The second card that Johnson played against Rauh was the fact that Rauh and Hubert Humphrey were long-time friends and ADA allies. He used this to get to both of them at the same time. It was no secret that Johnson had hinged Humphrey’s vice-presidential hopes on whether or not the senator from Minnesota could defuse the situation with the MFDP. In Oval Office conversations Johnson repeatedly linked the possibility of nominating Humphrey to his stopping the MFDP. When talking to Walter Jenkins on the Friday before the convention, Johnson suggested Jenkins should call Humphrey and give him a not-so-subtle message. The message to Humphrey was “you better get Reuther and you better get Rauh to quit causing these goddamn troubles, Hubert, because this is going to make a bad convention if you don’t tell them to quit doing stuff like this. Now if you haven’t got any influence with this ADA crowd, tell us

⁷⁷ Mills, p. 112.

⁷⁸ Todd Gitlin. *The Sixties: Years of Hope, Days of Rage*. (New York: Bantam Books, 1987), p.154.

⁷⁹ McAdam, p. 120.

who has.”⁸¹ Humphrey was aware of the pressure to find the solution the president wanted, but he never asked Rauh to give in to the administration's pressures.⁸² He would often ask Rauh for “something to tell the president,” but he received the same brusque message that Walter Reuther received.⁸³

Not only did Johnson go after Democratic insiders like Rauh and Humphrey to obtain his desired solution, but he also pursued the committee members who might vote opposite his position. To find out which members of the credentials committee supported the MFDP, Johnson exploited the naïveté of the MFDP by having a black congressman befriend the group while they were in Atlantic City. During a strategy session at the convention hall the congressman approached Bob Moses and asked for the list of committee members believed to be strongly behind the MFDP challenge. He said he wanted to show the list to the credential committee chair so that the strength of the MFDP's support would be known. Moses did not want to give up the list, but he did so at the urging of SNCC's Courtland Cox. Cox, a leadership insider, remembers the subsequent events as “something unbelievable.” He said “every person on that list... got a call.” A committee member was told that if she did not “shape up” her husband would not get the judgeship he was in line to receive. Others were told that the loans they were supposed to get would not come through.⁸⁴ According to Joseph Rauh, the Secretary of the Army told a man who worked in the Canal Zone that his job would be lost if he did not withdraw his support from the MFDP.⁸⁵ After the calls were made, numerous civil

⁸⁰ Oral History by Joseph Rauh. Henry Hampton and Steve Fayer, eds. *Voices of Freedom: An Oral History of the Civil Rights Movement from the 1950s through the 1980s*. (New York: Bantam Books, 1990), p. 197.

⁸¹ Beschloss, p. 521. LBJ's conversation with Walter Jenkins on Friday, August 21, 1964.

⁸² Mann, p. 439.

⁸³ Oral History by Joseph Rauh. Henry Hampton and Steve Fayer, eds. p. 197.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.* p. 199.

⁸⁵ McAdam, p. 120.

rights leaders, religious leaders, and liberals began to pressure the MFDP to moderate its position.⁸⁶

Johnson was not above doing some of the dirty work himself. His most blatant swipe at the MFDP came during Fannie Lou Hamer's testimony in front of the credentials committee. Johnson recognized the emotional power of Mrs. Hamer's testimony and called an impromptu news conference in the middle of her speech to get her off the air. The content of his news conference was of no substance. Courtland Cox remembers it being about the president's "trip to the hospital or some other foolishness—his beagles, or something inconsequential."⁸⁷ This tactic was less successful than some of his others because the networks replayed Mrs. Hamer's testimony in full during prime time that evening.⁸⁸

The most disturbing of President Johnson's tactics was, by far, his use of the FBI as his secret police force to find out information on the MFDP and other civil rights leaders in Atlantic City at the time. The historian John Dittmer has called the FBI operation in Atlantic City "a Watergate that worked."⁸⁹ Johnson had about thirty agents keeping tabs on the MFDP for him in Atlantic City.⁹⁰ The FBI bugged the MFDP's headquarters at the Gem Motel as well as Union Temple Baptist Church where the MFDP held its meetings.⁹¹ In addition to this, the rooms of Martin Luther King, Jr. and Bayard Rustin were also bugged. Even the supporters of the MFDP were put under

⁸⁶ Oral History by Courtland Cox. Henry Hampton and Steve Fayer, eds. p. 199.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.* p. 199.

⁸⁸ Mills, p. 123.

⁸⁹ W. Marvin Dutton. Ed. *Essays on the American Civil Rights Movement*. "The Transformation of the Mississippi Movement, 1964-68: The Rise and Fall of the Freedom Democratic Party." John Dittmer. (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1993), p. 18.

⁹⁰ Kenneth O'Reilly. *"Racial Matters": The FBI's Secret File on Black America, 1960-1972*. (New York: The Free Press, 1989), p.186.

⁹¹ *Ibid.* p.187.

surveillance.⁹² Some agents even sported NBC press credentials and posed as reporters in order to find out strategy and support information.⁹³ The FBI, who felt “it was a pleasure and a privilege to be of assistance to the president,” provided Johnson with hour-by-hour updates of MFDP political strategy and the names of their supporters.⁹⁴ The MFDP was treated like a bunch of spies. They were watched and followed and pressured to conform. They did not, but their supporters did.

As the convention approached, the initial support the MFDP enjoyed began to deteriorate. The liberal Democrats who liked to champion the cause of civil rights began to withdraw their support for the challenge. As is the tendency in American politics, most began to move toward compromises being floated at the time. The first to be floated was from the Johnson camp, and it called for the MFDP to be admitted to the convention as “honored guests.” The next proposal came from Oregon congressman and MFDP supporter Al Ullman, which called for giving the MFDP only two seats at the convention. Joseph Rauh recalls how his “heart sunk” at this suggestion because an MFDP supporter had reduced the demand to two votes “before the fight had started.”⁹⁵ A third compromise was from Oregon congresswoman Edith Greene. Her proposal, which appealed to the MFDP, called for the seating of anyone who would take a loyalty oath to the Democratic ticket. The final compromise, which was more or less an ultimatum, came from Lyndon Johnson. It allowed the MFDP only two at-large seats with symbolic votes, and the promise that the 1968 convention would be fully integrated. To add insult to injury, the two at-large delegates were chosen for the MFDP by the Democratic

⁹² *Ibid.* p.186.

⁹³ *Ibid.* p.187.

⁹⁴ Gitlin, p.155. and Dittmer, p.292.

⁹⁵ Dittmer, p. 288.

leadership! With the MFDP leadership behind closed doors with top Democratic Party officials and powerful party members, such as Hubert Humphrey and Walter Reuther, Joe Rauh saw the MFDP's support evaporate as he tried to stave off the Johnson cronies from railroading the final compromise through the credentials committee. In the end, only eight people voted against the proposal. As Rauh put it, "They had gotten the rest of them away from us."⁹⁶ Lyndon Johnson got his way.

Initial reaction from the MFDP, which learned of the proposal's passage on television, was outrage. Bob Moses was in the meeting with Humphrey and Reuther when the news incorrectly reported unanimous passage of the proposal. Moses reportedly lost his temper and jumped up and yelled at Humphrey, "You tricked us." He then stormed out of the meeting and slammed the door.⁹⁷ In front of the television cameras he voiced his distrust of the political system and vowed to no longer participate in it.⁹⁸ The rest of the MFDP delegates reacted in similar fashion. They were infuriated. The misinformation about unanimous support for the Johnson proposal meant that Rauh would have had to vote for the proposal as well. He had met with Humphrey every night to try to bargain for the MFDP, and this close association left him suspect in the eyes of the MFDP.⁹⁹ By the time the truth of the situation was clarified it was too late. A sense of betrayal had taken a firm grasp on the MFDP delegates.

Exacerbating the tensions and increasing the anger felt by the MFDP delegates was the fact that Joseph Rauh and civil rights leaders from other organizations were pushing the MFDP to accept a proposal that was unacceptable. In front of the cameras, Rauh said

⁹⁶ Oral History by Joseph Rauh. Henry Hampton and Steve Fayer, eds. p. 200.

⁹⁷ Dittmer, p.297.

⁹⁸ Oral History by Joseph Rauh. Henry Hampton and Steve Fayer, eds. p. 202.

⁹⁹ Dittmer, p. 294.

that the proposal was “a great victory” because it included a promise that the Democratic Party would never again accept an all-white delegation.¹⁰⁰ The NAACP’s Bayard Rustin called for the compromise because they were in “the world of politics, not protest,” and compromise was a necessary part of this world.¹⁰¹ Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. seemed to understand that the proposal was inadequate, but he felt something could be gained by accepting it. He said that “as a Negro leader, I want you [MFDP] to take this, but if I were a Mississippi Negro, I would vote against it.”¹⁰² The message of ‘wait until next time’ that the local authorities of Mississippi preached to African-Americans was now being delivered to the MFDP by national civil rights leaders, but to no avail. The MFDP rejected the proposal. The feelings of the MFDP delegates were summed up when Fannie Lou Hamer said, “we didn’t come all this way for no two seats.”¹⁰³

The MFDP returned home emotionally drained and disillusioned with the political process. All of the hopes and ideas the MFDP carried to Atlantic City were trampled on by the will of Lyndon Johnson. They put their lives on the line, only to have Democratic and national civil rights leaders try to push them in a direction other than the one toward justice. Now, as they returned to Mississippi, they faced continued harassment, discrimination, violence, and federal inactivity.

A perfect example of the situation waiting at home for the MFDP ironically occurred on the night of August 24 as Lyndon Johnson accepted the Democratic nomination for President. As Johnson announced his plans for a Great Society, the home of COFO activists Matti and Willie Dillon of McComb shook with an explosion. In the

¹⁰⁰ Oral History by Joseph Rauh. Henry Hampton and Steve Fayer, eds. p. 202.

¹⁰¹ Mills, p. 129.

¹⁰² *Ibid.* p. 129.

¹⁰³ Dittmer, p. 302.

yard they found nine sticks of unexploded dynamite wrapped together in a paper bag. The local police and the FBI's task force in McComb investigated, but turned their focus to Mr. Dillon when they discovered he was working on a car owned by COFO. Mr. Dillon was arrested and charged with operating a garage without a license and for stealing electricity by attaching a wire outside the meter. He did not run a garage, and the illegal wire was used to power a floodlight he had installed to protect his family from the very attack he had undergone that evening. When the time came for Dillon's trial, it was bumped up thirty minutes without notifying his counsel, Jess Brown. When Mr. Brown arrived, Willie Dillon had already been convicted of the charges. He was fined \$600 and sentenced to nine months in jail. His bond was set at \$1,200, but it was changed to \$2,000 when his family raised the previous amount.¹⁰⁴ No one was ever charged with the bombing, the twelfth in McComb since June 22. Shortly thereafter, the FBI reduced its force in McComb from fifteen to four agents.¹⁰⁵ President Johnson's Great Society was still a long way from Mississippi.

Johnson could not understand why the MFDP would not go along with his wishes. When discussing the situation with Roy Wilkins, executive secretary of the NAACP, Johnson said, "If I were the Negro . . . I'd just let Mississippi sit up on the platform, if they wanted to, and I'd stand at attention and salute the son of a bitch. Then I'd nominate Johnson for President and my Vice President and I'd go out and elect my Congressman . . . And the next four years, I'd see the promised land."¹⁰⁶ He never seemed to grasp the deep desires of the MFDP. He just wanted them to wait. By his actions he told African

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.* p. 303-4.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.* p. 304.

¹⁰⁶ Beschloss, p.517. LBJ's conversation with Roy Wilkins on Saturday, August 15, 1964.

Americans to wait for justice, wait for inclusion in the democratic process, and to wait for equality. Johnson promised “the promised land” if they would only wait.

President Johnson felt he, Humphrey, and the Democratic leadership had reached a good solution, but at what cost?¹⁰⁷ He saw the compromise as epitomizing the Democratic Party by hearing “the poor, and the downtrodden.”¹⁰⁸ He heard them, but he did not listen. He, in fact, did everything possible to shut them up. For Johnson, the best way to help African Americans was for him to win a landslide election and keep the Democrats in firm control of Congress. He intended to change the plight of the African-American with political maneuvers, and his actions can be skewed as a means to further this end. Is it possible, though, to advance a cause when you ignore the every day plight of those you want to help? In order to end segregation in the Democratic Party, Johnson let a segregated delegation remain seated. In order to advance the cause of justice, Johnson used wire taps, FBI surveillance, and threats to deny the legitimacy of a legally tight challenge. All of this was to extend his hand to those who blatantly and openly broke the law. To further democracy, he did not allow the MFDP to vote. To promote equality, he refused to let “that illiterate woman [Fannie Lou Hamer] on the floor of the Democratic convention,”¹⁰⁹ and had white police officers remove the MFDP delegates from the convention floor on national television.

The actions that Johnson took against the MFDP reveal volumes about his real priorities and about the extent of his power. The measures he employed to

¹⁰⁷ Beschloss, p.534. LBJ’s conversation with Humphrey and Reuther on Tuesday, August 25, 1964.

¹⁰⁸ Beschloss, p.534. LBJ’s conversation with Humphrey and Reuther on Tuesday, August 25, 1964.

remain in firm control of the convention were unprecedented. He tried everything short of murder to neutralize his opponents and their supporters. The MFDP and its meager resources did not have a chance against the will of a leader in one of the world's most powerful institutions. His ability to have thirty FBI agents keep up with the movements of several civil rights and MFDP leaders shows that he did have power over the FBI. Why, then, did he not have them stop the violence occurring against civil rights workers in Mississippi instead of just taking notes? Atlantic City and the events surrounding it are a disturbing example of justice, democracy, and equality being traded for political expediency. Roy Wilkins remembers Atlantic City and the events that unfolded there with a "lasting sense of grievance" because of the "terrible damage to relations between white liberals and black organizers in the South."¹¹⁰

The bright spot in the controversy is the uncompromising determination of the MFDP. They showed that the poor and excluded can have a voice, and a loud one at that. They also demonstrated that economic conditions do not have to determine one's political consciousness and activity. They embodied the ideals that America likes to think we possess. They risked their lives to confront societal and governmental wrongs, and they were not willing to sacrifice ideals and goals for token recognition. Their rejection of the compromise handed down from Johnson rejected the paternalism heaped on them from the government and other civil rights groups. It showed that they were competent to represent themselves, and that they would make their own decisions. The MFDP and its

¹⁰⁹ King, p. 347.

¹¹⁰ O'Reilly, p.190.

members embodied what America longs to be. The MFDP and its ideals were, nevertheless, rejected. When Lyndon Johnson betrayed the people that made up the Civil Rights in Atlantic City, he betrayed the movement as a whole.

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