

BOB MOSES, SPEECH AT STANFORD UNIVERSITY (24 APRIL 1964)

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Abstract: The Council of Federal Organization’s 1964 Summer Project needed student volunteers. As the head of that project, Robert “Bob” Moses came to Stanford University in the spring to recruit. Or did he? In this one-hour address delivered before Stanford undergraduates, Moses detailed Mississippi’s recent history, both to document the extent of the state’s racial violence and the deeply entrenched racism students could expect to encounter. In limning the contours of the movement in Mississippi, Moses employed vertical and horizontal imagery throughout the speech to convey two interrelated ideas: that the “root” of the problems in the state had to be understood in order to be potentially excavated and, in turn, rebuilt, and that such a radical, structural solution was premised on whether the nation could “bend” its existing institutions in order to accommodate new rights for Black Mississippians. In other words, if “steps” could be taken by the country, then perhaps the impending explosion of Black violence might be contained, perhaps even defused. The nation’s foundational structures were cracking, and if immediate steps weren’t taken to relieve that pressure, the entire country—not just Mississippi—was in grave danger.

Keywords: Bob Moses; Freedom Summer; Freedom Vote; Stanford University; Mississippi; Racism; Voting Rights; Council of Federated Organizations; Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee

Stanford University’s campus was buzzing as day turned to evening on Friday, April 24, 1964. One of the nation’s foremost orators and the unrivalled leader of the burgeoning civil rights movement, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., had spoken on campus at Memorial Auditorium before 1,800 audience members just 24 hours earlier. King was very much in favor of a Mississippi “summer project” that was beginning to take form. Reverend King noted specifically that within Mississippi’s monolithic power structure, “justice has no meaning,” and that “help must come” from outside the state.¹ That help, he suggested, might mean Stanford’s undergraduates heading east and south to lend a hand. King’s eloquence was on full display in Palo Alto: his address was followed immediately by a five-minute standing ovation.

The following afternoon, Richard Wasserstrom, a Stanford alumnus and former attorney in the Civil Rights Division at the Justice Department, spoke to students and faculty at Dinkelspiel Auditorium about the nation’s Black Belt and voting rights. His “eloquent” but “very bleak” speech concluded: “There is no conception of the Negro as a person and possessor of rights.”² As Dr. King had suggested, if progressive reforms were to happen, help would have to come from those outside the Deep South.

Rounding out the Stanford civil rights conference was a 29-year-old bespectacled Black man who had grown up in Harlem and had been educated in philosophy and mathematics at Hamilton College and Harvard University. He had a very different rhetorical agenda than either King or Wasserstrom. Truth be told, he really didn’t like to give speeches, at least not in the

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traditional manner of practiced eloquence, careful organization, and formal stylistic choices. That said, word of Robert (Bob) Moses's forthcoming address had gotten around campus, and by Friday evening Cubberly Auditorium was packed with several hundred students.³ The soft-spoken, intense man, who some with a secular bent had likened to Gandhi and others with a more sacred sense to Jesus, decided not to use a microphone, nor would he use the lectern; he'd be more comfortable wandering Cubberly's stage and talking to the Stanford undergraduates as topics came to him.⁴

That buzz on campus, that palpable sense of urgent mission and activism, echoed all the way back to October 1963, when former Stanford Dean and professor, Allard Lowenstein, gave a speech asking for the campus' involvement in a curious project just then taking shape across the state of Mississippi.⁵ Volunteers were urgently needed for a parallel or mock election in Mississippi. The Freedom Vote, as it came to be known, featured an interracial team of Aaron Henry for Governor and Reverend Ed King for Lieutenant Governor on a Freedom Ticket.⁶ With just a few weeks to organize the entire state, Lowenstein (and Moses) urgently needed young men to travel to Mississippi. Because Lowenstein recruited at Stanford and Yale by dint of previous affiliations, those men were white.

Now, in late April, Moses was on campus searching for volunteers. This time, though, nearly seven months later, he wasn't nearly as urgent in seeking recruits. In fact, as his speech at Cubberly will reveal, he appeared less than enthusiastic about reaching out to his undergraduate listeners. Never during his one-hour and four-minute speech did Moses even ask them to apply to the "summer program," the "sequel" to the Freedom Vote. Instead, Moses offered a fascinating, methodical, and nuanced speech that functioned rhetorically less to recruit students and more as a meditation on the civil rights movement generally and Mississippi specifically. In limning the contours of the movement in Mississippi, Moses employed vertical and horizontal imagery throughout the speech to convey two interrelated ideas: that the "root" of the problems in the state had to be understood in order to be potentially excavated and, in turn, rebuilt, and that such a radical, structural solution was premised on whether the nation could "bend" its existing institutions in order to accommodate new rights for Black Mississippians. In other words, if "steps" could be taken by the country, then perhaps the impending explosion of Black violence might be contained, perhaps even defused. The nation's foundational structures were cracking, and if rather immediate steps weren't taken to relieve that pressure, the entire country—not just Mississippi—was in grave danger.

Stanford, by Way of Ella Baker and Mississippi

Bob Moses was, if anything, suspicious of rhetors and rhetoric. Why? One explanation lies with his mentor and friend, Ella Baker, who in her role as Executive Director of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) had witnessed first-hand the egos, sexism, hierarchy, and personality-driven pecking order among many of its young, clergy-trained Black men. While orating expertly from a pulpit might move, if temporarily, the masses, Baker's philosophy of organizing emphasized the long term. In her estimation, "In government service and political life I have always felt it was a handicap for oppressed people to depend so largely on a leader, because unfortunately in our culture, the charismatic leader usually becomes a leader because he has found a spot in the public limelight." Without mentioning Dr. King by name, Baker continued: "There is also the danger in our culture that, because a person is called upon to give public statements and is acclaimed by the establishment, such a person gets to the point of

believing he is the movement . . . and they don't do the work of actually organizing people."⁷ Giving speeches, in other words, wasn't organizing in Baker's formulation; in fact, speechmaking could work against it.⁸

Baker helped found the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) in April 1960, as a response to the student sit-in movement then sweeping across the South. As the organization's informal founder and friend, Baker steered the college students away from joining forces with Dr. King and SCLC and to form their own bottom-up organization. In her memorable formulation, "strong people don't need strong leaders." The model she preferred—and the model that SNCC quickly adopted—was community organizing, or developing leadership in the areas in which they worked. That cultivation would take time, but it was time well worth investing in local people eager to learn how to create and sustain local movements. As such, SNCC staffers understood their roles principally as facilitators, listeners, organizers, and consensus-seekers. Oratory, while useful as a means to bring communities together, as a means to disseminate information, and as a witness to critical events, was not an end in itself; it simply couldn't sustain, however eloquent, a long-term local movement.

Bob Moses went to Mississippi in the fall of 1960 at Ella Baker's instruction. He didn't give any speeches, maybe informal talks with locals, but never a carefully rehearsed and polished public address. Rather, he met with several local Black community leaders in small towns scattered throughout the state: Amzie Moore in the Delta community of Cleveland; E. W. Steptoe in Amite County in the southwestern part of the state; and C.C. Bryant in the bordering eastern county, Pike. Based on his initial reconnaissance, Moses and SNCC decided to open a voter registration program in McComb in July of 1961. Enthusiasm was so immediate and so strong that Black residents in Amite and Walthall Counties also asked for voting workshops.

But the white reprisal was predictably swift—and violent: in August, as he accompanied three men to the county courthouse to try and register to vote, Moses was savagely beaten by Billy Jack Caston, a cousin of the local sheriff. Moses was later arrested—and quickly released based on his collect call to the Justice Department, which was accepted by Assistant U.S. Attorney for Civil Rights, John Doar. Locals wondered: How did Moses have a direct line to the Justice Department? Weeks later, in the small community of Liberty, Herbert Lee was murdered in broad daylight at a local cotton gin by Mississippi Representative E. H. Hurst, who spuriously claimed self-defense. A member of the local NAACP, Lee, a father to nine children, had shepherded Moses around the county. Hurst was never arrested or investigated for the murder. Lee's targeted killing changed things for SNCC and for the nascent movement: community support evaporated, bond money was hard to come by, and the news media—local, regional and national—simply didn't care about rural Black people being murdered by white people in Mississippi.

Moses and SNCC eventually retreated north to the relative safety of the state capital in Jackson. His reputation in the organization rather quickly became the stuff of legend. Introspective, deeply philosophical, slow to speak, fearless, and a tireless worker, Moses was typically attired in the denim overalls of his favored constituency, the Black Mississippi farmer. And the intrepid leader of SNCC in Mississippi almost never gave speeches.

Perhaps not surprisingly, Moses's laconic nature corresponds to a dearth of scholarship by rhetoricians and historians. While rhetorical critics have spent considerable time with the speeches of Dr. King, Malcolm X, Fannie Lou Hamer, and even Ella Baker, only Richard Jensen and John Hammerback have ventured into an extended treatment of Bob Moses's rhetoric.⁹ And

to be fair, Jensen and Hammerback focus very little on his speechmaking—because almost none of it exists or survives.

Why is that? Several reasons. First, Moses spent most of his time organizing in small rural Mississippi communities; as such, the media simply wasn't following him or recording movement meetings. Even the FBI, who chronicled so much of Dr. King's movements and had ready informants, didn't have much, if any, surveillance on Moses. As we'll see, part of Moses's frustration of working in Mississippi is that the news media and federal government didn't care. Second, as we've already noted, Moses didn't like to call attention to himself by giving speeches. Third, when he did deliver extended speeches (for example, at SNCC conferences), few if any transcribed or oral records survive. We are aware, in fact, of only two surviving and complete Bob Moses speeches delivered when he was active in the civil rights movement: the April 24, 1964 speech at Stanford University, and a December 1963 speech at a Washington, DC SNCC meeting recorded by Alan Ribback (later known as Moses Moon).¹⁰ Perhaps we will discover and recover more speeches in the years ahead, but it's humbling and just a bit sad to realize that one of the nation's most important civil rights activists and organizers has left behind so little to analyze, appreciate, and explore.

Finding an Anchor

All this makes Moses's Stanford address all the more important to examine carefully. At the most basic level, Moses offered a detailed narrative history of SNCC and the Council of Federated Organization's (COFO) work in Mississippi—just to let his listeners/volunteers know what they might be getting into. Again, Moses never appealed for volunteers; that sort of frontal, explicit appeal would have been inappropriate given the grave state of race relations in Mississippi. But before getting to that history, before even introducing himself, Moses began his speech this way: "When we first went to Mississippi, we didn't know what we could do. And we went there more or less with the attitude to try and find out what was possible, that is to see what could be done. We didn't have any resources, really, and we weren't sure how we should go about it, or what it was that we should do (1)."¹¹

This may be one of the more inauspicious starts in the history of speechmaking: there was no introduction to speak of; there was no directing the action; the "we" in question was far from explicit; and even the subject wasn't made clear. No doubt the students assembled in Cubberly settled in *very* quickly to this address; there was no time for the feel-good bonhomie of countless introductions. Students were thrust into the vexations of Mississippi before they could even utter the words "summer project." But that uncertainty and doubt were quickly and expertly squelched by Moses: "The first, I guess, real sense of what we had to do came with some of the contact that we had, particularly, with rural farmers. Because perhaps for the first time, certainly, in my life, I met some people who seemed extremely simple in their conception of life, but very direct in terms of what they wanted, and in terms of certain elemental ideas about justice and feelings about people" (1). Note the terms that Moses did not use: the "farmers" in question were not raced, nor were they called "sharecroppers" or "farm laborers" or "cotton pickers" or some other designation. Instead, Moses elevated their dignity and status by labeling them "rural farmers." And per Ella Baker's organizing philosophy, it wasn't surprising that this Mississippi group, "simple in their conception," would know exactly what they wanted and needed.

But more than just providing some semblance of order to COFO's ambition—the unstated "we" in question—Moses further elevated their status with a building metaphor: "And if

we have any anchor at all, I mean if there's any base from which we operate, if there's any reason why we don't really go crazy, why we don't have more real problems than we do have, if there's any reason we can skip around from the bottom of Mississippi to the top of the skyscrapers in Manhattan, and still maintain some kind of internal sense of balance, I think a lot of it has to do with those people. And the fact that they have their own sense of balance, which is somehow independent of what goes on around the country because they're not affected by it" (2).

This is the first instance of the vertical and horizontal imagery used by Moses in his address; it's a very striking allusion insofar as "simple farmers" quite literally grounded the Harvard mathematician and other staff organizers in Mississippi. Stanford students probably didn't miss the very early shot across their bow: poor, rural Mississippi Blacks held the movement together, not the other way around. Don't come to Mississippi with your white skin, family wealth, and fancy pedigree thinking you're special or heroic or even noteworthy. No, what "anchored" the movement in Mississippi was that these "simple farmers" knew exactly who they were and exactly what they needed. Their balance kept the activists from going "crazy"; they kept them upright and moving/skipping wherever they happened to be. Such was their rhetorical power and steadying influence.

One of the reasons that Moses encountered great resistance to the idea of a summer project back in the winter and early spring was because many COFO Black staffers thought that elite white college students would totally dominate them and the local Black men and women they'd be helping to register, organize, and teach. Such zero-history white volunteers would do more long-term harm than short-term good, since local Blacks might defer to their default white superiority. Even veteran Black staffers might defer to that same white skin and thus white superiority. But Moses appeared unconcerned: by starting his speech with the simple and rural Black farmers of Mississippi, by emphasizing their sense of justice, their simplicity, and their unwavering steadiness amid the violence of white supremacy, white volunteers and Black staffers had simply to hold on to their "anchors"; that bedrock wasn't going to move—for anyone. Well-educated white college kids had absolutely nothing to teach older Black Mississippians about textbooks and grades. Ella Baker couldn't have opened with a more appropriate sentiment.

Minus a transition, Moses then rather abruptly talked about himself by way of teaching and his hometown of Harlem. More important than mere biography, Moses connected his inability to teach in Harlem's public schools—he could (and did) teach in New York's elite, "fancy," presumably white private schools—with the country's misplaced educational priorities. How could a Hamilton- and Harvard-educated philosopher-mathematician—Moses was careful not to mention his elite pedigree and instead played up Harlem—*not* be qualified to teach Harlem's (Black) public school students? This nuanced attempt at biography also functioned rhetorically to connect the racial problems in Mississippi to the larger country. No doubt Moses was very aware of the fact that many would-be student volunteers would need their parents' permission to participate; the age of consent was then twenty-one. And no doubt many parents would not just say no, but "hell no!" Mom and dad, in other words, were going to need some persuasion, and Moses provided it throughout his speech by connecting Mississippi, largely through education and migration, to the country as a whole. Some volunteers forged their parents' signature; how could COFO know? Others no doubt tried variations on the theme of "It's our country I'm fighting for, not just Mississippi; the problem is so much bigger than one state." Moses would provide several variations on that theme as his address unfolded.

Mississippi and race were just the “spearhead” of a very lethal and interlocking set of problems—problems exacerbated by the mechanization of plantations, a lack of education, and a search for employment, often in the north. So yes, what appeared to be a Mississippi problem was actually a national one.

Fighting By Ourselves

Moses next transitioned into the lengthiest section of his speech: a chronological account of SNCC/COFO’s work in Mississippi. It was a very partial narration, as it had to be, but Moses began at a place that would become important for would-be white volunteers: being alone. “When we first got into Mississippi, we were really on our own and very much alone” (5). Moses was not talking inter-organizationally: the NAACP, after all, had established a beachhead in the state many years before with a full-time field secretary, Medgar Evers. What Moses’s alone-ness referenced was, in fact, far more perilous and race-inflected: nobody was watching as mostly Black SNCC workers got bludgeoned by white racists. Moses recounted for the students his beating at the hands of Caston on the way to the courthouse in Liberty—a beating that led to several stitches in his scalp. “The [J]ustice [D]epartment’s reaction,” Moses recounted, was that “they didn’t really have a clear-cut case because we were walking through the streets on our way to the courthouse. The news of that never got around the country, . . . we were out there fighting by ourselves” (5). Not only would the civil rights division not intervene—not yet—but the nation’s news media was nowhere in sight. Keep in mind that the events from the previous spring in Birmingham, Alabama, had largely made civil rights a national issue: high pressure firehoses turned on Black kids in Kelly Ingram Park outraged the nation. SCLC’s Project C, for Confrontation, worked: Eugene “Bull” Connor had lost his temper with television cameras rolling. And as moving as King’s Letter from Birmingham Jail was, its rhetorical power didn’t rival nationally televised German Shepherds taking hunks of flesh out of Black children or water fusillades careening their limp bodies down city streets.

Bob Moses would return to this issue throughout 1964: if the news media wasn’t there to record and document the white-on-Black violence, how could the nation be made to care about Black Mississippians? The *McComb Enterprise Journal* sure as hell wasn’t going to be sympathetic to the so-called “outside agitators” intent on changing their “way of life,” nor would any one of dozens of small Mississippi weeklies. Moses and his SNCC colleagues were the enemy, after all. As his speech would reveal shortly, the answer to the publicity problem, of making the nation give a damn about the Klan-outpost known as Mississippi, had already been solved.

And if the Stanford undergraduate was thinking, “Fine, but what about the FBI,” Moses was well ahead of them: “The FBI agent who came around to do the investigation, although we called him that same night, showed up two weeks later for the first time. And then proceeded to try and convince me that I had [fallen]. And he tried to convince me that I fell three times, and that the wounds in three different places were from those three different falls” (5). Moses’s horizontal motion, his mobility, impeded by white supremacy on the streets of Liberty, was simply not seen as serious—witnesses notwithstanding. White southern FBI men couldn’t be trusted; “time and time again” they couldn’t be bothered to investigate seriously racist violence.

That lack of mobility, though, was quickly juxtaposed with more recent events, after SNCC had taken leave of the deadly southwestern part of the state and retreated north to the capital. What Moses and his intrepid band of brothers and sisters had more recently learned was

that there were a few Black Mississippians willing to make a stand, who you could organize around: in every community we could find “one or two people willing to take a stand, who would be willing to identify with you, who would provide some kind of foothold in that community and allow you a chance to work and organize” (6). Moses noted that this identification allowed them “to move around the state” to assess just how enormous the problem really was. In his words, their new-found mobility helped them see the “dimensions of the problem—just how immense the problem was, just how deep it was rooted, just how long a struggle it would be, just how limited we were in our resources” (6). It’s a good thing that rural Black farmers provided SNCC/COFO with an immovable bedrock, an anchor and a balance (and now a foothold), if for no other reason than the state’s “deeply rooted” racism required leverage and patience to be uprooted. The image of a tiny band of highly committed and mobile guerilla fighters emerges—but fighters without the weapons of combat.

Those fighters got even more support as 1962 unfolded, including from the country’s ground-zero of institutional power: the Kennedy administration. That support, in the form of grants to the Voter Education Project (VEP), provided SNCC/COFO with new resources with which to mobilize and organize. Instead of sleeping in cars and eating with local families, some staff members received \$12 every two weeks. Well into his speech, Moses finally came to the crux of the “problem” in question; their new mobility revealed that the issue was less white-on-Black violence, as terrifying and unpredictable as it was, and more institutional in nature: “it was clear that the problems in Mississippi . . . were to be focused on political problems. That what we had to do, somehow, was begin to tackle the political establishment in Mississippi—that the White Citizens’ councils, the governor, the state legislature, the judiciary were all part of one, monolithic system” (8). That system, under the aegis of the Democratic Party, called all the shots in the state. Whereas other states had a healthy balance of Republican and Democratic elected officials, Mississippi had only one party—and it wasn’t going anywhere. The “deeply rooted” problems—education, employment, housing, healthcare, all boiled in the toxic stew of white supremacy—could only be eradicated by hitting “right at its heart.” The beating heart of Mississippi white supremacy wasn’t the White Knights of the Ku Klux Klan; it wasn’t Billy Jack Caston or his racist cousin. Those were merely the kudzu branch roots sustained by the state’s political institutions—the real beating heart that pumped the racist bilge throughout the state’s 82 counties.

Symbolic Terror

But if Moses’s reasoning was accurate, and it was, how could a political solution take hold? How could a voter registration drive, however well-intentioned and funded, make inroads into the county registrar’s office? Such registrars had tremendous discretion as to whether or not a candidate passed or even took the test, and they could legally ask registrants to read and interpret any one of nearly 300 provisions in the state’s byzantine constitution. One Black registrant with a Master’s degree was famously asked how many bubbles were in a bar of soap; such was the chicanery around registering Black men and women to vote. On top of the absolute discretion of county registrars, would-be registrants also had their names and addresses published in local newspapers for two consecutive weeks, thus informing the entire reading public just who was attempting to vote—and where they lived.¹² And as Black Mississippi sharecropper Fannie Lou Hamer found out in the summer of 1962, vigilantes wouldn’t stop at a

vacant address. Hamer was eventually tracked down to a neighbor's address where she was staying and the house was sprayed with 10 rounds, badly wounding two teenagers.

Moses did not shrink from telling his listeners about the lethal violence they might encounter; his chronological narration of victims is instructive: "all of the work" they were doing was "colored" by "symbolic terror." "You can roll off the names. On 1956 [sic], Mr. [George] Lee in Belzoni who was shot and killed. The year after, in that same city, it was Gus Courts who was shot and run out of the city. 1960, it was a man [Lamar Smith] on Brookhaven's courthouse lawn who was shot and killed. 1961, in Amite County, it was Herbert Lee who was shot and killed. In 1963, it was Medgar Evers in Jackson who was shot and killed. In 1964, it was Louis Allen, and three people in Wilkinson County, and just recently another person in Wilkinson County—all shot and killed" (9). The repetition of "shot and killed" punctuated each name, most of whom Stanford students probably did not know; in fact, several remained nameless. Moses's very partial roll call of Black Mississippi martyrs is interesting for who he excluded; for example, missing is the name Emmett Till, a 14-year-old from Chicago visiting relatives infamously lynched in the Delta for whistling at a white woman. Also missing is the name Jimmy Travis, a SNCC staffer who was driving a car Bob Moses was in during the winter of 1963 when it was shot up by white men in a passing car. Bullets lodged in Travis' neck; no doubt Moses was the assassins' intended target, not the 21-year-old from Jackson.

Beyond the fact that a monolithic white Democratic party ran everything worth running in the state, Moses and other civil rights organizations understood something about electoral math. That is, Mississippi was still the "Blackest" state in the union, with more than 40% of Mississippi's population. Further, several Delta counties in particular had huge and potentially decisive black majorities. As such, if Blacks could be convinced to register and vote, they could determine all manner of county-level offices, including sheriffs, mayors, and school boards. Further, Mississippi's second congressional district featured a huge swath of the Delta, thereby putting into play a U.S. congressional seat since several Delta counties were black-majority.

But how to convince Black men and women in the state to attempt the perilous journey to the courthouse and attempt to register? Moses knew the math, to date, was terrible: so few Blacks had attempted to register that the VEP pulled its funding in the fall of 1963. Moreover, even if Black men and women did successfully register to vote, for whom would they vote: a member of the White Citizens' Council or a rumored Klansmen? Importantly, Moses did not blame the paltry registration numbers on apathetic Blacks in the state; to the contrary, he returned to an image with which he began his address, as if to counter any perceived antipathy for the "simple Black farmers." Despite the murders and the "symbolic terror," "what kept people going, what still keeps people going, was that you were able to reach and make contact with the Negro farmers (and) with the people in the cities. You were able to actually grab ahold of them. There was some feeling that you had hit some rock bottom, that you had some base you could work with, and that you could build on, and as long as you had that, then maybe there was hope of making some real changes someday" (11). Countering the vertical imagery of a deeply rooted white supremacy was a bedrock foundation of Black men and women who fearlessly resisted the state's terror and who were willing to begin building a nascent political organization.

But how to drive deep pilings into that hard bedrock of support? How to begin the long construction project with political organizing and voting at its core? The solution that Moses and COFO eventually hit on was brilliant, and completely transformed the possibilities in the state. To his Stanford listeners, Moses deemed it "a new dimension." Ultimately it had brought Bob Moses to Stanford.

Not Just the Negro's Problem

The idea was simple and profound: what about running a parallel election in which Black Mississippians cast ballots for a gubernatorial ticket? What if a well-known and well-respected Black candidate—in this case, Clarksdale's Aaron Henry—ran on an integrated ticket (with Tougaloo College chaplain, Ed King) and actively campaigned around the state on a platform tailored to the myriad needs of Black men and women? So what if the ballots weren't legal? So what if Henry and King hadn't been legally nominated by a legally recognized political party? Beginning in early October 1963 and running through the first week of November, COFO attempted to organize the state, with the exceptionally ambitious aim of registering 200,000 Black voters under the aegis of a Freedom Party. Rhetorically speaking, the one-month Freedom Vote campaign was nothing short of paradigm shifting: long-disenfranchised Mississippi Blacks suddenly became citizens when they marked a ballot and deposited it in a ballot box; for the first time the national (and local) press took an interest in a Mississippi voting campaign; the Department of Justice was an active and very visible presence in the state; and, not to be overlooked, the Freedom Vote galvanized and constituted a new group of activists: white college students.

There was one other thing that happened during the Freedom Vote. Or, more accurately, didn't happen. And Bob Moses did not see it coming. Something or someone had seemingly flipped off the violence switch. After the campaign had ended Moses reflected: "That was the first time that I realized that the violence could actually be controlled. . . . That it wasn't totally random. I realized that somewhere along the line, there was someone who, even if they didn't actually order it to happen, could at least send out word for it to stop."¹³ That the heretofore random and lethal white-on-Black violence could be predicted, tempered, and perhaps even shut off "was a revelation" to the man whose head had been bludgeoned in Liberty and whose bold vision had put a husband and father of nine in the grave. The differences—in fact the only notable differences—between the summer campaign in McComb and the fall Freedom Vote two years later involved the scale and participation of the white college students. As a mathematician and keen logician, that one variable seemed to provide overwhelmingly conclusive proof to Bob Moses that only an interracial calculus could crack open the state to federal intervention. SNCC's Lawrence Guyot, who was a vocal proponent of both the Freedom Vote and what would become Freedom Summer, linked the lack of violence to the visible federal presence in the state: "Wherever those white volunteers went, FBI agents followed. It was really a problem to count the number of FBI agents who were there to protect the students. It was just that gross."¹⁴

COFO, with the rhetorical assistance of Allard Lowenstein, had recruited scores of Stanford and Yale students to help with the Freedom Vote campaign. And the students came. They came in VW vans; they came in pairs from New Haven; they drove non-stop from Palo Alto; some stayed for a few days, others for a week; they brought their campus newspapers with them—and yes, they brought the national press and the Justice Department. There were numerous arrests, constant harassment, and some violence, but no one died; everyone returned to campus by the first full week of November. The Yalies sipped sherry in a cloistered space on campus.¹⁵ By the final count, 82,000 Black Mississippians had cast Freedom Ballots.

And many in COFO loathed them. Deeply. It wasn't personal, but the anger and suspicion were very real for many. The "simple farmers," on the other hand, loved the clean-cut

boys from Yale and Stanford. For the first time in anyone's memory, the country cared about Mississippi. But it was a proxy caring: that care and concern was a function of elite, white, college-educated young men lending their brains and brawn to the heretofore "wretched of the earth." Literally in just a few weeks, 60 Yale and Stanford students had accomplished what two solid years of daily, hard Black organizing could not: get the nation to give a damn about what happened to Black people in Mississippi. There was at least one SNCC field worker, George Greene, who straddled the love/loathe continuum with a hard-boiled pragmatism: "See if you want to shoot me you were going to have to shoot a white boy too. And I don't think you can get away with shooting that white boy cause his daddy is a Congressman in the United States Congress." The fearless SNCC organizer from Greenwood who defied the Klan in the very dangerous southwestern part of the state continued, "if you shoot me, if you do anything to me, the world will know about it because I know that that boy is going to call his Daddy each and every night and tell him what happened. I am going to say my blessings with him because he is keeping me alive. He is keeping me alive."¹⁶ George Greene, frankly, didn't care about the racist premise of the interracial arrangement: better alive with a white colleague than Black, alone—and dead.

Bob Moses was on Stanford's campus in April 1964 only because of the successes of the Freedom Vote. And because Stanford (and Yale) had supplied the shock troops (and financing) that this new insurgency demanded. But as he briefly narrated the Freedom Vote campaign, he equivocated on specifics: "There were real, very tough problems, with the sudden appearance of numbers of students from Stanford, and from Yale. But what they meant, more than anything else, was some type of involvement of the rest of the country on a different scale, with a different kind of personal commitment, and with a different possibility for organizing and working within the state" (12). Three "differents" in just one sentence—and the main different, the implied different, the always-already different, was skin color. Fifty-one days hence, and white college students would still be eyed with anger, disdain, and suspicion by many Black COFO staff; their presence, after all, was proof that Black lives really didn't matter.

Moses punctuated the mid-part of his address by closing the Freedom Summer section with his only appeal, admittedly indirect, to Stanford undergraduates; not surprisingly, it was couched in vertical imagery: "what's at stake [this summer] is something deeper [than the Freedom Vote]. It's a question of whether, in this country, we can find people who are committed. Who know, who care, who are willing to sacrifice. Who are willing to say that they want to do their share. Who are willing and able, perhaps, to look on this as the country's problem, not just as the Negroes' problem"(14). Further "if we're really going to get to the bottom" of the problem, those same people were going to have to understand Mississippi's racial problems as also belonging to the entire nation. Whether Moses and COFO could actually "find" those people remained to be seen. Moses did not assume that they were sitting in front of him in Cubberly, though. There was no appeal to a "you" or a "we"; students would have to make a decision to apply (or not) in the solitude of their own conscience. What Bob Moses and COFO did not need was a gaggle of self-important undergrads looking for thrills, interracial courtship, and playing hero along the dirt roads, canebrakes, and bayous of Mississippi.

The Very Root

Moses's indirect appeal thus served as a transition into connecting the ostensibly "closed society" of Mississippi with the rest of the nation; for its borders, especially for so many Black

residents of the state, were in fact rather porous. Mississippi racism metastasized well beyond the state's physical geography, the depths of which were hard to fathom. As Blacks migrated north, meanwhile, the country finally caught up with COFO and Mississippi: with the events in Birmingham in April and May of 1963, "the problem had, all of a sudden, become a national problem" (15). And with the March on Washington and the ensuing Klan killing of four young Black girls at Sixteenth Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, civil rights had ceased to be an exclusively southern problem. The news media still wasn't focused on Mississippi, but the camera lenses were trained on demonstrators, demonstrations, and always the violence accompanying both. For Moses, the problems, the issues, went deep: "The questions that we think faces the country are questions which . . . go very much to the bottom of mankind, and of people. . . . They're questions which go to the very root of our society" (16). Those roots and bedrock, as we've already witnessed, juxtapose the evils of white supremacy with the simple and just equilibrium of Black farmers; now that the entire country had been engaged, it would have to pick one or the other.

As we saw earlier in the address, Moses's vertical imagery intersected with a corresponding horizontal movement, in this case, a movement—steps—that functioned to improve the nation's existing institutions. In other words, on one hand Moses offered his Stanford audience a radical, if incipient, vision of deep structural change; on the other hand, Moses also presented a more conservative alternative, one in which room would need to be made for including more Black Americans—whether in housing, employment, or education. Moses poses the matter thus: "The problem is whether we will really be able to really find solutions, whether we will be able—if we find these solutions—to take the steps that might be necessary, in terms of the structure of our politics and economics, to carry them through" (17). This more conservative vision, one in which "steps" were taken across extant political and economic arrangements, could happen peaceably, but Moses was not sanguine about that prospect. His pessimism was fueled by the simple fact that just a handful of Representatives and Senators—he mentioned the powerful Mississippi Senator James O. Eastland by name—controlled the fate of any and all civil rights legislation. In a word, the filibuster, even though Moses didn't name it specifically, continued to be used to block even relatively conservative racial reforms that the country desperately needed.

If political changes didn't happen, if the South would continue to control the legislative levers of power, the "steps" of progress would be halted and violence would ensue; structural change would be coaxed at the point of a gun, in an exploding Molotov cocktail, or whatever weapon Black men and women had at hand. Of course the news media would blame the violence on "dissident and extremist elements within the civil rights movement" (20), but Moses urged his listeners to understand the origins of that rage, many of which led right back to Mississippi. A people who couldn't read and write, who had no opportunity for work in either the North or the South, with no (re)education opportunities, and caged in a restrictive urban ghetto would not suffer in perpetuity. Again, Moses framed the matter in strictly political terms: "if you teach people how to read and write, then they're going to begin to want to govern themselves in an area where they form the predominance of the population, over a more articulate, economically controlling white group. And that's the political problem in our country" (28). And because white southern representatives and senators in Congress wouldn't sponsor such legislation, Black Deltans had fled to many corners, from Los Angeles to Chicago and Detroit.

The specific "political problem" that Moses pointed to wasn't simply that white southerners controlled all the legislative levers of power; rather, it was that their control had been

vouchsafed by a terrorizing and totalizing white supremacy that didn't allow Blacks in Mississippi to even register, let alone cast a ballot. From the courthouse, to the county registrar, to the weekly newspaper, to the firings, night-riding, and near constant harassment, Black men and women did not have a say in any significant legislation that affected their daily lives. None. The system was self-sealing and total.

MFDP

This lead-in to one of the final significant sections of the address portends much of what would occupy summer volunteers: a “freedom registration.” Again drawing lessons from the Freedom Vote, Moses informed his listeners that many would be working to create a new party—what would become the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party (MFDP)—and would canvass the entire state to sign up new Black voters. In brief, the MFDP would be a parallel institution, but whereas previous political organizing by COFO had not been legal, this new party would go through all the mechanisms of institutional political legitimacy in order to challenge the seating of the regular Democratic Party at its national convention in Atlantic City come August. Because they knew they would be barred from participating in the state (white) Democratic party primary, the MFDP's argument for being the state's legitimate Democratic party, and for being seated at the convention, would hinge on the fact that they simply couldn't participate in the “regular” (white) electoral process; as such, any delegation that claimed to represent Mississippi—and which systematically excluded Blacks—was, by definition, illegal and irrelevant.

Moses let his audience know that a confrontation was coming: “we're trying to work as closely, and as assiduously, and as hard as we can within the existing political structures of this country. Trying to see if they will bend, if they have any flexibility, if they give at some point, if they can really accommodate themselves to the demands of the people” (35). Up until now, Moses added, the institutions in question hadn't bent, only patches had been applied, “[a]nd every time you put a patch on here, pressure mounts there, and something explodes” (35). While the metaphor had shifted ever so slightly from steps to pressure—he later referred to “avenues”—the motion remained the same: impeded progress, horizontally across extant structures, continued to be blocked. Those structures could only remain solvent for so long before they gave entirely; Moses confessed to not knowing how long they could remain structurally whole—especially since the problem of civil rights was now a national one, and the news media added to the mounting pressures. The deep structural roots of racism, in Mississippi and elsewhere, had to be vanquished lest the entire tottering edifices collapse in a wave of Black anger and frustration—for which, of course, Black men and women would be blamed.

Moses's beginning now comes into sharper relief: the Black farmers of the Delta helped him and his colleagues keep their sometimes tenuous equilibrium; the rest of the nation was not as fortunate.

Resting Heavy

The lengthy close to Moses's address functioned as a brief history of the decision to have the summer project at all, from the close of the Freedom Vote, as well as its myriad aims beyond the creation of the MFDP. Minus an outline or a manuscript, Moses likely knew that he needed to end with a heavy dose of candor and realism. Would-be volunteers absolutely needed to know

that “the staff in Mississippi were violently opposed to the summer project when it was first announced” (39). What he didn’t say was that many were still “violently” opposed—many months later. And would continue to be. To this day.

Moses attempted to counter the staff’s opposition, though, by emphasizing just how much Black Mississippi farmers favored the idea: “The farmers, and the people who live and work there, welcomed the whole idea. Because they feel that anybody who comes down to help is good. They need all the help they can get” (41). It was their unwavering support, Moses claimed, that helped convince many within COFO to vote for the summer project. Including Bob Moses, who once again, sided with the “simple” Black men and women of the Delta: “in many cases, the instincts of the people, and particularly some of the rural farmers about these things are truer, deeper, less cluttered, and less bothered by personal problems and things like that than the instincts of . . . the staff and people who are working” (41). That bedrock of simplicity, their steady anchor of support, superseded the staffers who obsessed over a racial accounting that ultimately didn’t matter to the project’s ambitious short-term aims. If Freedom Summer was good enough for locals like Amzie Moore, E. W. Steptoe, “Sweets” Turnbow, and Fannie Lou Hamer, it should be good enough for anyone headed to Mississippi that summer. Furthermore, it was local Black leaders like these four who would be housing white volunteers, and such a Peace Corps-like arrangement “might change the whole conception around the country of how it might be possible to get at some of these problems in the Deep South” (46).

If there was a pink elephant in Cubberly on the evening of the 24th, Moses decided to close by finally addressing it; he knew that would-be volunteers would have to confront it rather directly. Arguably the speech didn’t really end so much as Moses detailed an existential dread that exceeded speech; it was the “really deep moral problem” of violence, the specter of death specifically. Moses knew, but Stanford students likely did not, that the White Knights of the Ku Klux Klan had been very busy organizing all winter and spring for the coming “summer invasion.” Moses also knew that the federal government wasn’t likely to provide any proactive protection, even as the Justice Department took an active interest in COFO’s summer plans. In brief, Moses knew that some students would likely not return to campus for fall term. He also wanted them to know that this likelihood “rested heavy” with him.

Moses let Stanford students eavesdrop on his deeply personal ruminations, that his actions and decisions had gotten Herbert Lee, among others, murdered; he “was killed just as surely because we went in there to organize, as rain comes because of clouds. If we hadn’t gone in there, he wouldn’t have been killed” (51). Nine children and a wife didn’t have a dad and a husband because of Bob Moses, and “you have to dig into yourself” to determine just what level of responsibility you share. Notice that Moses’s second person “you” was a thinly veiled “I.” Lee’s death had made him an executioner on Camus’ accounting. But, did one—did Bob Moses—have to become a willing executioner for those simple Black farmers to “get their freedom”? Perhaps a more pressing point for his listeners involved, less, who was culpable in the moral accounting, and more, would I be murdered in Mississippi? Bob Moses could “dig into himself” all he wanted, but will I come home—in a box or on a bus? Moses struggled even to complete the thought: “the people who go down to Mississippi this summer [pause] that whole question about what will happen rests very heavy, because nobody really knows what might happen” (52). In a speech that featured frequent references to depth, structures, roots, anchors, and bedrock, Moses’s last words resonated: “it still rests very heavy” (52).

And with those final words, followed by a pronounced pause, the audience in Cubberly rose as one and applauded this remarkable one-hour-and-four-minute speech. Most of Moses’s

interlocutors would not go to Mississippi in less than two months; Stanford, though, would have nearly 40 students and faculty participate, the largest contingent of any university in the country.¹⁷ Even so, Bob Moses had brought the closed society of Mississippi onto campus, and many weren't likely to forget his magnetic presence and the shared intimacy of his address. Student and journalist Pell Fender no doubt spoke for many of his fellow attendees: "Up until a few days ago, Mississippi was a no man's land, explored only by people unknown to most of us. Some of us thought them crazy to be fighting the segregationists of Mississippi, others of us thought them heroes. But for a few days Mississippi and her gadflies came alive."¹⁸

And yet, even as Bob Moses was speaking at Cubberly on Friday evening, at the very same time he detailed the white supremacy and "symbolic terror" students would likely encounter in the state, the White Knights sent an unmistakable warning to the "invaders." In papers across Mississippi that weekend, journalists documented the kerosene accounting: the Klan had burned crosses—simultaneously—in 64 of the state's 82 counties on Friday night. One of those counties was Neshoba, where the local Klan burned a cross at the county seat of Philadelphia. Fifty-eight days to the day, on the very first day of the summer project, Klansmen would execute James Chaney, Andrew Goodman, and Mickey Schwerner on the outskirts of town—a conspiracy instigated and orchestrated by local law enforcement. And just eight days after his speech, Meadville, Mississippi Klansmen would lynch two Black teenagers, Henry Dee and Charles Moore, neither of whom was involved in civil rights, but who looked suspicious enough to kidnap, torture, bound, and drown in the backwaters of the Old River near Vicksburg. The nation quickly learned about the former lynching; the latter one would rather rapidly disappear from the front page. Why? Two of the three murdered men were white, one of whom, Goodman, was a volunteer in the summer project.

Bob Moses, more than anyone in COFO, had helped put into motion the events that would lead to the Klan's lethal violence, just as surely "as rain comes because of clouds." Perhaps he had become Camus' executioner. To many of the simple Black farmers of the Delta, he had become their savior.

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As this manuscript was being readied for publication, we learned of Bob Moses' death, on July 25, 2021 at the age of 86. Not surprisingly, many obituaries lead with his leadership of Freedom Summer. While his passing rests heavy with us, we honor a life so well lived.

¹ Nancy L. Steffen, "King Calls for Further Action Before Crowd Of Over 1800," *Stanford Daily*, April 24, 1964, 1

² Bob Pickus, "Conference Gives Active Program," *Stanford Daily*, April 27, 1964, 1.

³ While relatively little has been written directly about Bob Moses's life, two books have been published to date: Eric R. Burner, *And Gently He Shall Lead Them: Robert Parris Moses and Civil Rights in Mississippi* (New York: New York University Press, 1994); and, Lara Visser-Maessen, *Robert Parris Moses: A Life in Civil Rights and Leadership at the Grassroots* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2016).

⁴ Moses was introduced by Stanford undergraduate, Dennis Sweeney, who'd worked with Moses the preceding summer in the Council of Federated Organization's Jackson, Mississippi office. Sweeney's activism had been catalyzed by friend, mentor, and former teacher, Allard Lowenstein, who taught at Stanford during the 1961-1962 academic year. The deeply connected and frenetic Lowenstein was vital in recruiting Stanford students in the fall of 1963 to participate in the Freedom Vote. Years later, a mentally ill, deeply paranoid Sweeney emptied a revolver into Lowenstein in 1981, killing him; see David Harris, *Dreams Die Hard: Three Men's Journey Through the Sixties* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1982).

⁵ Mary Kay Becker, "Lowenstein Describes Negro Oppression in South," *Stanford Daily*, October 3, 1963, 1.

⁶ To date the best work on the Mississippi Freedom Vote remains Joseph A. Sinsheimer, "The Freedom Vote of 1963: New Strategies of Racial Protest in Mississippi," *Journal of Southern History* 55 (1989): 217-44. See also, William H. Lawson, *No Small Thing: The 1963 Mississippi Freedom Vote* (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2018).

⁷ Quoted in Charles E. Cobb, Jr., "The Civil Rights Movement, 1959-1964," in *Four Hundred Souls: A Community History of African America, 1619-2019*, eds., Ibram X. Kendi and Keisha N. Blain (New York: One World, 2021), ellipses in original, 327.

⁸ For Baker as a speechmaker, see Nikki Orth, "Ella Baker: Address at the Hattiesburg Freedom Day Rally (January 21, 1964)," *Voices of Democracy* 11 (2016): 25-43. The best biographical treatment of Baker is Barbara Ransby, *Ella Baker and the Black Freedom Movement: A Radical Democratic Vision* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2003).

⁹ Richard J. Jensen and John C. Hammerback, "'Your Tools Really Are the People': The Rhetoric of Robert Parris Moses," *Communication Monographs* 65 (1998): 126-40; Richard J. Jensen and John C. Hammerback, "Working in 'Quiet Places': The Community Organizing Rhetoric of Robert Parris Moses," *The Howard Journal of Communication* 11 (2000): 1-18.

¹⁰ The Moses Moon audio archive at the Smithsonian Museum of American History remains a vastly underutilized resource for civil rights scholars looking to understand the rhetorical dynamics of the civil rights movement. Moon/Ribback, owner of the Gate of Horn nightclub in Chicago brought his recording equipment south in 1963 at the invitation of SNCC Executive Secretary, Jim Forman. Moon/Ribback recorded movement meetings in small venues such as Danville, VA, Selma, AL, Greenwood, Hattiesburg, and Indianola, MS, as well as a SNCC conference in December 1963, where Moses spoke extensively. For more details on the archive see, <https://sova.si.edu/record/NMAH.AC.0556>.

¹¹ All passages from Moses's speech are cited with reference to paragraph numbers in the printed text that accompanies this essay on the VOD website. A transcript can also be found at <http://americanradioworks.publicradio.org/features/blackspeech/bmoses.html>

¹² The race of any would-be registrant could be inferred based on whether or not a courtesy title was used by the newspaper in question. For example, a Mr., Mrs., or Miss was always assumed

to be white whereas a Fannie Mae or Freddie Johnson was always assumed to be Black. Many discursively agile Black families named children “Mister” and “General” or “Queen” to speak back to such racist customs.

¹³ Stokely Carmichael and Ekwueme Michael Thelwell, *Ready for Revolution: The Life and Struggles of Stokely Carmichael (Kwame Ture)* (New York: Scribners, 2003), 353-54.

¹⁴ Guyot quoted in Howell Raines, *My Soul Is Rested: The Story of the Civil Rights Movement in the Deep South* (New York: Penguin, 1977), 287.

¹⁵ Jon M. Van Dyke, “Students Trade Stories of Adventures Over Sherry at Ezra Stiles Meeting,” *Yale Daily News*, November 11, 1963, 1.

¹⁶ Joseph Sinsheimer interview with George Greene, transcript available at the Joseph A. Sinsheimer Papers, Duke University, Durham, NC.

¹⁷ Vivian Bozman, “Operation Mississippi To Enter State Politics: COFO Plants To Unseat Mississippi Delegation to Democratic Convention,” *Stanford Daily*, May 27, 1964, 1.

¹⁸ Pell Fender, “How’s The South? It’s Hell,” *Stanford Daily*, April 28, 1964, 1.