

With Determination and Fortitude We Come to Vote: Black Organization and Resistance to Voter Suppression in Mississippi

by Michael Vinson Williams

On July 2, 1946, brothers Medgar and Charles Evers, along with four friends, decided they would vote in their hometown of Decatur, Mississippi. Both brothers had registered without incident but when the men returned to cast their ballots they were met by a mob of armed whites. The confrontation grew in intensity with each step toward the polling place. After a few nerve-racking moments of yelling and shoving, the Evers group retreated, but the harassment did not end. Medgar Evers recalled that while they were walking away some of the whites followed them and that one man in a 1941 Ford “leaned out with a shotgun, keeping a bead on us all the time and we just had to walk slowly and wait for him to kill us They didn’t kill us but they didn’t end it, either.” The African American men went home, retrieved guns of their own, and returned to the polling station but decided to leave the weapons in the car. The white mob again prevented them from entering the voting precinct, and the would-be voters gave up.¹

¹ This article makes use of the many newspaper clippings catalogued in the Allen Eugene Cox Papers housed at the Mitchell Memorial Library Special Collections Department at Mississippi State University (Starkville) and the Trumpauer (Joan Harris) Civil Rights Scrapbooks Collection at the Mississippi Department of Archives and History in Jackson, Mississippi. Cox, a white administrator and program director working in Mississippi during the late 1930s, 1940s, and mid 1950s, and Trumpauer (later Mulholland) one of the few white students at Tougaloo Southern Christian College in the early 1960s, were both active with civil rights organizations and supported African Americans’ fight for civil equality. As a means of highlighting the racial problems in Mississippi both collected and catalogued materials regarding these issues and much of that material consisted of newspaper clippings. Although assembling an immense and detailed collection, Trumpauer

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The action the Evers brothers took that day was not unique. All over the south such events were taking place with startling results for socially and politically conservative whites. In 1946 and 1947 alone, historian Glenda Gilmore notes, "black World War II veterans formed impromptu regiments to assault the polls of southern cities."² In 1958 Medgar Evers, whom the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) in November of 1954 had tapped as its full-time Mississippi field secretary, painfully admitted, "I was born in Decatur, was raised there but I never in my life was permitted to vote there."³ This sense of personal humiliation, heightened by the many constant social reminders of Negroes' second-class status, pushed individuals to resist Jim Crow and to intensify challenges to political repression. Returning black veterans often stood within the eye of the growing political storm as angry community residents looked to them for leadership and support.⁴

As a means of protecting their political privilege, white Mississippians, and many of their southern supporters, suppressed black political growth through intimidation and violence; when this failed, they relied upon supremacist organizations and state legislatures for support of white supremacy. African Americans vehemently resisted whites' social and political encroachment upon their rights, which brought both groups into direct political and physical conflict. It is my contention that by the 1950s and 1960s the actions that white political leaders undertook to prevent a strong black political presence had increased exponentially since 1870, as had African Americans' efforts to overcome voter sup-

sometimes failed to provide attribution and, at times, dates for some of her catalogued newspaper items. When necessary, I have attempted to provide acknowledgment and dates for sources where there were none. Where I could not discern attribution I have listed the cooperative news agencies supplying news groups with their featured story. Jack Mendelsohn, *The Martyrs: Sixteen Who Gave Their Lives for Racial Justice* (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1966), 66 (quotation); Charles Evers, interview with the author, February 4, 2005, cassette recording, Jackson, Mississippi, taped recording in possession of author; and Medgar Evers, "Why I Live in Mississippi," *Ebony* magazine, November 1958, p. 66. See also, Charles Evers and Andrew Szanton, *Have No Fear: The Charles Evers Story* (John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 1997), 61.

² Glenda Elizabeth Gilmore, *Defying Dixie: The Radical Roots of Civil Rights, 1919-1950* (New York and London: W.W. Norton & Company, 2008), 414 (quotation).

³ Mendelsohn, *The Martyrs*, 66 (quotation). For a detailed examination of the life and work of Medgar Wiley Evers, see Michael Vinson Williams, *Medgar Evers: Mississippi Martyr* (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 2011).

⁴ Throughout this article, I use the term "Negro" without quotations when period-appropriate.

pression and claim their rightful political place. This article addresses issues of political suppression and the tactics used to maintain it; African Americans' resistance to white political hegemony, particularly during the 1950s and early 1960s; and white Mississippians' often-debilitating fear of the black vote. As a consequence, it is the human element behind the struggle for the ballot in Mississippi that takes center stage.

In 1946 there were nearly 350,000 black Mississippians of voting age.⁵ White politicians could not help but consider the political ramifications such statistics represented, as well as the potential for a deluge of black political challenges to voter denial that the *Herndon* and *Allwright* Supreme Court rulings would now bolster. As an additional area of political concern, the Mississippi Legislature—perhaps without fully accounting for the potential ramifications—passed a law exempting returning soldiers from having to pay their poll taxes for the previous two years. This revision in the law provided more than 80,000 returning African American servicemen, such as Medgar and Charles Evers, with the economic and political incentive to challenge America's democratic hypocrisy.⁶

During the 1940s blacks ramped up challenges to age-old notions of political naiveté that many whites harbored. African Americans organized demonstrations and descended upon local polling stations intent on exercising their right to vote. In the process they ran afoul of Mississippi Senator Theodore Bilbo. By publicly opposing Bilbo's bid in 1946 to claim his senate seat after his reelection, black servicemen further demonstrated their political tenacity. Over a three-day period of public hearings in Jackson, Mississippi, black veterans and other community residents testified to the violent and rabble-rousing rhetoric Bilbo used to incite white violence against potential Negro voters and registrants.

Bilbo had openly called "on every red-blooded American who believes in the superiority and integrity of the white race to get out and see that no nigger votes. And," Bilbo continued, "the best time to do it is the night before." He also understood the barrier to voting that the state constitu-

⁵ John Dittmer, *Local People: The Struggle for Civil Rights in Mississippi* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1994), 3.

⁶ Steven F. Lawson, *Black Ballots: Voting Rights in the South, 1944-1969* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1976), 103; Myrlie Evers-Williams and Manning Marable, *The Autobiography of Medgar Evers: A Hero's Life and Legacy Revealed Through His Writings, Letters, and Speeches* (New York: Basic Civitas Books, 2005), 6; and Dittmer, *Local People*, 2-9.

tion provided. Speaking to the purpose of section 244 of the Mississippi State Constitution, Bilbo explained that the

“poll tax won’t keep ‘em from voting. What keeps ‘em from voting is section 244 of the constitution of 1890 that Senator [James Zachariah] George wrote. It says that a man to register must be able to read and explain the constitution or explain the constitution when read to him. And then Senator George wrote a constitution that damn few white men and no niggers at all can explain.”⁷

During the hearings African Americans provided additional testimonies they believed effectively demonstrated reasons why Bilbo was politically unfit to retain his senatorial position. The United States Senate would convene to decide Bilbo’s fate but in lieu of his current bout with cancer, senate members agreed to table the matter until he recovered and returned from surgery.⁸ Before the matter could be resolved, Bilbo died on August 21, 1947, from complications related to oral cancer. Yet despite the number of legal obstacles the state threw up between blacks and the ballot box, and in spite of the intimidation tactics that individuals such as Bilbo advocated, the number of black registered voters in Mississippi increased from an estimated 2,000 in 1940 to 5,000 in 1947.⁹ This expansion of the electorate resulted from organized resistance across the state initiated in many instances by black veterans and community organizations. Yet, those fighting for Negroes’ right to vote were up against a long history of state-sanctioned denial

⁷ Senator Theodore Bilbo quotes presented in “The Seating of Senator Bilbo,” *Congressional Record Proceedings and Debates of the 80th Congress*, First Session Vol. 93, January 3, 1947, No. 1, p. 8 (all quotations), Mississippi Department of Archives and History, Archives & Library Division, Special Collections, Jackson, Mississippi. See also, Dittmer, *Local People*, 2-9; Charles Payne, *I’ve Got the Light of Freedom: The Organizing Tradition and the Mississippi Freedom Struggle* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1995), 24-25; Timothy B. Tyson, *Radio Free Dixie: Robert F. Williams and the Roots of Black Power* (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 1999), 29; and Manfred Berg, *“The Ticket to Freedom”: The NAACP and the Struggle for Black Political Integration* (Gainesville and Tallahassee: University Press of Florida, 2005), 92.

⁸ “The Seating of Senator Bilbo,” *Congressional Record Proceedings and Debates of the 80th Congress*, First Session Vol. 93, January 4, 1947, No. 2, pp. 103–04, Mississippi Department of Archives and History, Special Collections.

⁹ Payne, *I’ve Got the Light of Freedom*, 24-25; Earl M. Lewis, “The Negro Voter in Mississippi,” *Journal of Negro Education*, Vol. 26, No. 3 (Summer, 1957): 334; and Lawson, *Black Ballots*, 105–15.

of blacks' rights to the ballot.

Early in Mississippi's history the United States Congress limited the vote to white citizens. On January 9, 1808, Congress, "as an amendment to the Organic Act controlling the Mississippi Territory," enacted legislation providing the vote to white males only. The Act required the voter to be free, male, twenty-one or older, a citizen, a land owner, and white. Mississippi carried this amendment forward in both its 1817 and 1832 constitutions. Yet for the white political elite these stopgap measures proved inadequate in light of the political freedoms African Americans acquired during Reconstruction and the voting opportunities the 15th Amendment provided black men.¹⁰

In 1890, white political leaders called for a convention to amend the state constitution whereby they effectively disenfranchised African Americans. Among the tactics incorporated into the new constitution were literacy and understanding clauses as well as residency and poll tax requirements. During the convention Judge J.B. Chrisman acknowledged that it had been "no secret that there ... [had] not been a full vote and a fair count in Mississippi since 1875." He pointed out that white Mississippians had

"been preserving the ascendancy of the white people by revolutionary methods. In plain words, we have been stuffing ballot-boxes, committing perjury and here and there in the State carrying the elections by fraud and violence until the whole machinery for elections was about to rot down. The public conscience revolted."

¹⁰ "Voting in Mississippi," *A Report of the United States Commission on Civil Rights, 1965*, Wilson T. Minor Papers, Box 13, Folder 2/3 "voting, 1965," 1 (quotation), Mitchell Memorial Library Special Collections Department, Mississippi State University, (hereinafter cited as MSU Special Collections). Commission members included John A. Hannah, chairman; Eugene Patterson, vice chairman; Mrs. Frankie Muse Freeman; Erwin N. Griswold; Rev. Theodore M. Hesburgh, C.S.C.; Robert S. Rankin; and William L. Taylor, staff director-designate. See also, the Honorable R.H. Thompson, "Suffrage in Mississippi," *Publications of Mississippi Historical Society*, vols. 1-2, Mississippi Historical Society, 1898, 28-29. Regarding the limitations of the 15th Amendment, historians such as Steven Lawson rightfully argue that the 15th Amendment "merely stipulated that states could not invoke race as a ground for disfranchising people otherwise eligible to vote." States such as Mississippi soon realized that they could discriminate against their Negro counterparts as long as their methods were not "overtly racial." See Lawson, *Black Ballots*, 3. Regarding Mississippi's 1817 and 1832 Constitutions, see 1817 Constitution of the State of Mississippi, Article III, Section I, <http://law.mc.edu/library/ms1817.html> (accessed May 12, 2012) and 1832 Constitution of the State of Mississippi, Article III, Section I, http://law.mc.edu/index.php/download_file/view/227/ (accessed May 12, 2012).

The white elite also feared the political power that the black vote represented when properly “handled.” While speaking at the constitutional convention, W.S. Eskridge expressed this concern. Here we

“stand confronted ... with 70,000 male adult negroes in this State in excess of the white vote, a majority which if organized and handled by adroit and courageous leaders, might at the ballot box, at any election, by taking the white vote unawares, overthrow the present civil government The white people of the State want to feel and know that they are protected not only against the probability but the possibility of negro rule and negro domination.”¹¹

The mechanisms to repress the black vote put in place in 1890 grew in intensity in the decades that followed. On March 4, 1902, the white elites in Mississippi achieved greater political power with the passage of the primary election law. This, in effect, categorized political parties as private organizations that were thus no longer under the purview of the 15th Amendment. The primary election law mandated that “all nominations for state, district, county, and county district officials be made by primary elections.” Denied membership or opportunities to participate at the primary stage, blacks had no say in who was elected to office. The Democratic primary, rather than the general election, would carry the most political weight, and this new legislation produced dire political consequences for African Americans.¹² “A statewide primary,” historian Albert Kirwan acknowledged, “would equalize the power of the white voters in all sections of the state. Control by the black counties would be eliminated, and supremacy of the white counties would be assured.”¹³ This political advantage proved worth protecting, and in 1946 Senator Bilbo would encourage his constituents to “support the officials and ‘use whatever means at your command to preserve and protect the custom

¹¹ Judge J.B. Chrisman, *The Daily Clarion-Ledger*, September 9, 1890, 1, 12 (first quotation) and “Hon. W.S. Eskridge...,” *The Daily Clarion-Ledger*, September 16, 1890, 1 (second quotation).

¹² Patrick Gerster and Nicholas Cords, eds., *Myth and Southern History, Volume 2: The New South* (University of Illinois Press, 1988), 75 (quotation). See also, Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, “Mississippi Subversion of the Right to Vote,” Segregation and Integration Miscellaneous Collection, MSU Special Collections, Folder 24, p. 10.

¹³ Albert D. Kirwan, *Revolt of the Rednecks, Mississippi Politics: 1876-1925* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1951), 128 (quotation) and Stephen Cresswell, *Multiparty Politics in Mississippi, 1877-1902* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1995), 5.

in the Southern, white, Democratic primary.”¹⁴ White Mississippians’ political control at the primary stage usually led to Democratic victories in general elections as well. “Since nomination by the Democratic party in Mississippi was equivalent to election in all state-wide contests and to most local offices, debarment from the primary was in effect disfranchisement.” The NAACP, through litigation, ended such tactics with positive Supreme Court rulings in *Nixon v. Herndon* (1927) and *Smith v. Allwright* (1944).¹⁵ By the early 1950s white Mississippians felt the social and political winds of change and once again constructed political hurdles many African Americans found all but impossible to clear.

In November 1954, more than 75,000 Mississippians voted to stiffen the state’s registration law by approving a constitutional amendment to section 244. The Southern Regional Council (SRC), a racial injustice watchdog organization comprising “religious, educational, labor, business, and professional leaders,” explained that the revised law now made the “ability to read and write a prerequisite [to registering to vote]; before that, an applicant could register if able to read or understand the constitution when read to him.” The law also required that new applicants explain, to the county registrar’s satisfaction, why he or she deserved the vote and its meaning. They were also to demonstrate an understanding of what citizenship meant “under a constitutional form of government.” This statement, of course, had to be written without assistance.¹⁶ These new requirements were nothing more than brazen

¹⁴ Senator Theodore Bilbo quotes presented in “The Seating of Senator Bilbo,” *Congressional Record Proceedings and Debates of the 80th Congress*, First Session, Vol. 93, January 3, 1947, No. 1, p. 8 (quotation).

¹⁵ Kirwan, *The Revolt of the Rednecks*, 131 (quotation). See also, Lawson, *Black Ballots*, 25-28, 42-45. Although both the *Herndon* and *Allwright* cases are discussed extensively throughout the historiography, see Walter White, *A Man Called White: The Autobiography of Walter White* (New York: The Viking Press, 1948), 83, 89-90; Berg, “*The Ticket to Freedom*,” 79-80, 88-93; and Jason Morgan Ward, *Defending White Democracy: The Making of a Segregationist Movement & the Remaking of Racial Politics, 1936-1965* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011), 63-65.

¹⁶ Regarding descriptors of the SRC, see *New South*, Southern Regional Council, Vol. 14, No. 1 (January 1959), Allen Eugene Cox Papers (hereinafter cited as Cox Papers), MSU Special Collections, Box 5, Folder 19, p. 9 (first quotation); Margaret Price, *The Negro Voter in the South* (Atlanta: Southern Regional Council, September, 1957) in the Cox Papers, MSU Special Collections, Box 5, Folder 19a, 9 (second quotation); and *Congressional Record: Proceedings and Debates of the 85th Congress*, First Session, July 26, 1957, Cox Papers, MSU Special Collections, Box 10, Folder, 2, p. 7 (third quotation). For statistical data regarding the number of votes cast for and against the constitutional amendment, see Earl M. Lewis, “The Negro Voter in Mississippi,” 339.

attempts at keeping African Americans from the political arena and not some stopgap measure to protect the integrity of the election process. Given the wide latitude provided registrars, the SRC surmised that in many cases those “interested in voting ... [were] far more likely to be barred by a question on the Constitution than by a rope or whip.”¹⁷ Although the NAACP acknowledged the amendment had reduced the number of registered black voters from “22,104 down to about 8,000 out of a total Negro population of 986,500,” African Americans responded to the new voting requirements by organizing study groups while continuing to assail registrars’ offices across the state.¹⁸ Many white leaders realized more than ever the importance of an organized approach to massive black political resistance, and a particular group organized during the summer of 1954 would take on great importance.

In July, Robert “Tut” Patterson, a plantation manager in Sunflower County, Mississippi, gathered like-minded men in the county seat of Indianola and founded the Citizens’ Council. The group organized to defy the U.S. Supreme Court’s *Brown v. Board* decision, to protect white supremacy, and to use economic pressure to intimidate supporters of desegregation.¹⁹ Voting proved a particularly important sticking point

¹⁷ Price, *The Negro Voter in the South*, 11 (quotation). See also “Voter Registration Laws in Mississippi: Subversion of the Fifteenth Amendment in Mississippi,” http://www.educationanddemocracy.org/FSCfiles/C_CC7c_VotersRegistrLawsInMS.htm (accessed August 7, 2011) and *United States, Appellant v. Mississippi et al*, 380 U.S. 128. No. 73, http://ftp.resourse.org/courts.gov/c/US/380/380.US.128.73.html#fn6_ref (accessed August 7, 2011).

¹⁸ NAACP, “Help End Racial Tyranny in Mississippi,” *New York Times*, October 3, 1955, L-19 (quotation).

¹⁹ For a deeper discussion of the Citizens’ Council, see Joseph Crespino, *In Search of Another Country: Mississippi and the Conservative Counterrevolution* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2007), 19; Aaron Henry with Constance Curry, *Aaron Henry: the Fire Ever Burning* (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2000), 91; Evers-Williams and Marable, *The Autobiography of Medgar Evers*, 14; *NAACP Annual Report, Forty-sixth Year 1954*, “The Year of the Great Decision,” (June 1955), 11-12; Pete Daniel, *Lost Revolutions: The South in the 1950s* (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), 196-197; J. Todd Moye, *Let the People Decide: Black Freedom and White Resistance Movements in Sunflower County, Mississippi, 1945-1986* (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 56-58, 64-65; Neil R. McMillen, *The Citizens’ Council: Organized Resistance to the Second Reconstruction, 1954-64* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1971), 16-17; and Numan V. Bartley, *The Rise of Massive Resistance: Race and Politics in the South During the 1950s* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1969), 82-107. For Citizens’ Council membership data for Mississippi, see McMillen, *The Citizens’ Council*, 26-28 and Moye, *Let the People Decide*, 68-69. The formation of Citizens’ Council chapters in Alabama, Louisiana, South

with Citizens' Council members. The basis of their desire to control the black ballot rested in what voting symbolized and the power that bloc voting represented. As SRC executive director Harold Fleming explained, the ballot is basic "to the American philosophy that a citizen's right to vote is the sovereign remedy for all his civic grievances."²⁰ African Americans had a lot of "civic grievances" to address, and white politicians understood that African Americans comprised the majority in many Mississippi counties. Councils bolstered their membership numbers through propaganda and well-placed advertisements, while focusing a great deal of attention upon blacks who had managed to get their names on the voter rolls.

According to United States Department of Justice figures, in 1955 in Mississippi there were 495,138 blacks of voting age but only 21,502 on the voter rolls, representing 4.3 percent of the "Negro voting age population registered." That same year there were fourteen of Mississippi's eighty-two counties, the SRC reported, "in which no Negroes were registered ... and 28 in which less than one per cent had registered." Medgar Evers proclaimed "that one of the Citizens Councils' primary aims is to eliminate Negro voting." Four years later Governor-elect Ross Barnett would announce that the "Citizens Councils throughout Mississippi and the Southland are rendering a great contribution to the general welfare of both white and colored races and the maintenance of constitutional government." In the art of voter suppression, the refusal to accept poll tax payments proved an effective strategy of political repression that black leaders targeted.²¹

Humphreys County, among others, had a history of voter fraud and a reputation for abject denial of rights of African Americans. Blacks were

Carolina, Georgia and other southern areas are also subjects that McMillen addresses.

²⁰ Harold Fleming quoted in the foreword of Margaret Price, *The Negro Voter in the South*, Southern Regional Council, September, 1957 (quotation).

²¹ "Voting in Mississippi," A Report of the United States Commission on Civil Rights, 8 (first quotation); Price, *The Negro Voter in the South*, 29 (second quotation); Medgar Evers quoted in Price, *The Negro Voter in the South*, 42 (third quotation); and "Barnett Praises Council Activity," *The Citizens' Council* (Official Paper of the Citizens' Councils of America), September 1959, Cox Papers, MSU Special Collections, Box 1, Folder 2 (fourth quotation). The Southern Regional Council listed the number of black registrants in 1955 at 20,000 down from 22,000 the year before, see Price, *The Negro Voter in the South*, 2, 21, 29. In a speech in 1958, Medgar Evers also provided some dreadful voter statistics. See, Medgar Evers Address, May 18, 1958, Milwaukee, Wisconsin, in National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) Records, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C., Group II, Box C-244, Folder 2, p. 6. (Hereinafter cited as NAACP Papers, LOC).

prevented from paying their poll taxes until 1953 when a federal court ordered the practice banned after seventeen black citizens had filed suit against the county sheriff who also served as tax collector. Paying the tax when one was supposed to was crucial to voting, as individuals had to present a receipt verifying payment to vote. As a consequence of the suit, 485 African Americans successfully paid their poll taxes, but white intimidation prevented all but 200 from actually registering. By 1954 that number had been reduced to 126, who were then subjected to further intimidation and violence.²² By 1955 the numbers were even smaller as whites contacted registrants' employers. Medgar Evers recalled that an "employer would have a (voters) list and if he found this person's name ... he'd say, 'we can't employ you until you get your name off this list.'" By this method alone "they knocked down registration to about 90 names and they started getting down to the hard core and other types of pressure were used." According to Edward Gamarekian, writing in the *Reporter*, with this remaining group "the shotguns came out." Whites would inform registrants, Evers reported, that you've "lived in this community for a long time and if you want to stay here in peace, you'd better get your name off this list. After they started making personal visits, the Negroes gave in to the extent that there are now only about 35 left."²³ Overcoming such intimidation strategies continued to be one of the biggest problems Mississippi activists had to surmount in the battle for the ballot and one that organizations such as the NAACP focused intensely upon. In the fight against economic intimidation, the NAACP also played a pivotal role.

The NAACP sought to counter economic repression perpetrated by groups such as the Citizens' Council by working with the African American-owned and controlled Tri-State Bank of Memphis, Tennessee.²⁴ By establishing an economic relationship with Tri-State Bank, the

²² Edward Gamarekian, "A Report from the South On the Negro Voter," *The Reporter: the Magazine of Facts and Ideas*, Volume 16, No. 13 (June 27, 1957): 9. For further discussions regarding problems African Americans experienced with paying their poll taxes, see Circuit Court Judge William Bootle's discussion in David C. Colby, "The Voting Rights Act and Black Registration in Mississippi," *Publius: The Journal of Federalism*, Vol. 16, No. 4 (Fall 1986): 127.

²³ Price, *The Negro Voter in the South*, 42 (first and second quotations); Gamarekian, "A Report from the South On the Negro Voter," June 27, 1957, 9 (third quotation); and Price, *The Negro Voter in the South*, 42 (fourth quotation).

²⁴ See the *Tennessee Encyclopedia of History and Culture* @ <http://tennesseencyclopedia.net/imagegallery.php?EntryID=T113> (Accessed June 16, 2011). For a brief historical



Citizens' Council support flyer, no date. Citizens' Council Collection. Courtesy of Special Collections, University of Mississippi Libraries.

NAACP sought to raze the Jim Crow landscape. Gloster Current, NAACP director of branch and field services, pointed out that the organization was responding to the economic threats of the Citizens' Council. The NAACP, Current explained, had "met the propaganda effect of their announcements, which was to scare Negroes, with a counter-propaganda by announcing a program to build up a financial institution in Memphis whereby a Negro institution would offer relief to those who constituted good credit risk."²⁵ As a means of increasing group involvement in civil rights activities, and voter registration efforts in particular, the NAACP hoped that the Tri-State Bank program would help nullify fears black communities had of potential economic reprisals.

Roy Wilkins, NAACP executive secretary, underscored the association's support of the financial program by acknowledging that "\$20,000 of its reserve funds [had already been deposited] in a savings account at the Tri-State bank" and that the NAACP had encouraged other businesses to do the same. "This effort on our part," Wilkins pointed out,

outline of the Tri-State Bank of Memphis, see Tri-State Bank of Memphis's webpage at <http://www.tristatebank.com/114673.html> (accessed May 24, 2011).

²⁵Gloster Current correspondence to Medgar Evers, January 26, 1955, NAACP Papers, LOC, Group II, Box C-346, Folder 4, p. 4 (quotation). The Jim Crow landscape was based upon economic exploitation of black sharecroppers and tenant farmers. See Neil R. McMillen, "Black Enfranchisement in Mississippi: Federal Enforcement and Black Protest in the 1960s," *Journal of Southern History*, Vol. 43, No. 3 (August, 1977): 361.

“indicates that the NAACP stands solidly behind Mississippi citizens in their struggle with the vicious and unfair credit ‘squeeze’ which is being attempted on them merely because they think they should enjoy the same rights as are enjoyed by other citizens.” By January 26, 1956, loans totaling \$156,000 had been distributed to help undercut economic intimidation as a strategy against voter registration and civil rights activity.²⁶ In the fight to secure the ballot, however, individuals such as Reverend George Lee, Lamar Smith, and Gus Courts stood up and paid a dear price for their advocacy.

Reverend George Washington Lee, an independent businessman, minister, and active member of the NAACP in Belzoni, Mississippi, vigorously worked to increase black registration and voting. He owned a grocery store and a printing shop, which made him less vulnerable to economic pressures.²⁷ On a personal level, Lee had accomplished a remarkable amount in terms of gaining access to the political process. George Lee, Evers noted in his 1955 annual report, “was the only Negro who had qualified himself in both County and City elections, in a county where Negroes have not voted since Reconstruction and where Negroes outnumber whites at the rate of more than two to one.”²⁸ His ability to register was not an anomaly. Blacks were more likely to register successfully in counties where they were a minority, better educated, less dependent upon white landlords, and economically independent. In response to Reverend Lee’s consistent political activism, whites shot-

²⁶ Roy Wilkins correspondence to Reverend J.E. Johnson, January 19, 1955, Evers (Medgar Wiley and Myrlie Beasley) Papers, Box 2, Folder 8, 1 (all quotations), Mississippi Department of Archives and History, Archives & Library Division, Special Collections, Manuscript Collection, No. Z/2231.000/S (hereinafter cited as the Evers (Medgar Wiley and Myrlie Beasley) Papers. See also, *NAACP Annual Report* Forty-seventh Year, “Progress and Reaction, 1955,” 10; Roy Wilkins correspondence to Miss D. Jeannette H. Broadnax Green, January 26, 1956, National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, *Papers of the NAACP: Part 20, White Resistance and Reprisals, 1956-1965*, John H. Bracy, Jr. and August Meier, eds. (Bethesda, Maryland: University Publications of America, 1995), microfilm reel 1 of 15, 1 (hereinafter cited as Papers of the NAACP: Part 20); and Gloster Current correspondence to Medgar Evers, January 26, 1955, Evers (Medgar Wiley and Myrlie Beasley) Papers, Box 2, Folder 39. For further indications of the success of the Tri-State Bank program, see Medgar Evers 1955 Annual Report, NAACP Papers, LOC, Group II, Box C-346, Folder 5, 2-3.

²⁷ Mendelsohn, *The Martyrs*, 2-3, 7.

²⁸ Medgar Evers, “1955 Annual Report,” Evers (Medgar Wiley and Myrlie Beasley) Papers, Box 2, Folder 39, 5 (quotation).

gunned him to death on May 7, 1955. His killers went unpunished.²⁹

Contacting influential politicians and demanding that they help remedy the political problems that African Americans faced proved to be one of the NAACP's primary tactics against voter intimidation. In May 1955, Roy Wilkins informed United States Senator Hubert Humphrey of Minnesota that there had been an extreme decline in the number of black registered voters in Humphreys County from approximately four hundred "about two years" before the Lee murder to reports of the number being "91" at the time of his death. The reason for the drastic decline, Wilkins argued, was due to the fact "that Negro registrants have been intimidated in various ways to tear up their poll tax receipts or instruct the registrar at the courthouse to remove their names from the voters list." He further warned Humphrey of the growing anger and the underlying potential for violence if something was not done to protect Negro citizens. He reported that community meetings had revealed "no evidence of fear but a deep resentment that murder would be used by a political machine in order to deny them the right to vote." He emphasized "the growing feeling of outrage on the part of Negro citizens everywhere over the callous actions which seem to be condoned—if not encouraged—by the ruling Democratic Party in certain Southern states."³⁰ The determination election managers exhibited in denying blacks the opportunity to vote resulted from orders that often came from their Democratic Party superiors.

Tom Tubb, state Democratic executive committee chairman, made sure election managers under his influence understood that Negroes were to be kept off the rolls. Clay County election managers had received instructions to deny Negroes the opportunity to vote. Tubb "ordered election officials," the *West Point Times Leader* reported, "to stop and challenge any Negro trying to vote in the primary, and, if he insisted in

²⁹ Regarding the issue of black registration, see Price, *The Negro Voter in the South*, 23. For an enhanced discussion of Reverend Lee, see Mendelsohn, *The Martyrs*, 1-20; Myrlie Evers with William Peters, *For Us, the Living* (New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1967), 155-160; Daniel, *Lost Revolutions*, 222-224; Dittmer, *Local People*, 53-54; Erle Johnston, *Mississippi's Defiant Years 1953-1973: An Interpretive Documentary with Personal Experiences* (Forest, Mississippi: Lake Harbor Publishers, 1990), 34; Berg, "The Ticket to Freedom," 150-151; and NAACP *Annual Report*, Forty-seventh Year, "Progress and Reaction, 1955," 23. See also, "M is for Mississippi and Murder," NAACP Papers, LOC, Group II, Box A-423, Folder 1, p. 4.

³⁰ Roy Wilkins correspondence to Senator Hubert Humphrey, May 25, 1955, NAACP Papers, LOC, Group II, Box A-422, Folder 8 (all quotations).

voting, to take his ballot, seal it, not count it, and send it to the county committee, 'where we'll know how to handle them.'"

Tubb justified his actions by arguing that Negroes "did not subscribe to the principles of the Democratic Party of Mississippi, and therefore were not qualified to vote in the primary." The "principles" Tubb alluded to, included opposing the Fair Employment Practices Committee and supporting states' rights. In addition, they also required supporting "the poll tax, the anti-miscegenation laws, and 'the traditions of the South.'" He figured that no Negro would subscribe to all of these principles and thus none would be eligible to vote. Tubb, with a great deal of confidence, announced that with each Negro vote challenged, he believed "that the 15-man committee will back me up unanimously that this was a good challenge That way we won't have any Negro votes."³¹ African Americans, however, remained determined to vote.

Ben Green, mayor of the black town of Mound Bayou in Bolivar County, responded to the discriminatory tactics perpetrated by officials such as Tubb. Green acknowledged that it is "their privilege to throw our ballots out, but it's our privilege to cast them. We shall keep on voting." Tubb, however, believed that blacks would get the picture and stay home. "Negroes have pretty good sense ...," he announced. "It shouldn't take night ridings or beatings for them to use their own good judgment." Roy Wilkins later informed U.S. Attorney General Herbert Brownell that Negroes were "in a jungle of race hatred and terror, at the mercy of hoodlum[s] who choose to attack. The ballot, the weapon of free men, has been taken from them by force. They are helpless except for such other weapons as they may possess and may or may not choose to employ."³² Wilkins's mention of "such other weapons as they may possess," was a not-so-subtle hint at the possibility of armed self-defense on the part of black Mississippians if nothing changed. Despite Wilkins's warnings

³¹ "Tubb Issues Instructions," *West Point Times Leader*, July 30, 1955, MSU Special Collections Vertical File (first quotation); Gamarekian, "A Report from the South," 10 (second and third quotations); and "Tubb Issues Instructions," *West Point Times Leader* July 30, 1955 (fourth quotation). See also, "Voting," copy in Cox Papers, MSU Special Collections, Folder 19a.

³² Gamarekian, "A Report from the South on the Negro Voter," June 27, 1957, p. 10 (first, second and third quotations) and Roy Wilkins correspondence to U.S. Attorney General Herbert Brownell, August 4, 1955, NAACP Papers, LOC, Group II, Box A-422, Folder 3, pp. 2-3 (fourth quotation). Regarding Tubb, see also Roy Wilkins's correspondence to U.S. Attorney General Herbert Brownell, August 4, 1955, NAACP Papers, LOC, Group II, Box A-422, Folder 3, p. 1.

the bloodletting continued.

Lamar Smith, a sixty-three-year-old farmer in Lincoln County, had encouraged blacks to utilize the absentee ballot as a means of ousting political incumbents. Smith was a registered voter who had voted in the primary election a few weeks prior to his public assassination.³³ Through his investigation of Smith's murder, Evers discovered that Smith had "kept an unknown political appointment" on August 13, 1955, and had been shot in broad daylight around 10:00 a.m. on the busy Courthouse Square with no apparent witnesses. District Attorney E.C. Barlow later announced that Smith's murder was "politically inspired ... because he was campaigning against the incumbent supervisor, J. Hugh James, whose office was up for grabs in Brookhaven's 'Democratic primary.'" Although three individuals were identified as suspects, no one was indicted for the murder, much less convicted. The social and political situation for African Americans in the Deep South proved grave, and Roy Wilkins announced that Mississippi represented "the worst offender."³⁴ As a means of preserving white supremacy, some white Mississippians were not averse to shooting a Negro in broad daylight or under the cover of darkness in an attempt to drive home the point of white political dominance.

Gus Courts of Belzoni, Mississippi, was a close friend of Reverend Lee and had succeeded him as president of the local NAACP chapter. Whites had warned Courts to move out of Belzoni, to withdraw his name as NAACP president, and to take his name off the voter roll; he refused. Citizens' Council members warned the grocer that they were "not going to

³³ Evers and Peters, *For Us, the Living*, 169-170 and NAACP Release, "NAACP Urges Federal Action on Violence in Mississippi," August 18, 1955, NAACP Papers, LOC, Group II, Box A-422, Folder 1.

³⁴ Medgar Evers, "1955 Annual Report," Evers (Medgar Wiley and Myrlie Beasley) Papers, Box 2, Folder 39, p. 5 (first quotation); Newspaper clipping, "Pin Vote Slaying on Trio," NAACP Papers, LOC, Group II, Box A-422, Folder 1 (second quotation); and Roy Wilkins correspondence to U.S. Attorney General Herbert Brownell, Jr., August 24, 1955, NAACP Papers, LOC, Group II, Box A-422, Folder 5, p. 3 (third quotation). See also, Medgar Evers, "1955 Annual Report," Evers (Medgar Wiley and Myrlie Beasley) Papers, Box 2, Folder 39, pp. 5-6; "Who Slew Negro Leader in Trap," *Jet* magazine, Vol. 8, No. 17, September 1, 1955, 5; "White Farmer Faces Murder Charge After Lincoln Negro Killed," *Jackson Daily News*, August 15, 1955, 1; "DA Arrests Suspect in Political Killing," *Jackson State Times*, August 15, 1955, 1; and *NAACP Annual Report*, Forty-seventh Year, "Progress and Reaction, 1955," pp. 9, 24. *Jet* magazine identified the individuals involved as Noah Smith, fifty-nine-years-old; Mack Smith, forty-five-years-old; and Charles Falvey, thirty-five-years-old.

let Negroes in this county vote and we're not going to let the N.A.A.C.P. operate. You're leading the Negroes, trying to get them to register and vote; we're going to put you out of business."³⁵ This warning proved to be much more than a hollow threat.

On November 25, 1955, Courts, his wife, and a few other customers were in his store between 8:00 and 8:30 p.m. when gunshots tore into the establishment, striking Courts. His injuries consisted of "two gunshot wounds of the left fore-arm (two pellets were removed from his arm) and one on the lower left side of his abdomen. There were no injuries to his intestines." The attending physician pointed out that "Courts was lucky that the blast caught him at the side and not in the front of the body."³⁶ The Citizens' Council, concerned about its image, sought to distance itself from the possibility of any federal inquiry that the Courts shooting produced.

As a means of protecting the organization, Council leaders "announced that they were offering a \$250.00 award for the 'arrest leading to a conviction of the party or parties who shot Gus Courts.'" When asked if Courts's civil rights activities had anything to do with his shooting, Humphreys County Sheriff Isaac J. Shelton responded "Hell no Some nigger had it in for him, that's all." Mississippi governor Hugh White was also concerned about the potential for federal involvement if cases of violence against Negroes went unsolved. He "told reporters that a series of violence against Negroes, all of them unsolved, threatened to put the state in 'serious federal trouble.'" White also instructed Sheriff Shelton "to 'do everything in your power'" to solve the shooting. While recovering, Courts admitted that he had "known for a long time it was coming, and I'd tried to get prepared in my mind for it. But that's a hard thing to do when you know that they're going to try to slip up and steal your life in the night and not in the bright. It's bad when you know you might get shot just walking around in your store. That's a hard kind of life to lead." He admitted surprise that anyone would want to kill him. "I've never been a trouble maker and I've never had on handcuffs. I'm 65 years old and I've never had the vote. That's all I wanted."³⁷ For African

³⁵ Gamarekian, "A Report from the South On the Negro Voter," June 27, 1957, p. 9 (quotation).

³⁶ "Memorandum to Mr. Moon from Mr. Current," December 1, 1955, 1, NAACP Papers, LOC, Box A-422, Folder 1 (all quotations). See also, "FBI Investigates Shooting of Negro; 3d Mississippi Probe in Six Months," *New York Post*, November 28, 1955.

³⁷ Mendelsohn, *The Martyrs*, 18 (first quotation); "FBI Investigates Shooting of Negro; 3d

Americans, Courts's statement defined the meaning of social struggle in Mississippi: the need to secure social, political, and basic human rights, and to stay alive in the process.

Courts eventually chose to leave the state. The NAACP, however, continued to work closely with local groups such as the Elks, Masons, various fraternities, the American Legion, churches, and other entities to organize voter registration drives.³⁸ It also put together community-based resistance teams. In 1955, Evers met with the nonpartisan Progressive Voters League of Jackson and organized two-person teams to visit local churches. The objectives of the teams were to provide instruction on the registration process and to hammer home the importance of the ballot. One such meeting, held on September 25, 1956, netted five teams that Evers believed would multiply as the groups headed "from church to church in the community." Each team had "the responsibility of urging persons to pay their poll taxes, register, and urge their families and neighbors to do likewise."³⁹

In 1958 the NAACP organized registration clinics and precinct clubs. There were also organized groups such as the Citizens Improvement League in Jackson and the Crusade for Voters in Meridian, whose sole purpose, Evers explained, was "to coordinate the social and civic clubs in one mammoth effort to increase the vote" throughout the state. Meridian's precinct number 3 helped get "ten persons" registered in that precinct alone. The following year the precinct clubs in Jackson "distributed 10,000 handbills and 100 placards in strategic business establishments and to individuals urging the payment of [their] poll tax." The NAACP also provided the Civil Rights Commission with affidavits from individuals who were denied an opportunity to register.⁴⁰

Mississippi Probe in Six Months," *New York Post*, November 28, 1955 (second quotation); "Mississippi Governor Acts in Negro Shooting," *United Press International*, November 28, 1955, Coleman (J.P.) Papers (hereinafter cited as Coleman Papers) Mississippi Department of Archives and History Manuscript Collection No. Z/1877.000s (third and fourth quotations); and Price, *The Negro Voter in the South*, 21 (fifth and sixth quotations). See also, *Congressional Record: Proceedings and Debates of the 85th Congress, First Session*, Cox Papers, MSU Special Collections, Box 10, Folder 2, "Publications: Race Relations 2, 1955-1961 and Undated" number 3, 6. Box 10 has two number 2 folders and thus this one is identified with the full folder name above.

³⁸ Medgar Evers, "Monthly Report," August 27, 1956, NAACP Papers, LOC, Group III, Box C-243, Folder 5, pp. 1-2.

³⁹ Medgar Evers, "Monthly Report," September 27, 1956, NAACP Papers, LOC Group III, Box C-243, pp. 2-3 (all quotations).

⁴⁰ Medgar Evers, "Monthly Report," May 23, 1958, NAACP Papers, LOC, Group III, Box

Progressive measures such as these incited stronger opposition to black voter registration from concerned whites. The purging of black registered voters proved another means of diluting black political strength.

In many cases African Americans who had managed to register had their names purged from the rolls. This practice became so widespread that the federal government took notice and threatened offending parties with prosecution. Assistant attorney general Warren Olney III announced that there had “been ‘wholesale purges’ of Negroes from voting lists in Alabama, Georgia, Louisiana, North Carolina and Mississippi ... [which] could strip the vote from thousands.” He warned all involved that in “every instance where we can show a person was denied his right to vote by reason of color, we intend to prosecute.” In response, Mississippi attorney general Joe T. Patterson declared that he would “defend any county registrar prosecuted by the Federal Government for assertedly [*sic*] purging Negroes from voting lists.”⁴¹ The NAACP leadership responded by placing the voting problems in Mississippi squarely on the plate of President Dwight D. Eisenhower in an attempt to bring further federal attention to Mississippi’s political problems.

On October 24, 1956, the Mississippi State Conference of NAACP Branches sent President Eisenhower a telegram regarding America’s global support of “free elections.” Association leaders reminded the president of his “profound and very deep interest in free elections throughout the world ...” This “interest” they noted, had resulted in his inviting the “Russians to come to this country to observe our system of free elections.” In response, NAACP leaders invited the president to

send the Russian observers to Humphrey[s] County, Missis-

C-244, Folder 2, pp. 2-3 (first quotation); Medgar Evers, “Monthly Report,” September 23, 1958, NAACP Papers, LOC, Group III, Box C-244, Folder 2, p. 4 (second quotation); and Medgar Evers, “Monthly Report,” January 21, 1959, NAACP Papers, LOC, Group III, Box C-244, Folder 3, pp. 2-3 (third quotation). See also, Medgar Evers, “Monthly Report,” February 17, 1958, NAACP Papers, LOC, Group III, Box C-244, Folder 2, p. 1.

⁴¹ “South Boiling on Threat: U.S. Officials Claims Negroes Being Purged,” *Jackson Daily News*, October 25, 1956 (first quotation); “Negro Vote ‘Purge’ in 5 Dixie States To Be Prosecuted,” newspaper clipping, n.d, MSU Special Collections Vertical File (second quotation); and “Patterson Will Aid County Registrars,” *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, October 26, 1956, MSU Special Collections Vertical File (third quotation). See also, Gamarekian, “A Report from the South on the Negro,” June 27, 1957, p. 10 and NAACP Release, “Mississippi Screams at Negro Vote Charge,” November 1, 1956, NAACP Papers, LOC, Group II, Box A-270, Folder 9.

ssippi, where The [sic] Reverend Mr. G. W. Lee was killed and Mr. Gus Courts was shot because they tried to vote as Americans. Send them to Jefferson-Davis [sic] County where more than one thousand persons, who have been qualified voters from three to ten years, were disfranchised because they were Negroes. Send them also to Hattiesburg, in Forrest County, where there are less than twenty-five Negroes registered when there are twelve thousand Negroes in the county.

By affording the Russians an opportunity to witness the political environment of the American South in real time void of political and diplomatic filters, they felt “that a more accurate and objective view ... [would] be derived from a visit in these counties, and the majority of Mississippi counties where no Negroes are permitted to register and vote in our great democracy.”⁴² There was no response from the president. African Americans’ inability to vote also had a profound impact upon the youth and placed parents in precarious positions when pressed for answers regarding Negroes’ second-class status.

In 1957 Reverend W.D. Ridgeway of Hattiesburg, Mississippi, testified before the Senate Subcommittee hearings on civil rights regarding his electoral experiences. He informed the committee that on October 16, 1956, he and “17 other Negroes” were denied the right to register. Ridgeway also explained the difficulty that Negroes had in answering their children’s questions of why blacks were denied rights when so many other groups were not. “Why is it so easy for foreigners to spend only five years in America and Mississippi, then enjoy all of the freedoms and privileges that our United States Constitution calls for, but, on the other hand, native-born Negro Americans and Mississippians are denied the very basic guaranties that our Constitution provides—the right to vote and petition one’s government without intimidations and economic reprisals? We cannot answer the above question”⁴³

The difficulty in answering such questions increased in the face of such politically oppressive locales as Jefferson Davis County, where the white political leadership found yet another means for disfranchising black Mississippians. According to the 1954 registration survey, 1,221

⁴² “News Release,” Mississippi State Conference of NAACP Branches, October 25, 1956, NAACP Papers, LOC, Group II, Box C-243, Folder 5 (all quotations).

⁴³ Margaret Price, *The Negro and the Ballot in the South* (Atlanta: Southern Regional Council, 1959), 20 (all quotations).

of the 3,900 Negroes of voting age in Jefferson Davis County were registered. In 1956, "the board of supervisors called for a reregistration [*sic*] ... and cleared the rolls. All the white voters reregistered without difficulty." African Americans who attempted to re-register, however, "had to interpret portions of the Federal and state constitutions to the satisfaction of the registrar." The requirements, of course, proved quite an effective tactic for preventing the majority of African Americans from registering. As a consequence, in 1956 only 60 of the previously registered 1,221 black Mississippians were able to surmount the added difficulties and successfully re-register.⁴⁴ By December 1957, the Regional Council of Negro Leadership (RCNL) reported voter intimidation in thirty-one Mississippi counties with various intimidation tactics employed. The RCNL had also launched a voter-registration drive to "increase Negro registration in the state from the present 22,000 to 100,000," especially in places where there existed "'gross intimidation' against Negro voting." RCNL executive secretary Aaron Henry informed Mississippi governor J.P. Coleman that the fears, "as outlined to us by our people include fear of physical violence, fear of economic pressure and reprisals, fear of loss of employment and fear of loss of all semblance of amicable human relations between the races if the Negroes attempt to register and vote These conditions, we are sure you agree, ought not to exist in Mississippi."⁴⁵ The RCNL leadership, however, was not depending upon the governor's sense of what "ought not to exist" when it came to securing voting rights. The RCNL had already organized weekly classes on the state constitution to prepare individuals to pass the voter registration exam. The classes were well-attended (thirty-six people as of March 4) and those in attendance, Aaron Henry noted, show "considerable interest in the subject, ask questions and discuss the sections as we study them." Of more importance, Henry pointed out, "every Negro who has taken the course (on the Constitution) and who tried to register ... succeeded in registering."⁴⁶ African Americans' open responses to such "conditions"

⁴⁴ Gamarekian, "A Report from the South on the Negro," June 27, 1957, pp. 9-10 (all quotations).

⁴⁵ "Negroes Claim Can't Vote in 31 Counties," *Jackson Daily News*, December 9, 1957, Cox Papers, MSU Special Collections, Box 5, Folder 19b (first and second quotations) and "We'll Vote, Says Negro Spokesman," *Jackson Daily News*, March 19, 1958, MSU Special Collections Vertical File (third quotation).

⁴⁶ "Seek Poll Rights: Negroes Bone Up on Constitution," *Jackson Daily News*, March 4, 1958, MSU Special Collections Vertical File, "Civil Rights to 1959" (all quotations). See

as Henry had pointed out to Governor Coleman laid the groundwork for the NAACP's legal intervention into the voting practices of Jefferson Davis County, one of the thirty-one problem counties.

On March 29, 1958, NAACP Washington Bureau director Clarence Mitchell Jr. spoke at a rally of some 1,200 individuals. Mitchell informed the crowd "that if any Negro in Mississippi is barred from registering 'and comes to us for help we will file suits in his behalf.'" Mitchell explained that in "a free country you don't need bullets and fists when you've got the ballot. There's nothing wrong with any police department or legislature that the voters back home can't correct." The NAACP was in fact sponsoring a suit filed by the Reverend H.D. Darby of Prentiss, in Jefferson Davis County, challenging the state's voting practices. Mitchell pointed out the irony: "'History made a full circle' with filing of the suit in a county named for the President of the Confederacy." Medgar Evers explained that both Darby and his wife had "tried repeatedly without success to re-register" after becoming two of the 1,300 victims of voter purging.⁴⁷

On June 22, 1957, Darby had gone before Circuit Clerk James Daniel, who required that he take the written exam. After the examination Daniel asked that Darby "demonstrate a 'reasonable' understanding of the duties and obligations of citizenship under a constitutional form of government." Daniel, Darby recalled, "refused to register him 'on the ground[s] that he had failed to interpret a provision of the State Constitution and had failed to demonstrate a reasonable interpretation of the duties and obligations of citizenship." Darby argued that the law provided "registrars leeway to use the constitution as an unsolvable test to bar Negro voting."⁴⁸ NAACP officials were confident that they could

also, "Negroes Attend Class on Constitution," *Jackson Clarion-Ledger*, March 5, 1958, Ed King Papers, Box 1, Folder 5, Mississippi Department of Archives and History, Tougaloo College Civil Rights Collection, unprocessed collection No. T-17.

⁴⁷ "Negro Voting Right Pledged By NAACP," *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, March 31, 1958, MSU Special Collections Vertical File (first and third quotations); "NAACP Promises New Voting Suits," *Jackson Daily News*, March 31, 1958, MSU Special Collections Vertical File, "Civil Rights to 1959," (second quotation); and "First Negro Suit on Vote Rights," *Associated Press*, March 18, 1958, Cox Papers, MSU Special Collections, Box 3, Folder 20 (fourth quotation).

⁴⁸ "NAACP Opens Battle in Mississippi, Files Vote Law Test Suit," *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, March 18, 1958, Cox Papers, MSU Special Collections, Box 3, Folder 20 (first and second quotations) and Jerry Proctor, "Capital Comments," *Jackson State Times*, March 18, 1958, Cox Papers, MSU Special Collections, Box 3, Folder, 19b (third quotation). See also, "First Negro Suit on Vote Rights," *Associated Press*, March 18, 1958, Cox Papers,

win a court decision.

On April 25, 1958, the RCNL voted "to seek a conference with the Federal Civil Rights Commission in Washington to discuss restrictions on Negro voting in Mississippi." Darby, whose suit against the county had put a lot of socially and politically conservative whites on edge, announced before an audience of more than one hundred Negroes that he had been "charged with stirring up the peace between the white man and the Negro—I am 51 years old and there has never been any peace There can't be any peace in a second class citizenship." Clarence Mitchell later predicted that when the Darby "suit is won and the Negro people vote in Jefferson Davis County that will make the name of Jefferson Davis synonymous with civil rights rather than rebellion against the United States."⁴⁹ In January of that same year, Jackson *Clarion-Ledger* city editor Gene Wirth addressed the black/white population ratio issue in Mississippi, pointing out that with blacks holding majorities in thirty-one counties; increased black voting would have a profound impact. "All in all," he noted, "it can be readily seen that the full employment of the ballot by the Negro would represent a serious threat to 'white supremacy.' The potential is political dynamite."⁵⁰ Mississippi attorney general Joe Patterson also feared the political consequences of a positive court ruling.

Patterson announced that the state of Mississippi was fully vested in defending against the Darby suit. He warned that if other black citizens followed in Darby's footsteps and filed lawsuits it could "only result in driving a wedge between the white and colored people of Mississippi and will in a short time destroy the peace, harmony, good will and understanding that has existed between the white and colored people of Mississippi for so many years."⁵¹ African Americans, however, strongly disagreed with Patterson's rosy assessment of the history of Mississippi's race relations. When the case came before Judge Ben Cameron of the

MSU Special Collections, Box 3, Folder 20.

⁴⁹ "Negroes Desire Voting Parley," April 26, 1958, MSU Special Collections Vertical File, "Civil Rights to 1959," (first and second quotations) and "Negro Voting Right Pledged by NAACP," *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, March 31, 1958, MSU Special Collections Vertical File (third quotation).

⁵⁰ "Study Negro in Politics," *Clarion Ledger-Jackson Daily News*, January 12, 1958, MSU Special Collections Vertical File, "Civil Rights to 1959" (all quotations).

⁵¹ "Miss. To Defend Suit by NAACP," *Memphis Press-Scimitar*, March 19, 1958, Cox Papers, Folder 20 (quotation).

United States Fifth Circuit Court of Appeals, Judge Sidney Mize of the United States District Court for Southern Mississippi, and Judge Claude Clayton of the United States District Court for Northern Mississippi, Darby's fate seemed uncertain. On November 6, 1958, however, and pointing out the fact that federal officials had Daniels under surveillance, the "three-judge Federal Court held ... [that] Mississippi Laws ... [were] constitutional and that [under the circumstances] Circuit Clerk James Daniel of Jefferson Davis County had been a 'conscientious, patient and fair public official, exerting every effort to do a hard job in an honorable way.'" On November 11, Governor Coleman sent a letter to Judge Cameron congratulating him on the Darby decision, which he categorized as "a judicial masterpiece." Furthermore, he shared with Cameron his belief that "the United States Supreme Court will find great intellectual difficulty in over-ruling the logical reasoning exhibited in this opinion." The governor's statement emphasized the kind of judicial and political power that African Americans were up against in the battle for the ballot. For many, the Darby verdict was not surprising as NAACP attorneys understood that criminal "intent in voting cases," as historian Neil McMillen points out, "was hard to prove, and [furthermore] all-white Mississippi juries were loath to convict [county registrars]."⁵² By 1961, however, the NAACP demonstrated greater organization in the fight for the ballot and unveiled yet another civil rights program.

On April 7, 1961, NAACP officers met at the organization's national office in New York and developed a six-point plan of attack on segregation named Operation Mississippi. The first organizational point of the new program called for each NAACP member to make every effort "to increase registration and voting." Students were to assist in voter registration, specifically in preparing voters to pass literacy tests, organizing citizenship training schools, facilitating publicity to encourage registration, and gathering affidavits documenting registration attempts. As a result of Operation Mississippi, in less than a year the number of black

⁵² "NAACP Appeal to Negroes Is Showing Little Effect On Mississippi Vote Rolls," *Associated Press*, December 13, 1958, Section II, 6, George Neal Meilhenny Papers, MSU Special Collections, Box 2, Folder 61, (first quotation); Governor J.P. Coleman correspondence to Judge Ben Cameron, November 11, 1958, Coleman Papers, Box 13, Folder 1 (second and third quotations); and Neil R. McMillen, "Black Enfranchisement in Mississippi," 359 (fourth quotation) and "Negro's Test of Vote Law is Dismissed," *Memphis Commercial Appeal* November 7, 1958, MSU Special Collections Vertical File, "Civil Rights to 1959. See also, Price, *The Negro and the Ballot in the South*, 28.

registered voters in Laurel more than doubled “to slightly over the 2,000 figure.”⁵³ The NAACP also set up a special office in Jackson and employed a young woman to call black residents. She contacted individuals from 1:00 to 9:00 p.m. daily urging them to pay their poll tax. This appeal proved so successful that the Hinds County courthouse in Jackson was inundated with Negroes with poll tax money in hand.⁵⁴

NAACP grassroots support for voter registration in 1961 continued what the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) initiated in 1960 as a part of its “Southwide [*sic*] campaign to increase voter registration.” SCLC organized voter registration groups and targeted fourteen southern cities, including Jackson and Clarksdale, Mississippi. On October 3, 1960, some sixty African Americans in Clarksdale went to the Coahoma County circuit clerk’s office determined to register. Most who took the test were schoolteachers, Circuit Clerk J.W. Smith acknowledged, but deridingly added “some others were just ignorant, country Negroes.” Despite his obvious bias, ten of the thirty applicants to whom he administered the “state literacy test” were successfully registered.⁵⁵ In addition to the accomplishments of the NAACP, Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) and SCLC in voter registration efforts, actions by the federal government in 1961 also provided African Americans with renewed hope of effective government intervention.

On July 6, 1961, the Justice Department filed suits in two Mississippi counties based on the 1957 and 1960 civil rights statutes. The suits came a few days after Clarence Mitchell “claimed the Justice Department ‘was dragging it’s [*sic*] feet in Mississippi voting areas.’”⁵⁶ The suits, filed in Forrest and Clarke counties, “asked the U.S. District

⁵³ “Program Operation Mississippi,” Papers of the NAACP: Part 20, Group III, Box A-232, microfilm reel 3, p. 1 (first quotation) and “Laurel, Miss., Negroes Registering to Vote,” March 23, 1962, NAACP Papers, LOC, Group III, Box C-270, pp. 1-2 (second quotation). See also, “‘Operation Mississippi,’ ‘Time has come,’ insists Medgar Evers, NAACP head,” Special to the *Afro*, April 25, no year provided but most likely 1961, newspaper clipping, Trumpauer (Joan Harris) Civil Rights Scrapbooks, Box 1, Folder 6, Correspondence/ Newspaper Clippings, Mississippi Department of Archives and History Special Collections, Collection No. Z/2274.000/S (Hereinafter cited as Trumpauer Papers).

⁵⁴ Medgar Evers, “Monthly Report,” January 20, 1961, NAACP Papers, LOC, Group III, Box C-245, Folder 1, p. 2 (quotation).

⁵⁵ “Negroes Crowd Clerk’s Office In Clarksdale, *Jackson State Times*, October 4, 1960, Cox Papers, MSU Special Collections (all quotations).

⁵⁶ “Government Files Voter Suits Here,” *Jackson Daily News*, July 6, 1961, Cox Papers, MSU Special Collections, Box 5, Folder 19b (quotation).

Court of the Southern District of Mississippi for both temporary and permanent injunctions against any discrimination in voting.” United States attorney general Robert F. Kennedy announced that investigations had demonstrated “a ‘clear cut pattern of discrimination’ in the two counties.” Justice Department officials reported that in Clarke County “none of the 2,988 Negroes ... [were] registered to vote, in contrast to the enrollment of more than 50 percent of the 6,072 eligible white citizens. In Forrest County, the domain of circuit clerk Theron C. Lynd, approximately 11,000 of the 22,431 whites and only 25 of the 7,495 Negroes of voting age... [were] registered.”⁵⁷ *United States v. Theron Lynd* would be an important voting rights case that Gordon Martin Jr., a Justice Department attorney working the case, called “a racial confrontation.”⁵⁸ By 1961 the black youth were taking a more direct approach to securing voting rights, and “outside agitators” often led the way.

In 1961, members of SNCC arrived in Mississippi en masse and ratcheted up direct challenges to voter denial with mixed but often violent results. On September 5, in southwest Mississippi, enraged whites beat SNCC’s Travis Britt and Robert Moses when they took several individuals to register at the Amite County Courthouse in Liberty. Britt later reported that one of his attackers hit him “more than 20 times.” Two days later in Walthall County, John Hardy, also a member of SNCC, led a group to the circuit clerk’s office in Tylertown to register and ran into trouble as well. When Hardy and his group arrived, circuit clerk John Q. Wood, who also served as the registrar, informed the group that “he ‘wasn’t registering voters’ that day.” He then forced Hardy out of the

⁵⁷ Untitled, Cox Papers, MSU Special Collections, Folder 19a, pp. 1-2 (all quotations). The information provided here came out of a four-page review of the voting problems in Clarke and Forrest counties and the Justice Department’s response to those issues; whether lost or removed the report failed to present a title page. See also, “Chapter 18, Civil Rights Division Chronology January 1961-1963,” compiled by Brian K. Landsberg, <http://www.und.edu/instruct/jfkconference/JFKChapter18R.doc> (accessed May 12, 2012); “Voting in Mississippi,” A Report of the United States Commission on Civil Rights, 10; NAACP *Annual Report*, “NAACP in Action,” 1961, p. 13; and McMillen, “Black Enfranchisement in Mississippi,” 356.

⁵⁸ Gordon A. Martin, Jr., *Count Them One By One: Black Mississippians Fighting for the Right to Vote* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2010), 85 (quotation). For a general but helpful discussion of the United States’ Civil Rights Division and its work in the area of voting rights, see John Doar, “The Work of the Civil Rights Division in Enforcing Voting Rights under the Civil Rights Acts of 1957 and 1960,” *Florida State University Law Review* (Vol. 25:1 1997) <http://www.law.fsu.edu/journals/lawreview/downloads/251/doar.pdf> (accessed August 30, 2012).

office at gunpoint and while Hardy's back was turned assaulted him about the head with a pistol "causing an ugly laceration."⁵⁹ By 1962, the Justice Department, due to sustained black organizational challenges and ever-growing national press coverage highlighting the violent responses to blacks' attempts to vote, proved more willing to address the issue of voter denial in Mississippi. The problems African Americans were facing in the state also grabbed the attention of key civil rights leaders such as Martin Luther King Jr.

Martin Luther King believed that the power to gain political equality in Mississippi rested in the hands of those presently disfranchised. King, speaking to a crowd of some two thousand on February 8, 1962, in Clarksdale, Mississippi, announced that an intense and full voter registration drive would "change the entire political structure of the state of Mississippi." Yet in order to accomplish this change, he warned, black Mississippians would have to first "overcome 'the resistance and conniving methods of southern registrars ...' We must continue to insist that the President and the agencies of the federal government give leadership in the field of civil rights, but the Negro must understand his salvation is not in Washington." King made sure to stress that the future of the Negro "is primarily in our own committed hands." In regard to strategies, he explained that black Mississippians would have to be "prepared to stand-in, sit-in, and walk-in by the thousands, in order to reveal to the world that we are determined to be first class citizens." In July, speaking at the NAACP Fight for Freedom Fund and awards dinner at Morehouse College in Atlanta, King announced that he was "still convinced that one of the most significant steps that the negro can take at this hour is that short walk to the voting booth."⁶⁰ Civil

⁵⁹ "Chronology of Violence and Intimidation in Mississippi Since 1961," March 31, 1963, Voter Education Project Report, Cox Papers, Box 3, Folder 19a, p. 2 (first and second quotations) and Medgar Evers, "Monthly Report, Mississippi Field Secretary," October 5, 1961, Papers of the NAACP: Part 20, Group III, Box A-115, microfilm reel 15, p. 2 (third quotation). See also, Dittmer, *Local People*, 108 and Clayborne Carson, *In Struggle: SNCC and the Black Awakening of the 1960s* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995), 48.

⁶⁰ "King in 'People' speech backs Miss. Vote drive," February 17, 1962, no attribution provided, Trumpauer Papers, Box 1, Folder 6 (first, third, and fourth quotations); "The Ballot Box is Called Path to Freedom," *Memphis Press-Scimitar*, July 6, 1962 (fifth quotation) and "King Asserts State Negroes Can Elect 5," *United Press International*, February 9, 1962, Trumpauer Papers Box 1, Folder 6 (second quotation). Unfortunately, some of the presented newspaper clippings do not provide attribution of the papers carrying the stories. However, portions of King's statement of Negroes being prepared to "stand in, sit in, and walk in by the thousands," was also carried by the *Memphis*

rights organizations such as SNCC and the Highlander Folk School in Monteagle, Tennessee, understood this and relied upon each other to further the black voting agenda.

In preparation for the Mississippi Voter Registration Project, in 1962 Bob Moses requested that Highlander send representatives to Mississippi to conduct workshops throughout the state. Bernice Robinson, Highlander extension director, recalled that "Citizenship schools for functional illiterates, classes in registration procedures, and a series of eight workshops on the field were planned." Highlander began on June 16 with a workshop at Tougaloo College, where fifteen students decided afterwards to work on the voter registration campaign in Jackson. Robinson spent the rest of the month traveling the state, dropping in on workshop participants and finding the lessons imparted in the workshops put into play in Greenwood, Clarksdale, and Vicksburg. However, in Greenville the workshop seemed to have the most intensity. A Greenville student, Robinson noted, had successfully implemented

all the methods learned at the June workshop: setting up an office and holding voter-education classes; making notes of sections of the Constitutions; keeping records of blocks canvassed, persons contacted, and the dates and hours they are free to register; providing transportation and following up with telephone calls. As a result, he has registered six out of the seven persons whom he has taken to register.⁶¹

African Americans were training and mounting successful challenges to voter suppression and making it harder for registrars to handle these new coordinated attempts to vote and still operate within an ever-confining system of franchise denial.

White registrars were also confined by the system of segregation and often acted on the orders of their superiors, as the *Lynd* case aptly demonstrated. On March 5, 1962, former deputy clerk Wilma Walley testified that she was not allowed to provide Negroes with registration cards. She informed the court "that while working for Circuit Clerk

Commercial Appeal in "Negroes Push Voting Drive," April 6, 1962, Cox Papers, MSU Special Collections, Box 5, Folder 19b.

⁶¹ "Summary of Mississippi and Louisiana Extension Report," August, 1962, Cox Papers, Box 1, Folder 32, MSU Special Collections (all quotations).

Theron C. Lynd she was instructed to give application forms to both races, but issued registration cards ‘just to whites.’” She and another witness, deputy circuit clerk Dorothy Massengale, “testified that it was the practice for Lynd to decide on Negro applications.” No matter the educational background of black applicants who attempted to register, coming before Lynd all but assured one would fail the prescribed test. This practice proved the case for the Reverend James Chandler, who held a Masters Degree in Theology from Union Theological Seminary in New Orleans, and for Robert Lewis, a twenty-eight-year-old high school chemistry and physics teacher who also held a Masters Degree. Lynd informed both they had failed the literacy test. Even Negroes, Medgar Evers reported, “with A.B., B.S., [and] M.A. Degrees who are teaching Government, [and] Civics ... are denied the right to vote.”⁶² However, whites such as twenty-two-year-old twins Thomas and John Edward Dabbs and twenty-three-year-old Marsha Wright all successfully registered. In fact, Wright did not recall filling out any paperwork that day but simply “signed the registration book,” while Mary Trudie Bilberry admitted that “a deputy clerk registered her and she filled out the precinct number after the clerk handed her a card with the number on it.” That clerk was none other than Wilma Walley.⁶³ The Justice Department placed a great deal of pressure upon Lynd to cease voter bias and finally secured a permanent injunction in February 1965 barring him from continued discrimination against black registrants. The Justice Department filed a number of lawsuits in 1962 to prevent voter denial in Mississippi. Conservative whites responded with intimidation, and political elites added legislation to counter an aggressive federal government in the field of legal challenges to white political supremacy in Mississippi.

The *Commercial Appeal* (Memphis) acknowledged the rush of legislative measures designed to stall the Justice Department’s attack upon white political dominance in the state. Black voter registration proved

⁶² “Negro Voter Card Denial Is Described,” *United Press International*, March 6, 1962, Trumpauer Papers, Box 1, Folder 4 (first and second quotations) and Medgar Evers Address, May 18, 1958, NAACP Papers, LOC, Group II, Box C-244, Folder 2, p. 6 (third quotation). See also, “Testifies Negroes Frightened Her,” *Jackson Daily News*, March 6, 1962, Trumpauer Papers Box 1, Folder 4.

⁶³ “Testifies He Handled Negro Registrations,” *Jackson Daily News*, March 7, 1962, Trumpauer Papers, Box 1, Folder 4 (all quotations) and Martin, *Count Them One By One*, 180-182.



Voter registration applicants before circuit clerk Theron C. Lynd, 1964. Moncrief Photograph Collection, courtesy Mississippi Department of Archives and History.

to be such an issue that Mississippi's 1962 legislature adjourned after "a record-setting 22 weeks session ... [which] was the longest session since 1870." One of the newly enacted statutes required that an applicant "be 'of good moral character' and to demonstrate that fact to the county registrar." One could challenge the morality of a candidate for voter registration, and when such happened the applicant had to appear before "an 'administrative hearing to determine the sufficiency of the application or challenge.'" Thus, applicants had to publish their intentions to register in the local newspaper before the registrar could consider the application. After the individual filed his or her application, the registrar published it once a week for two weeks, and if no challenges arose regarding the individual's character within the fourteen days of the last publication the application proceeded forward. In order to qualify to register, an individual could not have been convicted of "bribery, burglary, theft, arson, obtaining money or goods under false pretenses, perjury, forgery, embezzlement or bigamy ..." These were crimes that many whites attributed to blacks in general. One must also have "paid all poll taxes for the two proceeding years and have paid them before the

first day of February of the year in which he offers to vote.”⁶⁴ If a person had not paid his or her poll taxes, they could not catch up on any back poll taxes in an election year. As oppressive as these obstacles were, African Americans understood that the potential for violence towered over all other concerns.

African Americans were often willing to chance going to the county courthouse and registering, but voting was a different matter. As scholars such as Neil McMillen acknowledge, “voter registration is not voter participation,” a fact that people such as Adlena Hamlett discovered. In 1962, Hamlett, a retired schoolteacher, was one of the first African Americans to register in Tallahatchie County. When her name appeared in the newspaper, as required by state law, she found a “life-sized effigy of a woman hung above her mail box Although she did go to the county seat to register, she admitted that fear of violence made her unwilling to go to her polling place to vote in the elections which followed.” Some African Americans had been allowed to register and had received assistance from the registrar to complete the process. In many cases voting was not the ultimate objective behind allowing blacks to register, as Jake Cain of Carroll County learned. In 1959, four African Americans were registered in Carroll County due to a previously voided “murder conviction.” The fact “that Negroes had been systematically excluded from the jury rolls” had produced the altered verdict. Since Mississippi required that jurors come from the pool of registered voters, the sheriff, in an obvious attempt to skirt this type of problem in the future, requested that four Negroes be allowed to register and that the registrar assist them in the process. When Jake Cain later asked if he could vote, he was informed that “there might be trouble and that he should see the sheriff.” Cain decided not to approach the sheriff and received no assistance from the registrar and thus did not try to vote.⁶⁵

⁶⁴ “New Bars to Negro Vote Set by ‘Moral’ Amendment,” *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, June 3, 1962, Trumpauer Papers, Box 1, Folder 5 (all quotations). As if these hindrances to voting were not enough, Senator George Yarbrough of Red Banks introduced a bill that would require individuals who did not successfully register to wait six months before trying again. See “Six Months Wait Asked Registrants,” *Associated Press*, March 22, 1962, Trumpauer Papers, Box 1, Folder 5 and McMillen, “Black Enfranchisement in Mississippi,” 353. See also, Colby, “The Voting Rights Act and Black Registration in Mississippi,” 126 and Kirwan, *The Revolt of the Rednecks*, 130-131.

⁶⁵ McMillen, “Black Enfranchisement in Mississippi,” 372 (first quotation), and “Voting in Mississippi,” A Report of the United States Commission on Civil Rights, 1965, pp. 27-28 (second, third, fourth, and fifth quotations).

These two situations symbolized the range of political problems that civil rights organizations faced. As the number of civil rights workers and organizations operating in Mississippi intensified, so did the tactics designed to stop them.

On August 30, 1962, Robert Moses and SNCC workers C.R. McLaurin, Albert Garner, J.O. Hodges, and Samuel Block were arrested by Indianola policemen and charged with “distributing literature without a permit.” The men had been passing out leaflets door-to-door announcing an upcoming mass registration meeting. During the trial on August 31, Block cross-examined one of the officers, asking if he had actually seen him “hand out a leaflet?” The judge quickly informed the officer that Block could ask him “anything he wants to, but you don’t have to answer.” The white political leadership also used oppressive tactics against churches that supported voter registration. On September 3, 1962, Ruleville Mayor Charles Dorrough sent a letter notifying Williams Chapel Missionary Baptist Church that both its “tax exemption and free water were being cut off because the property was being used for ‘purposes other than worship services.’” The church had served as a meeting place for registration workers.⁶⁶ Those with the greatest physical needs also found themselves the victims of political retribution.

CORE leaders argued that Mississippi politicians used their positions to apply pressure on the poor who depended upon the state for aid. They proclaimed that reprisals were directed against “20,000 Mississippi Negroes who tried to register to vote by dropping them from federal surplus commodities lists.” CORE representatives, by way of telegram, informed U.S. attorney general Robert Kennedy and Agriculture Secretary Orville Freeman of what was transpiring in Mississippi regarding voter discrimination and oppression. CORE representative David Dennis explained to Freeman that “about 20,000 people dropped from federal surplus commodities list. Leflore County hit hardest. Affidavits being secured to support contention this is largely reprisal against Negroes who attempted to register.” CORE urged the Department of Agriculture to thoroughly investigate the matter so as to offer protection to the “20,000 destitute defenseless people.” This, CORE director James Farmer noted, “is [the] type of reprisal to be expected through

⁶⁶ “Chronology of Violence and Intimidation in Mississippi Since 1961,” Voter Education Project, Cox Papers, March 31, 1963, MSU Special Collections, Box 3, Folder 19a, pp. 10-12 (all quotations).

discriminatory use of local option in ... [dispensing] federal funds, goods and services."⁶⁷ As a result of the negative coverage that both Dennis's and CORE's accusations generated in the national press, Mississippi officials responded quickly.

Mississippi Department of Public Welfare commissioner Fred A. Ross branded CORE's accusations an "unadulterated lie." In response to Dennis's emphasis upon affidavits, Ross argued that it is quite "possible to procure affidavits from some people that the moon is made out of green cheese or that limburger cheese smells like perfume But that does not make either one of these propositions true." An appearance by black comedian Dick Gregory heightened the national attention created by SNCC and CORE concerning the cessation of provided federal surplus commodities. National attention intensified after Gregory arrived in Greenwood with food that had been collected in Chicago. Regarding Gregory's arrival, Ross warned the African American community that it "is perfectly possible ... that county boards of supervisors could decide to turn the entire food problem in the counties to Dick Gregory and his cohorts in Chicago, rather than tax the citizens of the counties for the expense of doing so." He further warned that any "sane person would hate like thunder to try to exist permanently on the grub Gregory would provide after his publicity headlines vanish." In addition, Ross called the food drive a "cheap publicity stunt ... calculated to produce, not avoid, racial violence. The primary beneficiary," he continued, "is Khrushchev and his worldwide propaganda ministry" Responding to federal pressures, the Leflore County Board of Supervisors resumed its "full-scale free surplus food distribution program for one month under an ultimatum to do it or have it done by the federal government." James Forman, SNCC executive secretary, hailed the decision as "a great victory for those working to bring true democracy to Mississippi."⁶⁸

⁶⁷ "Integration Group Charges Reprisals," *Associated Press*, December 12, 1962, Trumpauer Papers, Box 1, Folder 4 (all quotations). See also, McMillen, "Black Enfranchisement in Mississippi," 361-362.

⁶⁸ "Reprisal Charge Rapped By Ross," *Jackson Daily News*, December 13, 1962, Trumpauer Papers, Box 1, Folder 4 (first and second quotations); "Racketeering In Surplus Food," *Jackson Daily News*, February 16, 1963, 6, Trumpauer Papers, Box 1, Folder 6 (third and fourth quotations); "Bad Faith Is Charged In Donations Of Food," *Clarion-Ledger-Jackson Daily News*, March 17, 1963, Cox Papers, MSU Special Collections, Box 5, Folder 19b (fifth quotation); "Handouts Forced Under U.S. Threat," *Jackson Daily News*, March 21, 1963, (sixth quotation); and "Negroes Vow To Intensify Ballot Drive," *Associated Press*, March 21, 1963, Trumpauer Papers, Box 1, Folder 6 (seventh quotation).

By March 1963, the NAACP, SNCC, SCLC, and CORE were all working together on voter registration. The NAACP launched a three-month voter registration drive. The group, as Medgar Evers explained, believed that with “this effort, and with the pressure of Justice Department officials [now] checking the records of the Circuit Clerk ... it is expected that the registration of Negroes in Jackson and Hinds County will take a sharp curve upwards.” The pressure Justice Department officials placed upon circuit clerk offices sometimes produced unimaginable results for some white registrants. On April 13, the “Walthall County Board of Election Commissioners ... purged 13 white persons from voter registration rolls in the wake of a Federal civil rights suit.” Each admitted that they could not read nor write and had received assistance from someone in the circuit clerk’s office in filling out their applications. The pressure from the Justice Department on the state stemmed from President John F. Kennedy’s plans to address the voting problems in Mississippi. Kennedy argued that his plan was “necessary ‘to free the forces of our democratic system by promptly insuring the franchise to all citizens.’” Mississippi officials countered Kennedy’s logic by arguing that the United States Constitution did “not provide that the federal government will guarantee the right to vote to every adult, regardless of qualifications. The states have the right to set qualifications for voters. This is the law of the land.” They couched their fears within a robe of concern for voter integrity. “Lowering the qualifications for voters,” they argued, “and flooding the books with illiterates and other unqualified persons who are not competent to vote intelligently is hardly the promotion of democracy Lowering standards of voter qualification is a direct step toward lowering the standards of government.”⁶⁹ Negroes challenged the idea of their political incompetence with vigor, and as the year progressed, tensions mounted both inside and outside the state and the potential for bloodshed increased.

In 1963 civil rights leaders focused their attention upon Leflore County with the express objective of registering every Negro in the county. An unidentified “Negro minister” announced at a mass meeting

⁶⁹ Medgar Evers, “Monthly Report,” March 6, 1963, NAACP Papers, LOC, Group III, Box C-245, Folder 3, pp. 3-4 (first quotation); “13 White Voters Taken From Rolls,” *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, April 14, 1963, Cox Papers, MSU Special Collections, Box 5, Folder 19b (second quotation); and “Lowering Voter Qualifications,” *Jackson Daily News*, March 10, 1963, Trumpauer Papers, Box 1, Folder 4 (third, fourth, and fifth quotations).

of some four hundred that the “voter registration drive is not aimed ‘at hurting the white man We are going to change the political structure of Greenwood and this country.’” The Reverend James Bevel of the SCLC, speaking before a crowd of some two hundred fifty people with approximately one hundred more standing outside the church building, acknowledged that he believed in “prayer. But it’s never put a governor in office. We need the vote. Get your freedom. Become a registered voter” In Greenwood the NAACP, SNCC, SCLC, CORE, and the local NAACP Youth Council, under the umbrella of the Council of Federated Organizations (COFO), united their efforts to combat voter fraud and intimidation. Wiley A. Branton, director of the Voter Education Project, noted the change in the way blacks now approached the voting issue: “For the first time in a Mississippi county there has been a breakthrough of the fear which has held Negroes back. Since March 1, [1963,] over 500 have waited determinedly at the Greenwood court house, trying to register Weekly mass meetings are thronged, and Leflore Negroes are saying emphatically and courageously that they will not wait any longer to be treated as American citizens. And police suppression will not stop them.”⁷⁰ By April, activists stepped up their work in Leflore County, producing greater national scrutiny.

In March and April activists, who organized registration marches in Greenwood to challenge and highlight the inequities in the voter registration process, were met with violence. In March, a police dog bit the Reverend D.L. Tucker of Greenwood as he and other Negroes left the courthouse after attempting to register. A police dog also bit both Bob Moses and young Matthew Hughes while on a registration march; the latter requiring hospital treatment.⁷¹ In addition to the violence, white

⁷⁰ “Tense Quiet in Delta Follows Arrest of 11 in Greenwood Protest,” *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, March 28, 1963, Cox Papers, MSU Special Collections, Box 5, Folder 19b (first and second quotations); “Political Upheaval Goal is Emphasized,” *Memphis Press-Scimitar*, March 28, 1963, Cox Papers, MSU Special Collections, Box 5, Folder 19b (third quotation) and “News Release,” Voter Education Project, Cox Papers, March 31, 1963, MSU Special Collections, Box 3, Folder 19a, p. 2 (fourth quotation). Organized in 1961 and revitalized in 1962, the Council of Federated Organizations served as an umbrella organization bringing together the major civil rights organizations (NAACP, SNCC, SCLC, and CORE) to present a more unified attack against social and political repression and inequality in Mississippi.

⁷¹ “Hundreds Want to Vote in Greenwood,” *Mississippi Free Press*, April 6, 1963, Ed King Papers, Box 7, Folder 372, unprocessed collection, Mississippi Department of Archives and History.

political elites relied upon registration tests to ensure political dominance. “Leflore County has a voter registration test that ‘God himself couldn’t pass unless they wanted Him to,’” Dick Gregory announced. Police later broke up a march and arrested nineteen protestors—although refusing to arrest Gregory to avoid undue publicity. Gregory pronounced that he would be canceling all of his other engagements to remain in Greenwood and “fight this thing until the Government sends in troops. If it takes 20 years, I’ll be here in an effort to put down the police brutality.” He admitted, however, that you “can’t blame the whites for fighting back. He’s had the place to himself for 200 years.” If the government did not act decisively, Gregory added, then one would have to question the sincerity of the Kennedy administration. “If 30,000 soldiers aren’t in Leflore county by sunrise tomorrow,” newspaper accounts attributed to Gregory, then “something strange has happened to Gen. Kennedy’s strategy.”⁷²

Governor Ross Barnett labeled the Greenwood marches “as ‘badly infected and misguided’ and ‘as dangerous to the community as a loaded bomb resting in a street in the heart of the city.’” He further added that the “election of the Kennedys does not amend the Constitution ... and I shall stand by the officials of Greenwood to assist them in the exercise of their lawful rights If a white or colored person is qualified to vote,” Barnett stated, “he needs no crowd to accompany him.” Wiley Branton exclaimed that Mississippi’s negative responses to black political advancement were no new phenomenon. “The State of Mississippi,” he opined, “has repeatedly thrown down a gauntlet at the feet of would-be Negro voters, not only by the discriminatory practices of the registrar, but also by the economic pressures, threats, coercions, physical violence, and death to Negroes seeking the right to vote.”⁷³ Branton’s statement, however, did not mean that African Americans were unwilling to protect themselves.

⁷² “Mayor Speaks for Greenwood,” *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, April 17, 1963 (first quotation); “Police Seize 19 Negroes, Skip Gregory,” *United Press International*, April 3, 1963, Trumpauer Papers, Box 1, Folder 6 (second quotation); and “Clayton Scheduled To Hear U.S. Pleas,” *Associated Press*, April 4, 1963, Trumpauer Papers, Box 1, Folder 6 (third and fourth quotations). See also, “Hundreds Want to Vote in Greenwood,” *Mississippi Free Press*, April 6, 1963, Ed King Papers, Box 7, Folder 372, unprocessed collection, MDAH.

⁷³ “Barnett Says Peril Lurks In Marches,” *Jackson Daily News*, April 1, 1963 (first and second quotations) and “The Struggle to Vote in Greenwood, Mississippi,” May 1, 1963, Trumpauer Papers, Box 1, Folder 6, p. 27 (third quotation). Unfortunately, there is no accompanying journal or magazine title provided with this article copy.

Hartman Turnbow had proven to be a key leader in Holmes County, and in April 1963 he led a protest march on the courthouse. He also had a reputation for his willingness to defend his family. Turnbow later reported that on the night of May 7, 1963, two white men had thrown "three flaming bottles of gasoline into his house ... opposite where he and his wife and 16-year-old daughter were sleeping." His wife and daughter escaped, but when he tried to exit the house shots were fired at him. He returned fire at two of the men before they all fled. He reported that approximately thirty shots were fired. Despite his account of events to police, on the following day five Negroes, including Turnbow and Robert Moses, were arrested in connection with the firebombing. Moses was charged with having refused to stop taking pictures at the scene, thereby "'impeding' officers in their investigation." The other three individuals were identified as Hollis Watkins, Laverne Hampton and Zack Edward Ball; each of the five was charged with arson and held under a \$500 bond.⁷⁴

Medgar Evers quickly labeled the arrests as "harassment and intimidation" and further argued that in Mississippi there existed a "complete reign of terror in the delta area against Negroes seeking to register to vote." When questioned about the arrests, Holmes County chief deputy Andrew Smith "said his investigation showed three 'Molotov cocktails' were thrown into Turnbow's home near here before dawn yesterday 'in a plan to get the colored population excited because Negroes had lost interest in this voter campaign.'" The arrests, U.S. attorney general Robert Kennedy argued, had been orchestrated to "intimidate and coerce Negroes in Holmes County from attempting to register to vote." Furthermore, the Justice Department contended that the charges were "false and baseless" and announced that the suit asked for court orders forbidding the "prosecution of the Negroes and forbidding the arrest, prosecution of interfering with the right to vote."⁷⁵ The assassination of

⁷⁴ "Five Negroes Jailed In Holmes Incident," *United Press International*, May 9, 1963, Trumpauer Papers, Box 1, Folder 4 (first quotation) and "Negroes Accused Of Setting Fire To Pep Up Vote Drive," *Jackson Daily News*, May 9, 1963 (second quotation). See also, "Negro Rights Leaders Held As Arsonists," *United Press International*, May 9, 1963, Trumpauer Papers, Box 1, Folder 4; "Justice Dept. Files Suit Seeking Negroes' Release," *United Press International*, May 12, 1963, Trumpauer Papers, Box 1, Folder 4; and "Say CR Leader's Home Set Ablaze By Negroes," *Jackson Clarion-Ledger*, May 10, 1963, Cox Papers, MSU Special Collections, Box 5, Folder 19b.

⁷⁵ "Negro Rights Leaders Held As Arsonists," May 9, 1963, *United Press International* (first quotation) Trumpauer Papers, Box 1, Folder 4; "Negroes Accused Of Setting Fire

Medgar Evers on June 12, 1963, however, helped dissipate fears many African Americans harbored toward voter registration and positively impacted the fight for voting rights.

The murder of Mississippi's most recognizable civil rights leader outside of his home in Jackson by white supremacist Byron De La Beckwith created tensions that city officials feared would result in a full-scale race riot. Black Mississippians remembered how Negroes felt when they learned that Evers had been shot in the back and killed. Many immediately turned their thoughts toward the causes most important to him as NAACP field secretary. People were angry, frustrated, hurt, and looking for someone to take responsibility and the blame for what had happened. People wanted to know what's "going to happen now?" The answer in the mind of many "was burn, baby, burn," civil rights activists Fred Clark Sr. recalled. "Burn the cities down. People were angry everywhere." Individuals were now committed to voting regardless of the dangers, and they openly expressed their frustration. "I'm going to vote, damn it ...," Clark remembered people's steeled determination; "I'm going to vote. Damn them white folks. They done shot Medgar now. I'm mad. That made them old folks get up off their lazy behinds and made them drunkards get sober and go vote. Everybody was on somebody's ass about going to vote."⁷⁶ Black Mississippians also pressed for voting rights by tapping into a little-used Mississippi law.

In August, black Mississippians appeared before polling stations and "submitted affidavits and marked ballots. They were acting," newspapers reported, "under a little-known state law on emergency voting." State officials announced that the ballots resulting from the "vote-in" would not be counted. "We could not count those ballots any more than we could count ballots cast by white people who had not paid their poll tax and qualified as required by law." SNCC field secretary Timothy Jenkins had planned the vote-in and announced that "the move was to protest efforts by State and local officials to 'frustrate Negro voter

To Pep Up Vote Drive," *Jackson Daily News*, May 9, 1963, (second and third quotations) Trumpauer Papers, Box 1, Folder 4; and "Justice Dept. Files Suit Seeking Negroes' Release," *United Press International*, May 12, 1963, Trumpauer Papers, Box 1, Folder 4 (fourth, fifth, and sixth quotations).

⁷⁶ Fred Clark Sr., interview with Leesha Faulkner, June 10, 1994, Mississippi Oral History Program, University of Southern Mississippi, volume 494, 1994, p. 49 (all quotations).

registration drives.”⁷⁷ Through planning and organized demonstrations, black Mississippians demonstrated that they were indeed deserving of the vote, and if provided with their right to the ballot would take their duty seriously.

In October 1963, NAACP state president Aaron Henry announced that he would run for governor as a write-in candidate for the November 5 election. NAACP field worker John O’Neil proclaimed that the group would sponsor Henry’s candidacy to “spearhead a ‘freedom balloting’ designed to show unregistered Negroes’ ‘desire’ to vote.” In addition to Henry, white Methodist minister Reverend Edwin King would run as lieutenant governor on the same write-in ticket. The secretary of state’s office announced, however, “that write-in votes... [would] be voided unless all candidates die before the election.” The Freedom Ballot platform proclaimed “that Mississippi politicians ‘have been able to maintain their power by burying the state’s problems under a blanket of race hatred.’” COFO organized the campaign, and SNCC’s Robert Moses explained that “the balloting... [was] directed against literacy and interpretation tests administered to Negroes by white voter registrars.” Civil rights leaders impressed upon all that a big voter turnout would prove all-important in the fight for the ballot. Aaron Henry encouraged all to stand tall and support the program with their votes and to overcome their fears. Henry had a reputation for speaking his mind to anyone; he had “once told Gov. Ross R. Barnett to stop trying to scare Negroes because scary Negroes have left the state and only tough, hard Negroes remain.” Henry said the “Negro has done this white man’s work since this country was founded ... and now it’s payday.”⁷⁸ The Freedom Ballot initiative focused on challenging more than simple voter repression.

Although voter suppression proved a major issue of concern for civil

⁷⁷ “Negroes Try Voting by Affidavit,” *Associated Press*, August 6, 1963, Trumpauer Papers, Box 1, Folder 4 (all quotations).

⁷⁸ “Aaron Henry Being Run For Governor By NAACP,” *Jackson Daily News*, October 13, 1963, Trumpauer Papers, Box 1, Folder 5 (first quotation); “Henry Will Be ‘Write-In’ Candidate,” *Jackson Daily News*, October 15, 1963, Trumpauer Papers, Box 1, Folder 5 (second quotation); “Miss. Negroes Plan ‘Private’ Election,” *Washington Post*, October 27, 1963, Trumpauer Papers, Box 1, Folder 5 (third quotation); *National Guardian*, newspaper clipping, October 24, 1963, Trumpauer Papers, Box 1, Folder 4 (fourth quotation); “Miss. Negroes Plan ‘Private’ Election,” *Washington Post*, October 27, 1963 (fifth quotation); and “Henry Urges Negro Turnout On November 5,” *Jackson Daily News*, October 25, 1963, Trumpauer Papers, Box 1, Folder 5 (sixth quotation). See also, McMillen, “Black Enfranchisement in Mississippi,” 365-366.



Rally attendees for COFO's Freedom Vote campaign, 1963. Moncrief Photograph Collection, courtesy of the Mississippi Department of Archives and History

rights activists, the entire oppressive system that Mississippi symbolized proved the real problem. The Freedom Ballot platform sought to address the overall problems plaguing the state. The platform called “for an end to segregation, including in public accommodations; replacement of the present State Sovereignty Commission with a State Commission on Equality; fair employment; a \$1.25 minimum wage; better schools; a guaranteed right to vote; academic freedom; and an end to the hypocrisy of dry Mississippi’s tax on illegal whiskey.” In other words, white supremacy was the system under attack and those in political power sought to protect it at all costs. Mississippi’s United States Senator James O. Eastland made his opinions on the matter of Negro voting well known. He cautioned white voters not to divide into two parties “or the Negroes could hold the balance of power.” He further warned that “White supremacy ... ‘is the ‘noblest cause that can bring us together.’”⁷⁹ The same types of apprehensions manifested in 1963 regarding black voting were the very same ones expressed in 1890. The “freedom bal-

⁷⁹ “Miss. Negroes Plan ‘Private’ Election,” *Washington Post*, October 27, 1963, Trumpauer Papers, Box 1, Folder 5 (all quotations).

lot” campaign, although falling short of the desired 150,000 to 200,000 participants, demonstrated African Americans’ desire to fully participate in the political arena.

Black Mississippians turned out by the thousands to cast their freedom ballot and make their political voices heard throughout the state. The Freedom Vote Campaign targeted both the registered and unregistered voter. On election day, Freedom Vote organizers asked that those registered voters who did not favor either the Democratic or Republican candidate “to write the name Aaron Henry on the line of the ballots thus voting, but denying our vote to either of the candidates in the race that offer us so little or nothing.” Voters were to do the same with Ed King when it came to voting for lieutenant governor, while unregistered voters were to “vote in the Freedom Election.”⁸⁰ Newspapers reported that more “than 90,000 disenfranchised Negroes in 200 communities throughout the state cast ‘Freedom Ballots’ in churches, schools, poolrooms and ‘votemobiles’ over a three-day period here.” There were also some very interesting voter statistics that demonstrated just how effective attacks upon the black voting population had been. “In 1890,” newspaper reports acknowledged, “Mississippi had 190,000 Negro registered voters. Two years later, it had 8,600. In 1954 there were 22,000 Negro voters—less than 5 per cent of the registered electorate.” The vast number of individuals who cast their freedom ballot led Bob Moses to label the campaign “a political breakthrough in Mississippi.” Moses also argued that the “results of the Freedom Vote indicate that there are at least eighty thousand people who would have voted for Aaron Henry if they had not been disfranchised.” Regarding literacy tests that registrars used to stifle black voting, Moses added that “any kind of literacy test is unconstitutional in a state which has failed to meet its responsibility to educate its citizens.” James Forman admitted that “even though write-ins are not counted, they indicate that Negroes here had

⁸⁰ “Coahoma County Branch NAACP” Release, October 12, 1963, Aaron Henry Papers, Box A, Folder 1, Mississippi Department of Archives and History, unprocessed collection No. T-13 (first quotation) and “Freedom Vote Campaign,” Ed King Papers, Box 8, Folder 413, n.d., unprocessed collection (second quotation). For more on SNCC’s role in securing the vote, see “Operation Mississippi, One Man, One Vote Campaign, September, 1963, Ed King Papers, Box 8, Folder 414, unprocessed collection. For additional discussions of the impact of SNCC and the environment they labored in, see Howard Zinn, “‘SNICK’: The Battle-Scarred Youngsters,” *The Nation*, October 5, 1963, Ed King Papers, Box 8, Folder 414, unprocessed collection.

no choice between Democratic and Republican candidates, and if permitted, Negroes would register to vote in large numbers." Large numbers of workers had flooded the state foreshadowing Freedom Summer the following year. More than one hundred campaign workers were arrested over the three-week period leading up to the election, and students from universities such as Yale and Stanford were working on the Greenwood campaign as well.⁸¹ Suddenly it seemed as if everyone's attention was on Mississippi. Resources flooded into the state from across the U.S.A.

The desire for the vote embodied in the faces and actions of committed activists in Mississippi spread across the state and nation. The all-out commitment to voter equality displayed by individuals, groups, and organizations across the country eventually produced the Voting Rights Act of 1965 (VRA) allowing black Mississippians such as Joe Ella Moore to successfully take the voter registration oath.⁸² The VRA would prove a huge boon to black registration and voting. Although the early to mid 1960s were marked by intense civil rights activities on the local and national scene, Paul Joubert and Ben Crouch maintain that from June "1962 to August 1, 1965 ... there [had] occurred only negligible changes in the proportion of eligible Blacks registered" in Mississippi. With the advent of the VRA, however, that changed considerably. The first month of the VRA saw the number of black registrants increase by 120 percent, from 35,000 to 77,222. By the end of 1970, 71 percent of eligible black Mississippians were registered voters and most of these had been registered between 1965 and 1966. The total number of black registrants increased dramatically due to the VRA, "from 28,500 in 1965 to 406,000 in 1984." This occurred despite Mississippi officials' attempt to undermine the VRA whenever possible. After 1965, Frank Parker argues, "the focus of voting discrimination shifted from preventing blacks from registering to vote to preventing them from winning elections." Civil rights attorney Robert McDuff points out that Mississippi politicians took particular action in 1966 when the state legislature, without securing preclearance for changes as section 5 of the VRA requires, "changed a

⁸¹ "Miss. Negroes Register Stand: 90,000 Cast 'Freedom Ballots,'" November 18, 1963, newspaper clipping, no attribution provided, Trumpauer Papers, Box 1, Folder 5 (first, second, third and sixth quotations) and "Aaron Henry for Governor Release," November 5, 1963, Ed King Papers, Box 8, Folder 413, unprocessed collection (fourth and fifth quotations). See also, Frank R. Parker, *Black Votes Count: Political Empowerment in Mississippi after 1965* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 24.

⁸²Jo Ella Moore is pictured on the cover of this issue taking the voter registration oath.

number of the voting laws to limit the influence of the newly enfranchised black voters.” Although the number of new registrants slowed during the early 1970s, large increases continued during the early portion of the decade.⁸³ The VRA also produced noticeable changes in the number of black Mississippians elected to political office.

Although the VRA provided opportunities to vote free of many of the obstacles erected by local registrars and assigned Federal Examiners made the difference in many Mississippi counties, the fight that local people instituted for their right to vote was crucial in constructing the type of political foundation from which black political officials emerged during the 1970s. Between 1970 and 1972, 129 black Mississippians were elected to political offices, with 50 elected in 1971 alone, “giving Mississippi more elected black officials than any other southern state.” By January 1989, black Mississippians could point to 646 black elected officials. Before 1965, voter registration obstacles prevented all but 6.7 percent of blacks from registering, and black Mississippians could boast of no more than six elected officials.⁸⁴ The VRA also increased the number of African Americans serving in the state legislature. By 1988 “22 African Americans [had] gained seats in the state legislature.” This proved significant in that no African Americans had served in the body since 1896. This wave of black legislators began in 1967 with Holmes County, which three years earlier had only twenty black voters. By 1967 that twenty had multiplied to more than 6,000, who helped elect Robert G. Clark Jr. to the Mississippi House of Representatives. Clark remained the lone black member of the 122-seat body until 1975. By 2001, Mississippi could point to 892 African American elected officials, including forty-three legislators—eight men and two women in the Senate and twenty-six men and seven women in the House.⁸⁵

⁸³ Paul E. Joubert and Ben M. Crouch, “Mississippi Blacks and the Voting Rights Act of 1965,” *Journal of Negro Education*, Vol. 46, No. 2 (Spring, 1977): 159, 161, 165 (first quotation); Colby, “The Voting Rights Act and Black Registration in Mississippi,” 123 (second quotation); Parker, *Black Votes Count*, 3 (third quotation); and Robert McDuff, “The Voting Rights Act and Mississippi, 1965-2006,” p. 2 (fourth quotation), www.protectcivilrights.org/pdf/voting/MississippiVRA.pdf (accessed July 25, 2012). For further discussion regarding the history of the Voting Rights Act, see United States Department of Justice, “History of Federal Voting Rights Laws,” http://www.justice.gov/crt/about/vot/intro/intro_b.php (accessed September 23, 2014.)

⁸⁴ Joubert and Crouch, “Mississippi Blacks and the Voting Rights Act of 1965,” 165 (quotation) and Parker, *Black Votes Count*, 2.

⁸⁵ Byron D’Andra Orey, “Black Legislative Politics in Mississippi,” *Journal of Black*

Although the Voting Rights Act had its limitations, it proved quite effective in increasing African Americans' voting opportunities. The VRA, much like the 15th Amendment, helped place the protection of individuals' political rights on the national table for discussion and analysis. African Americans' constant fight against voter suppression focused national attention upon the political problems plaguing Mississippi. The legal statutes put in place in Mississippi in 1890 suffered serious legislative, individual, and organizational attacks during the 1960s that would make the VRA possible. Such attacks provided civil rights activists with additional weapons in the fight for civil, political, and human rights in Mississippi that effectively undermined accepted ideas of black political apathy and sociopolitical inferiority in the state and the nation as a whole. Although the Voting Rights Act had its limitations, it proved quite effective in increasing African Americans' voting opportunities. The VRA, much like the 15th Amendment, helped place the protection of individuals' political rights on the national table for discussion and analysis. African Americans' constant fight against voter suppression focused national attention upon the political problems plaguing Mississippi. The legal statutes put in place in Mississippi in 1890 suffered serious legislative, individual, and organizational attacks during the 1960s that would make the VRA possible. Such attacks provided civil rights activists with additional weapons in the fight for civil, political, and human rights in Mississippi that effectively undermined accepted ideas of black political apathy and sociopolitical inferiority in the state and the nation as a whole.

Studies, Vol. 30, No 6, Special Issue: African American State Legislative Politics (Jul. 2000): 791, 794, 797 (quotation); Colby, "The Voting Rights Act and Black Registration in Mississippi," 123; and Robert McDuff, "The Voting Rights Act and Mississippi, 1965-2006," 2, 8, 9. See also, Parker, *Black Votes Count*, 2. For information regarding the number of black Mississippi legislators in 2001, see *Mississippi 2001 Legislative Session Roster* (Jackson: The Electric Power Associations of Mississippi, 2001), 13-19, 24-39. Copies of the Legislative Roster are located on the third floor, room 308, of the State Capital Building in Jackson, Mississippi.

