

THE
EYES
ON THE
PRIZE

CIVIL RIGHTS READER

DOCUMENTS, SPEECHES, AND
FIRSTHAND ACCOUNTS FROM
THE BLACK FREEDOM STRUGGLE,
1954-1990

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white face nor any
land that separates
until some voices
squat with spasms.”

Do not speak to me of living.
life is obscene with crowds
of white on black.
death is my pulse.
what might have been
is not for him/or me
but what could have been
floods the womb until I drown.

3. “Black Belt Election: New Day A’Coming”

Stokely Carmichael and Charles V. Hamilton

In the immediate aftermath of the Selma-to-Montgomery march, several SNCC workers—including future chairman Stokely Carmichael (now Kwame Turé), who had already earned his organizing spurs in the Mississippi Delta in 1963 and 1964, focused their efforts on Lowndes County, Alabama, the hard-core segregationist stronghold lying between Selma and Montgomery and through which the marchers had passed. This is an excerpt from Black Power: The Politics of Liberation in America (1967), by Carmichael and political scientist Charles V. Hamilton.

. . . In March, 1965, not one black person was even registered to vote; over the next twenty months, close to 3,900 black people had not only registered but also formed a political organization, held a nominating convention and slated seven of their members to run for county public office. . . . If ever the political scientists wanted to study the phenomenon of political development or political modernization in this country, here was the place: in the heart of the “black belt,” that range of Southern areas characterized by the predominance of black people and rich black soil.

Most local black people readily admit that the catalyst for change was the appearance in the county in March and April, 1965, of a

handful of workers from SNCC. They had gone there almost immediately after the murder of Mrs. Viola Liuzzo, on the final night of the Selma to Montgomery March. Mrs. Liuzzo, a white housewife from Detroit, had been driving marchers home when she was shot down by Klansmen on that same Highway 80 in Lowndes County. For the black people of Lowndes, her murder came as no great surprise: Lowndes had one of the nation's worst records for individual and institutional racism, a reputation for brutality that made white as well as black Alabama shiver. In this county, eighty-one percent black, the whites had ruled the entire area and subjugated black people to that rule unmercifully. Lowndes was a prime area for SNCC to apply certain assumptions learned over the years of work in rural, backwoods counties of the South.

SNCC had long understood that one of the major obstacles to helping black people organize structures which could effectively fight institutional racism was *fear*. The history of the county shows that black people could come together to do only three things: sing, pray, dance. Any time they came together to do anything else, they were threatened or intimidated. For decades, black people had been taught to believe that voting, politics, is "white folks' business." And the white folks had indeed monopolized that business, by methods which ran the gamut from economic intimidation to murder.

The situation in Lowndes was particularly notable inasmuch as civil rights battles had been waged on an extensive scale in two adjoining counties for years: in Dallas County (Selma) and in Montgomery County. The city of Montgomery had seen a powerful movement, led by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., beginning in 1955 with the bus boycott. But Lowndes County did not appear affected by this activity. This is even more striking when one considers that at least seventeen percent of the black people in Lowndes work in Montgomery and at least sixty percent of the black people do their major shopping there. Lowndes was a truly totalitarian society—the epitome of the tight, insulated police state. SNCC people felt that if they could help crack Lowndes, other areas—with less brutal reputations—would be easier to organize. This might be considered a kind of SNCC Domino Theory.

There were several black organizations in Lowndes County, all

centered around the church. . . . Some of the most politically-oriented people who subsequently formed the Lowndes County Freedom Organization were those experienced in the internal politics of the church. The ability and power of these local leaders, however, rested inside the black community and was geared toward religious and social affairs only. Many people who were very political *inside* those organizations were unwilling to enter the *public* political arena. They were afraid.

The black people most respected by the whites in Lowndes County were the school teachers and the two high school principals. But, as in many southern communities, they were at the mercy of the white power structure. They held their positions at the sufferance of the whites; the power they had was delegated to them by the white community. And what the master giveth, the master can take away. The power of the black principals and teachers did not come from the black community, because that community was not organized around public political power. In this sense, they were typical "Negro Establishment" figures.

The question of leadership in the county was crucial. If there was to be a sustained political assault on racism, the black people would have to develop a viable leadership group. The white-established Negro leaders—the teachers, principals—were looked up to by the black community because they could get certain things done. They could intercede with the white man, and they had certain overt credentials of success: a big car, a nice house, good clothes. The black ministers constituted another source of leadership. They have traditionally been the leaders in the black community, but their power lay inside the black community, not with the white power structure. In some cases, they could ask white people to do certain things for black people, but they did not have the relative power possessed by the white-made leaders. The ministers, likewise, could invoke the authority of God; they were, after all, "called to preach the gospel," and, therefore, their word had almost a kind of divine authority in the black community.

There was another set of leaders in the black community of Lowndes County. This was a group of middle-aged ladies, who knew the community well and were well known. They were to

play a very important role in the political organization of the blacks. They had considerable influence in the black community—being staunch church members, for example—but they possessed no power at all with the white community.

Economically, Lowndes County is not noted for its equitable distribution of goods and income. The average income of blacks, most of them sharecroppers and tenant farmers, is about \$985 per year. Eighty-six white families own ninety percent of the land. Inside the black community, there were in 1965 few people who had running water in their houses; only about twenty families had steam heat, and the rest got by with stove burners and wood fireplaces to keep warm. The economic insecurity of the latter is obvious, yet as we have seen, even the “Negro Establishment” faced disaster if they started meddling in “white folks business.”

Against these odds, there had somehow been in Lowndes County a long history of black men who started to fight—but were always cut down. Mr. Emory Ross, who later became an active participant in the Lowndes County Freedom Organization, had a father who was a fighter. He was shot at several times; his house riddled with bullets; his home burned down at one time. But he continued to struggle, and he was able to impart his determination to his son.

There were a few more like him. Spurred by the demonstrations and Dr. King's presence in Selma in early 1965, some seventeen brave people rallied around Mr. John Hulett, a lifelong resident of the County, to form the Lowndes County Christian Movement for Human Rights in March of that year. SNCC workers began moving around the county shortly afterward, talking a strange language: “Political power is the first step to independence and freedom.” “You can control this county politically.” It was exceptionally difficult at first to get black people to go to the courthouse to register—the first step. The fight at that point was waged simply in terms of being able to establish within the black community a sense of the *right* to fight racial oppression and exploitation. This was a battle of no small proportion, because black people in this county—many of them—did not even feel that they had the *right* to fight. In addition, they felt that their fight would be meaningless. They remembered those who had been cut down.

From March to August, 1965, about fifty to sixty black citizens made their way to the courthouse to register and successfully

passed the registration "test." Then, in August, the 1965 Voting Rights Act was passed and federal "examiners" or registrars came into the county. No longer did a black man face literacy tests or absurdly difficult questions about the Constitution or such tactics as rejection because one "t" was not properly crossed or an "i" inadequately dotted. The voting rolls swelled by the hundreds. . . .

The *act* of registering to vote does several things. It marks the beginning of political modernization by broadening the base of participation. It also does something the existentialists talk about: it gives one a sense of being. The black man who goes to register is saying to the white man, "No." He is saying: "You have said that I cannot vote. You have said that this is my place. This is where I should remain. You have contained me and I am saying 'No' to your containment. I am stepping out of the bounds. I am saying 'No' to you and thereby I am creating a better life for myself. I am resisting someone who has contained me." That is what the first act does. The black person begins to live. He begins to create his *own* existence when he says "No" to someone who contains him.

But obviously this is not enough. Once the black man has knocked back centuries of fear, once he is willing to resist, he then must decide how best to use that vote. To listen to those whites who conspired for so many years to deny him the ballot would be a return to that previous subordinated condition. He must move independently. The development of this awareness is a job as tedious and laborious as inspiring people to register in the first place. In fact, many people who would aspire to the role of an organizer drop off simply because they do not have the energy, the stamina, to knock on doors day after day. That is why one finds many such people sitting in coffee shops talking and theorizing instead of organizing.

The SNCC research staff discovered an unusual Alabama law which permits a group to organize a potential political party on a county-wide basis. . . . The black people of Lowndes County and SNCC then began the hard work of building a legitimate, independent political party with no help from anyone else. Virtually the entire country condemned this decision; it was "separatism";

it was traditionally doomed "third-party politics" and the only way to succeed was through one of the two established parties. Some even said that the black voters of Lowndes County should support the Democratic party out of gratitude for being given the vote. But the Democratic party did not give black people the right to vote; it simply stopped denying black people the right to vote.

In March, 1966, the Lowndes County Freedom Organization was born with the immediate goals of running candidates and becoming a recognized party. In building the LCFO, it was obviously wise to attempt first to recruit those black people who owned land and were therefore somewhat more secure economically than those without property. But there were few of them. Those without property, merely sharecropping on white-owned plantations, were subject to being kicked off the land for their political activity. This is exactly what had happened at the end of December, 1965; some twenty families were evicted and spent the rest of the winter living in tents, with temperatures often below freezing. Their fate, and it was shared by others later, intensified the fear, but it also served to instill a sense of the tremendous need to establish an independent base of group power within the community. That base could lend support, security. Thus, despite the ever-present threat of loss of home and job and even possibly life, the black people of Lowndes County continued to build. Mass meetings were held weekly, each time in a different part of the county. Unity and strength, already developing over the winter, grew.

In May, 1966, the time arrived to put up black candidates in the primary election. . . .

The black people of Lowndes County were ready and made themselves even readier. Workshops were held, with SNCC's assistance, on the duties of the sheriff, the coroner, the tax assessor, tax collector and members of the Board of Education—the offices up for election. Booklets, frequently in the form of picture books, were prepared by SNCC and distributed over the county. People began to see and understand that no college education or special training was needed to perform these functions. They called primarily for determination and common sense, and black people in Lowndes had long since shown that they possessed these qualities.

The campaign which followed was hardly a typical American political campaign. There were no debates (or offers to debate) between the candidates; black candidates certainly did not canvass white voters and no white candidates made open appeals for black votes.

[Despite tremendous LCFO efforts, on election day, Nov. 8, 1966, all of the black candidates lost to their white competitors by margins of roughly 600 votes—2,200 to 1,600. Nonetheless, the LCFO drew clear lessons from the experience.]

The new Lowndes County Freedom Party is also aware that somehow it must counteract the economic dependence which so seriously impedes organizing. It must begin thinking of ways to build a "patronage" system—some sort of mechanism for offering day-to-day, bread-and-butter help to black people immediately in need. A prime example occurred on election day at 1 P.M., when a black family's home was completely destroyed by fire; fourteen children, ranging in age from four to eighteen, and two adults were left homeless and penniless. Immediate assistance in the form of clothes, food, and dollars coming from the Party would have been politically invaluable. It is true that the Party does not have the local resources to help every family burned out of their homes or kicked off the land or in need of a job, but it must begin to move in that direction. Such "patronage" should always be identified as coming from the Party. If necessary (and it undoubtedly will be necessary), drives in selected northern communities could be launched to help until the Party can show more substantial victories. Only so many black people will rush to the banner of "freedom" and "blackness" without seeing some way to make ends meet, to care for their children.

One way or another, the fact is that the John Huletts of the South will participate in political decision-making in their time and in their land. November 8, 1966, made one thing clear: some day black people will control the government of Lowndes County. For Lowndes is not merely a section of land and a group of people, but an idea whose time has come.