



MISSISSIPPI BURNING
THE FREEDOM SUMMER
OF 1964

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For Teaching American History

The Situation

- **According to the Census, 45% of Mississippi's population is Black, but in 1964 less than 5% of Blacks are registered to vote state-wide.**
- **In the rural counties where Blacks are a majority — or even a significant minority — of the population, Black registration is virtually nil.**

The Situation

- **For example, in some of the counties where there are Freedom Summer projects (main project town shown in parenthesis):**

County (Town)	Number Eligible	Whites			Blacks	
		Number Voters	Percentage	Number Eligible	Number Voters	
Coahoma (Clarksdale)	5338	4030	73%	14004	1061	
Holmes (Tchula)	4773	3530	74%	8757	8	
Le Flore (Greenwood)	10274	7168	70%	13567	268	
Marshall (Holly Spgs)	4342	4162	96%	7168	57	
Panola (Batesville)	7369	5309	69%	7250	2	
Tallahatchie (Charleston)	5099	4330	85%	6438	5	
Pike (McComb)	12163	7864	65%	6936	150	

Source: [1964 MFDP report](#) derived from court cases and Federal reports.

The Situation

- **To maintain segregation and deny Blacks their citizenship rights — and to continue reaping the economic benefits of racial exploitation — the white power structure has turned Mississippi into a "closed society" ruled by fear from the top down.**
- **Rather than mechanize as other Southern states have done, much of Mississippi agriculture continues to rely on cheap Black labor.**
- **But with the rise of the Freedom Movement, the White Citizens Council is now urging plantation owners to replace Black sharecroppers and farm hands with machines.**
- **This is a deliberate strategy to force Blacks out of the state before they can achieve any share of political power. The Freedom Movement is in a race against time, if Blacks don't get the vote soon, it will be too late.**

The Situation

- **Blacks who try to register still face intimidation, violence, and arrest. At the Courthouse they endure phony literacy test, tricks, and abuses from the Registrar.**
- **After leaving the courthouse, they face arrest on trumped up charges, Klan violence, and economic retaliation — evictions, firings, foreclosures, business boycotts, license revocations, credit denials, and insurance cancellations.**
- **And lest there be any doubt as to whom should be targeted for this retaliation, the names of those attempting to register are published in the local newspaper.**

The Situation

- **With steadfast courage, freedom fighters have suffered and endured beatings, jailings, shootings, bombings, and even assassinations in trying to increase Black voter registrations.**
- **These freedom fighters have built a broad and determined mass-movement, yet no more than a few hundred new voters have been added to the rolls.**
- **Despite their many public promises, neither Kennedy nor Johnson take any effective action to defend Black voters in the Deep South.**
- **Though laws are on the books making it a Federal crime to interfere with voting rights, neither the FBI, the Department of Justice (DOJ), nor the Federal courts enforce those laws.**

The Dilemma

- **By the end of 1963, Movement activists in Mississippi are exhausted, frustrated, and discouraged.**
- **Their efforts and strategies have built a movement — but not increased the number of Black voters.**
- **But movements *move*, if one strategy fails you try another.**
- **Something new is needed, something dramatic, something bold.**

The Dilemma

- **In October of 1963, SNCC leaders note that the presence of northern white supporters at Freedom Day in Selma encourages Black turnout, draws national media attention, and restrains the normally vicious Sheriff Clark and Alabama State Troopers from the kind of violence and arrests they previously inflicted on Blacks lining up at the courthouse to register.**
- **If the presence of a handful of northern whites can restrain Jim Clark in Selma what would happen if a thousand northern students, most of them white, came to Mississippi for the entire summer of 1964?**
- **Discussions begin on the idea of a summer project involving a large number of northern white students.**

The Volunteers

- **Most histories estimate the number of Freedom Summer volunteers at between 700 and 1,000, counting the 550-600 who attend the two training sessions at Western College for Women and the hundreds more who arrive in Mississippi later.**
- **The 700-1,000 figure does not include the unknown number of out-of-state volunteers who come to Mississippi and participate for various lengths of time through personal or family connections, or direct organizational affiliations with SNCC, CORE, NAACP, SCLC, SCEF, or other Movement organizations.**
- **It is legitimate to say that in the summer of 1964 the very best of America came to Mississippi to confront and challenge the very worst.**
- **The average age of Summer Project volunteers recruited was 21 (though a few are well into adulthood).**
- **Depending on how you count the volunteers, roughly 85-90% of them are white, the remaining 10-15% are Black with a few Latinos and Asians.**
- **Most of them are from middle and upper-middle class families, and the majority (57%) are from the top 30 universities in the nation (123 are from Harvard, Yale, Stanford, and Princeton alone).**



Photo from:
ed.uiuc.edu

Volunteer Orientation

- **Two orientations for Summer Project volunteers are funded and coordinated by the National Council of Churches (NCC).**
- **Western College for Women in Oxford, Ohio (today, part of Miami University) steps up with an offer to use their campus.**
- **The first of the week-long sessions for roughly 300 volunteers begins June 13, the second session commences June 20.**

Volunteer Orientation

- **Included in the orientation sessions are stories of violence, warnings of violence to come, training in how to survive beatings and jailings, frank discussions about fear and courage and endurance.**
- **Workshops in Nonviolent Resistance teach the techniques of survival when under attack, and the volunteers are trained in the safety practices and security procedures that are habitual with SNCC and CORE field staff (see next slide):**



Photo from:

<http://www.usm.edu/news/article/freedom-summer-photo-exhibit-display-cook-library-gallery>

Volunteer Orientation

- **Don't let cops or whites see you enter or leave the Black home where you are staying.**
- **Don't carry the names of local supporters on you, don't tell cops or strangers who you are living with.**
- **Keep the shades down at night and never stand in a lighted doorway.**
- **Remove the dome light of your car so it doesn't illuminate you when the door is opened.**
- **Each morning check your car for bombs (Volunteer David Gelfand does, and discovers 4-sticks of dynamite wired to his ignition).**
- **Learn all roads in and out of town, and the danger spots to avoid.**
- **Vary your driving routes, and never let anyone pass you on a deserted road.**
- **Always be prepared for arrest and police-search at any time.**
- **Never go anywhere alone.**
- **Leave word where you are going and when you are expected to get there. Check-in on arrival.**

Mississippi Prepares for an Invasion

- **Mississippi's white power structure and white media react to Freedom Summer as if they faced invasion by another "War of Northern Aggression" (their term for what the rest of the nation knows as the "Civil War").**
- **The Klan issues its own warning — on a single night crosses are burned in 64 of the state's 82 counties.**
- **Some of the churches that had agreed to host Freedom Schools are firebombed.**
- **In many cases, shortly before churches are burned their fire insurance policies are suddenly cancelled by their white insurance agents — a typical example of the Ku Klux Klan and White Citizen Council working in tandem.**
- **The state legislature passes laws outlawing Freedom Schools, allowing officials to declare dawn-to-dusk curfews, and making it a crime to pass out leaflets advocating a boycott. The number of State Troopers is doubled, cities and towns hastily deputize and arm white men (many of them Klansmen) to repel the "beatnik horde."**

Washington Does Nothing

- **While white Mississippi mobilizes to defend the "*Southern Way of Life*" with billy clubs and jail cells, guns and bombs, the White House and Justice Department do nothing.**
- **Despite repeated pleas from civil rights leaders, they refuse to condemn or criticize the hate and hysteria being whipped to fever pitch in Mississippi.**
- **They refuse to issue any public statement or give any private signal that violence or state repression against nonviolent voter registration efforts will be prosecuted as required by Federal law.**

The Disappearance of Chaney, Schwerner, and Goodman

- **The first group of volunteers leave Ohio and go down into Mississippi on June 20th. On the following day three of them, including one summer volunteer, disappear.**
- **Word arrives in Ohio where the second orientation session is underway:**

"Yesterday morning, three of our people left Meridian, Mississippi to investigate a church-burning in Neshoba County. They haven't come back and we haven't had any word from them...."

The Disappearance of Chaney, Schwerner, and Goodman

- In the days that follow, hope wars with dread, hope that the missing are held in captivity but still alive, against the growing certainty that they have been lynched.
- On the last night of the second orientation, Bob Moses addresses the volunteers and tells them: "*The kids are dead.*" When he finishes speaking the auditorium is deathly silent. Then a woman raises her voice in song, "*They say that freedom, is a constant struggle...*" The next morning the second wave of volunteers board the buses to go down into Mississippi.

Mississippi Burning

- The 1988 film *Mississippi Burning* is based loosely on the disappearance and murders of James Chaney, a 21-year-old black man from Meridian, Mississippi; Andrew Goodman, a 20-year-old Jewish student from New York; and Michael Schwerner, a 24-year-old Jewish CORE organizer also from New York, symbolized the risks of participating in the civil rights movement in the South during what became known as "Freedom Summer", dedicated to voter registration.
- The real names of the murderers nor the names of the victims are used in the film.
- It is important to note that the investigation has been dramatized in the film.

Mississippi Burning

- **The following clip on the next slide is the opening scene that dramatizes the 1964 murders of the Freedom Summer workers.**
- **Note: The clip is rated R and includes graphic violence and offensive language and should be taken into consideration before being shown to students. Also keep in mind copyright issues with Youtube clips.**
- **For a timeline from the real Mississippi Burning case, use this link to the FBI article:**
<http://www2.fbi.gov/page2/feb07/miburn022607.htm>

The Work of Freedom Summer

- **For the volunteers, the work is long and grueling. Up at dawn with the family they live with. No hot shower. No morning paper. No leisurely cup of coffee. Often, no toilet. Strange food for breakfast — hominy grits, collard greens, biscuits & gravy. Then out the door into the brutal, muggy heat.**
- **For project staff, the work is even harder.**

The Projects of Freedom Summer

- **Voter Registration & the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party (MFDP)**. Every project engages in voter registration and building the MFDP.
- **Freedom Schools**. Most projects operate a Freedom School taught by volunteers. Mississippi's segregated school system is designed to keep Blacks "in their place" — low-paid, docile, subservient, and intellectually-isolated. The Freedom Schools challenge that regime, beginning a process of opening up new worlds of thought and possibility for Black children.
- **Community Centers**. Many projects open community centers that provide cultural and educational programs for the Black community, including political organization, adult-literacy courses staffed by Citizenship School teachers, health-education classes taught by MCHR volunteers, vocational training centers, and live theater shows by the **Free Southern Theater**. Libraries of books donated by northern sympathizers are established to serve communities who have been denied access to the state's publicly-funded "white-only" libraries.
- **Letters**. A major strategic objective of the Summer Project is to raise national awareness of Mississippi realities, demand Federal action, and mobilize political support for the MFDP. All volunteers are urged to write frequent letters to family, friends, teachers, and ministers about the Freedom Movement and their experiences. Many volunteers arrange to have their letters published in local newspapers, school or church newsletters, or reproduced and distributed to informal networks.



Photo from: <http://www.deltastate.edu/pages/1388.asp>

The Social Revolution

- **The Freedom Movement as a whole, and within it the Summer Project, is about far more than voter registration or education — it is at heart a social revolution.**
- **A revolution that defies fear, throws off enforced subservience, asserts dignity and rejects inferiority.**
- **A social revolution that demands an equal share of economic and political power.**
- **A social revolution that abolishes old relations, and forges new personal, political, and social identities.**

Violence

- **Across the state there is widespread violence, police repression, and economic retaliation against local Blacks and Freedom Summer participants.**
- **Over the course of Freedom Summer there are:**
 - Six known murders and one "mysterious" fatal accident**
 - 35 known shootings, 4 people critically wounded**
 - At least 80 Freedom Summer workers are beaten**
 - More than 1,000 people are arrested (staff, volunteers & locals)**
 - 37 Churches are bombed or burned**
 - 30 Black homes or businesses are bombed or burned**

Voter Registration

- **During the 10 weeks of the Summer Project, more than 17,000 Blacks defiantly line up at their county courthouse to register.**
- **However, the Registrars add only 1600 to the voter rolls (just 9% of those who apply), and most of them are in counties where whites solidly outnumber Blacks.**
- **While 1600 is three or four times the number who have been registered over the preceding years of Movement struggle, it is still just a drop in the bucket.**

The Final Analysis

- Though few voters are added to the rolls, the pall of fear that has held generations in thrall is beginning to lift.
- The signs are unmistakable, to take just one example, as an act of intimidation local newspapers routinely publish the names of Blacks who try to register to vote — thereby alerting white employers, landlords, and businesses who to fire, evict, boycott, and foreclose.
- But as one volunteer deep in the Delta writes, "*In Panola County now the Negro citizens look with pride at their names in the Panolian, they point out the names of friends and neighbors and hurry to the courthouse to be enlisted on the honor roll.*"
- Where once it was a signal victory to find three courageous souls willing to go down to the courthouse, now Blacks in the dozens and hundreds are putting on their Sunday best to defiantly demand that they be allowed to vote.

The Final Analysis

- **Though the mass media focuses almost exclusively on the white volunteers, the nation is nevertheless becoming aware of voter registration and denial of basic human rights in the South as important issues.**
- **Just as the Freedom Rides and the Birmingham Campaign, forced segregation onto the national agenda, the news stories and letters from Freedom Summer volunteers raise voting rights to a new level of public concern.**
- **That concern is now being brought to the attention of Congress and the White House by northern voters — white as well as Black.**
- **As Freedom Summer ends, Johnson is still saying that no new civil rights legislation is needed, but pressure is building, pressure that explodes in Selma, Alabama, just four months later.**

Bibliography

Photo on Title Slide

- Photo: <http://withfriendship.com/user/sathvi/freedom-summer.php>

Photos on Slide 21

- Photo 1: <http://funwithhistory.wordpress.com/2010/06/>
- Photo 2: <http://www2.fbi.gov/page2/feb07/miburn022607.htm>
- Photo 3:
<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/northamerica/usa/2458844/FBI-used-Mafia-enforcer-to-find-bodies-in-Mississippi-Burning-case.html>

Text

- Text was graciously borrowed from the website Civil Rights Movement Veterans. <http://www.crmvet.org/tim/tim64b.htm#1964fs>