

One of the most significant portions of the Civil Rights Movement of the, the early sixties was the summer of 1964 when the Civil Rights organizations got together on a massive push in the state of Mississippi, a push on voter education and voter registration. There were especially four organizations involved, SNCC, CORE, the SCLC, that's the Southern Christian Leadership Conference and the NAACP. This um, concept of Freedom Summer was originated by a young man in SNCC, a man by the name of Bob Moses, an unsung hero of the movement. He did not want the limelight, uh, a strange person in many ways; he preferred to stay in the background but it was he who conceived of the idea of getting the activist organizations together, uh pooling their resources in one state and then calling upon people of goodwill, especially young people from all over the country to come in to that one state of Mississippi to volunteer to do work of voter education and voter registration. The two major organizations uh, as players in this uh movement for the summer were of course SNCC and CORE. Um, an umbrella organization was set up called the Council of Federated Organizations uh, under the acronym of COFO, C.O., F.O. And what the organizations did was divide up the turf as it were; the state was divided up. Um, SNCC took, cer, certain counties, CORE other counties and um, some of the counties were jointly um operated by CORE and SNCC. We did that so we wouldn't be tripping over each other's feet and competing with um, the other organization for headlines and for credit for whatever happened uh, or blame for whatever didn't happen in that particular county. Um, calls were then issued all over the country, especially focusing on college and university campuses for volunteers to go to Mississippi. Now you must understand the spirit of that time, in the early spring of 1964, the most important thing that was happening in the country was the Civil Rights Movement; people were captivated by it and were asking how can I get involved. Many young people were postponing their college careers, in order to participate in CORE or SNCC and especially its activities in the South. They wanted to put their bodies where their hearts were as it were. When the call went out it went out from SNCC headquarters and from CORE headquarters and CORE chapters all over the country and it went out through the National Student Association which was working with both SNCC and CORE. So that call got to college campuses, desks were set up in the lobbies of um, uh, student centers on virtually every campus in the country, leaflets were distributed on campus, meetings were held at lunch hour to recruit volunteers and there were more volunteers signing up than we could possibly use. Tens of thousands signed up. We wanted thousands and we got more than we could use and these were really volunteers. The students were not going to be paid anything, not a dime and this was valuable time, time which they would be using otherwise to hold down jobs, to earn tuition money for the next academic year. But now they were volunteering to spend that time and not earn a dime. In fact, it would cost them money or cost their parents money because they'd have to live during that summer. They wouldn't live in fancy hotels and eat in good restaurants instead they would uh, live with poor black families in backwoods Mississippi, rural areas and on plantations. They would live in their houses, their shanties, their shacks, sometimes on the plantations. They would become parts of those families. Most of the students who volunteered of course were white; overwhelming majority of the volunteers were white and they became part of black families, poor black families. Those families had then for the summer adopted white sons and white daughters. They ate the meager fare that that family normally ate which meant that the mother of the household would pour more water into the soup to stretch it and they were volunteering to live without a tomorrow. When they left that house if it could be called a house to go about their pointed tasks of teaching voter education and voter registration they had no confidence, they could have no confidence of returning safely that evening. It was touch and go; they might be killed and they knew it because they were in the haunts of

bigotry and they understood that. The whole idea was conceived by the, this young man, Bob Moses as I indicated and uh, Moses uh, dreamed of having books brought in, donated from uh libraries around the country to help in teaching people who were illiterate how to read in Mississippi so that they could better register and better vote. So the students would not just teach the mechanics of registration and voting, they would teach them how to read so that they would know what they were doing when they registered and they voted. It was gonna be quite an operation and the students went down there full of vim, vigor and vitality; joined those poor black families and went about their tasks, working with great energy. If they needed spending money then it was their own money or their parents' money that they used. Some of them were assigned to counties which were under the umbrella of CORE and others under the umbrella of SNCC or SCLC or NAACP. Now uh, one of the counties which was a CORE county was Neshoba county, Mississippi. The uh, large town, the county seat was uh, a town named Philadelphia not to be confused with the City of Brotherly Love in Pennsylvania which is not to be confused with the City of Brotherly Love. But uh, Philadelphia, Mississippi in Neshoba County was generally considered, even in Mississippi to be uh, the uh prototype of, if you pardon the expression, redneck territory. The sheriff had a reputation of being, and once again pardon the expression, a nigger killer. The deputy of his own choosing worked with him. A nearby town, just outside of Neshoba County was Meridian or is Meridian and that was where the CORE headquarters for this area were set up. And my staff, I was National Director of CORE, my staff lived there in Meridian, my Mississippi staff of that part of Mississippi and they lived in uh, a small, black owned hotel, two or three story building and the office was nearby in a building that was also black owned. Now the staff was uh interracial. Among the staff members there working out of the Meridian office were three young men, one was a Michael Schwerner, a white social worker, young, in his twenties from New York. His wife was there with him, Rita Schwerner. Mickey Schwerner had been on the CORE staff for a quite a few months, six months or so before Freedom Summer but he continued on through Freedom Summer. He wanted to take time out from his social work career to work where the action really was there in Mississippi; that's what he chose to do even though the money that CORE was paying him, since he was not just one, some of the volunteers for Freedom Summer, uh, we were paying him a small stipend. It was much, much less than he would get even as a social worker in New York or elsewhere. But this is what he chose to do for a period of his life. Then there was Andrew Goodman, also white a student at uh, from Queens College in New York, a young man of about twenty. He was a Freedom Summer volunteer whom COFO had assigned to work in Neshoba County, the CORE county. And there was James Chaney, a young black man who lived in Meridian. Chaney was working for CORE also in the CORE staff. He and his entire family, his mother, his sister, his brothers were members of CORE and worked on and off for CORE. Well now those three young men, Goodman, Schwerner and Chaney were jointly conducting a voter education and voter registration seminar or classes in a black church on the outskirts of the town of Philadelphia in Neshoba County, a short distance from the city of Meridian. They left on a brief vacation, you know we made it a policy after people were working under the gun as it were in the trenches on the firing line for a brief period of time to rotate them out to get them away on voca, on vacation so that they could breathe fresh air; so that their nerves which had grown taut could relax; it was as though they were in war and were suffering uh, uh, battle fatigue. They had to be moved away from that zone for a while to recover. So they went away on a brief vacation. While they were away, that church, that black church on the outskirts of Philadelphia in Neshoba County was burned to the ground. When Schwerner, Goodman and Chaney returned from that vacation, their first act was to get in the CORE owned car, a

white Ford station wagon and drive over to look at the ruins, the ashes of the church in which they had conducted those classes. They went over early one afternoon and that was the last time the CORE people saw them alive. At my apartment, my home in New York, I got a call the next morning about three o'clock from my chief of staff there in Meridian, George Raymond. He woke me up; I always had an unlisted, I had a listed phone, I would not have an unlisted phone because my staff on the firing line had to be able to get in touch with me at any time of the day or night and if they didn't have my number, they had to be able to get from information. So he called me about 3AM or a little earlier and said, "Jim, Chaney, Goodman and Schwerner are missing." "What do you mean missing?", I asked. He said they left, early yesterday afternoon to go over to Neshoba County and look at the ashes of that church that was burned down while they were away. They were to be back by sundown last evening. It's now three o'clock in the morning. They have not returned; we have not heard from them. Grasping for straws I said, well maybe they um were tired and stopped to visit friends and um, so tired they decided to stay over until morning and then drive home. [laughs] no, Jim, they're joy dreaming not down here and you know that. You know that when you are away on a mission and you're supposed to be back at a designated time. If you were not going to be back at that time you called and let people know why and when you're going to be back, so something has happened to them, there has been foul play and I knew it too. I said, alright George, I'll be down on the first flight I can get out of New York. I uh, made a reservation on a flight that left at seven o'clock in the morning. I then called Dick Gregory, in uh, his apartment in Chicago, woke him up, he had just gotten back from a European trip and was jet lagged and exhausted and yes so almost anybody else would have cursed me out or felt like cursing me out for awakening him at that hour but not Dick. He said, hey Big Daddy what's happening! [laughs]. I said well Dick, three of my guys are missing in Mississippi. He said, oh Lord, what part? I told him. Said, "When are you going down?" "Seven o'clock in the morning." Said alright, I'll get the first flight I can get out of Chicago and meet you down there. I wanted to have somebody else there with me, somebody whose name was known nationally or internationally that would be, uh, add to the safety factor. Uh they could bump one person off who was known, but to bump two off who were known would uh be more of an embarrassment to them and so we would be safer, if there was more than one. When I arrived in Meridian the plane landed, there were a couple of dozen city policemen from Meridian there at the airport. Now Meridian was a not too bad town; it was kind of an island of sanity in the sea of insanity there in that part of Mississippi. So uh, the police were there to see that I'd arrived safely and got safely to wherever I was going in the town of Meridian and uh, gave me an escort along with uh, George Raymond, my chief of staff and others of the staff who'd met me there, back to the small black hotel, where I would be staying. Dick Gregory came in, not long later and uh, joined us there. At the hotel I met with staff members and of CORE and uh, Rita Schwerner, Mickey's widow or so then we did not know she was a widow, oh yes we knew it in our heart of hearts but we did not know it officially. She was uh, dry eyed because she knew the risk they were taking when they went there. And we discussed what we could do to find the whereabouts of the men or their bodies; the emphasis was on their bodies, for we were sure that what we were looking for were bodies. She said that there was um, an incinerator for the county, Neshoba County and uh, it may be the bodies were thrown in there and so if we could get there and go through the ashes, we might find a jewelry rings and things like that or buttons from clothing that could be identified or fillings from teeth, that kind of thing. We all thought it a good idea but we never followed through on it; things were happening too fast and too much was going on. We uh, went down to the little office at the hotel on the ground floor and Dick Gregory and I George Raymond, another staff person, sat down

huddled and decided on our next move. It was an officer of the city police, from Meridian there, actually to uh, supervise protection and I think that was genuine too. Outside were other city police, two standing on the sidewalk and then two squad cars across the street for our protection. Finally, the officer asked, well what are you gonna do, Mm Farmer? He said I have enough sanity but that was as close as he could come to saying Mr. Farmer, Mm Farmer. It was a noble effort though. I told him that uh, uh, Dick Gregory and I were going into Neshoba County, into Philadelphia, the county seat and we were going to talk with uh, Sheriff Rainey and his Deputy Price about the disappearance of my three staff members. He said no you can't do that, you can't do that, we can't protect you over there, said we can't protect you outside the city limits of Meridian and that's real redneck territory over there; they'll kill you over there. I reminded him that we weren't asking him for protection and we knew the risk that we were taking. But that's what we had decided we were going to do. He then got on the phone and called um, the head of the State Police of Mississippi, a Colonel Snodgrass. I had uh, met Sternal, uh Colonel Snodgrass, at least I had seen him, met isn't the appropriate word. He had been at, um, covering some of our demonstrations in Mississippi and uh, I wish I knew more about his uh, background. Uh, I always had the feeling that he was uh, genuine human being and was possibly even sympathetic, certainly not hostile and not a redneck. When no one was looking, he would even smile. If someone was looking, the smile would quickly disappear. Oh, I thought he was not unfriendly, that was Colonel Snodgrass. So he called Colonel Snodgrass and told him that Farmer and this uh, nigra comedian, Dick Gregory say they're going over to Neshoba County to meet with Rainey and Price and I could hear Colonel Snodgrass scream over the phone though I must have been ten feet away from it and finally uh, this officer handed me the phone said, he wants to talk to you, Farmer. And he yelled said, Farmer, you know you can't go over there says uh, state police can't protect you there! That's real redneck territory and they'd just as soon kill you as look at you! I uh, told Colonel Snodgrass said, I appreciated the professional manner in which he had provided protection uh, at our various demonstrations in Mississippi uh, however we had never requested that protection and we were not asking him for protection now but we were going over to Neshoba County. But this is a free country and we were citizens, and it was our right to go anyplace in this country and we were going. [announcer: this lecture continues next week; music]