

The Day Fannie Lou Hamer Shocked America

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“If the freedom Democratic Party is not seated now, I question America. Is this America, the land of the free and the home of the brave, where we have to sleep with our telephones off of the hooks because our lives be threatened daily because we want to live as decent human beings, in America?” Fannie Lou Hamer



The summer of 1964 was a watershed moment for the civil right movement and for America. Never before had black and white Americans worked together with such common purpose. And yet, by the end of August, black civil rights leaders were vowing never to work with white people again. Meanwhile, white civil rights activists realized they didn't have a home in either of the major political parties.

The voting rights movement had been building momentum in Mississippi since [the Freedom Rides of 1961](#). The work was dangerous, beatings were commonplace and martyrs were plentiful. What better way to win protection and attention than to issue a call to idealistic young white people from across America to come to Mississippi for the summer of 1964? John Kennedy had been assassinated half a year earlier and a still-grieving nation was desperate for healing.

Across the southern states, only 40% of eligible African Americans were registered to vote; in Mississippi it was 6.4%. [As we have seen](#), civic leaders in the Magnolia State were determined to keep Negroes out of the courthouse. For the most part, they were successful. To outsiders this looked like blatant injustice, but the good people of Mississippi felt they were simply preserving a cherished way of life. Throughout the spring and early summer the young people kept coming, just as they had at the high water mark of the Freedom Ride movement. They were young, idealistic, dedicated and often remarkably naive. Fannie Lou Hamer had to take the white girls aside and explain why it was a bad idea to be seen in public with a young black male—no matter how good looking and entertaining he might be.

The big idea was a mock election for the purpose of choosing delegates to the 1964 Democratic Convention in Atlantic City. Since African Americans were excluded from participating in the formal election process, they formed their own party, the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party (MFDP) and conducted parallel

elections that were open to all. The MFDP was prepared to argue that they should be seated in Atlantic City in preference to Mississippi's all white "regular" democratic contingent. The official election was unconstitutional and undemocratic, it was argued, because black voters had been excluded. Furthermore, it was common knowledge that the Mississippi delegation to the Democratic Convention would be supporting the Republican Barry Goldwater in the fall election.

Throughout the summer, Freedom Schools designed to introduce children to the civil rights movement and the American Constitution popped up across Mississippi. White Mississippians correctly interpreted the Freedom Schools as the threat to the established order. In early June a church in the Neshoba County town of Philadelphia was burned to the ground for opening its doors to a Freedom School. Two young white civil rights workers from New York City, Andrew Goodman and Michael Schwerner, traveled to Philadelphia with James Earl Chaney, a black activist from Meridian Mississippi to investigate. Arriving in town, they were arrested, held for several hours, then released, re-arrested and delivered into the custody of the local Ku Klux Klan. While search teams were still scouring the area for the missing men, Mississippi Senator, James Eastland, speculated that the entire affair was a publicity stunt designed to make his beloved Mississippi look bad.

When the bodies were finally found buried in a Neshoba County dam, the bodies of all three men were riddled with bullets and Chaney's body had been horribly mutilated. During that summer, 35 shooting incidents were reported, six activists were murdered, 80 were beaten and 65 houses or churches were burned.

On August 21, 1964, short days before the beginning of the Democratic Convention, seven buses carrying Freedom Democrats from Mississippi rolled up to a modest motel in Atlantic City. President Lyndon Johnson had been hoping the MFDP would back down; he now realized that wasn't going to happen. Everyone knew Johnson was on the verge of naming Minnesota Senator Hubert Humphrey as his running mate, but the formal announcement hadn't been made. Humphrey was told that if the credentials of the MFDP delegates were recognized he could forget about being VP.

Lyndon Johnson famously predicted that the 1964 Civil Rights Act would lose him a sizable slice of the South, but his lead in the polls over Goldwater was large and growing. Still, he was worried. What if the sight of white delegates storming out of the convention while black delegates took their places sparked an anti-civil rights backlash across the nation. Besides, Johnson had a good working relationship with Mississippi Senators Jim Eastland and John Stennis and didn't want to lose their behind-the-scenes support.

Photographers approached the MFDP delegation with a mix of trepidation and curiosity. One reporter said they had the look of prison escapees who feared they would be re-arrested the minute they re-crossed the Mississippi line. At the heart of the group stood the indefatigable Fannie Lou Hamer of Ruleville. Short and squat in her store-bought dress she was leading the group through a medley of spirituals and freedom songs.



Ed King at the Jackson Woolworth sit-in

The MFDP contingent also had a smattering of white delegates like Ed King, the chaplain of Tougaloo College in Jackson. King, a veteran of the sit-in movement, had nearly lost his life in a non-accidental highway accident. The family of slain activist Micheal Schwerner could frequently be seen with the MFDP delegates. Despite the disapproval of the Democratic hierarchy, MFDP attorney, Joseph Rauh, was able to arrange for a hearing in front of the credentials committee. Ed King, Martin Luther King, Rita Schwerner (the widow of the slain activist) and Fannie Lou Hamer were selected to address the committee.

While Lyndon Johnson watched in amazement, Fannie Lou Hamer sat down before a jam-packed auditorium and [peered, unblinking, into the camera](#). “Mr. Chairman and the Credentials Committee,” she said, “my name is Mrs. Fanny Lou Hamer, and I live at 626 East Lafayette Street, Ruleville, Mississippi, Sunflower County, the home of Senator James O. Eastland, and Senator Stennis.”

The president was livid. This ignorant woman (as Johnson called her) was about to set the world on fire. Hurriedly, Johnson called a press conference to tell reporters nothing they didn’t already know. It worked. Network coverage shifted away from the ignorant woman from Ruleville to the most powerful man in the world.



Fannie Lou Hamer talks about Winona justice

Johnson's reprieve was only temporary. Hamer's testimony was so riveting that the networks replayed her remarks in their entirety later that evening. Fannie Lou talked about losing her job on the plantation because she had registered to vote in Indianola. Then she talked about her encounter with Mississippi Justice in the little town of Winona.

"And in June the 9th, 1963, I had attended a voter registration workshop, was returning back to Mississippi. Ten of us was traveling by the Continental Trailway bus. When we got to Winona, Mississippi, which is in Montgomery County, four of the people got off to use the washroom, and two of the people—to use the restaurant—two of the people wanted to use the washroom.

"The four people that had gone in to use the restaurant was ordered out. During this time I was on the bus. But when I looked through the window and saw they had rushed out I got off of the bus to see what had happened, and one of the ladies said, "It was a State Highway Patrolman and a Chief of Police ordered us out."

"I got back on the bus and one of the persons had used the washroom got back on the bus, too.



Trailways Depot in Winona

"As soon as I was seated on the bus, I saw when they began to get the four people in a highway patrolman's car, I stepped off of the bus to see what was happening and somebody screamed from the car that the four workers was in and said, "Get that one there," and when I went to get in the car, when the man told me I was under arrest, he kicked me.

"I was carried to the county jail, and put in the booking room. They left some of the people in the booking room and began to place us in cells. I was placed in a cell with a young woman called Miss Ivesta Simpson. After I was placed in the cell I began to hear the sound of kicks and horrible screams, and I could hear somebody say, "Can you say, yes, sir, nigger? Can you say yes, sir?"

"And they would say other horrible names.

“She would say, “Yes, I can say yes, sir.”

“So say it.”

“She says, “I don’t know you well enough.”

“They beat her, I don’t know how long, and after a while she began to pray, and asked God to have mercy on those people.

“And it wasn’t too long before three white men came to my cell. One of these men was a State Highway Patrolman and he asked me where I was from, and I told him Ruleville, he said, “We are going to check this.”

“And they left my cell and it wasn’t too long before they came back. He said, “You are from Ruleville all right,” and he used a curse work, and he said, “We are going to make you wish you was dead.”

“I was carried out of that cell into another cell where they had two Negro prisoners. The State Highway Patrolmen ordered the first Negro to take the blackjack.

“The first Negro prisoner ordered me, by orders from the State Highway Patrolman for me, to lay down on a bunk bed on my face, and I laid on my face.

“The first Negro began to beat, and I was beat by the first Negro until he was exhausted, and I was holding my hands behind me at that time on my left side because I suffered from polio when I was six years old.

“After the first Negro had beat until he was exhausted the State Highway Patrolman ordered the second Negro to take the blackjack.

“The second Negro began to beat and I began to work my feet, and the State Highway Patrolman ordered the first Negro who had beat me to sit upon my feet to keep me from working my feet. I began to scream and one white man got up and began to beat me my head and told me to hush.

“One white man—since my dress had worked up high, walked over and pulled my dress down and he pulled my dress back, back up.

“I was in jail when Medgar Evers was murdered.

“All of this is on account of us wanting to register, to become first-class citizens, and if the freedom Democratic Party is not seated now, I question America, is this America, the land of the free and the home of the brave where we have to sleep with our telephones off of the hooks because our lives be threatened daily because we want to live as decent human beings, in America?

“Thank you.”

In moments, Democratic Party officials were deluged with phone calls and telegrams from outraged Americans demanding that the MFDP be seated immediately.

Lyndon Johnson was adamant that this must not happen. A compromise was proposed. Ed King and Aaron Henry would be seated as representatives of the MFDP and the white Mississippi delegation would be seated in its entirety. Fannie Lou Hamer decided the issue when she informed her contingent that she didn’t come all the way to Atlantic City “for no two votes.”

The issue was decided by a rushed vote—the white Mississippi regulars would be seated along with King and Henry. It was too late. Most of the regulars walked out of the convention in protest. When MFDP delegates took their places they were ushered out of the building by security personnel. The second night, every seat in the building was taken so the MFDP contingent marched to the convention floor where Fannie Lou Hamer led them in spirited song.



Stokely Charmichael

The white Mississippi regulars, as expected, abandoned the Democrats for the Republican Goldwater. They have controlled American politics ever since. It was no accident that Ronald Reagan launched his 1980 presidential campaign at the Neshoba County Fair.

Fannie Lou Hamer was disillusioned but undaunted. When a reporter asked her if she was seeking equality with the white man she peered at him imperiously. “No,” she said. “What would I look like fighting for equality with the white man? I don’t want to go down that low. I want the true democracy that’ll raise me and that white man up . . . raise America up.”

Are we there yet? Forty-six years after Ms. Hamer told America the truth about Winona, Mississippi the town remains deeply divided. [The wrongful prosecution of Curtis Flowers](#) has revealed a deep perception gap between Winona’s black and white residents. In the fourth of five trials, all five black jurors saw through the state’s paper thin evidence while all seven white jurors voted to convict. When legislation was introduced in a desperate attempt to expand the jury pool only one black senator supported the bill. It passed anyway thanks to overwhelming support from white senators.

The fact that Mississippi has a handful of black senators shows how much has changed. But the inability of white residents to call a wrongful prosecution by its proper name demonstrates just how far we have to go.