

The Right to Vote in Mississippi

Voter Education Efforts Meet with Violent Resistance

At the time John F. Kennedy takes office in January 1961, a person trying to register to vote in Mississippi must first pass a literacy test, then explain a portion of the US Constitution, and also be able to pay a poll tax before voting. While poor educational opportunities and overt racial discrimination by registrars make it difficult for many blacks to meet all of these requirements, terror, violence, and economic intimidation also suppress black voter participation. In 1955, two civil rights workers active in voter registration were murdered.

In the summer of 1961, talks between civil rights leaders and Attorney General Robert Kennedy lead to the creation of the Voter Education Project (VEP). Funded by a private foundation, the program provides grants to civil rights groups to help coordinate and increase the registration of black voters in southern states. The president and the attorney general believe this strategy will be a more effective way to bring about change than sit-ins, freedom rides, and demonstrations. Several civil rights organizations obtain grants from the program. One effort the VEP funds is run by Bob Moses.

Moses comes to Mississippi from New York in July 1961 as an organizer for SNCC -- the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee -- "Snick". On August 7, he opens his first voter education school and begins teaching Negroes how to pass the tests, register, and respond non-violently if they are attacked. When he brings them to voter registration offices, many are badly beaten by white segregationists. Tensions escalate and, in late September, Herbert Lee, a farmer who volunteers for SNCC, is shot and killed.

The US Department of Justice investigates Lee's murder, as well as the ongoing harassment of Moses and blacks participating in voter registration efforts. Most of the people being helped by the VEP efforts in the rural counties of the Mississippi Delta are poor sharecroppers. They depend on food surpluses from the federal government to survive. In October 1962, two county governments cut off the distribution of these food supplies to 22,000 people. The Justice Department investigates and the Commission on Civil Rights begins asking the president for permission to hold hearings on racial discrimination in Mississippi. By the end of the year, Moses is desperate. On New Year's Day 1963, he files a lawsuit against the federal government demanding that the Justice Department enforce laws meant to prevent interference with voter registration. By early 1963, the retaliation of the counties in cutting off federal surpluses spurs hundreds of Negroes to try to register to vote.

On February 28, President Kennedy sends a Special Message to Congress on Civil Rights, calling for effective legislation and urging "every state legislature to take prompt action ... to outlaw the poll tax...as the 24th amendment to the Constitution." On the same day, 22-year-old Jimmy Travis, a veteran of the Freedom Rides, and a SNCC and VEP worker, is shot while driving Moses on Highway 82 near Greenwood, Mississippi. Travis survives, and SNCC

channels its efforts into Greenwood. White segregationists respond by burning SNCC offices and shooting at more volunteers, including Dewey Greene Sr., who is killed on March 24. In Greene's and Travis' honor, SNCC launches registration marches in Greenwood. After Moses is arrested on March 27, Burke Marshall of the US Department of Justice threatens the city with a federal lawsuit. Meanwhile, the SNCC marches continue. The best-known civil rights activist in Mississippi and NAACP field secretary for the state, Medgar Evers and other leaders come to Greenwood to support the movement. On April 5, popular black comedian Dick Gregory joins the marchers, attracting national media attention. That day, the Justice Department strikes a deal with the city. Greenwood officials agree to release the jailed demonstrators and the Justice Department agrees to drop the lawsuit. Additionally, the federal government pays for the distribution of federal food to the starving people of the rural counties.

Later that spring, on June 11, the same evening that the president delivers his major address on civil rights to the nation, Medgar Evers is killed outside of his home in Jackson, Mississippi.

July 12, 1961: In the Oval Office, the president meets with a group from the NAACP. They praise Kennedy's "effective executive action" in civil rights matters, but hope that Congress can do more to change or create new laws. Kennedy explains that he believes more needs to be done in carrying out current laws. He presses for a greater effort in registering more Negro voters. **How to Change That (Photograph)**

September 13, 1962: A reporter quotes Martin Luther King Jr., saying that there is "anti-Negro terrorism in the South," explaining that many civil rights groups believe the government "hasn't done enough" about it. What does the president think? He gives his answer. **Anti-Negro Terrorism (Video)**

September 21, 1962: Charles R. McLaurin writes to the president from Ruleville, Mississippi. For black people living in his small delta town, registering to vote is no simple thing. **Vote at Your Own Risk (Letter)**

October 3, 1962: Troops are now in Oxford, Mississippi, keeping the peace. Two days ago, riots erupted there when Federal Marshals escorted James Meredith to register as a student at Ole Miss – the all-white University of Mississippi. Aaron Henry and Medgar Evers, of the NAACP, think this could have been avoided. **Tragedy at Ole Miss (Telegram)**

October 22, 1962: Lee White, Special Assistant Counsel to the president, asks for advice from Burke Marshall, the assistant attorney general. Aaron Henry and Medgar Evers made a suggestion in a telegram received this month. Perhaps it is worth considering. **Advice on Henry and Evers? (Memo)**

October 25, 1962: Burke Marshall responds to Lee White, who has asked for Marshall's opinion on a telegram that arrived earlier this month from Aaron Henry and Medgar Evers of the NAACP. **In a Word: Outrageous (Memo)**

October 29, 1962: Burke Marshall has called a telegram from Aaron Henry and Medgar Evers “too outrageous to respond to.” Lee White agrees, but there is something in the telegram he finds interesting. **The Whole Picture? (Memo)**

February 12, 1963: The Commission on Civil Rights is less than six years old. It was established under President Eisenhower. Its two-year term has been extended twice. This could be its last year. Its members, under Chairman John Hannah, investigate civil rights problems for the president and US Department of Justice. **Civil Rights Commissioners (Photograph)**

March 1, 1963: Wiley Branton is the Director of the Voter Education Project, which distributes grants for voting registration efforts across the South. He writes President Kennedy about the shooting of SNCC worker, Jimmy Travis. “This cannot longer be tolerated,” he proclaims. He tells the president what his group intends to do. **James Travis Shot (Telegram)**

March 7, 1963: Last week, it was James Travis in a car with two other SNCC voter registration workers. This week another group of volunteers has been targeted on the road. Roy Wilkins, of the NAACP, sends a telegram to the president asking for new action, including withholding federal funds from the State of Mississippi. **Yet Another Shooting (Telegram)**

March 16, 1963: Much of Leflore County’s black population is surviving on federal food surpluses. To punish these people for trying to register to vote, and to distract SNCC with a new problem in the area, the county government cuts off the distribution of the food supply. The Northern Student Movement will deliver supplies to them. Raymond Blanks asks for donations. **You Can Help Today (Letter)**

March 20, 1963: Since Wiley Branton sent a telegram to the president on March 1, three more voter registration workers have been “shot at.” White replies to Branton. **We’re Doing What We Can (Letter)**

March 21, 1963: Lee White responds to Roy Wilkins on behalf of the president. He explains what actions the administration has already taken, and what it will continue to do, moving forward. **Actions Have Been Taken (Letter)**

March 21, 1963: Five states still use the poll tax, which requires people to pay a tax when they vote. Congress agreed in September that the poll tax is unconstitutional, and proposed the Twenty-Fourth Amendment to make it illegal in federal elections. If three-fourths of the states also say they agree, then the amendment can take effect. President Kennedy asks state governors to move on this quickly. **Please Ratify the Twenty-fourth Amendment (Telegram)**

March 26, 1963: With the stamp of its official seal, and the signature of its Secretary of State, Washington ratifies the Twenty-Fourth Amendment to the US Constitution. That’s twenty-one states down and seventeen to go before the poll tax is eliminated in federal elections. **Signed, Sealed, and Delivered (Resolution)**

March 27, 1963: Longtime civil rights champion A. Philip Randolph sends a telegram to the president. He lists the recent attacks on the voting registration movement in Mississippi, including the latest by Greenwood police just this morning. **Need Protection Now (Telegram)**

March 27, 1963: Students at two colleges in Geneva, New York, want the president to “investigate the Travis incident,” and “bring integration to the South.” Together, they sign a petition. **We The Undersigned (Petition)**

March 30, 1963: The Commission on Civil Rights recommends “withholding federal funds from Mississippi,” which stands “in defiance of the Constitution.” It also claims that the president and attorney general have repeatedly obstructed hearings in that state. The commission warns it may give its resolution to the press. **Resolution of the Commission on Civil Rights (Resolution)**

April 3, 1963: Albert Rosellini, governor of Washington, responds to the president’s request. His state legislature has voted on the twenty-fourth amendment: the poll tax should be eliminated. He presents Joint Resolution 15 stating so. **Washington State Agrees (Letter)**

April 3, 1963: “Do you have any comments on the voter registration drive?” a reporter asks. Comedian Dick Gregory is in Greenwood now, generating national publicity for the movement. A photo in today’s *New York Times* shows him being abused by policemen. The president responds. **Any Comments, Mr. President? (Video)**

April 10, 1963: Lee White reads the resolution of the Commission on Civil Rights, and writes a memo about it for President Kennedy. He believes many of the Commission’s claims are “manifestly wrong,” and that its recommendations could have harmful effects. **In Defense of the President (Memo)**

April 10, 1963: Two days ago, the *Evening Star* – an edition of the *Washington Star Newspaper* – ran a “misleading” article about events in Greenwood, Mississippi. Wiley Branton, director of the Voter Education Project, writes to the paper and forwards his letter to Lee White. **Get the Facts Right (Letter)**

April 19, 1963: President Kennedy writes to the chairman of the Commission on Civil Rights, responding to accusations and recommendations in the commission’s Resolution on the State of Mississippi, which the president calls an “Interim Report.” **Kennedy Defuses the Resolution (Letter)**

April 24, 1963: A reporter wants to know, why has the president rejected a certain suggestion from the Commission on Civil Rights? The president shares his reasons. **About the Commission’s Resolution (Video)**

May 23, 1963: In March, the government of Leflore County stopped distributing federal food surpluses to the “approximately 21,000” needy people there. As Burke Marshall explains in his response to a letter, people did begin receiving supplies again in April when the federal government stepped in, but there is still a “definite need.” **Starving Mississippians (Letter)**

June 12, 1963: The president speaks to the nation about civil rights at 8:00 p.m. on June 11. Four hours later, at 12:20 a.m., Medgar Evers, NAACP field secretary for Mississippi, is killed. Richard Anderson of Deckerville, Michigan, writes to the president. He has heard there's a reward for information leading to the arrest of the killer. He thinks the same should be offered for the arrest of those who killed two white men. **Two Killers, Equal Rewards? (Letter)**

June 13, 1963: The president writes a personal message to Mrs. Medgar Evers the day after her husband is killed. **Condolences from the President (Letter)**

June 15, 1963: Earle Belle Smith writes to President Kennedy. The Catholic Interracial Council believes Medgar Evers should be given "the highest civilian award available." **Honored at This Time (Letter)**

June 17, 1963: Lula M. Donaldson, "a southern white lady," sends a telegram the president about the death of Medgar Evers. **Sarcastic Suggestion (Telegram)**

June 21, 1963: Two days ago, 3,000 people attended the funeral of Medgar Evers. He was buried at Arlington National Cemetery. Today, President Kennedy visits with his family in the Oval Office. **Together in Grief (Photograph)**

June 26, 1963: Frank Smith has had "personal contacts" with Byron De La Beckwith, whose name he misspells. He writes to Burke Marshall about this and warns, "There are others like him all around." Twenty-nine years later Beckwith is convicted. **Evers' Assassin (Letter)**

July 19, 1963: On behalf of President Kennedy, Lee White responds to Richard Anderson. He mentions nothing about rewards, but he does explain why he thinks the murder of Medgar Evers is different. **This Murder was Different (Letter)**

October 29, 1963: SNCC, along with other civil rights organizations known together as the Council of Federated Organizations, holds a Freedom Vote. It is a mock election to demonstrate the will of black Mississippians to vote if not held back by intimidation or violence. **A Mock Election (Photograph)**

August 6, 1965: Next year, President Lyndon Johnson signs the Civil Rights Act of 1964, making it harder for states to keep non-whites from voting. Also, the states ratify the Twenty-Fourth Amendment, ruling the poll tax unconstitutional in national elections. But it will be two years before a federal Voting Rights Act makes any and all discrimination at the voting booth illegal. President Johnson will sign the bill into law on August 6, 1965. **The Voting Rights Act (Photograph)**