

2010 Alabama Historical Association Clinton Jackson Coley Award

lines the topic more thoroughly and in greater depth than any previous
ake no mistake about it: this book is a needed and important addition
ography of the Civil Rights movement. . . . Essential."

Written the book historians of the black freedom movement have been
is beautifully written account rescues Lowndes County from its role
backdrop to 'Black Power,' to being one of the key battlegrounds for
the United States."

D. G. Kelley, author of *Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination*

African Americans in rural Lowndes County, Alabama, working closely
armichael and the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC),
l-black, independent, political party—the Lowndes County Freedom
LCFO)—in a bold bid to win control of the local government. The LCFO,
symbol was a snarling black panther, transformed the majority black
citadel of white supremacy into the center of southern black militancy;
so changed SNCC forever. Championing the ballot in the wake of the
Act and the bullet in the face of extreme racial terrorism, the Lowndes
ment ushered in the Black Power era.

les tells for the first time the remarkable full story of the LCFO—the
nther party. Deeply researched, this riveting account of the missing
civil rights organizing and Black Power politics offers a new way of
the African American freedom struggle.

ME JEFFRIES is an associate professor in the history department and
titute for the Study of Race and Ethnicity at The Ohio State University.

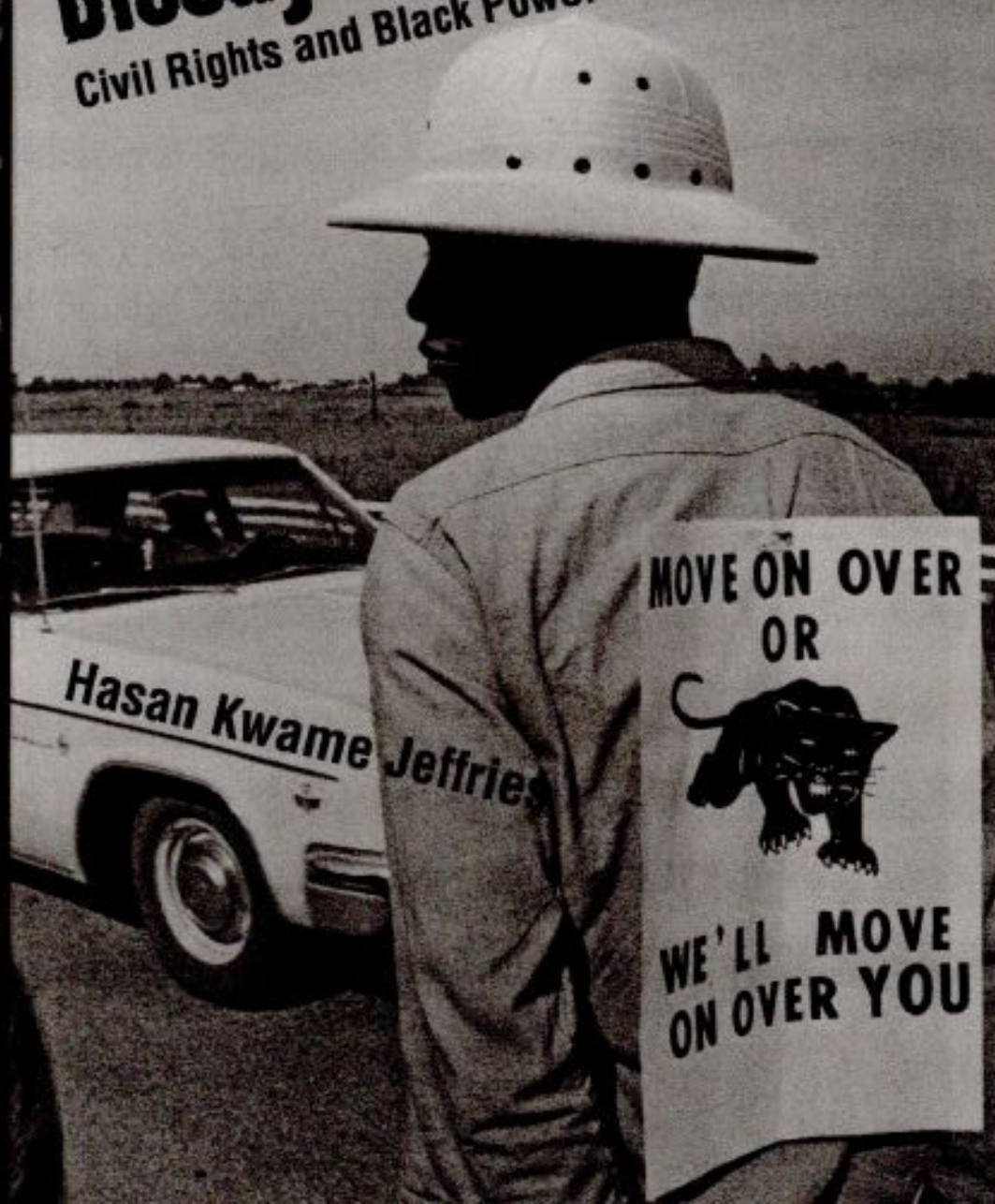
civil rights demonstrator wears a placard featuring the LCFO black panther and the
ing "Move on over or we'll move on over you" during James Meredith's March Against
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Bloody Lowndes

HASAN KWAME JEFFRIES

Bloody Lowndes

Civil Rights and Black Power in Alabama's Black B



We Gonna Show Alabama Just How Bad We Are

*The Birth of the Original Black Panther Party
and the Development of Freedom Politics*

It was a beautiful day to vote. The cloudless sky was crystal blue and the temperature had not quite reached Alabama hot. As the work-day neared an end, hundreds of people made their way to First Baptist Church, the site of the LCFO candidate nomination convention. Sharply dressed in their favorite hats and finest suits and dresses, they gathered on the church lawn where third-party volunteers checked their voter registration status to confirm their eligibility. State law forbade unregistered voters from participating in the May 3, 1966, event, and LCFO officials, fearing disqualification for even the slightest transgression, adhered to the letter of the law. The volunteers directed eligible voters to a row of seven wooden tables. At each table, they handed them a slip of paper with the names of the black candidates seeking to become LCFO nominees printed on the left side, and the party's black panther logo beneath the phrase "One Man—One Vote" on the right. The candidates stood about a dozen feet behind the tables so that the voters could easily identify them, but poll watchers monitored all interaction to ensure that no one told them for whom to vote. The volunteers also assisted those unable to read and physically incapable of standing in line. After placing an "X" next to the name of the candidate of their choice, the voters slid their ballots into the cardboard boxes located beside each table and then moved on to the next station.¹

As the people voted, SNCC field secretaries, equipped with two-way radios, patrolled the area for signs of danger. Because the sheriff refused to protect black voters, the young organizers remained vigilant. Local people were also on guard. "I remember when that minister got



LCFO supporter casts ballot for Black Panther nominee for sheriff on May 3, 1966.
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shot here," said a sixty-seven-year-old veteran of the First World War, referring to the murder of SNCC volunteer Jonathan Daniels. "He had his arms folded and just got shot down." The man then reached into the pocket of his overalls and produced three shotgun shells. "We gonna protect our friends this time," he said. Fortunately, there was no violence that day.²

The possibility of an attack did not dampen the spirit of the people. Children scampered about, playing their usual outdoor games, while those who had already voted lingered under shade trees talking amiably. One group even serenaded the crowd with freedom songs. "There was a festive air to the affair," wrote a reporter.³ The enormity of the occasion, however, was not lost on anyone, especially SNCC organizers. Near sunset, SNCC field secretary Willie Ricks ascended the steps of the church and delivered an impromptu speech that lived long in everyone's memory. Nicknamed "The Reverend" because of his country preacher oratorical style, the Chattanooga, Tennessee, native could stir the souls of black folk like few others. That evening, the high school graduate, sporting black frame spectacles and a denim jacket, reminded the crowd of the

incongruity of being black and a Democrat. "Do you know George Wallace is a Democrat?" he asked rhetorically. "And the people who work you for three dollars a day—what are they? The people who wear those white sheets at night and call themselves the Ku Klux Klan—what are they? If you black in Lowndes County, you aren't no Democrat—you black!" He also praised those assembled for challenging white supremacy in ways that transformed how their neighbors thought of them. "When people talk about Selma, they tell you there's some bad white folks down there. When they talk about Wilcox County or Greene County, they tell you there's some bad white folks down there. But when you mention Lowndes County, they say, 'There's some bad niggers down there.' We gonna show Alabama just how bad we are!"⁴

The LCFO convention was a memorable event for the black community, which had not hosted such a gathering since Reconstruction. It was equally important to SNCC's Alabama organizers, who had worked tirelessly to create a grassroots third party to provide an alternative to the Democratic Party. The significance of the LCFO convention, however, transcended its local meaning. The selection of seven African Americans to run against white Democrats in November 1966 was a triumph for democracy. Although there was nothing particularly radical about the candidate selection format, the process of political education that African Americans underwent leading up to the convention cut completely against the grain of American politics. After the 1965 Voting Rights Act became law, SNCC organizers developed a unique political education program for Lowndes County residents that used workshops, mass meetings, and primers to increase general knowledge of local government and democratize political behavior. As a direct result of this effort, the emerging black electorate rejected the undemocratic traditions that defined American politics. Rather than promote the interests of the socio-economic elite, draw candidates exclusively from the ranks of the propertied and the privileged, or limit decision making to a select few individuals, they adopted a freedom rights platform, selected candidates from the poor and working class, and practiced democratic decision making. In this way, the political education process gave rise to freedom politics. This new kind of political engagement coupled the movement's egalitarian organizing methods with the people's freedom rights agenda. The embrace of freedom politics by third-party supporters made the LCFO convention the high point of the Lowndes movement.

When SNCC organizers entered Lowndes County in March 1965, they did so with an eye for establishing a grassroots, independent political party. "It is not enough to add more and more people to the voter rolls and then send them into the old 'do-nothing,' compromise-oriented political parties," explained Carmichael. "Those new voters will only become frustrated and alienated."⁵ Within SNCC, Carmichael was a leading advocate of third parties. His attraction to independent politics stemmed primarily from the lessons he learned at the 1964 Democratic National Convention. These insights included the need for African Americans to refrain from entering into coalitions unless they had an equal say in the terms of the union. "It is absolutely imperative that black people strive to form an independent base of political power first," he argued. "When they can control their own communities—however large or small—then other groups will make overtures to them based on a wise calculation of self-interest. The blacks will have the mobilized ability to grant or withhold from coalition."⁶ Carmichael imagined independent parties as the first step toward creating these bases of power.

Carmichael introduced the leaders of the Lowndes movement to the idea of creating an independent party, but he waited to do so until the end of the summer of 1965. He knew that he could not approach them until he earned their trust, which required demonstrating that neither the slow pace of progress nor white violence could chase SNCC activists away. He also had to help them build a critical mass of supporters, because a third party had to have an active and sizeable constituency. Throughout the spring and summer of 1965, SNCC helped build this constituency by canvassing the county and promoting voter registration. Carmichael also needed local leaders to generate a body of experiences capable of elevating political awareness to the point where organizing outside the two-party framework became an acceptable option. Lowndes County activists began accumulating these politicizing experiences during the middle months of 1965 as they organized to improve black public schools, desegregate all-white public schools, win control of county farm committees, bring in anti-poverty programs, and respond to reprisals that ranged from mass evictions to murder. Finally, he had to wait until African Americans had the vote in hand, which did not occur until federal registrars appeared in the county in August 1965.⁷

At an executive committee meeting of the LCCMHR held two weeks after the Voting Rights Act became law, Carmichael finally suggested that African Americans form their own political party. During his pitch, he

shared his distrust of the Democratic Party, which he later called "the most treacherous enemy of the Negro people on a national basis. They step on us, they take our vote for granted and we're completely irrelevant."⁸ Regarding Alabama Democrats, he said, "There's no room for Negroes in the same party as Wallace."⁹ He also questioned the trustworthiness of Lowndes County Democrats. Movement leaders were intrigued by Carmichael's analysis and asked for precise details about creating a third party.¹⁰

After the meeting, Carmichael relayed the leaders' request to SNCC's research department. The research department was a remarkably efficient unit that had grown in less than two years from a single staff member clipping newspaper articles to a team of six that conducted staff training and gathered specific intelligence for field secretaries.¹¹ Jack Minnis, the department's resourceful director, handled Carmichael's inquiry personally. A skilled researcher, he combed the entire twelve-volume set of the *Alabama Code of Laws* with trademark thoroughness. "Alabama law says it is possible to bring to existence a totally new political party," wrote Minnis in his report to the Lowndes Project leader. "Whether or not this is, in fact, possible is not quite so certain. But, under Alabama law, there appear to be sufficient provisions for political activity independent of existing party and power structures, that it may be worthwhile to attempt such action."¹² The specific state law that Minnis referred to was Title 17, Section 337 of the *Alabama Code*. The statute, a relic of the Reconstruction era, was written by ex-Confederates to help them retake political control of the state. The law stated that a group of qualified voters could establish a third party by forming an organization with the express purpose of running candidates for office and holding a candidate nomination convention on the first Tuesday in May, the same day as the Democratic primary. Voters could not participate, however, in both a convention and the primary.¹³ "I should suppose that the proceedings of the new organization could be invalidated if it could be shown that even one of its members voted in the primary," speculated Minnis. Finally, if one or more of the organization's candidates received at least 20 percent of the total vote in the general election, then the state would recognize the organization as a political party.¹⁴

The long-forgotten law was exactly what Minnis had hoped to find. Still, there was a lot more to forming an independent party than the steps outlined in the obsolete statute. "There are provisions for appointment of poll watchers, vote counters, election clerks, etc., that will have to be thoroughly understood by the people," explained Minnis. "It's going to take

a major educational effort, I'm sure, between now and next November." Forming a party would be a daunting task, but Minnis believed that it could be done and he looked forward to meeting with SNCC's Lowndes County staff to "discuss the whole thing in greater detail."⁵

Minnis's discovery excited Carmichael and his co-organizers, but they did not let their enthusiasm interfere with their commitment to letting the people decide the direction of the movement. Although they wanted Lowndes County residents to create an independent party, they remained true to SNCC's organizing tradition by leaving the decision to form a party to the people themselves. Thus, when Carmichael met with the LCCMHR executive committee in September 1965, he explained the procedure for establishing a third party and enumerated the benefits of political independence. Then, he stepped aside and let them determine the next move. "The SNCC workers brought the idea to us that we could organize our own political group if we wanted to," recalled Hulett, who headed the LCCMHR at the time. The decision, he added, "was left entirely to the people of Lowndes County."⁶

The prospect of forming a third party sparked a debate among the LCCMHR officers about how to maximize the voting strength of African Americans. "We thought about what we were going to do with these 2,500 registered voters in the county, whether or not we were going to join Lyndon Baines Johnson's party," explained Hulett. "Then we thought about the other people in the state of Alabama who were working in this party. We thought of the city commissioner of Birmingham, Eugene 'Bull' Connor; Al Lingo, who gave orders to those who beat the people when they got ready to make the march from Selma to Montgomery; the sheriff of Dallas County, known as Jim Clark—these people control the Democratic Party in the state of Alabama." As a part of this conversation, they discussed the leaders of the Democratic Party, including Robert Dickson, Jr., the chairperson of the Lowndes County Democrats and a vocal proponent of white supremacy.⁷ They quickly concluded that they should not cast their lot with such men. According to LCCMHR founding member Frank Miles, Jr., "It didn't make sense for us to go join the Democrat party, when they were the people who had done the killing in the county and had beat our heads."⁸ Instead, they decided to pursue independent politics. In their view, this was the best way to give meaning to black votes. "We felt that if it was anyway possible for us to do anything, we would have to form our own party. And that was a third party," explained local activist Mathew Jackson, Sr.⁹ They also decided to ask SNCC organizers to help them

navigate these uncharted waters. They turned to the student activists not because the idea to form a party had come from them, but because of the personal bonds of trust and respect that existed between them. Although local leaders initially doubted the organizers' commitment to working in the county and their ability to endure white violence, fighting together in the movement's trenches demonstrated that they were sincere and that their resolve was strong.¹⁰

The decision by local leaders to form their own party allowed Carmichael and other advocates of independent politics to begin a serious discussion within SNCC about making third parties the focus of the organization's work. In an internal memo, political strategist Courtland Cox framed the issue brilliantly with a clever play on a familiar Biblical scripture. Revisiting Mark 8:36 he asked, "What would it profit a man to have the vote and not be able to control it?"¹¹ He added, "When you have a situation where the community is 80 percent black, why complain about police brutality when you can be the sheriff yourself? Why complain about substandard education when you could be the Board of Education? Why complain about the courthouse when you could move to take it over yourself? [In] places where you could exercise the control, why complain about it? Why protest when you can exercise power?"¹² The logic of this argument, combined with local interest in independent politics and the decline of SNCC projects in Mississippi, drew a slew of experienced organizers to Lowndes County. "A lot of folks from Mississippi had become frustrated with the Democratic Party orientation of the MFDP, and by the prevailing atmosphere of uncertainty within the organization," recalled Carmichael. "So they began to look at Lowndes County and saw that we were disciplined and had a clear program that could use their talent. In a time of transition, it seemed like one of the few viable programs with a clear focus that SNCC had."¹³

The arrival of reinforcements beginning in the fall of 1965 transformed the Lowndes Project into a laboratory for testing the feasibility of organizing independent parties, and in the process it breathed new life into SNCC. More than a year had passed since the MFDP's defeat in Atlantic City and SNCC as an organization still lacked an organizing program. Consequently, everyone in the organization paid close attention to the project's development. They were unwilling, however, to make the development of third parties the organization's primary focus—at least not yet. SNCC's operational culture dictated that actual programs, rather than

theories, determine SNCC policy. This viewpoint prompted them to wait to see what became of the third party in Lowndes County before organizing independent parties elsewhere.²⁴

SNCC activists wasted little time designing a political education program to help African Americans create a political party capable of spreading democracy locally. The program stressed sending canvassers "into areas where no one has bothered to go before," said SNCC's Courtland Cox. "The Democratic Party is willing to include Negroes, but not junkies, bums, workers or the dispossessed and poor." The program emphasized focusing on the problems that plagued "those who are illiterate, those who have poor educations, [and] those of low income," added Cox.²⁵ It recognized the right of ordinary people to make decisions about their own lives, which SNCC's Alabama organizers said was "the most fundamental right that a member of a democratic society can have."²⁶ It also challenged traditional leadership hierarchies. "It's not radical if SNCC people get political offices, or if M. L. King becomes President, if decisions are still made from the top down," said Carmichael. "If decisions get made from the bottom up, that's radical."²⁷ Finally, it stressed placing group interests ahead of personal interests.

The ideas behind the political education program sprang directly from the organizing philosophy of influential SNCC adviser Ella Baker. The veteran activist, who helped establish SNCC in 1960, believed passionately in organizing ordinary people, not just middle-class professionals. "I have never been diploma conscious," she once said. She also believed fervently in the right of ordinary people both to make the decisions that affected their lives and to develop leaders among themselves. Baker weaved a commitment to these principles into the fabric of SNCC, and the organization's Alabama organizers applied them to electoral politics. In this way, Baker left her imprint on the Lowndes movement.²⁸

SNCC activists developed the political education program with local politics in mind. "Until county courthouses can be taken over, bit by bit, there is no point focusing faraway on glamorous offices which leave the local situation unchanged," explained Jack Minnis, the program's principal architect.²⁹ SNCC's Alabama organizers also pointed out that local politics offered African Americans an opportunity to become "the distributors of any state and federal resources, the taxers of any industry in their county, the determiners of the quality of education and the money spent for county schools."³⁰ The emphasis on local politics reflected SNCC's evolving understanding of the loci of power in southern politics. "If you control the

county level then you're in a position to bargain," said Carmichael. "You can tell whoever you're bargaining with—this is what we want. If you go to the state and you don't have the power then you just have to get what you can. Once you have the power, I don't care whose government you're under—George Wallace or James Eastland—they have to meet your power on that level."³¹ SNCC activists also believed that county politics was the best way for African Americans to retain control of their political agenda. According to Carmichael, "If you organize on a state level, things get too confused and you lose a lot, and if you organize on a national level, the same thing happens, there are too many compromises you have to make, too many of what people call 'political decisions,' and what happens is that the powerful people make those decisions and the other people just get stepped on."³² Local leaders concurred with these basic assumptions. Hulett believed adamantly in the primacy of county politics. "The election of local officials is the most important thing for people in Lowndes County," he said.³³ The political education program, therefore, sought to instill in African Americans a commitment to democratic practice and to teach them how to gain control of the local government.

After studying Alabama election law and county government for two months, Minnis and his research team hosted four weekend workshops for Lowndes County residents at SNCC's Atlanta headquarters. "The purpose of the workshops was to help the Lowndes County people learn everything they needed to know about the political laws of Alabama as they applied to county government," explained Minnis.³⁴ The organizers hosted the initial retreat in early December 1965, a few weeks after black farmers failed to win control of the ASCS. At the meeting, SNCC researchers led twenty-five residents in a careful examination of the statutory and constitutional provisions for conducting elections and nominating independent party candidates. They also discussed the legal powers associated with the positions up for election in November 1966, which included sheriff, tax assessor, tax collector, coroner, and three seats on the school board. By deconstructing political power and authority in these ways, they hoped to demystify county government.³⁵

During the workshops, the facilitators steered the discussions away from abstract theories until, as Minnis phrased it, "the participants had a clear idea of the statutory powers of the offices."³⁶ For example, analysis of the theories of arrest and habeas corpus, differences between civil and criminal procedures, and dispossession and foreclosure occurred only after everyone understood the duties of the sheriff. By grounding political

theory in actual Alabama law, political power took on concrete meaning. This approach also brought into sharp relief the extent to which serious abuses of power were taking place. Minnis reported that after discussing the duties of the coroner "it became clear to everyone" that murder at the hands of persons unknown "could never have gone uninvestigated and unpunished" without the coroner's "connivance" and "collusion." What's more, this method prompted participants to think about new solutions to old problems. A conversation about the power and authority of the school board, for instance, led to a debate about physical plant necessities, curriculum shortcomings, and teacher qualifications. Minnis recalled that by the end of the weekend it was obvious to everyone that winning control of the county courthouse through independent means was "the appropriate machinery for building the kind of society in that county, which the people of that county wanted."³⁷

Within days of returning from Atlanta, the leaders of the LCCMHR announced plans to form their own party. "The white folks think they can let a few of us vote and fool us," said a local movement supporter. "They just don't see that we're now startin' to see how to use the vote to help ourselves instead of helpin' them."³⁸ They named their party the Lowndes County Freedom Organization and planned to rename it the Lowndes County Freedom Party after the November 1966 general election, assuming they received 20 percent of the vote. In addition, they selected a snarling black panther as their ballot symbol to meet the state requirement that every political party have a logo due to the high rate of adult illiteracy. There are several conflicting stories about the origin of the symbol, including one that has SNCC activists choosing it because it reminded them of a fiercely determined local activist. In truth, the logo was the brainchild of SNCC field secretary Ruth Howard, who patterned it after the panther mascot of Clark College in Atlanta, Georgia. The panther was not her first suggestion. Initially, she proposed a white dove, but "nobody thought that worked," she later confessed. The problem was that the dove failed to capture the seriousness of purpose and the indomitable spirit of the people of the county. The black panther pleased everyone, however, because it conveyed these characteristics perfectly. "The Black Panther is an animal that when it is pressured it moves back until it is cornered, then it comes out fighting for life or death," said Hulett. "We felt we had been pushed back long enough and that it was time for Negroes to come out and take over." Moreover, everyone knew that cats preyed on roosters, and a white rooster was the symbol of the Alabama Democratic Party. "We felt that

the panther could destroy the rooster," said Hulett. "That is our plan. On November 9 we feel we can destroy the rooster in Lowndes County."³⁹

The logo not only energized local activists, but it also captured the imagination of African Americans nationwide. The reason for its broad appeal was obvious to Carmichael. The black panther represents the "strength and dignity of black demands today," he said. "A man needs a black panther on his side when he and his family must endure—as hundreds of Alabamians have endured—loss of job, eviction, starvation, and sometimes death, for political activity."⁴⁰ African Americans' enchantment with the LCFO symbol manifested itself most clearly in a spate of new organizations, mainly in urban areas outside the South, that adopted the symbol as their own. In California, several groups styled themselves black panthers, including the Oakland-based Black Panther Party for Self-Defense (BPP).⁴¹ Like countless others, BPP cofounders Huey P. Newton and Bobby Seale believed that the LCFO logo accurately reflected their political attitude. The BPP experienced phenomenal growth soon after Newton and Seal secured exclusive use of the Black Panther name in California by compelling competing groups to change their names. By 1970, the organization stood at the vanguard of the Black Power movement. As a result, the black panther emblem became more closely associated with the BPP than with the rural residents of Lowndes County.⁴²

The BPP and the LCFO never established formal ties, which is hardly surprising given that the two organizations shared little in common beyond the black panther symbol. During its heyday, the BPP never seriously considered independent politics. Moreover, the Alabama group was an explicitly local organization. Local activists created it and local politics was its primary focus. Thus, rather than seek alliances with outside groups, the LCFO concentrated on building a viable political party, starting with the development of a local constituency.

LCFO organizers grew the party's base one person at a time, just as they had pieced together the LCCMHR. Political education workshops played a central role in this process. Movement leaders encouraged those who learned about Alabama government and election law in Atlanta to share their new knowledge with family and friends back home, a strategy that yielded immediate dividends. "News about the new freedom organization travels fast in Lowndes County," noted an internal SNCC communiqué. "Local people who are attending the workshops speak at church services, visit in different homes and also invite people over to their homes to talk

about the new party."⁴³ The impact of having scores of residents discuss their new political insights with people they knew was profound. "[T]here are now in Lowndes County 400 people who know what the duties of a sheriff are," said Carmichael after the final workshop. "All of those 400 people feel qualified to run for sheriff. So you will in fact not have someone running for sheriff who can out lie the other, because that's what campaigns are all about, you know." "More than that," he added, "once the sheriff is elected, he can't step out of his bounds, because everybody knows just what his duties are."⁴⁴

Unfortunately, many of the people who wanted to participate in the workshops were unable to do so because the trip to Atlanta was either too expensive or required too much time away from work. As a remedy, SNCC's research staff began conducting biweekly workshops in the county. Like the Atlanta workshops, the Lowndes County meetings, which began at the end of February 1966, focused on the duties of the courthouse officials up for election in November. Ahead of the first workshop, the research staff circulated mimeographed descriptions of the responsibilities of elected officials "so that everyone who was interested could find out as much about each office as he felt he needed to know," explained Minnis.⁴⁵ The primers enabled workshop facilitators to center discussions on the specific questions that residents had about each office. SNCC organizers also disseminated cartoon storybooks in an effort to reach those unable to read. The storybooks used simple, hand-drawn figures to depict the responsibilities of county officeholders and to describe the potential power of African American elected officials. The cartoon about the sheriff showed a black police officer reviewing jailhouse records with the public and appointing black poll inspectors.⁴⁶

Once workshop participants demonstrated a firm grasp of the powers associated with the positions up for election, SNCC researchers discussed the qualifications for holding public office. According to Alabama law, anyone older than twenty-one who lived in the state for at least two years, the county for at least one year, and in his or her voting precinct for three or more months could run for office. The custom in Alabama, though, as in the rest of nation, was to limit the pool of potential candidates to the wealthy and well connected. SNCC activists were aware of this tradition. "[A]nother way in which people have been prevented from practicing politics is through teaching them that there are only a few people in each community who are 'qualified' to practice politics," wrote Alabama field secretaries. "If all the people believe these teachings, they will sit back



Excerpt from SNCC Freedom Primer explaining the duties of the sheriff of Lowndes County. In possession of author.



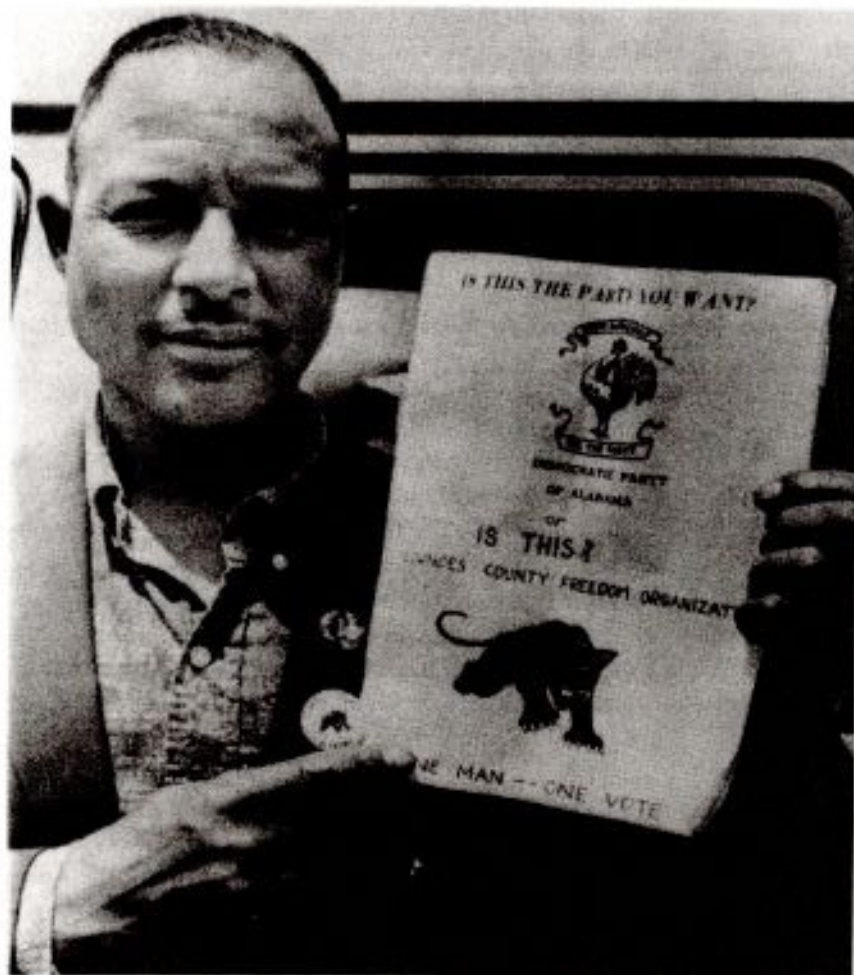
Excerpt from SNCC Freedom Primer explaining the duties of the coroner of Lowndes County. In possession of author.

and leave politics to those who say they are 'qualified.' This is pretty much what has happened in the past, and we can all see what a sorry mess the 'qualified' ones have made of things." Consequently, workshop leaders de-emphasized wealth, connections, experience, and expertise as prerequisites for holding office. "It is just a simple fact, which everyone knows if he will think about it, that each and every grown man and woman is just as 'qualified' as anyone else to decide what he wants his life to be like," argued the Alabama organizers. "There may be some information that some of us need in order to decide how to go about making our lives what we want them to be, but we can get that information and we can learn it just as well as anyone else."⁴⁷

By teaching hundreds of residents about local government, the Lowndes County workshops, together with the Atlanta workshops, dramatically increased the size of the politically educated electorate. More people than ever before now knew the responsibilities of local officials as well as the boundaries of their power. In addition, these same folk came to see themselves as capable of holding office. They no longer viewed politics as white folks' business or even as the preserve of black professionals. It had become clear to them that ordinary people could and should occupy public office. In these ways, the workshops transitioned African Americans from voter registration to voter participation, while simultaneously laying the groundwork for a new, more democratic political culture rooted in freedom politics.

SNCC organizers were certainly not the first civil rights activists to use workshops as a means of political education. In South Carolina, Septima Clark helped pioneer the use of workshops through the Citizenship Schools she coordinated in the mid-1950s under the auspices of the Highlander Folk School. These workshops helped African Americans living on the Sea Islands get ready to take the voter registration exam by teaching them the basics of reading, writing, and government. SCLC popularized workshops in the late 1950s and early 1960s through its Crusade for Citizenship, a regional voter registration campaign modeled after Clark's Citizenship Schools. SNCC organizers, though, were the first to use workshops in the post-Voting Rights Act era to prepare African Americans for what to do with the vote.⁴⁸

LCFO organizers did not limit their effort to build the party's base to holding workshops. They also flooded the county with literature criticizing the Democratic Party. One of their earliest and most effective flyers called attention to the state party's official slogan of "White Supremacy



Movement supporter Jesse Favors holding a LCFO flyer critical of Alabama's Democratic Party and its official slogan, "White Supremacy for the Right."

© Associated Press.

for the Right." In bold type above a reprint of the slogan and an image of a crowing rooster, they asked, "Is this the party you want?" At the bottom of the sheet they inquired, "Do you want this party to decide, for you, who you can vote for next year in the counties and in the state? Or do you want to start your own organization, that you will control, that

will not be for white supremacy, that will put on the ballot at next year's general election the candidates of your choice for all the county and state offices?" Printed on the flip side was a description of the law that permitted county residents to form their own party. "If Alabama doesn't want to repeat what happened to the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party then Alabama doesn't have to," announced the activists.⁴⁹

Independent party advocates circulated another arresting leaflet in February 1966 in response to a decision by the executive committee of the Lowndes County Democratic Party to raise the cost for running in the Democratic primary. The qualification fee for candidates for sheriff, for instance, jumped from fifty dollars to five hundred dollars, or to more than half of the annual income of most black residents. News of the hike angered African Americans and solidified support for the third party. "If we were going to build up a treasury we were going to build up our own," said Hulett.⁵⁰

As local activists and SNCC organizers laid the groundwork for an independent political party, they looked ahead to the 1966 general election and realized that a handful of key courthouse positions, including superintendent of education and probate judge, were not up for election because state law staggered four- and six-year terms of office. In an attempt to make every county government position available immediately, they filed *McGill v. Ryals* in January 1966. In the lawsuit, which took its name from plaintiff Lillian McGill, the secretary of the LCCMHR, and defendant Frank Ryals, the county sheriff, the activists argued that whites "seized and retained all political power" by "unlawful and unconstitutional means" and excluded African Americans from participating in county government in violation of the Fourteenth and Fifteenth amendments. They also pointed out that whites used "threats, terror, and violence" to keep African Americans from "even attempting to exercise their franchise." To remedy the situation, they asked the court to vacate local offices with unexpired terms so that every county government position would be up for election that year. A failure to act would deny African Americans "their fundamental and inalienable right to be governed by persons in whose election they have been permitted to participate."⁵¹ A panel of three federal judges, however, dismissed the lawsuit on March 31, 1966, on the grounds that the relief sought would adversely effect "the orderly transaction of government." The justices also suggested that other remedies, namely the 1965 Voting Rights Act, existed "to alleviate the effects of past discrimination." But they overstated the extent to which a special election would

disrupt local governance, and they also misread the main provisions of the Voting Rights Act, which were better suited to protecting black voting rights going forward than correcting the political power imbalance created by decades of disenfranchisement. Although the ruling did not keep local activists from running black candidates in the 1966 general election, it did prevent them from fielding candidates for several important positions that year.⁵²

Local activists brushed aside the adverse ruling and continued distributing leaflets and conducting workshops. The first Tuesday in May was fast approaching and party advocates still needed to accomplish a lot in order to hold a nomination convention. Most importantly, they had to officially establish the LCFO, which they did at a mass meeting at Mt. Moriah Baptist Church on April 2, 1966.⁵³

Soon after the sixty movement stalwarts settled into Mt. Moriah's well-worn pews they directed their attention toward Hulett, who opened the meeting by explaining the need for an independent black party. "We have to form our own power structure," he said. "If we stay within the Democratic Party the same people will still be in control." He reminded the audience that these people were the ones who increased the Democratic Party's filing fees to deter African Americans from running in the primary. He also made the point that the little bit of room set aside within the Democratic Party for African Americans had been reserved for the black elite, who tended to put personal interests ahead of the interests of the black masses. "They get into positions of power then just walk all over their black brothers and sisters." Lastly, he connected the failure of the movement to achieve its goals beyond securing the right to vote to the absence of black political power: "We boycotted the schools most of last year and got nothing. If we had the power to put some white kids into those schools, then we'd get the money." He said that the same was true of their effort to secure poverty program funding: "The federal government's been playing around with us on this poverty program. If we had the power we could get the program." Power was the key to generating the change that they wanted: "Once you get power you don't have to beg."⁵⁴

Choosing the party's officers was the first item on the evening's agenda. Not surprisingly, the group selected people with distinguished records of leadership in the movement. For president, they turned to Hulett, who immediately resigned as the chairperson of the LCCMHR so as not to jeopardize its tax-exempt status. They named Robert L. Strickland, the chairperson of the LCCMHR Housing Committee, vice president. Sidney Logan,

Jr., a member of the LCCMHR Anti-poverty Action Committee, agreed to serve as treasurer, and Ruthie Mae Jones and Alice Moore signed on as financial secretary and recording secretary. Lastly, Frank Miles, Jr., consented to serve as chaplain. By drafting some of the most active people in the movement, LCFO supporters sought to infuse the organization with the same willingness to challenge white power, commitment to empowering poor people, and dedication to democratic practices that had become staples of the freedom struggle.⁵⁵

Next, they discussed the rules governing the candidate nomination convention, particularly the laws that limited participation to registered voters and banned participants from also taking part in the Democratic primary. "They'll be watching for any irregularities," warned Hulett. Voluntarily opting out of the primary, however, remained a source of tremendous concern for more than a few people, and rightly so. For their entire lives, the Democratic primary had been the single most important event in Alabama politics, and not participating in it seemed like throwing away their votes. During a spirited debate, Hulett argued that taking part in the primary would be foolhardy—because white voters still outnumbered black voters, white candidates would easily defeat black candidates. He also maintained that participating in the primary would cause them to squander their first opportunity to win control of the courthouse. He conceded that because Democratic primary winners always carried the general election, following the independent-party route meant sacrificing their say in state elections, including the gubernatorial race between Lurleen Wallace, the wife of lame-duck governor George Wallace, and state attorney general Richmond Flowers, her less reactionary opponent. But he insisted that the election of local black officials was exponentially more important. A black sheriff would do more for them than a moderate white governor, who, if elected by some miracle manifestation of white moral conscience, would be, at best, only marginally less a white supremacist than Governor Wallace. The discussion continued for some time until an elderly man who had been silent up to that point stood and shared his thoughts. With regard to not participating in the primary, he said, "So what! We ain't been votin' at all 'till now." With that, the debate ended. They would move forward with the nomination convention and observe the law that prohibited convention participants from voting in the primary.⁵⁶

Before the meeting adjourned, the party's local organizers asked Carmichael to say a few words. During his remarks, he made a keen observation,

"This meeting is very different from any other meeting taking place in the state because the candidates are not important. It is the organization that is important." He could not have been more correct. The principal concern of LCFO advocates was establishing a people's party, one in which political candidates worked toward implementing an agenda agreed on by African Americans. The interests of individual office seekers were inconsequential. The needs of the people mattered most. In a radically democratic way, candidates were irrelevant. "We feel in Lowndes County that the power does not lie in the person who runs for office but in the organization around the person," explained Hulett.⁵⁷ Indeed, LCFO supporters did not even discuss who should, or would, run for office that night even though the convention was only four weeks away.⁵⁸

The desire to create a people's party emerged out of the political education workshops. For four months, African Americans studied the legal responsibilities of county officeholders, discussed the shortcomings of white elected officials, and debated the best ways to create lasting change. Their critical examination of local government provided them with a new framework for processing lived experiences, which helped them see exactly how whites in positions of political power protected the racial caste system. It also led them to devise creative ways to transform existing political practices. Foremost, it convinced them of the necessity of filling the courthouse with people who were responsive to their needs.

The belief that the collective interests of African Americans trumped the political aspirations of individuals kept party supporters from volunteering immediately to run for office. In fact, no one stepped forward as a candidate until the middle of April 1966. A disdain for political professionalization was not the only factor limiting the candidate pool. Fear of white retaliatory violence was equally important. Running for office challenged white power much more than registering to vote or housing outside organizers. It required extraordinary courage not only on the part of prospective candidates but also from their families because it put people's lives in extreme danger.

Hulett and his family displayed such courage continuously for more than a year. Thus, it is no surprise that he considered running for sheriff. Among the local activists, he was a logical choice for the position. No one was more closely associated with the movement and few people had been as willing to challenge white power as openly. Additionally, there was a groundswell of support for him to seek the LCFO nomination. Conversations about possible candidates were rare, but when they did occur

Hulett's name invariably surfaced. In the end, though, he chose not to run. He believed that he could do more for the movement working behind the scenes.⁵⁹

In the wake of his decision, others stepped forward. Sidney Logan, Jr., reaffirmed which side he was on by seeking the LCFO nomination for sheriff. So too did Jesse Favors, a railroad laborer and the vice president of the usher board at Mt. Gilliard Baptist Church. Alice Moore, a forty-two-year-old mother and farmer's wife, offered herself as the LCFO nominee for tax assessor. Frank Miles, Jr., the LCFO chaplain, and Josephine Waginer, a homemaker and active member of Mt. Gilliard, volunteered to run for tax collector. For coroner, Emory Ross came forward, and for school board, Robert Logan, a Sears, Roebuck employee and the brother of Sidney Logan, Jr., volunteered. John Hinson, a bricklayer born in Montgomery who had moved to the county after marrying Mathew Jackson, Sr.'s oldest daughter, also volunteered to run for a seat on the school board. Joining them as prospective school board nominees were Bernice Kelly, Virginia White, Willie Mae Strickland, who was the wife of LCFO vice president Robert Strickland, and her sister Annie Bell Scott, a resident of Tent City.⁶⁰

These six men and six women had much in common, not the least of which was courage. They all belonged to families that had been very active in the movement. The Logans, for example, joined the struggle en masse the previous spring, a decision that cost Robert's wife, Sarah, a veteran public school teacher, her job. Although courage and family affiliations set them apart, many other aspects of their lives made them indistinguishable from everyone else. Indeed, the biographical profiles of the candidates reflected the movement's constituency. Some were landless, but many were small landowners. A few were active in large community churches, whereas others worshipped at small family churches. Most were married and almost all had young children. Each also had some schooling, but the amount varied tremendously, from college coursework to little more than elementary school training. In short, they were ordinary, working-class, black men and women who became involved in independent politics because they happened to be born into a racially volatile situation at a unique moment in American history.⁶¹

The candidates made their public debut on Sunday, April 24, 1966, at a mass meeting at Mt. Moriah. About two hundred people gathered at the Beechwood church to hear what they had to say. One by one, the prospective nominees addressed the crowd from the pulpit. "We have too long

waited and done nothing for ourselves," declared Jesse Favors. "Vote for me and I'll stand up for fair treatment." Sidney Logan, Jr., followed Favors to the microphone and explained that if he were sheriff African Americans would not have to fear the law. "I will not be the man to stand in the courthouse door when you come to seek power," said the World War II veteran, playing on the image of Governor Wallace trying to keep black students out of the University of Alabama. Alice Moore explained that "if everyone had been taxed their share we'd have better schools and good roads today." The speeches evinced the candidates' firm grasp of the power of the offices they sought and their knowledge of the extent to which white elected officials neglected their duties. They also reflected their clear understanding of the central significance of racism and the uneven ownership of wealth to the problems plaguing the black community.⁶³

With less than two weeks to go before the nomination convention, there was still a lot to do and not much time to do it. Because the candidates needed to learn more about the powers associated with the offices they hoped to occupy, SNCC activists scheduled three workshops specifically for them. "We'll talk all about the offices as they revolve around the power to tax," explained Minnis, who directed the workshops. "Taxation is a powerful weapon—it is the only weapon devised by politicians that can take money from the rich and give it to the poor."⁶⁴ LCFO organizers also had to rally support for the candidates, which they did by holding community meetings. Every night the candidates, or one of their representatives, spoke to scores of African Americans who gathered at neighborhood churches to meet and learn about the Black Panther. At the same time, they canvassed the county encouraging African Americans to register. They were not content, however, with simply mobilizing the black electorate. They also wanted to educate them. With this in mind, they organized a series of political education workshops for the public that drew thirty to forty people nightly.⁶⁵

The efforts of SNCC activists to create a new political culture appeared to be working, but success was hard to measure. The outcome of the May 3, 1966, convention would be the most accurate indicator. A strong turnout by black voters would mean that African Americans approved of the independent party and the new political practices responsible for its emergence and growth. The convention, therefore, became a referendum on whether developing independent political parties ought to become SNCC's new organizing program.⁶⁶

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Enthusiasm for the Black Panther ran high, which gave party supporters good reason to believe that African Americans would participate in the convention in significant numbers. Indeed, Black Panther fever seemed contagious. Not only had it spread rapidly in the county, but it also swept across the Black Belt, carried by local supporters who testified personally at Sunday services and weekday mass meetings to the power and potential of independent parties. On March 20, 1966, for example, roughly sixty residents traveled to six nearby counties to explain what was happening in Lowndes County and to urge their neighbors to organize parties of their own. Such activity anchored the effort to spread the Black Panther regionally, and then, perhaps, nationally.⁶⁷ "First we're going to straighten out this county, then we're going to spread abroad . . . into the other counties of Alabama, then into the North, into Harlem, Chicago, Watts," said Frank Miles, Jr.⁶⁸ Although the Black Panther never made it out of Dixie, at least not in the form of the LCFO, it did find a home in several Black Belt counties. In Dallas County, African Americans formed the Dallas County Independent Free Voters Organization; in Wilcox County, they established the Wilcox County Freedom Organization; and in Greene County, they formed the Greene County Freedom Organization.⁶⁹

Not everyone caught Black Panther fever. Alabama whites proved universally immune to it, and the black middle class exhibited their own stubborn resistance. "If it is evil to have all-white government, it is also evil to have all-Negro government," mused Stanley Smith, a sociology professor at Tuskegee Institute and one of two African Americans elected to the five-member Tuskegee City Council in 1964.⁷⁰ The black middle class in Lowndes County was extremely small. It consisted mainly of a couple hundred public school employees. It was also not politically active. Even those who opposed the movement rarely acted on their opposition. There was no middle-class political organization, for instance, that challenged the LCFO's pursuit of power. Instead, middle-class blacks tended to watch from the sidelines and usually voiced their criticism in private. But the potential for organized opposition existed, and this possibility worried movement organizers tremendously. The response of Tuskegee's black professionals to the Black Panther, therefore, is extremely instructive because it illuminates the less-than-democratic black political traditions that SNCC activists wanted desperately to avoid, and it exposes the motives behind that group's general hostility for the LCFO.

Since the early 1940s, African Americans employed at Tuskegee Institute and at the city's segregated Veterans Administration hospital, worked

through the Tuskegee Civic Association (TCA) to promote civil rights. In 1960, a favorable Supreme Court ruling in *Gomillion v. Lightfoot*, which effectively overturned a discriminatory state law that neutralized the voting strength of African Americans in Tuskegee by gerrymandering them out of the city, set the stage for a climactic electoral showdown four years later. The leaders of the TCA and the Macon County Democratic Club (MCDCL), the political arm of the local movement, however, shied away from the face-off. Rather than sponsor black candidates for a majority of the seats on the city council and the board of revenue, they decided among themselves that the ruling white minority should retain control of the local government; consequently, they backed only a few carefully selected African Americans for office. Charles Gomillion, the dean of the school of arts and sciences at Tuskegee and the chairperson of both the TCA and the MCDCL, explained, "We will try to support white candidates who seem to be in a position to render the best service for the total community."⁷⁰ An unrepentant gradualist, Gomillion believed that too many black faces in the courthouse would scare whites, which would make the formidable task of dismantling Jim Crow and achieving racial equality that much more difficult. For Gomillion, gradualism was appropriately accommodating, and many black professionals, including those outside the Black Belt, agreed. In Birmingham, for instance, the black elite spent several generations cultivating personal relationships with white powerbrokers and did not wish to lose the precious little political capital they had accumulated by appearing to favor a government takeover. This possibility truly frightened whites because of the century-old fear that African Americans, once in power, would treat them just as they had been treated. Thus, black professionals in the Magic City praised the Tuskegee model of black political participation, and after the Voting Rights Act became law, they urged black Alabamians to support the Democratic Party. The Alabama Democratic Conference Inc. (ADCI), a statewide political advocacy group established by black Birmingham's movers and shakers in 1960 to support the presidential bid of John F. Kennedy, led the way by working hard to deliver black votes for white gubernatorial candidate Richmond Flowers in the 1966 Democratic primary.⁷¹ The LCFO, therefore, represented an approach to politics that ran counter to that of most black professionals, and its rising popularity promised to undermine the standing of this group by reducing the influence that its members had over the broader black electorate.

National civil rights organizations were no less hostile to the Black Panther. Although Charles Evers, the NAACP's Mississippi field director and the self-anointed heir to the legacy of his brother Medgar, did not speak for the NAACP as a whole, he reflected the views of the national office when he said that the organization would never support the push for "all-black government." "We want Negroes in all departments of government," he explained, "but we don't want to go from white supremacy to black supremacy."⁷² The NAACP, however, had only a handful of political organizers on the ground in Alabama, which limited its ability to influence the state's black citizens. SCLC, on the other hand, had a strong presence in Alabama, and like the NAACP and countless black professionals, found the LCFO extremely problematic.

Before the ink dried on the press release announcing the formation of the independent party, SCLC's Alabama organizers called a meeting of state leaders and grassroots activists to encourage them to support the Democrats. "This meeting came about when we first heard talk of a black panther party," said Hosea Williams, SCLC's Alabama director of voter registration and political education. At the meeting, Williams made no effort to mask his disdain for the LCFO. In a lengthy diatribe, he stated that it possessed all the markings of reverse racism and demanded to know if its advocates planned to "treat white folks like the white folks treated them? Will they hate the white folks like the white folks hate them?" Beyond that he warned, "We may mess around here and create a monster in Alabama [that] will be detrimental to generations of Negroes unborn." He laid blame for the third party idea squarely at the feet of SNCC and accused its field secretaries of deliberately duping naive African Americans, "There ain't no Negro in Alabama including ourselves that knows one iota about politics. Politics is a science," he said, and black folk had neither the opportunity nor the time to study it properly. "This is why I think SNCC is taking advantage of the Negroes." The Georgia native ended his rant by saying that independent politics was bad mathematics. "We are only 35 percent of the people in Alabama, and 10 percent in the nation. We can't go pitting race against race."⁷³

Like the black elite, political interests fueled Williams's contempt for the Black Panther. SCLC activists aspired to dictate the course of black politics in the post-Voting Rights Act era. They wanted African Americans to join the Democratic Party and support southern white moderates for office, believing that this was the only way for them to realize the full potential of re-enfranchisement. "We must let the Negro vote hang there

like a ripe fruit, and whoever is willing to give the Negro the most freedom can pick it," said Williams. "We may not be able to elect a black man, but God knows we can say what white man."⁷⁴

From the outset, SCLC decision makers looked to Alabama as the place to popularize their political vision. The reason for their interest in the state had everything to do with the timing of Alabama's Democratic primary. Set for May 3, 1966, it was the first election in the Deep South since the passage of the Voting Rights Act. Committed to working in Alabama, they launched a statewide voter registration drive in October 1965. The thinking behind this stratagem was neither altruistic nor democratic. Speaking of the state's black voters, Williams said, "The person who register[s] them controls them." To oversee black voting behavior, SCLC formed the Confederation of Alabama Political Organizations (COAPO). Williams marketed the COAPO as the voice of Alabama's black electorate and insisted that it was capable of delivering black votes to white candidates in exchange for political spoils that could be redistributed to loyalists at the county level. "We've got to say, 'White folks, what you going to give us?' We've been selling our vote all along. Now we've got to sell it for freedom."⁷⁵

The COAPO had two immediate goals. First, it sought to deliver the black vote for Attorney General Flowers in the gubernatorial race. "For all of these years whites have bloc-voted to keep us down," said Dr. King of COAPO's call for a "united Negro vote" in support of Flowers. "Now we got to bloc-vote to get ourselves out of this dilemma."⁷⁶ Williams was confident that they would make good on their promise given the time they had spent registering black voters, particularly in the Black Belt. Second, COAPO wanted to sponsor black candidates for local offices in majority black counties where SCLC maintained a strong presence, such as Wilcox and Perry. Like the Tuskegee Civic Association, however, COAPO chose not to back African Americans for every available office. "We don't want to look like we're taking over," explained Albert Turner, director of SCLC's operations in Alabama. "But we do want to elect enough Negroes so it will do some good."⁷⁷ To reach its goals, the COAPO applied strategies that SCLC used to mobilize African Americans for civil rights demonstrations—methods that had little to do with political education and everything to do with garnering media attention. In late April 1966, the COAPO arranged for Dr. King and a half dozen of his advisers to take a six-day, seventeen-stop tour of the state. From George Wallace's hometown in Barbour County to Brown AME Chapel in Selma, Dr. King and his entourage

instructed African Americans to vote for Flowers and the local black candidates they named. Not surprisingly, they avoided Lowndes County. "We don't want Dr. King picketed or booed or anything like that," said Williams.⁷⁸ Bypassing Lowndes County was easier than ignoring the success of SNCC's political education program. Borrowing from SNCC's playbook, SCLC hosted a weekend workshop at Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta for the black candidates they had picked to run for office. Approximately fifty of the sixty Democratic primary hopefuls attended. Their experience, though, differed substantially from that of the Lowndes County residents who attended SNCC's Atlanta workshops. Among other things, there was very little dialogue between them and retreat organizers. The latter invited them to Atlanta to learn what to expect in the coming days by listening rather than asking questions and sharing concerns. Except for the preponderance of black faces, typical American politics was the order of the day.⁷⁹

The mainstream liberal media was well aware of the controversy swirling around the LCFO and unapologetically opposed the Alabama organizers. Rather than form independent parties, the press believed that African Americans ought to align with Democrats. "If they fuse their strength with liberal white voters they can achieve tangible gains in fairer administration of justice and better treatment from state and local government," wrote the editors of the *New York Times* shortly before primary day. The editors also blamed SNCC for the political shortsightedness of Alabama's black voters. "[The] Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee's call for Negro voters to boycott the primary is destructive mischief-making" and "can only produce frustration and defeat for the state's Negroes," they lamented. To them, SNCC's "rule-or-ruin attitude" derived from the same mind-set of "extremism for the sake of extremism" that "prevailed in the refusal of the Mississippi Freedom Democrats to accept a generous compromise worked out in their behalf at the 1964 Democratic National Convention." Like Williams and his fellow SCLC organizers, the press was sure that SNCC had hoodwinked black voters by exploiting their political immaturity to advance a reckless "revolutionary posture toward all society and Government."⁸⁰

Public criticism of the LCFO deeply disturbed the party's backers. SNCC organizers were especially concerned about the effect that it would have on future projects. They were confident that African Americans in Lowndes County would be able to decipher the truth about the LCFO given their nearness to the organization but were less sure that those living outside

the county would be able to sift through the misinformation and see the LCFO for what it truly was. Their worries led them to make plain the purpose and goals of the LCFO through a series of speeches, letters to editors, interviews, and position papers. In a letter to the *Times*, SNCC executive secretary James Forman responded to the accusation that his organization's call for African Americans to participate in third-party conventions rather than the Democratic primary was not only extremist but also a willful attempt to deceive unsuspecting black voters. "If, as is true, SNCC workers in Alabama have expressed the opinion that the outcome of the Democratic primary has little relevance in terms of the needs of the majority of Negroes in certain counties, it is because the people themselves feel this way," he wrote. "If, as is true, SNCC workers have advised Negroes not to vote in the Democratic primary, it is because of this feeling but also because of a law which could be used to invalidate the independent nominating conventions on the grounds that voters had also participated in the Democratic primary." He ended by asking, "Does all this sound like 'extremism for the sake of extremism' as your editorial states?"⁸¹

To the charge that the LCFO was a manifestation of reverse racism, Carmichael answered, "There is nothing wrong with anything all black. There is nothing wrong with anything all white. What is wrong with either of those things is when force is used to keep somebody else out based on color. That's what is happening in this country."⁸² SNCC political strategist Courtland Cox added in a position paper that the LCFO's "major emphasis is to bring political power at the county level to the poor and excluded—the color of skin is incidental. The extent to which blackness is seen as a 'problem' is one of the manifestations of a segregated and racist society."⁸³

SNCC activists also dismissed the notion that political compromise was in the best interests of African Americans. "What kind of compromises can we make with these guys that been beating us over the head all these years?" Carmichael asked a *Newsweek* reporter.⁸⁴ A SNCC essay on Alabama laid bare the issue: "From the viewpoint of a tent city resident sleeping with a gun in a freezing tent there can be no middle ground. Who can ask a tent city resident to forget that he lost his home because he tried to act like a good citizen and vote? Who can blame the dispossessed for asking if the vote of a landless person is equal to the vote of a landowner?"⁸⁵ This is why SNCC activists refused to tell black voters to support white candidates. "What you have in this country is that Negroes are always told to vote for someone who is less of a racist instead of more

for Negroes," said Carmichael. At a mass meeting attended by the press, Carmichael clarified this point by calling attention to Flowers's record as attorney general. "When Jonathan Daniels was killed, Richmond Flowers said he was for justice. He didn't say he was for Negroes. He said he was for justice. When Sammy Younge was killed that cracker didn't say anything. When a white man is killed, he says he is for justice and when a Negro is killed, he doesn't say anything . . . He's never said he's for us, and there's a big difference."⁸⁶

Finally, the organizers explained away attacks from "middle class leaders" as a function of their not having had "the SNCC experience." "They have not watched their friends beaten and killed while the federal government stood sterily [*sic*] by taking notes," read the SNCC essay on Alabama. "They have not organized people to vote in mock elections proving that hundreds of thousands of Negroes in the black belt are disenfranchised and then find that neither the Democratic Party, nor the United States Congress will deal with that fact. The men in a comfortable position in life will not understand SNCC unless they know what it is to live with the pervading fear of violence from creditors, sheriffs, hostile whites, and the 'boss man.'"⁸⁷

Despite their best efforts, the organizers were unable to stem the tide of negativity emanating from friends and foes alike. SCLC's Albert Turner, for example, continued to lambast SNCC and the LCFO. At a Perry County mass meeting on April 17, 1966, he said, "SNCC doesn't register voters, [and] doesn't care about registering voters." He also said that the organization was trying to split the black vote.⁸⁸ As primary day approached, the chasm separating independent-party advocates from SCLC and the black elite remained as wide as ever.

In preparation for the nomination convention, Hulett asked sheriff Frank Ryals for permission to hold the election on the courthouse lawn. "We are trying to obey the law set by Alabamians," he explained in a letter to Ryals. "We hope that you do the same."⁸⁹ Sheriff Ryals, however, refused to allow them to use the public square. When pressed for an explanation, he said that he could not protect African Americans from angry whites, but movement activists disputed this claim. Everyone knew that the sheriff could keep whites from attacking them if he wanted to.⁹⁰

In response to the sheriff's decision, LCFO leaders convened an emergency mass meeting during which a consensus emerged for proceeding with plans to hold the convention at the courthouse. The prospect of white

violence no longer paralyzed frontline activists. "We been walkin' with dropped down heads, with a scrunched-up heart, and a timid body in the bushes," explained an older man a few months later. "But we ain't scared any more. Don't meddle, don't pick a fight, but fight back! If you have to die, die for something, and take somebody before you."⁹⁰ Ever since the murder of Jonathan Daniels, local organizers had waged an armed defensive struggle against their white opponents that had kept the movement afloat. To exercise the franchise as they saw fit, they resolved to continue to meet violence with violence. "If the sheriff cannot protect us, then we are going to protect ourselves," declared Hulett.⁹¹

The willingness of movement activists to defend black voters did not keep them from seeking a peaceful resolution to the dispute. To avoid bloodshed, Carmichael wrote to U.S. assistant attorney general John Doar and explained that the LCFO had "no choice" but to hold its convention at the courthouse. State law required that such events take place at an official polling place, and the courthouse was the only voting site in the county that was not a white-owned business or a private white residence. Carmichael insisted that the Justice Department had an obligation to protect black voters because the county sheriff had abdicated his duty: "Since Sheriff Ryals has put the LCFO on notice that he will not permit holding the mass meeting, we feel the responsibility for providing such protection as will permit the orderly and uninterrupted conduct of the mass meeting without undue physical danger for the participants [falls to] the U.S. Justice Department." Carmichael also alluded to the willingness of African Americans to defend themselves in the absence of federal intervention: "If we do not hear from you, or if the U.S. Government does not find itself able to protect the participants in the mass meeting we shall be forced to look to such resources as we can muster on our own to provide such protection."⁹²

The Justice Department was much more concerned about blacks killing whites than about the illegality of the sheriff's actions. To avoid a race war, the department dispatched investigator Charles Nessem to the county. The Saturday before the convention, Nessem met with Hulett and asked what African Americans intended to do if whites began shooting. "We are going to stay out there," replied Hulett. Blacks and whites will "die together." Nessem implored Hulett to call off the event, but the local leader refused. "We are going to have it," he said, and "we are going to protect ourselves." Nessem met with Hulett for a second time Sunday afternoon, but once again failed to persuade him to cancel the convention. Hulett's resolve prompted Nessem to ask the state attorney general to allow the LCFO to hold its

convention at an alternate site. After some cajoling, Richmond Flowers agreed to permit the LCFO to meet at First Baptist Church, an African American church located a half mile from the courthouse. When Nessem relayed this information to Hulett, the local activist asked, "Do you have any papers that say that's true, that are signed by the Governor or the Attorney General?" "No," answered Nessem. "Go back and get it legalized," said Hulett, "and bring it back here to us and we will accept it." "And sure enough," recalled Hulett, "Monday at 3 o'clock I went to the courthouse and there in the sheriff's office were the papers all legalized and fixed up, saying that we could go to the church to have our mass meeting."⁹⁴

The peaceful end to the courthouse dispute did more than just allow the convention to take place. By not balking at the prospect of a bloody confrontation with whites, African Americans demonstrated the value of collective determination and spirited defiance. "When people are together, they can do a lot of things, but when you are alone you cannot do anything," observed Hulett.⁹⁵ From that moment forward, African Americans embraced racial solidarity more explicitly. In fact, this incident was one of the key movement experiences that led many people to embrace Black Power later that summer.

On Tuesday, May 3, 1966, some nine hundred registered black voters descended on First Baptist Church and cast ballots in the LCFO convention. After party officials tallied their votes, Hulett announced the winners. Sidney Logan, Jr., won the nomination for sheriff, and Frank Miles, Jr., received the nod for tax collector. Alice Moore and Emory Ross would represent the LCFO as the candidates for tax assessor and coroner, and Robert Logan, John Hinson, and Willie Mae Strickland would be the school board nominees.⁹⁶ The results pleased party supporters. "We have our candidates," said Carmichael in an interview late that evening. "Their names will be on the ballot November 8 along with our symbol, the Black Panther. All the people have to do is pull the lever under the panther. November 8 we vote. November 9 we take over the courthouse."⁹⁷ The nominees shared Carmichael's enthusiasm. When a reporter asked Sidney Logan, Jr., about his chances for victory in the fall, he answered, "I don't go out to lose."⁹⁸ What excited people the most was the strong turnout. Nearly half the county's registered black voters participated in the election. "The movement had opened the eyes of many Negroes," said White Hall shopkeeper William Cosby.⁹⁹ "We must use the vote to get out of the cotton fields and we can't do that by voting for the boss man," explained a local black farmer.¹⁰⁰

Of course, not every African American who voted on May 3 cast ballots in the LCFO convention. Some seven hundred black voters took part in the Democratic primary.¹⁰¹ Their experience was relatively uneventful. "It wasn't nothing bad," said sixty-four-year-old Iona Morgan, who mustered the courage to vote at the courthouse. The pedestrian nature of their experience reflected a level of white tolerance for black political participation that had not existed locally in nearly a century. "Course, we'd rather it wasn't this way," said L. W. Crocker, a white voting inspector assigned to the courthouse on Election Day. "But it is, and we have to accept it." There were limits, of course, to how far whites would acquiesce to the new order. They stomached African Americans participating in the primary because it meant that they were not taking part in the Black Panther convention. Voting for white candidates was one thing, but voting for African Americans was entirely different. Nevertheless, African Americans who participated in the primary found their first voting experience personally fulfilling. "It felt good to me," said eighty-one-year-old Willie Bolden. "It made me think I was sort of somebody."¹⁰²



Lowndes County residents dressed in Sunday finery and work clothes participate in the LCFO nomination convention held on the grounds of First Baptist Church in Hayneville on May 3, 1966. © Flip Schulke/CORBIS.



LCFO chairperson John Hulett making the rounds during the LCFO nomination convention on May 3, 1966. © Jim Pepler.

It is not hard to imagine why African Americans took part in the Democratic primary given the gravity of the event and the tangle of socio-economic ties that bound blacks and whites. Economic vulnerability, interracial friendships, fear of provoking white violence (especially by electing a black sheriff), and a belief in the inability of poor and working-class people to fulfill the obligations of elected office were among the factors that prompted black voters to go to the courthouse rather than to First Baptist Church on Election Day. Testimony from African Americans who voted for white incumbents in neighboring Wilcox County illuminates some of these motivations. Leo Taylor, a fifty-four-year-old house painter, voted against the black candidate for sheriff in the Wilcox primary. "It was too early for us to have a colored sheriff," said Taylor, who supplemented his

income by driving a school bus for the county. "The white folks wouldn't have liked that a bit and it would have caused some trouble." Buster Lawrence, a fifty-eight-year-old farmer, said he voted for the white candidate for tax assessor because the two men had known each other their entire lives. "I lived across the road a ways from him when he was little," explained Lawrence. "He's loaned me his car before to go to Birmingham, and when I need to borrow a little money, I can get it from him and his family. He helped me so I helped him."¹⁰³

The willingness of black voters to support white incumbents helps explain the defeat of black candidates in Democratic primaries across the Black Belt. Ahead of the election, political observers speculated that African Americans could win as many as twenty contests in six Black Belt counties given the twofold increase in black registered voters since the Voting Rights Act became law. Black candidates, however, failed to win a single race outright even though black voters turned out in record numbers; they did force runoffs in five elections, including the race for sheriff in Macon County, where black voters rallied behind Lucius Amerson rather than the white candidate favored by black professionals. The willingness of white officials to resort to electoral fraud also worked against African Americans. Across the state, they disqualified black ballots, switched polling sites without prior notification, allowed ineligible whites to vote, counted illegal absentee ballots, and marked ballots for illiterate black voters. White bloc voting was equally responsible for the outcome. Quite simply, white Alabamians refused en masse to vote for African Americans. They also chose not to vote for white candidates who failed to pledge allegiance to white supremacy. The principal beneficiary of these voting tendencies was Lurleen Wallace, who won the gubernatorial race with more votes than her nine opponents combined and almost three times as many votes as Flowers. Despite all the talk about a white moderate vote, it never materialized.¹⁰⁴

Local activists viewed the poor showing by Flowers, the failure of black primary candidates to win simple majorities, and Lucius Amerson's strong performance in Macon County as validation of their political project.¹⁰⁵ But rather than dwell on the ill fortune of others, they began strategizing for the November 1966 election. Defeating white candidates would not be easy, especially because local whites would undoubtedly vote as a bloc and resort to electoral fraud as had their neighbors. Moreover, there was little expectation that the black elite would rally behind the Black Panther. "Our biggest fight now is among our own people, like the professional people,

school teachers and preachers who don't want any part in it because once the common Negro moves up he will become equal with him," said Hulet.¹⁰⁶ To win, they would have to organize those African Americans who remained on the sidelines, the majority of whom were unemployed and underemployed agricultural workers living on white folks' land.

For SNCC, the poor showing by black primary candidates coupled with the strong convention turnout demonstrated that independent county-wide politics offered African Americans their best opportunity to secure political power. Moreover, it confirmed the feasibility and practicality of developing all-black parties. Almost two years after the MFDP defeat in Atlantic City, SNCC had finally found a new organizing program.

The creation of the LCFO reflected the desire of African Americans to use the ballot to secure their freedom rights. This foray into electoral politics was an integral part of the Lowndes movement. It was inseparable from the voter registration drives that marked the beginning of local civil rights protest, intertwined with the fight to improve segregated black schools and desegregate white schools, and interwoven with the effort to increase economic opportunities for black farmers. Not surprisingly, local activists' movement experiences, filtered through a prism of pre-movement memories, played a critical role in the development of the LCFO by predisposing them to promoting democratic practices and a populist agenda. The political education workshops created by SNCC organizers standardized these practices by providing African Americans with the interpretative tools they needed to apply insights gained from organizing to electoral politics.

The LCFO enabled people whose views had been suppressed since Reconstruction to express them publicly. This alone was a remarkable accomplishment. The party, however, did more than give a voice to the voiceless. It also introduced freedom politics, which offered its adherents a more democratic way of doing things. Instead of privileging the interests of the social and economic elite, it made the needs of the poor and working class a top priority. Rather than limiting leadership to a handful of people, it democratized decision making. It also rejected wealth, whiteness, and previous political experience as prerequisites for holding office. The LCFO's most significant achievement, therefore, was its ability to elevate the political awareness of African Americans to levels seldom achieved by others in the movement. In the process, it made freedom politics synonymous with black politics. The party's supporters, however,

wanted to do more than just transform black politics. They wanted to replace the undemocratic traditions that defined American politics with more democratic practices. The LCFO convention was a significant step in this direction, but to normalize freedom politics African Americans had to unseat white office holders in the November 1966 general election.

6

Tax the Rich to Feed the Poor

Black Power and the Election of 1966

It was nearly impossible to hear over the clamor they created as they finalized plans for the election scheduled for the next day. But a Sunday morning quiet seized them the moment that the Black Panther candidates began assembling near the pulpit. Alice Moore, the forty-two-year-old nominee for tax assessor, stood proudly among the group as each addressed the crowded sanctuary of Mt. Moriah Baptist Church. The Lowndes County native was a dedicated servant of the people. She was active in several clubs at Mt. Elam Baptist Church and a member of numerous community organizations, including Union Burial Society No. 9. She had also joined the movement as soon as it began. As an LCFO nominee, she was accustomed to addressing mass meetings, but she tended to shy away from theatrical speechifying. This evening was no different. When her turn came to speak, she chose her words carefully. In a calm yet commanding voice, she said, "My platform is tax the rich to feed the poor." Then, without uttering another word, she sat down. Nothing else needed to be said.¹

Moore's platform reflected her core political beliefs. It also reflected the guiding principles of the LCFO. Local activists and SNCC organizers formed the independent party to oust whites from the county courthouse and replace them with African Americans committed to extending freedom rights to everyone. For more than a year, they organized with an eye toward taking over the local government, and as the 1966 general election approached they stood on the cusp of realizing this goal. The very real possibility that African Americans would gain political power in 1966 made that year's vote the climatic event of the Lowndes movement.

The election of 1966 was also an important moment for SNCC as an organization. During the summer of 1966, SNCC adopted a new organizing program, which it dubbed Black Power. The program involved sending

African American organizers into black communities to cultivate racial consciousness and build independent political parties. The Lowndes movement played a leading role in the development of this program. Organizing in Lowndes County reinforced SNCC activists' appreciation of rural black southerners' cultural values and reconfirmed the significance of community controlled institutions. Working with the LCFO was particularly important. The formation of the party convinced SNCC activists to make building grassroots third parties the centerpiece of their work. It also provided them with a blueprint for establishing these parties. As a result, the election of 1966 was the first major test of SNCC's most significant Black Power project.

The selection of a full slate of LCFO candidates during the party's convention on May 3, 1966, thrilled SNCC organizers. SNCC had operated without a central organizing program ever since the MFDP failed to unseat Mississippi segregationists at the 1964 Democratic National Convention. The success of the LCFO nomination convention, however, provided the organization with programmatic direction by demonstrating the grassroots appeal of independent political parties. "We were convinced that we had found *the Lever* we had been searching for," recalled SNCC program director Cleveland Sellers.²

Less than one week after the convention, some one hundred SNCC activists descended on Kingston Springs, Tennessee, for a staff retreat. Their primary goal was to reach a consensus on an organizing program. With this in mind, they made three major policy decisions. First, they voted to make the development of third parties the focus of SNCC fieldwork. Sellers explained that they believed that "such organizations working together could end racial oppression once and for all."³ Second, they decided to promote black consciousness, which they defined as ideas and behaviors that affirmed "the beauty of blackness" and dispelled white supremacist constructions of race. "We have to stop being ashamed of being black," said Stokely Carmichael. "They oppress us because we are black and we are going to use that blackness to get out of the trick bag they put us in."⁴ Third, they agreed to limit organizing in black communities to African Americans. "It seemed to us a major contradiction to ask white secretaries to go among black sharecroppers and convince them of their power to be self-determining and independent," explained Gloria Larry, a veteran of the Lowndes Project.⁵ "We will not fire any of our white organizers," said Carmichael, "but if they want to organize, they can organize white people."⁶

The Lowndes Project played a decisive role in these decisions. In addition to persuading SNCC members to build third parties outside of Alabama, it convinced them to promote black consciousness. Appeals to black pride in Lowndes County were less overt than later manifestations. "We've done it without talking about 'Whitey' and 'getting rid of 'Whitey' and that shit," said Carmichael.⁷ Nevertheless, they were plain to see. The play to black solidarity inherent in the black panther ballot symbol was unmistakable. The Lowndes Project also influenced the decision to prohibit white volunteers from organizing in black communities. Restricting the activities of whites had become increasingly common on SNCC projects, but the Lowndes Project was the most glaring example of this trend.⁸ In Lowndes County, SNCC organizers refused to allow whites to work in the field mainly because they believed that it was needlessly dangerous. As evidence, they pointed to the senseless murder of white volunteer Jonathan Daniels in August 1965. "A few whites were working in Selma and some of the other counties, but not in Lowndes," said Carmichael. "This was not because we had any formal policy of excluding them, we simply did not encourage them . . . The general feeling was that we couldn't, on principle, exclude anyone who genuinely wanted to struggle against racism. On principle. But as a practical matter, under the objective conditions, we found it would have been foolhardy, even irresponsible, to bring in whites."⁹

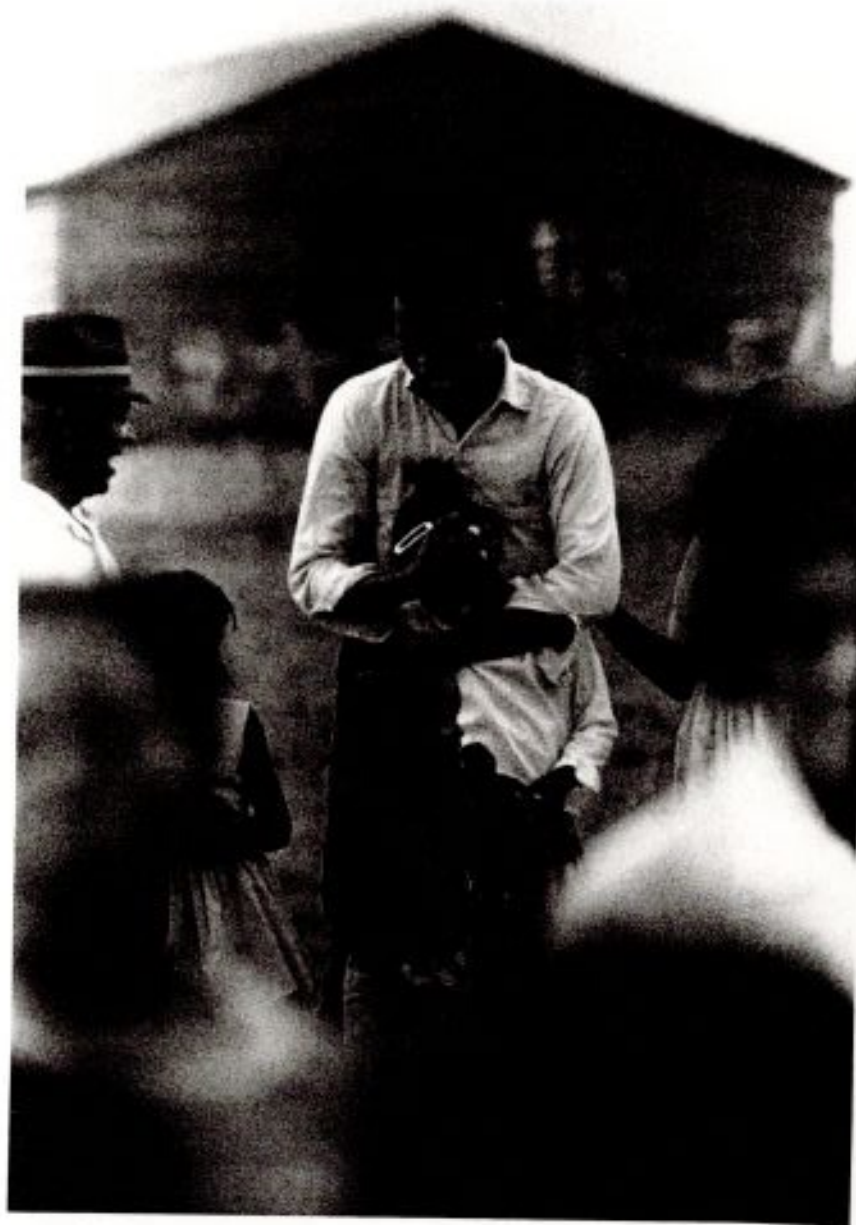
The decisions made at the Kingston Springs meeting formed the basis of SNCC's new organizing program. Going forward, SNCC would send African American activists into black communities to develop black consciousness and build independent political parties. In essence, they would do what Carmichael had done in Lowndes County. Thus, the inspiration for SNCC's new program was not what anyone had said or wrote, but what field secretaries in Alabama had actually accomplished. Very soon, SNCC members began calling the new program Black Power, an abbreviated version of the slogan "Black Power for Black People" that Lowndes County organizers helped popularize. For SNCC activists, Black Power meant celebrating blackness, cultivating racial solidarity, and building black institutions, and the catchphrase described their new program perfectly. "[Black Power] was a more specific way of saying what we mean," said field secretary Willie Ricks.¹⁰ It was also a way to link SNCC to its organizing roots.

To implement Black Power, SNCC activists turned immediately to Carmichael, whom they elected chairperson of the organization during a contentious election at the end of the retreat. Many believed that having the

architect of the Lowndes Project oversee the process of spreading black consciousness and building third parties was necessary for the program's success. In addition, John Lewis, the incumbent chairperson, had alienated many field secretaries, especially those working in Alabama and Mississippi, and had fallen out of favor with some of the Atlanta staff, particularly those with connections to Howard University. Lewis viewed the movement as a moral crusade, which conflicted with the dominant belief within the organization that the movement was a political struggle. This ideological difference, however, was nothing new, and most people probably could have continued to live with it. What troubled SNCC members the most was Lewis's growing opposition to independent third parties, which became clear during the run-up to the LCFO convention when he encouraged African Americans in Alabama to vote in the Democratic primary while touring the state with Dr. King."

In the weeks following his election, Carmichael moved quickly to export the organizing approach that his team perfected in Lowndes County to other rural southern communities, starting with the counties surrounding Lowndes. His duties as chairperson, however, involved endless fundraising trips, which prevented him from spending much time in Alabama. If it were up to local activists, Carmichael would have remained in the county. "Yes[,] we are all looking for your return home (smile)," wrote LCFO candidate Alice Moore late that summer. "Here is where *Stokely* belong. We will loan you to other places, but they will have to return you safely home."¹¹ His absence, though, did not create a leadership vacuum. SNCC field secretary Bob Mants, who had worked in the county for more than a year, coordinated the Lowndes Project in his place.¹² A skilled organizer and able leader, he worked well with local activists. Although the people missed Carmichael, they were happy to have Mants. With his help, preparation for the November 1966 election proceeded seamlessly.

To win the general election, the LCFO needed twice as many people to vote for Black Panther candidates than the nine hundred people who participated in the party's nomination convention. Realizing this, local leaders focused on increasing the party's base of support. As summer began, they sent movement volunteers back into the field to talk to African Americans, but unlike earlier efforts, they focused squarely on the poorest black communities. "We go into the worst areas where people are still afraid and shaky, people who live on plantations," explained LCFO chairperson John Hulett. "We go in and talk with these people and let them know that they can live without these landowners . . . Once you start telling people



SNCC field secretary Stokely Carmichael playing with a local child during the LCFO nomination convention on May 3, 1966. Two weeks later, he was elected the chairperson of SNCC. © John F. Phillips/johnphillipsphotography.com.

this they start thinking about it. You may have to leave them for a day or two, but you keep going back to them and finally you're able to pull most of those people in."¹⁴ Andrew Kopkind, a writer for the *New Republic*, witnessed this process up close when he shadowed Hulett as he canvassed the "least organized" black community in the county. Kopkind's account of their visit to one household captures the canvassers' deft dance:

The people were "shaky," Hulett said. They were wary of "that mess" and of the white Northerner. But Hulett approached briskly and confidently. "Baby," he told a child, "tell your mother to step to the door." He introduced himself, and asked the woman whether she had heard of the Freedom Organization—"with the emblem of the black panther"—whether she would register to vote when the federal registrars came to town. She was unresponsive. "We got to do something," he went on. "You know it, we need good schools and running water for our houses. We been pushed around too long." The woman nodded perfunctorily; "uh huh," she answered, in the way the people do in Baptist church services, but now with less faith. "You don't need to be afraid," Hulett said. "If we all stand together, there ain't nobody can turn us 'round." Hulett talked a while longer, then asked if she and her family would come to a community meeting at the church two nights later. The woman was noncommittal.

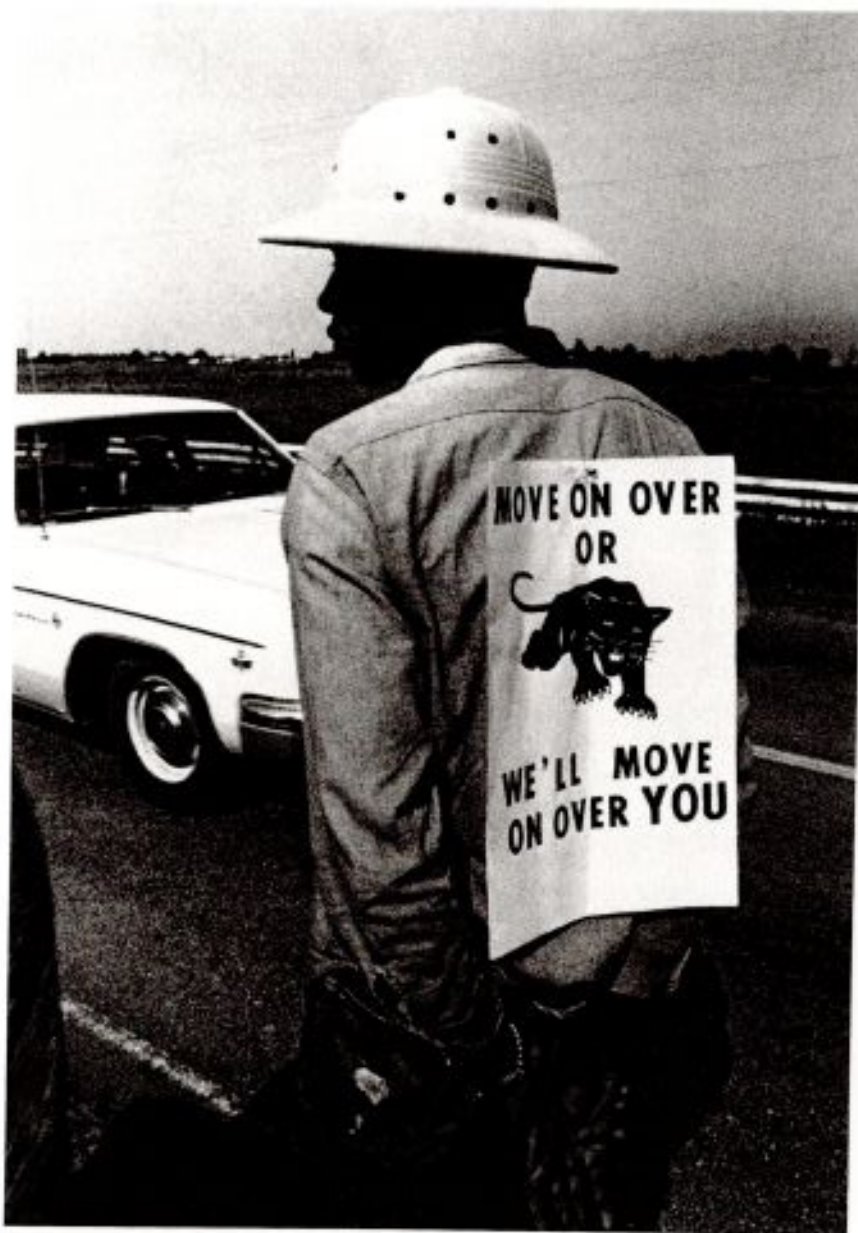
"They'll come, I think," he said as we left. "You got to go back to these people and talk to them about their problems. They know what can be done." Two nights later, at a ramshackle church in a stand of pine trees, the meeting had just begun when the woman and her husband—dressed in their Sunday finery—walked in.¹⁵

Hulett and his fellow canvassers had tremendous success piquing people's interest in the LCFO. The key was their ability to talk about change in concrete terms. If African Americans supported the LCFO candidates, then once they were in office they would be able to improve black schools, secure financial assistance for farmers, curb white violence, halt unlawful evictions, and tax wealthy landowners. It also helped that the Black Panther candidates were the only alternatives to the Democrats. "The Democratic Party was still the party of white supremacy," explained SNCC's Gloria Larry. "People knew that that wasn't something that they wanted to be involved in, so it wasn't difficult for us to talk about independent organizing."¹⁶

Political education was an integral part of the process of building popular support for the party. "Educating the population, not just manipulating them, was very important to us," recalled SNCC political strategist Courtland Cox.¹⁷ Accordingly, LCFO organizers held workshops at which they discussed the powers associated with the offices up for election. They also invited the public to attend workshops designed specifically for LCFO candidates. At these gatherings, they scrutinized the pitfalls of holding positions of power. "These workshops dealt with the ways in which people with money pay off elected officials and get them to sell-out ordinary folks," explained Jack Minnis, the director of SNCC's research department. After several sessions, the participants "began to see what they had to watch for in a candidate they elected to public office. More important, they began to see that the people do not have to put up with such sell-outs. They began to see that officials whom they elect to office, when they sell out this way, can be removed by impeachment, prosecution for not doing their jobs properly, special elections, and so forth."¹⁸

Although boosting attendance at the workshops and mass meetings was essential to expanding the party's base, movement activists still had to get people in front of a registrar before the September deadline for qualifying to vote in the 1966 election passed. To meet this challenge, they launched a countywide voter registration drive that netted hundreds of new black voters. By Election Day, they had raised the total number of registered African Americans to 2,800, which was 400 more than the total number of registered whites. Still, it was only half the county's eligible black voters.¹⁹

As Lowndes County activists galvanized local support for the LCFO, Carmichael rallied national support for Black Power. He launched this initiative in Mississippi in June 1966 during James Meredith's March against Fear. After a white Mississippian shot Meredith at the beginning of his solo demonstration, Carmichael persuaded SNCC's executive committee to allow him and a handful of veteran field secretaries to join those planning to resume the march on Meredith's behalf. Carmichael wanted to organize African Americans as the march wound its way through Mississippi, just as he had done in Lowndes County the year before during the Selma to Montgomery March. In the best tradition of SNCC, he aimed to transform a mobilizing event into an organizing opportunity. "We wouldn't just talk about empowerment, about black communities controlling their political destiny, and overcoming fear. We would demonstrate it," he explained.²⁰



Civil rights demonstrator wears placard featuring LCFO black panther and the popular LCFO saying, "Move on over or we'll move on over you," during James Meredith's March against Fear in Mississippi in June 1966.

© Flip Schulke/CORBIS.

As the march entered the Mississippi Delta, local African Americans welcomed the SNCC organizers cheerfully. It was a homecoming of sorts because several SNCC workers, including Carmichael, had spent many months over several years organizing in that part of the state. The admiration that the student activists and local people shared for one another convinced Carmichael that the Delta was the place to introduce black Mississippians and the nation to Black Power.

Carmichael's familiarity with the Delta extended to its jails. Like so many other grassroots organizers, he had been arrested several times on trumped up charges stemming from civil rights-related activities. But he never got used to the local lockups, nor did he ever grow accustomed to having sheriffs trample on his civil rights. So when the public safety commissioner of Greenwood, Mississippi, arrested him for trying to help a group of marchers pitch tents outside of a Leflore County public school, he was livid. That night, following his release from jail, he returned to the schoolyard and addressed some six hundred marchers and march supporters. As he spoke, his high tenor voice pierced the darkness of the night like a bolt of lightning before a fierce summer storm. "This is the twenty-seventh time I have been arrested," he said. "I ain't going to jail no more." The crowd applauded feverishly. They were as fed up with white rule as he was. Sensing their mood, he decided to invoke SNCC's new rallying cry, but he harbored a small measure of doubt about how the crowd would respond. SNCC advance man Willie Ricks had advised him a few nights earlier that the people were ready for the new slogan, but he found his friend's report of sharecroppers joining the movement at the first mention of Black Power hard to believe. Nevertheless, he felt the time was right. After reiterating his unwillingness to return to jail, he shouted, "We want Black Power!" The crowd exploded. "What do we want?" cried Carmichael. "Black Power!" the people thundered. Carmichael repeated the question several times, and each time the crowd roared, "Black Power." Ricks was right—the people were ready for Black Power.²⁸

Carmichael's June 16, 1966, speech was the most significant event of the Meredith march. It introduced a more radical slogan into the protest lexicon of African Americans. From that day forward, Black Power became a rallying cry for African Americans nationwide, from the cotton fields of the rural South to the assembly lines of the urban North. It ushered in a new phase of the African American freedom struggle. Starting that summer, the movement emphasized racial consciousness and solidarity much

more explicitly. And it marked the beginning of SNCC's effort to develop independent political parties outside Alabama.

In every town the marchers entered, African Americans reacted to the call for Black Power in much the same way that the crowd in Greenwood did. The slogan resonated with them because it captured their feelings about the status quo in non-deferential tones that few had ever heard expressed publicly. The slogan, however, did more than just excite people. It also got them interested in voting, racial solidarity, and independent political parties because it referred to a plan for black political empowerment that made sense. Once ordinary African Americans became interested in Black Power, SNCC organizers were able to get them to register and to begin discussing the process of forming third parties. In this way, Black Power transcended simple rabble-rousing rhetoric and moved people to act.²²

The response of national civil rights leaders to the call for Black Power was manifestly different. Floyd McKissick and the activists in charge of the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) were among the few who applauded it. "Black Power is no mere slogan," said Don Smith, CORE's director of public relations. "It is a movement dedicated to the exercise of American democracy in its highest tradition; it is a drive to mobilize the black communities of this country in a monumental effort to remove the basic causes of alienation, frustration, despair, low self-esteem and hopelessness."²³ Dr. King and his ministerial aides at SCLC, however, criticized it as a poor choice of words. "It is absolutely necessary for the Negro to gain power, but the term 'black power' is unfortunate because it tends to give the impression of black nationalism," stated SCLC's president. "We must never seek power exclusively for the Negro but the sharing of power with the white people . . . Any other course is exchanging one form of tyranny for another."²⁴ Unlike Dr. King, whose objection to Black Power was primarily philosophical, Roy Wilkins, the executive secretary of the NAACP, disapproved of Black Power for personal and political reasons. Moreover, he denounced it vociferously in public. In fact, Wilkins led the charge against Black Power and attacked it and its advocates in much the same manner that his predecessor, Walter White, damned communism and condemned African Americans such as singer and actor Paul Robeson for speaking out in favor of it in the late 1940s and early 1950s. "Ideologically it dictates 'up with black and down with white' in precisely the same manner that South Africa reverses the slogan," declared Wilkins during the keynote address at the NAACP's annual convention in July 1966. "It is

a reverse Mississippi, a reverse Hitler, a reverse Ku Klux Klan. Though it be clarified and clarified again, 'black power' in the quick, uncritical and highly emotional adoption it has received from some segments of a beleaguered people can mean in the end only black death."²⁵

Fear motivated Wilkins. The civil rights moderate was genuinely afraid that white perceptions of Black Power would lead to violence against African Americans and have an adverse effect on NAACP fundraising. He also worried that it would jeopardize the organization's access to national politicians. His concerns had merit. Not long after the Meredith march, police repression directed at black militants increased. Liberal whites also began using Black Power as a litmus test for determining black militancy and stopped funding those groups, most notably SNCC and CORE, that failed the test.²⁶

Liberal whites were skeptical of Black Power from the beginning. "We are not interested in black power and we're not interested in white power," declared president Lyndon Johnson at the NAACP convention, "but we are interested in American democratic power, with a small d."²⁷ Vice president Hubert Humphrey added, "Racism is racism—and there is no room in America for racism of any color. And we must reject calls for racism, whether they come from a throat that is white or one that is black."²⁸ Their skepticism stemmed from their belief that the freedom struggle had to be nonviolent and that black political interests were fundamentally aligned with their interests. These views led liberal whites to dismiss Carmichael's explanations of the ideology as ambiguous at best and unfathomable at worst. "There clearly seems to be more involved here than simple bloc voting in order to achieve equality of treatment," claimed the editors at the *New York Times*. Condemnation of Black Power by Wilkins and other civil rights moderates added to their doubt. "Nobody knows what the phrase 'black power' really means, neither those who oppose it nor those who have given it currency," wrote the *Times* editors.²⁹ The confusion surrounding Black Power's meaning, however, had less to do with what Carmichael said and more to do with how skeptics and critics interpreted what he said. In fact, Carmichael's explanation of Black Power as it applied to the rural South was unmistakably clear largely because he used Lowndes County as an example. And although his early explanations of what Black Power would look like in the urban North suffered from some ambiguity, by the time that his book *Black Power: The Politics of Liberation* appeared in print the next year, he had significantly clarified and complicated its northern applicability.³⁰

Any doubt that liberal whites harbored about the meaning of Black Power evaporated later that summer when a position paper written in March 1966 by members of SNCC's Atlanta Project surfaced. On August 5, 1966, the *New York Times* published excerpts from the statement, which discussed ousting whites from SNCC, increasing black consciousness among organizers and black southerners, and building independent economic and political structures.³⁴ The *Times* presented the essay as SNCC's definitive statement on Black Power and mistakenly (or perhaps purposefully) credited Carmichael with coauthorship. For liberal whites, SNCC's brand of Black Power was no longer ambiguous—it meant exactly what Wilkins and other black moderates had alleged. "Regardless of other interpretations that could reasonably be offered of the term 'black power,' Mr. Carmichael and his SNCC associates clearly intended to mean Negro nationalism and separatism along racial lines—a hopeless, futile, destructive course expressive merely of a sense of black importance," declared the editors of the *Times*. "As a practical program, it has nothing more to recommend it than the wretched violence that some Chicago whites have been using in recent days against the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King and his Negro followers."³⁵ Black moderates reinforced these claims by excoriating SNCC. Veteran activist Bayard Rustin declared, "Nothing creative can come out of SNCC."³⁶

The Atlanta Project position paper, however, was not SNCC policy. The members of the project were mostly organizational outsiders who had joined SNCC only recently—they did not speak for the group. Moreover, their political beliefs more closely reflected earlier affiliations with more radically nationalistic, northern-based groups, including the Nation of Islam (NOI). One of the authors of the paper, Rolland Snellings, was actually still a member of the Revolutionary Action Movement (RAM) and had been assigned to SNCC to secretly push the vanguard group in a more militant direction. Moreover, many of the Atlanta Project activists, with the notable exception of the two project leaders, had spent relatively little time engaged in grassroots organizing. Finally, the project's members did not provide a viable organizing program to go along with their demand that SNCC emphasize black pride and build black economic and political institutions. The lack of an organizing plan kept SNCC's executive committee from endorsing the paper as policy when the project's members presented it in spring 1966. Veteran Lowndes County organizer Willie Ricks explained, "We would always say, 'Mr. Say ain't the man, Mr. Do is the man. They talked about nationalism and that kind of thing inside

SNCC, but they did not have an organization in the community."³⁷ Programs rather than rhetoric always carried the day within SNCC, and when given the choice between the pontifications of the Atlanta activists and the political program of the Lowndes County organizers, SNCC members chose the latter.³⁸

The negative media portrayals of Black Power worried local activists in Lowndes County. "Stokely we have been reading some of your articles in the news paper and we know you mean good, and we do think what you are doing is *alright*, but you will have to be more careful, you must do more work and lest [*sic*] talk," wrote LCFO candidate Alice Moore in a letter to Carmichael. She also advised him to plan his speeches "before your whole SNCC staff and let them be satisfied too. For you can hurt yourself, SNCC, and also Lowndes County."³⁹ Carmichael wrote back immediately, assuring Moore of his good intentions. He noted, however, that "now I speak for SNCC and the tone has to be different." He hoped, though, that "the members of the L.C.F.O. will not become upset by what is said in the newspaper, because most of the times I haven't said that."⁴⁰ Carmichael's note pleased the local leaders. "Yes we understand why you speak as you do, but just remember that we understand, but maybe some do not. (smile)," responded Moore. "Yes the LCFO understand that most things that have been said is not true but we are just concerned about you and you know that. (smile)."⁴¹

Carmichael's assurances cleared the way for local movement supporters to fully embrace Black Power. After visiting the county that summer, Margaret Long, a freelance journalist and novelist, wrote that everyone she talked to "smiled approvingly at the slogan 'Black Power' and SNCC's democratic, if fierce, incitements in the majority black counties."⁴² "Ain't nothin' the matter with us!" declared a black resident at a movement meeting she attended. "We don't hate nobody for the color of their skin. We ain't shootin' nobody or throwin' bombs in their house at their women and children. But we ain't gonna no more take it. They shoot in our house and we shoot back. We aims to get Black Power."⁴³

African Americans in Lowndes County grasped the fundamental meaning of Black Power better than most people. "This was a group of black people who were out to right centuries of wrong in their own little corner of the world," explained Carmichael. "These people did not have to argue Black Power; they understood Black Power."⁴⁴ Local people embraced the ideology as their own partly because it resonated with their movement experiences. The preceding two years made it abundantly clear that they

needed to control the local government to create lasting change. "Once we've got Black Power, we've got something going," said Alice Moore. "Our schools are cold in the winter and our children have to run out and get trash and wood to build a fire and keep warm before they can study and learn. We'll get our children in a place that's already comfortable."⁴² Local people also responded favorably to Black Power because its core tenets corresponded with the ways they fought for freedom rights over the years. Most significantly, it spoke directly to their practice of using social networks to marshal community resources to challenge white supremacy. When the local and state government failed to provide African Americans with adequate public education, they supported their own schools, most notably the Calhoun Colored School, founded in 1892. To secure land, they pooled their meager savings and formed the Calhoun Land Trust, which helped hundreds of black farmers escape debt-based farm tenancy early in the twentieth century. To improve working conditions for sharecroppers, they tapped into church and fraternal networks and organized a sharecroppers' strike in 1935. To help meet the material needs of impoverished African Americans, they formed benevolent societies, such as the Daylight Savings Club, whose dozen or so members purchased essential household items for the elderly and indigent in the 1950s and early 1960s. Local people not only understood Black Power, they welcomed it, because it echoed their cultural values, social experiences, and organizing tradition.⁴³

As summer neared an end, activists in Lowndes County looked past the national controversy surrounding Black Power and concentrated on mobilizing the local black electorate for the November election. Toward this end, Bob Mants sent LCFO volunteers, many of whom were students from Tuskegee Institute and Alabama State University, into the field to campaign for the party's candidates. The volunteers plastered the roadways with posters urging African Americans to "Pull the lever for the Panther." They handed out leaflets explaining the importance of voting for the LCFO ticket. "Now is the time!" heralded one flyer. "If ever we had a chance to do something about the years of low pay, beatings, burnings of homes, denial of the right to vote, bad education and washed-out roads—Now is the time!" They distributed palm cards. "Negro voting power is 4 times greater in Lowndes County," read a card featuring a quartet of snarling black panthers staring intently at a solitary white rooster. Another card invoked the wisdom of Malcolm X. It read simply, "The Ballot or the Bullet."



LCFO canvasser discusses the November 8, 1966, general election with a Lowndes County resident outside his home. © Jim Pepler.

The volunteers also circulated literature on electoral procedure, including instructions on the proper way to read and mark ballots, and for the first time they passed out material promoting the party's candidates and their platforms. A leaflet about Sidney Logan, Jr., the candidate for sheriff, quoted him as saying, "I feel that the time has come for us, who have not been protected by the law, but brutalized by it, [to] begin to take action to see that justice is done without fear or favor." A flyer for school board candidate Willie Mae Strickland credited her with saying, "For changes in our children's education there must be some changes made in the board of education and how taxpayers' money is used."⁴⁴ Most importantly, the volunteers knocked on doors and engaged people in conversation in order to explain the candidates' positions, discuss their qualifications, and talk about the problems afflicting the black community.

Lowndes County whites united in opposition to the LCFO mobilization effort. Some harassed LCFO volunteers by chasing them away, usually at gunpoint, whenever they found them talking to their employees or tenants. Others threatened Black Panther candidates. According to one widely circulated rumor that emanated from the white community, black

voters had "better elect fifty-two sheriffs" because whites planned to "kill one every week." The reason for the hostility was no mystery. "They don't want us to come together 'cause we get too much strength," said Sidney Logan, Jr. "Once we get together we can move them out. That's the reason for all those shootings. They think [if] they get one afraid that'll frighten a lot of them." Times, however, had changed. White harassment neither stopped campaign workers from canvassing nor caused the candidates to drop out. The determination of movement activists stemmed from their willingness to make the ultimate sacrifice for this cause. "If I [have] to lose my life for what I think is right, I ain't backing down, 'cause I done made up [my mind]," declared Logan. Local activist Frank Miles, Jr., said, "If they kill one, we gonna put another one in. One day somebody's gonna get tired of killing, or else we're gonna start killing too. If trouble get in our way, we're gonna walk through it."⁴⁵

Months of exhausting preparation gave rise to high hopes for victory. "I been moving night and day, talking to my friends and getting my friends to talk to their neighbors," said Logan. "I feel very strongly we will win." Logan's brother Robert concurred. "I feel the people of Lowndes County will stand behind their candidates 100% on November 8" because the movement had "opened the eyes of all the people." "I'm sure they'll win," said a resident of Tent City who had been evicted from her home for registering to vote. "All of the people out here are registered voters, and we plan to vote for the freedom organization candidates."⁴⁶

Not everyone believed that total victory was possible. LCFO leaders harbored some doubts partly because of Election Day logistics. "We have never tried to get out the vote so we don't know what we can do," said Hulett.⁴⁷ He also knew that some African Americans intended to split their vote between black and white candidates. R. C. May, a black landowner who farmed 148 acres of cotton and corn, said that he and his family were "with the Black Panthers" but added that he doubted that he would vote for "all-Negro office-holders" because he did not believe that African Americans should "take over." "I've made up my mind to vote for Negro candidates I feel are able to do the job, and I may not vote for some who don't meet the qualifications. I feel like treating white people like I'd like to be treated myself. And I believe that if some few colored people win in the November election, the intelligent white people will fall in line."⁴⁸ Another black landowner dismissed the LCFO candidates outright. "The people that John Hulett has running are unqualified anyway," he said.⁴⁹

The cocksure attitude of white officials who acted as though the defeat of the black candidates was a foregone conclusion also caused trepidation. Their arrogance stemmed in part from white solidarity. There was little doubt that whites would vote as a racial bloc just as they had done during the Democratic primary. As a precaution, though, the Lowndes County Committee for Good Government, an ad-hoc, bipartisan group of local white power brokers, placed an advertisement in the county weekly identifying the candidates whom they wanted people to support. Of course, the candidates were all white, but the list also included two Republicans, which reflected a political compromise cemented during the summer, designed to preserve racial unity. But in the post-Voting Rights Act era, white solidarity was no longer enough to carry elections in the Black Belt. White candidates needed black votes, and because whites controlled the ballot box, regulated the political behavior of many African Americans living and working on their land, and knew that some African Americans, particularly schoolteachers, would vote for Democrats, they felt that victory was a fait accompli.⁵⁰ Sitting outside the courthouse the week before the election, county clerk Mac Champion interrupted his game of dominoes with Tom Coleman, the part-time deputy who had murdered SNCC volunteer Jonathan Daniels, to explain to a reporter that the "good Negroes in the county would help elect the white ticket."⁵¹ Carlton Perdue, the county solicitor, added, "Some of the nigras who come in here seem to be pleased with their life and treatment" and would "vote the straight Democratic ticket."⁵² Not unlike post-Reconstruction politics, whites pinned their expectation of victory partly to black ballots.

There was not enough time before the election for LCFO organizers to try to win over people who dismissed black candidates out of hand, or to convince those African Americans planning to split their votes to support the entire Black Panther ticket. Consequently, party officials concentrated on getting core supporters to the polls. Transportation had always been a problem for African Americans. Most people were too poor to own a car and the county did not provide public buses. Although the nation was preparing to send a man to the moon, mule-drawn carts remained the primary mode of transport for quite a few people. Fearful that LCFO candidates might lose simply because their supporters could not get to the polls, party organizers devised a free, countywide carpool system complete with predetermined stations. They told those who wanted a lift to the polls but who could not make it to a station to carry a piece of white

paper to the highway and use it as a flag to hail the shuttles. The volunteer drivers would be looking for them, they said.³³

LCFO leaders also focused on curbing ballot fraud. The Sunday before the election, they gathered at the decaying, one-room building that served as the party's headquarters and spent five and a half hours briefing the dozens of volunteers who agreed to spend Tuesday at the polls. They instructed the poll watchers to keep a careful record of the day's events, including lists of people who voted, people prevented from voting, people who asked for help, people who provided help, and people who intimidated voters. "Let's keep writing," said one party leader. "There's nothing like a pencil and paper to keep the other man honest."³⁴ They also prepped the volunteers on provisional ballot procedure because they expected white officials to challenge the eligibility of black voters. State law allowed voters who had been challenged to file provisional ballots after a qualified property owner witnessed them sign an oath attesting to their right to vote. LCFO organizers explained the statute and reviewed the list of nearly forty African American property owners who had agreed to serve as witnesses. Beyond that, they decided that poll watchers should challenge white voters as soon as whites began challenging black voters. "In fact, I think we ought to just challenge for the heck of it every two hours or so, just to let those crackers know that we are on our toes and they'd better not try anything," said one party supporter.³⁵ Everyone responded to this suggestion with great enthusiasm. They understood the irony and symbolism of challenging the right of white people to vote.

Although state law permitted poll watchers to assist voters whose eligibility had been questioned, it forbade them from aiding illiterate or disabled voters. Persons unaffiliated with a political party, however, could help anyone, opening the door for whites to steal countless black ballots. "The big point for us to make is that no black people should ask any white man for help," said a meeting participant. "We'll help each other."³⁶ This line of thinking prompted party leaders to instruct the volunteers to spread the word that black voters ought not return home immediately after casting their ballots as they had been advised previously because of the likelihood of white violence. Rather, they should stay at the polls as long as possible to help those in need. "Instead of pulling the black panther lever and going on home, we tell our people to pull the lever and back up fifty feet and stand by ready to help our brother if he needs it," declared Emory Ross, the candidate for coroner.³⁷

LCFO leaders also urged the volunteers to be on the lookout for whites casting ballots in the name of people who had long ago left the county or had died. To combat the graveyard vote, the volunteers needed a copy of the most recent voter registration roll. Unfortunately, the list of registered voters that the party possessed was several months old. To obtain the current list someone had to go to the probate judge's office. John Hulett and Sidney Logan, Jr., volunteered to make the trip Monday morning so that the volunteers would be able to review the list that night at the final mass meeting before the election.³⁸

Monday evening, several hundred movement supporters from every corner of the county gathered at Mt. Moriah Baptist Church for last-minute instructions. They also came to draw strength from one another, as well as from the divine. "God, go with us to the polls tomorrow," implored a preacher in an opening prayer. "Be there with us in the morning." After the invocation, Hulett addressed the crowd. He used his time to express his pride in all that African Americans had accomplished. "No matter what happens, tomorrow night I will hold my head as high as I have ever done. It is a victory to get the Black Panther on the ballot." The ultimate goal, though, was gaining control of the county courthouse so that they could bring about the kind of change that people wanted. To make this happen, they had to be better organized. "All we have is our organization," lamented Hulett. "In the next two years we ought to know where every house in this county is. We need the help of every Negro in our community."³⁹ Although they had traveled a great distance, Hulett understood that their journey was far from complete.

The church-like service quickly gave way to a political workshop during which the LCFO leaders spent a considerable amount of time explaining the carpool system and even more time reviewing the list of registered voters that Hulett and Logan obtained without hassle that morning. The list was supposed to be arranged according to voting precinct and voting box, but of course it was not. Nor did it include the race and sex of each voter—nothing was ever as it should have been in Lowndes County. Consequently, LCFO organizers asked the audience members to reseat themselves according to their voting precinct and to identify from memory the race and sex of every voter on the list. This tedious task took hours, but there was no way to avoid it.⁴⁰

Near the end of the meeting, the candidates addressed the crowd. When Alice Moore spoke, she fired up the people simply by repeating her campaign slogan—"Tax the rich to feed the poor." After the last speech,

LCFO officials handed the microphone to Carmichael, whose presence was a joyous surprise to everyone. SNCC's chairperson had returned to the area a few days earlier, but police in Selma had arrested him for campaigning for Dallas County's independent black candidates, and no one knew if they would release him before the election. "All that day where I had canvassed people had asked about Stokely, was he out of jail, would he be at the meeting?" reported SNCC volunteer Terence Cannon. Fortunately, SNCC attorneys secured his release just in time for him to attend the event.⁶¹

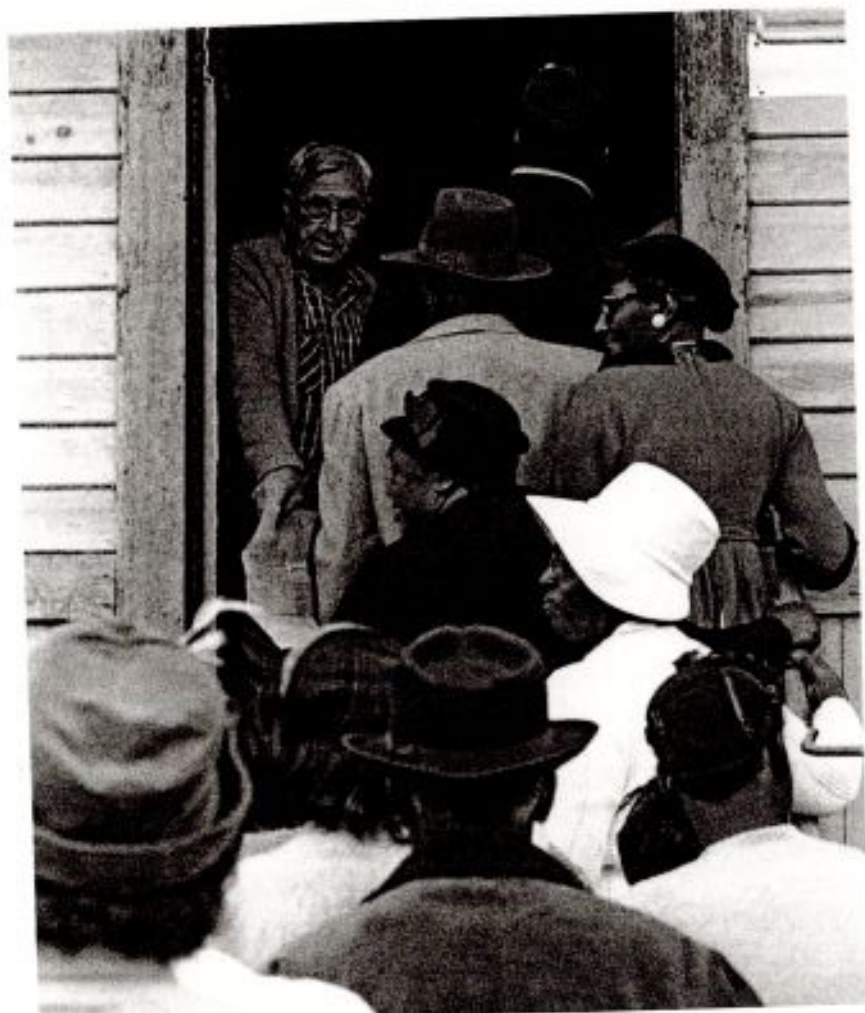
"It is so good to be home," said Carmichael, who was genuinely happy to be back. "We have worked so long for this. We have worked so hard for the right to come together and organize. We have been beaten, killed and forced out of our houses. But tonight says that we were right!" They had accomplished what everyone had assumed was impossible, he said. "Colored people have come together tonight. They said that niggers can't come together. Tonight says that we can come together, and we can rock this whole country from California to New York City!" Sensing the irony of their unique political situation, he pointed out that the "big shot Negroes" didn't have "anybody to vote for," but that they had "somebody." "We told them we knew what we were doing. We told them we were smart enough to do for ourselves. And all those school teachers in Lowndes County who told us we were stupid and uneducated, who are they going to vote for tomorrow?" He reminded them that more was at stake than simply having their own candidates: "When we pull that lever we pull it for all the blood of Negroes that the whites have spilled. We will pull that lever to stop the beating of Negroes by whites. We will pull that lever for all the black people who have been killed. We are going to resurrect them tomorrow. We will pull that lever so that our children will never go through what we have gone through. We don't need education—all we need is the will, the courage, and the love in our hearts." Their struggle had transformed the county, he explained. "Lowndes County used to be called the Devil's Backyard. Now it's God's Little Acre." It was a source of inspiration for the entire Black Belt: "We will open the eyes of all the black people in Alabama. We're saying to them, come to Lowndes County and we will show you how! We are telling them—you don't have to depend on a cracker like Wallace. We are not non-violent. We are not saying to whites—we are going to hit you over the head. We are saying—you stop hitting us." Absolute racial solidarity was important but not essential: "There are some who are not with us. When Moses crossed the Red Sea he left some people behind.

We are going to leave some Uncle Toms behind." Carmichael was in classic form. He was awash in the energy of the moment, but his excitement about the present did not cause him to lose sight of the past:

We have a lot to remember when we pull that lever. We remember when we paid ten dollars for a schoolbook for our children. We remember all the dust we ate. We are pulling the lever to stop that! When we pull that lever we remember the buckets of water we pulled, because we have no running water. We are pulling the lever so people can live in some fine brick homes. We are going to say goodbye to shacks, dirt roads, poor schools. We say to those who don't remember—you better remember, because if you don't, move on over, [or] we are going to move on over you!⁶²

The crowd cheered and showered Carmichael with handshakes and hugs as he made his way through the sanctuary. He had given voice to their passion, anger, fear, and determination as only he could. More than that, his words bolstered their courage. The day of reckoning was on them, not just for the previous year's work, but also for several generations of struggle, and he had just made plain what was at stake. Hulett understood this and brought the meeting to a close, but not before issuing a final set of instructions. He told the volunteers to arrive at the polls one hour before they opened. "We'll be there at seven," he said. He also instructed them to dress their best: "Let's dress up and look like people when we go to the polls tomorrow." "Only a John Hulett could have said that and not been misunderstood," said Carmichael.⁶³

LCFO supporters could not have asked for a more pleasant day to vote, a sign perhaps that the Lord walked with them. As instructed by Hulett, the volunteers began making their way to the polls soon after sunrise, as did scores of black voters who either wanted to vote before going to work or simply were too anxious to wait. The latter arrived in pairs, small groups, or alone. Some even came with children in tow. Those who owned cars drove, while those who did not walked at least far enough to flag down a carpool shuttle or to hitch a ride with a passing black motorist. Underneath the ordinary sweaters and overcoats that they wore to ward off the crisp morning air, they sported their sharpest dresses and finest suits, having taken to heart the charge to look their best. Once at the polls they instinctively lined up. Although they did not know what to expect, almost everyone stayed in line. At this point, there was no turning back.⁶⁴



African Americans in Lowndes County line up to vote, many for the first time, in the November 8, 1966, general election. © Jim Pepler.

The morning belonged to the LCFO as African Americans flocked to the polls in numbers far greater than whites. The favorable early turnout coupled with the absence of violence buoyed people's spirits and steeled their resolve. "I don't know if we'll win, [but] I know we will keep on fighting," said an eighty-five-year-old woman after pulling the lever for

the Black Panther. "If I'm beaten I'll know I was whipped fighting."⁶⁵ The promising beginning did not cause party organizers to lower their guard. Carmichael, for one, remained in the field. He spent the entire day crisscrossing the county in his car, shouting, "Did you vote right?" to the black people he came across, and no doubt flashing his trademark toothy grin every time someone hollered back, "Sure did!" For his trouble, he was shot at as he left a service station in Fort Deposit.⁶⁶

Around midday, the tide started to turn. Suddenly, more and more whites began appearing at the polls, spurred by news of the strong African American turnout. At the same time, plantation owners began hauling black workers to the polls with instructions to vote for the white candidates marked on the sample ballots that they had given them. Outside several voting sites, white loiterers started threatening African Americans, while inside they began "helping" them. Reports of these and other irregularities began flowing back to LCFO headquarters at an alarming rate. "Get over to Precinct 7, trouble there. Not letting our poll-watchers observe everything. Whites going in booths with Negroes," read one report. "Get up to Hayneville right away. Intimidating our people outside," read another. Still another said, "Precinct 5 needs more 'helpers' badly. See what can be done."⁶⁷ Though losing ground quickly, a remarkable number of poll watchers chose not to retreat. In the smoky backroom of the Jack Portis Store, which doubled as the Burkeville polling site, three black women, armed only with pads and clipboards, refused to abandon their post even after a white official threw out a movement lawyer. It must have taken every ounce of courage they could muster not to turn and run. By staying put, they cast a long shadow of doubt on the legitimacy of white authority. "[By] their mere presence they were challenging the very foundations of white power," observed Carmichael.⁶⁸

Most polls opened and closed without serious incident. "Lowndes whites 'played it cool' and abstained from excessive violence [to] avoid investigation by outsiders," reported SNCC's Cleveland Sellers.⁶⁹ In Fort Deposit, however, things turned violent just before the end of the day. Whites had been intimidating African Americans and harassing LCFO monitors all afternoon, but they had not assaulted anyone until Andrew Jones, a fifty-two-year-old resident of Fort Deposit, arrived to pick up black poll watchers Clara McMeans and Bobbie Jean Goldsmith. As he stepped out of his station wagon, he heard someone say, "Andrew, what the hell are you doing here?" Before he could respond, a savage blow to the back of his head buckled his knees. As he fell, he grabbed one of the white men

who had surrounded him, but he lost his grip after being clubbed a second time. Semiconscious and defenseless, his assailants began beating him with pistol handles, rifle butts, and a tire chain. Jones's sixteen-year-old daughter, Annie, witnessed the attack, and her cries caught the attention of a nearby group of SNCC volunteers who knew instantly that one of their own was in trouble. Without hesitating, they threw open the trunk of their car, divvied up a stash of handguns, and hustled to the scene, but they quickly realized that they were grossly outmanned and outgunned, so they kept their weapons out of sight. Fortunately, a newly appointed, non-movement, black deputy who observed the assault from a distance approached the mob just as someone raised a rifle to Jones's head. The deputy did not attempt to arrest anyone but his presence caused the hostile crowd to pause just long enough for the SNCC workers to retrieve Jones's limp body and hurry out of town.⁷⁰ "Mr. Jones was the last person I thought they'd try to get," said Carmichael after learning of the attack. "He's one of the toughest men in the county."⁷¹ Indeed, Jones had chosen to remain in Fort Deposit even after receiving death threats for refusing to campaign for white Democrats. If whites were bold enough to go after him, then no one was safe. Realizing this, the party sent armed guards to the homes of LCFO activists, a show of force that very likely deterred additional violence that night.

Voting ended at six o'clock, and shortly thereafter fatigued poll watchers began trickling into party headquarters with harrowing accounts of the day's events and with precinct totals. As they submitted their numbers, office workers kept a tally on the chalkboard that occupied most of one wall. Despite reports of fraud and a late surge in white voter participation, many people clung to the thin thread of hope that the party would still win. But it did not take long for everyone to realize that victory was not to be. In the end, the chalkboard showed that the black candidates had lost to their white rivals by margins ranging from three hundred to six hundred votes.⁷²

The reasons for the LCFO's defeat are clear. Although black registered voters outnumbered white registered voters, about 20 percent of the black electorate, or roughly six hundred African Americans, stayed home on Election Day, negating African Americans' numerical advantage. A great many people avoided the polls out of fear of white violence. Even those who contained their concerns about racial terrorism long enough to make the trip to the polls sometimes fled after seeing gun-toting whites congregated outside. "In one area we had a large number of people who walked

around with guns on their sides, who wasn't deputies, who wasn't [officially authorized] to carry these guns, some even had shotguns who stood there by the polls," recalled Hulett. "When the people turned out to the polls and seeing these people standing by, they returned to their homes, did not vote at all."⁷³ Quite a few people stayed away because they feared eviction. "Most people who live on the white people's land were afraid to vote for the freedom organization's candidates because they'd get thrown off their land," explained Alice Moore.⁷⁴ Those who worried about eviction did so with good reason. Hundreds of people had lost their homes since the movement started, and after the election white property owners evicted scores more. Still others feared economic retaliation. A retired teacher abstained from voting after school officials told her that she would forfeit her pension if she did. There were also those who feared having their votes stolen. "Many people stayed away from the polls because they could not vote freely," said movement leader Lillian McGill. Rather than "vote against themselves," they opted not to vote at all.⁷⁵

White chicanery also reduced the number of black ballots cast. Election officials assigned half the county's black voters to polling places in precincts far from their homes. Many occupants of the same household had to vote at sites at opposite ends of the county, while others had to check voter lists at several polling places before finding their assigned site; quite a few never did figure out where they were supposed to go. The situation caused great confusion.⁷⁶

Black nonparticipation, though, was not enough to seal the fate of the Black Panther. As expected, whites voted as a solid racial bloc, but this still did not give them enough votes to carry the election. White candidates needed black votes, and they received a fair share. Election returns indicate that some four hundred African Americans voted against the third-party candidates.⁷⁷ Many of these voters, particularly those who were black professionals, did so willingly. Maggie Connors was not one of them—she supported the LCFO. "I pulled the lever 'till the black cat howled," she said to a reporter on Election Day. But Mrs. Connors knew several people who opposed the party. When she spotted a teacher whom she suspected of voting against the Black Panther, she quipped, "I'll bet the rooster crowed when she voted."⁷⁸ The black elite had not supported the LCFO before the election and made no secret afterward that they had not experienced a last-minute change of heart. "I don't believe in going the third-party route," said a local black landowner. "It's a foolish thing to do."⁷⁹

Anecdotal evidence suggests that an even greater number of African Americans cast ballots for white candidates unwillingly. Coercion was partly implicit; African Americans understood white expectations and for many people meeting these expectations was critical to their survival. They neither had to be told to vote for white candidates nor physically compelled. The U.S. Civil Rights Commission concluded in a report about the election that the totality of white "economic domination in the region, together with a history of racial violence, infects the entire political process . . . There is no need for the white landowner or the white employer to direct the Negro sharecropper or worker not to run for office, not to vote, or to vote only for the white candidates favored by the landowner. In many cases, the Negro worker knows what his white landlord or boss wants him to do and naturally conforms." Speaking for rural black people across the South, an African American brick mason from North Carolina said, "You just know what you are supposed to do and what you are not supposed to do."⁸⁰

Even more African Americans voted for white candidates as a direct result of physical intimidation. In Fort Deposit, Sandy Ridge, and Braggs, plantation owners ordered black workers into trucks, drove them to the polls, hurried them inside, handed them completed sample ballots, and told them to vote for the white candidates marked on the sheets. Some who arrived on their own were given no choice but to accept "help" from white election officials. Others struggled to keep their ballot selections a secret. "Some white men would open the curtains with their hand, and look into the booth while the Negroes were voting," explained one black voter.⁸¹

Organizing shortcomings also contributed to the party's defeat. Several polling sites, including Sandy Ridge where sheriff Frank Ryals made his home, did not have any black poll watchers. At other locations, LCFO workers left early, failed to challenge white voters, or stopped taking notes when ordered to do so by whites. The carpool worked well, but there was neither enough time, nor enough cars, to transport everyone who needed a ride. In addition, the political education program, as innovative and dynamic as it was, did not reach every black voter. Having to vote twice, first in the nomination convention and again in the general election, confused some people, while voting protocol and voting machines baffled others. "We weren't really prepared," said Hulett. "We thought we was but we wasn't."⁸²

The defeat was tremendously disappointing. Party supporter James Jones, who lived in Lowndesboro, captured the prevailing sentiment when he told a reporter that losing to whites made him "sick."⁸³ Nevertheless,

African Americans retained their fighting spirit. "Even though we lost, the people have strong confidence," said Hulett.⁸⁴ Their resolve stemmed from the LCFO's impressive showing. The upstart party received 80 percent of the black vote and 42 percent of the total vote, a remarkable achievement considering the degree of black political exclusion that had existed locally and the willingness of whites to use intimidation and fraud to stay in power. Moreover, this was not just a moral victory. The strong showing meant that the state would recognize the LCFO as an official political party. The Black Panther was here to stay.

The election of 1966 revealed the potential of freedom politics to supplant the usual undemocratic politics. The vast majority of black voters embraced the new political culture that the party represented. They welcomed the LCFO's commitment to democratic decision making and its de-emphasis on professional qualifications as prerequisites for running for office. They also approved of its populist platform. They rallied behind the idea that they could tax the rich to feed the poor. African Americans now had a blueprint for future political practice. They had a way to achieve political power without compromising their commitment to freedom rights.

The significance of the LCFO's impressive performance was not lost on SNCC organizers. "November 8, 1966, made one thing clear: some day black people will control the government of Lowndes County," said Carmichael. They also understood that the election's significance extended far beyond the county line. "Lowndes is not merely a section of land and a group of people, but an idea whose time has come," explained Carmichael.⁸⁵ That idea—the development of independent political parties to enable African Americans to engage in electoral politics in ways that placed the people's interests ahead of everything else—was one of the key political developments of the post-Voting Rights Act era. It sparked the push to develop a national network of independent black parties that resulted in the formation of a statewide third party in Alabama and inspired a series of national black political conventions in the early 1970s.

The election's broader significance also relates to its influence on Black Power. SNCC's version of Black Power was not an empty slogan devoid of programmatic meaning that surfaced spontaneously during the Meredith march. On the contrary, it referred to a concrete organizing program for black political empowerment that grew out of the joint efforts of rural black southerners and SNCC organizers to democratize the South. It was a product of "the ferment of agitation and activity by different people

and organizers in black communities over the years," said Carmichael. The freedom struggle in Lowndes County was particularly influential. "SNCC's Alabama experience was the immediate genesis of the concept of Black Power," wrote Invanhoe Donaldson, director of SNCC's New York office.⁸⁶ Indeed, the Lowndes Project gave final form and full meaning to Black Power. Moreover, the permanent establishment of an independent political party made the Lowndes Project SNCC's most successful Black Power undertaking. Unfortunately, the web of misinformation that black moderates and white liberals spun about Black Power became a part of the standard civil rights narrative and caused most people to lose sight of the organizing experiences that led SNCC to demand Black Power. It also led people to overlook the connection between Black Power and SNCC's third-party program.

Black Power was just as important to the forward progress of the Lowndes movement as the local struggle was to the development of the ideology. Had SNCC organizers never introduced Black Power—with its emphasis on third-party politics and black consciousness—there never would have been an LCFO. Undoubtedly, African Americans would have continued to fight for freedom rights, but the ways in which they agitated and organized would have been noticeably different. It is also unlikely that they would have attained the same degree of political sophistication. Thus, neither the Lowndes movement nor Black Power can be fully understood outside of the symbiotic relationship that existed between them, which reached full maturity during the turbulent summer of 1966.

After the election, local leaders continued to organize. Although the defeat was a sobering reminder of who still held the reins of power, it also underscored the need to carry on. In the coming years, African Americans enjoyed their greatest success in electoral politics. But electing their own to public office did not mean that the movement had succeeded. There was a very real difference between black political visibility and black political power. For African Americans to reap the benefits of controlling the local government, black elected officials had to fight effectively for freedom rights.

7

Now Is the Time for Work to Begin

Black Politics in the Post-Civil Rights Era

They started arriving in Hayneville early that morning and they never stopped coming. As many as two thousand people from every corner of Lowndes County and from as far away as Detroit converged on the county seat. By noon, they had taken over the town square, which proudly displayed a stone memorial to the fallen heroes of the Confederacy. As they waited for the swearing-in ceremony to begin, they reminisced with friends and family about the struggles of the past and discussed the future, which looked considerably brighter in the wake of the election of the county's first black sheriff a few months earlier in November 1970. Perhaps the next time they gathered in Hayneville for an inauguration they would not need armed black men to guard them as they did that afternoon.

The ceremony began promptly at 1:30 p.m. inside the courthouse. More than four hundred people squeezed into the upper level of the century-old building to witness history, but hardly any white people were among them. Local whites avoided Hayneville completely that Saturday. The lone exception was probate judge Harrell Hammonds, who agreed to administer the oath of office as a gesture of gratitude for the support he received from African Americans during the recent election. After a succession of activists addressed the crowd, John Hulett placed his hand on a Bible and swore to enforce and uphold the law as the county sheriff. Hulett had been on the front line of the freedom struggle for six years and understood better than most the significance of the moment. His victory was not the end of the fight for freedom rights—rather, it was the start of an important new phase. "Now is the time for work to begin," he told the jubilant crowd.¹

Hulett's election raised the expectations of the county's black residents, and their heightened hopes prompted them to make electoral politics

their chief concern. This decision also reflected their faith in black elected officials. But in order for black officeholders to make a difference, they had to find a way to undue deeply embedded structural impediments to racial equality. White supremacy was not merely a manifestation of racist attitudes and discriminatory behavior. It was also a product of long-standing institutional arrangements that generally fell beyond the control of local officials. Alabama law, for instance, made it virtually impossible for local officials to raise property taxes to increase county school board budgets. Yet local officials were not completely powerless. By allocating their limited resources judiciously, they could keep some conditions from becoming worse and even improve others. Whether they would do so, however, was an entirely different matter.

OEO director Sargent Shriver finally released the funds for the Lowndes County Self-Help Housing and Job Training Program in November 1966. His decision came only a few weeks after the defeat of the Black Panther candidates and energized local activists. The leaders of the LCCMHR quickly hired thirty-four-year-old D. Robert Smith, a Connecticut native who worked for the Tuskegee Institute Community Education Program (TICEP), to serve as the program's director. They turned to Smith in large part because he met the strict educational requirements that the OEO had set for the position. Movement leaders also leased an old Episcopal church on the outskirts of Hayneville to serve as the program's headquarters. The abandoned church was in pitiful shape, but it was the best that they could do. Coley Coleman, the white shopkeeper who owned the building, was the only property owner in town willing to rent to them. Volunteers began renovating the church in January 1967. At the same time, adult education classes began in Ash Creek and Calhoun. More than one hundred people, all of whom lived below the poverty line (earning less than one thousand dollars annually) and tested at or below a sixth-grade literacy level, enrolled in the classes. This was their first chance to get ahead in life. "I am taking the courses so that I can do better by my children—get a better job," said Bessie McMeans. "I have nine children. Maybe at the end there will be something better for me." Nothing was guaranteed, but everyone was hopeful.²

The participants made tremendous progress during the first few months of 1967, and so did the volunteers working on the church. By early March, the renovation was nearly complete. But the volunteers did not get to enjoy the fruit of their labor. Just before dawn on Sunday, March 12, an



Man sifts through the ruins of the LCCMHR poverty program headquarters in Hayneville, which was destroyed by an arsonist on March 12, 1967. Photo by Louis H. Anderson/Courtesy of Estizer Smith.

arsonist set the old church ablaze. The fire burned for half the day, reducing the building to a smoldering heap of rubble. That evening, the LCCMHR held a mass meeting at Macedonia Baptist Church in Fort Deposit. Everyone was upset, including Robert L. Strickland, chairperson of the LCCMHR Poverty Program Committee. When he addressed the crowd, he reassured the people that the program would continue. His words buoyed their spirits and strengthened their resolve. They left the meeting believing that tomorrow would be better, but it wasn't. Macedonia Baptist Church burned early the next morning.³

SNCC chairperson Stokely Carmichael put the attacks into context. "The bombing and burning of black churches in the American south has become one of the traditional methods used by white racists to show their contempt and hatred of black people who dare to protest the inhuman degradation and humiliation to which we have been constantly subjected for the past 400 years," he wrote. "That this method has the approval of white America and its power structure is best exemplified by

the continued refusal of the federal government, FBI, and state and local police authorities to deal with this situation and make even minimal efforts to apprehend the perpetrators of such atrocities and bring them to justice.⁴ No one was ever arrested for torching the churches. Nor was anyone ever arrested for setting fire to Good Hope Presbyterian Church, an all-white church in Benton, which went up in flames one week after the black churches burned. The state fire marshal identified arson as the likely cause, but movement people insisted that lightning was to blame, a thinly veiled but unsubstantiated claim of responsibility. Who or what started the fire remained a mystery. But no more churches burned.⁵

People filled every pew of Gordonsville's Mt. Moriah Baptist Church on Sunday, March 19, 1967, the day after the fire at Good Hope, to commemorate the second anniversary of the LCCMHR's founding. It was supposed to be a joyous occasion, and to a certain extent it was. The people had a lot to celebrate, including the creation of the Black Panther Party. But the recent fires were on everyone's mind. Since the attacks, the county had become much more dangerous. Among other things, there had been a spike in police harassment. The people, however, refused to be intimidated. "There's going to be some trouble if people keep up that kind of stuff," said Strickland. They also remained focused. That afternoon, they recommitted themselves to fighting for freedom rights.⁶

Local activists fought on several fronts in 1967. Foremost, they held their ground on the poverty program. Less than two weeks after the headquarters burned, they moved a fifty-foot trailer onto the site to serve as a temporary operations center. Unlike before, armed guards stood sentry at night. They also launched a campaign to raise twenty-five thousand dollars to construct a permanent building. Soon they expanded the adult education offerings, adding classes on home economics and housing construction. The classes ran through the end of the summer and made a real difference in people's lives. "When I first came here, I couldn't do no good writing at all," said Joe Frank Taylor. "Now I can do a lot." The classes have "benefited everybody out here," said another program participant.⁷

Those who participated in the housing construction classes put their new skills to work immediately by building new homes for the residents of Tent City, many of whom had lived in the makeshift camp for a full year. They built the homes on one-acre plots that the evictees had purchased with the help of one-hundred-dollar grants from the LCCMHR. With the residents of Tent City resettled, the construction class participants, along with other movement supporters, began clearing the site to

build a cooperative grocery store and service station. The Lowndes County Co-op, a black economic development group started by local movement leader Elzie McGill, sponsored the venture. "Our plans are large, but we have to start small for financial reasons," said William Cosby, the co-op's treasurer. To finance the new businesses, the co-op sold common stock at twenty-five dollars a share and preferred stock, with a guaranteed higher dividend, for slightly more. Although fundraising was slow, movement leaders expected to break ground by the end of the year.⁸

Local activists also rallied around black students to ensure that whites treated them fairly at their new schools. At Hayneville High School, which used to be the county's flagship white high school, black students found classroom equality elusive. In June 1967, the school's white administrators held back sixty black students, fully half the black student population. "We went to see Hulda Coleman and asked why our kids aren't passing," explained Frank Miles, Jr., at a mass meeting. "Mrs. Coleman said that Hayneville High School kids are 'not interested in going on.' Mrs. Coleman told us that some kind of achievement tests were given, and the kids didn't pass them. But what I want to know is how a kid who was making A's and B's until last week comes up flunking. I know lots of kids worked hard." Someone else said, "I think these white people are trying to get the high school back for themselves, so they won't need a private school. That private school is costing somebody money."⁹ Conflict between black students and white teachers continued in the fall, prompting Hulett and several others to pen an open letter to Superintendent Coleman documenting, among other things, beatings with switches. Coleman responded by inviting movement leaders to discuss the issues raised in the letter. "We'll be glad to send someone up there to talk with her," said Hulett. "But it doesn't do any good. We've been up there on other things, and nothing was ever done."¹⁰

The year ended sourly with a leadership struggle within the poverty program. Internal conflict first surfaced during the summer when director D. Robert Smith agreed to build the new headquarters on land owned by Coley Coleman and to deed the building to him after a few years. Smith made the deal without consulting the poverty program board, whose members wanted to rebuild in the black community. "Don't think that Mr. Coleman is our friend just because he rented the building to us," said board member Frank Miles, Jr. "We know how white people in Hayneville treat us."¹¹ The board eventually voided the contract. A second dustup occurred over the proposal for the 1968 program. The board invited local

activists to help draft the document, but Smith objected to their participation, believing that a hard line should be drawn between the poverty program and political activism. He said as much to W. P. Painter, an Alabama state trooper assigned to investigate the poverty program, when the two met privately to discuss local happenings. "There are some people in the county who have a difficult time distinguishing between civil rights and a poverty program, but we have come to an agreement," he told the state investigator.¹² Smith's decision to meet with Painter cost him the trust of movement people, and eventually cost him his job. In September 1967, the board asked him to resign, citing a loss of confidence in his leadership. Smith refused to step down, and some within the movement supported him. Alice Moore, the former LCFO candidate for tax assessor and the director of the Calhoun poverty center, found no fault with Smith's leadership. "So far as I'm concerned, due to Mr. Smith's administration, seems like the program's moving on," she said. "He runs it like he has the trainees at heart."¹³ Smith, though, resigned in November. Louis H. Anderson, the poverty program's finance officer, replaced him. Anderson worked closely with the board, and during the next year he managed an expanded program effectively.¹⁴

Local activists turned their attention back to politics at the beginning of 1968. Hulett led the way, crisscrossing the county, usually by himself but often with a partner, encouraging African Americans to register. He logged so many hours knocking on doors and driving people to the courthouse that a close associate joked that his wife "doesn't know him" anymore. Some three thousand African Americans remained unregistered, and getting them on the voter rolls was critical. The LCFFP planned to run candidates for the school board, the county commission, and the justice of the peace in 1968. To have a chance at victory, they needed several hundred more votes than their predecessors received, and these votes had to come from African Americans because whites remained firm in their opposition to the party. With this in mind, Hulett and LCFFP leaders ratcheted up the canvassing effort by sending more volunteers into the field.¹⁵

The voter registration campaign mirrored earlier efforts. Elzie McGill explained that local leaders instructed the canvassers to encourage people to register and "get them to understand what the vote means." There was, however, one glaring difference—the absence of SNCC field secretaries. SNCC as an organization withdrew from Lowndes County shortly after the 1966 general election. The decision to leave was not easy. SNCC field

secretaries had become webbed into the black community. For activists such as Bob Mants, the fate of local people was inextricably linked to their own. At the same time, they had accomplished what they had set out to do—they had organized "Bloody Lowndes." African Americans now had an effective social movement organization dedicated specifically to fighting for freedom rights, and an independent political party recognized by the state. "Our way is to live in the community, find, train, or develop representative leadership within strong, accountable local organizations or coalitions that did not exist before, and that are capable of carrying on the struggle after we leave," explained Carmichael. "When we succeed in this, we will work ourselves out of a job. Which is our goal."¹⁶ Having achieved their primary aim, it was time to move on.

There was also a very practical reason for SNCC's departure. The organization wanted to expand its third party-organizing program beyond Lowndes County, but it did not have enough experienced field secretaries to shepherd multiple communities through the long process of party building. Its staff had shrunk to about one hundred people, less than half the size it was two years earlier. People left for a variety of reasons. Some drifted away, victims of battle fatigue; some were pulled into other struggles, both inside and outside of the movement; and some were forced out. Whites are often lumped into the last group, but far more faded from sight for personal reasons or voluntarily joined the student and antiwar movements than were ever asked to leave. SNCC's dwindling numbers made it impractical, if not impossible, for the organization to maintain its presence in Lowndes County and develop a national network of grassroots third parties. And soon it became hard for SNCC to do anything. In the wake of its public opposition to the Vietnam War and its call for Black Power, financial donations slowed to a trickle, making it extremely difficult for the organization to cover its operating expenses. Simultaneously, both the federal government, through the FBI's domestic counterintelligence program, and several state governments, through their various police agencies, sought to destroy the organization. Local law enforcement, for instance, repeatedly arrested SNCC organizers on trumped-up charges such as conspiracy to incite riot or provoke insurrection. The sharp increase in government repression, combined with the rapid evaporation of SNCC's meager resources, stripped the organization of its capacity to grow and slowly robbed it of its ability to organize. Although its members never lost the will to organize, by 1968 SNCC was a shell of its former self in terms of staff size and viable projects.¹⁷

Local movement activists owed SNCC organizers a tremendous debt. "Nobody ever [came] to us and done for us what Snick workers done," said Hulett. "And people was afraid to let 'em come in their homes, so they walked the streets. This is the first time in our history Negroes can go to the courthouse and talk loud. And when we got scared and talked real weak, the Snick boys with us took it up and talked real loud."¹⁸ Although indebted to SNCC organizers, local activists were not dependent on them. "Stokely came down and told us how to do good," said Frank Miles, Jr. "He didn't want to take over or run us. We're independent. He told us to take what we could use from what he gave us, and leave the rest."¹⁹ This did not mean that African Americans wanted to proceed without SNCC's help. "If we had an opportunity to have a SNCC crew like we once had, I'd be welcoming them back," said local leader Lillian McGill.²⁰ But they understood why SNCC organizers, particularly Carmichael, moved on. "It was just like Moses left Egypt. He had to go somewhere else," said student activist John Jackson. "They say [Carmichael's] a God-sent man and there's other work for him to do, and that he's opened our eyes and now it's time for us to do something for ourselves."²¹ Mathew Jackson, Sr., John's father, said "the people really felt like he had a bigger job to do, a bigger job somewhere else; and he felt like, after hearing our people discuss this thing . . . that we'd be able to go on out on our own. Then he could go some other place and help those people."²²

The absence of SNCC organizers did not reduce the people's commitment to freedom politics. Educating eligible voters, a hallmark of freedom politics, remained as important to LCFP leaders as registering them. Throughout 1967, they discussed the responsibilities of local officials at weekly mass meetings and made a special point of de-emphasizing political experience, wealth, and whiteness as prerequisites for holding office. They also conducted political education workshops patterned after the sessions that SNCC activists once organized. They placed a greater emphasis on the duties of poll watchers and election clerks, however, in order to guard against the kind of Election Day fraud that contributed to the defeat of black candidates in 1966. "If [African Americans] are going to be using somebody to assist them, they [will know to] use some of their own people [or to] use the officials who definitely don't go along with the [Democratic] party," said Hulett. They also took care to explain how to cast a split-ticket ballot so that movement supporters could vote for LCFP nominees in local contests and for moderate white Democrats in state races. "Most people were confused about this," said Hulett. "There

were many people who thought that they could go out and just vote for one [party. Now] they won't be confused when they go to the polls on Election Day."²³

Victory, however, was far from a sure thing. The outcome of the 1967 ASCS election underscored the difficulty of winning public office. Despite a spirited effort, African Americans managed to elect just three black farmers to ASCS community committees that fall, all from the same neighborhood. "In this community, most of us own our own farms," said R. C. Mays, one of the farmers who prevailed. "In other communities, they are tenants—the man says, 'vote for me or you're off the land.'" It was the same old problem—the immobilizing effect of fear.²⁴

Despite the disappointing showing in the ASCS contest, several people stepped forward in the early months of 1968 to run as LCFP candidates in that year's general election. All of them were veteran activists, folk willing to do what others were still too afraid to do. Jesse Favors, who participated in the first voter registration attempt in March 1965, decided to run for justice of the peace. Charles Smith, who succeeded Hulett as the chairperson of the LCCMR in December 1965, accepted the nomination to run for county commission. And John Hinson, who ran for office in 1966, chose to run again for the school board. Each candidate's distinguished record of challenging white supremacy earned him the support of the movement community.²⁵

In the spring of 1968, party officials submitted the names of the nominees to probate judge Harrell Hammonds in accordance with state law. When they delivered the list, however, they made an unusual request: they asked the judge to refrain from publishing the names until the fall, hoping that this would limit their exposure to reprisals. "Our people have been subjected to a great deal of intimidation," explained Hulett.²⁶ Although Alabama law required the judge to identify those running for office immediately, Hammonds honored the request, a decision that pleased the black community but infuriated the white community.

Hammonds was one of the wealthiest people in Lowndes County, but that had not always been the case. The fifty-one-year-old judge was born "a poor country boy," as he liked to say. His luck changed when he met and married Mary Dora Norman, whose father, a large landowner in the Fort Deposit area, started him in ranching and plantation farming. By 1950, Hammonds was a successful businessperson with a countywide reputation for industriousness. That same year, governor James "Big Jim" Folsom appointed him probate judge to complete the unexpired term of

the recently deceased Robert Woodruff, the former sheriff who led the bloody suppression of the sharecroppers' strike in 1935. The appointment was Hammonds's reward for supporting "Big Jim" in the governor's race.²⁷

As probate judge, Hammonds occupied the most lucrative office in county government. Probate judges had a long history of manipulating public records and exploiting privileged information to accumulate wealth. When they purchased land, they sometimes neglected to transfer the deeds, which allowed them to avoid paying taxes on their acquisitions. On other occasions, they failed to advertise public auctions and bought land that had been confiscated for delinquent taxes at below-market rates. A review of local tax records dating back to mid-century conducted by the Lowndes County tax assessor in the 1980s revealed that Judge Hammonds, after several decades in office, benefited tremendously from such schemes.²⁸

Many members of the white elite resented Hammonds for holding the county's most profitable public office for so long, and their envy prompted them to keep him at arm's length. The fact that he did not descend from old money, but instead married into his wealth, provided a socially acceptable justification for snubbing him. Hammonds was well aware of his outsider status and knew that others coveted his job. "There's a privileged few down here that think they ought to rule the world," he said.²⁹ So he built a base of support among working-class whites by using his wealth and authority as probate judge to secure their votes. He routinely paid county and state permit fees for people short on cash and made sure to remind them of such favors before each election. He was an astute politician who mastered the art of turning the personal into the political. Nevertheless, his hold on the judgeship was tenuous. Every six years the white elite trotted out someone else for the county's top spot. In 1964, they rallied behind Republican Tommy Coleman. Although Hammonds defeated his opponent by a margin of two to one, he was growing increasingly concerned about his ability to stay in office. His worries opened his eyes to the potential of the emerging black electorate and prompted him to begin courting this new voting bloc. His decision to withhold the list of Black Panther candidates was his attempt at bridge building.³⁰

The white elite viewed the judge's refusal to release the names of the LCFP nominees completely differently. To them, it was an unconscionable act of racial disloyalty, and they pilloried him for his lack of white solidarity. The editor of the county weekly initiated the assault by publishing a derisive column impugning his character. Others harassed him and his wife with threatening telephone calls. The war of words reached new heights

when twenty-two of his cattle turned up dead. "Somebody put enough poison in six troughs to kill six hundred head," said Hammonds. To make matters worse, the white elite renewed plans to dethrone him in 1970.³¹

Despite pressure from local whites and the Alabama attorney general, Hammonds refused to disclose the names of the LCFP nominees until late August 1968. The delay prevented whites from harassing the black candidates during the summer, but it did not change the outcome of the fall election. In November 1968, the LCFP candidates lost to their Democratic rivals by some six hundred votes, roughly the same margin as in 1966. The reasons for the defeat were similar to those that caused the party to lose two years earlier. Although there was no violence on Election Day, white officials harassed many black voters, and white landowners and bosses threatened others.³² The leaders of the LCFP also identified an additional factor—a black backlash against the Black Panther symbol. "The people were afraid [of] the idea of the black panther," said Hulett. They thought that as an all-black party "we were going to be detrimental to people."³³ Many movement outsiders associated the Black Panther with violence. Third-party advocate Alma Miller traced the source of this misperception to negative press coverage of the Oakland-based Black Panther Party for Self-Defense. The national media generally depicted the BPP as a violent band of mischief makers. The local and regional press not only echoed this perspective, but also insisted that the BPP and the LCFP were essentially the same. For those who failed to separate rumor from reality, the roar of the Black Panther sounded like trouble.³⁴

Soon after the election, the party's leaders gathered to discuss what they needed to do differently to win in 1970. In addition to voter registration and political education work, they decided to soften the image of the party to appeal to African Americans who remained on the sidelines. Many believed that the only way to do this was to drop the black panther logo, while others argued that simply discarding the ballot symbol was not enough. They maintained that the link between the black panther and the LCFP was so deeply ingrained in people's minds that disassociating the two was impossible. With or without the black panther symbol, African Americans who had not gotten involved in the movement would still view the party as too radical.³⁵

The desire to soften the image of the LCFP led the party's leaders to consider merging with the National Democratic Party of Alabama (NDPA). The NDPA was a mostly black, statewide alternative to the Democratic Party that John Cashin, an African American dentist from Huntsville,

cofounded with two white activists in 1967. Although the NDPA drew its inspiration from the LCFO, it more closely resembled the MFDP. Not only was its membership interracial, but it officially supported the Democratic Party's national candidates. In 1968, the NDPA ran nearly one hundred people for local, state, and federal office, but without much success. The poor showing convinced Cashin that the party needed to harness the voting strength of the rural Black Belt, so he invited the most celebrated political group in the region to merge with his organization.³⁶

Cashin's offer intrigued Lowndes County activists, partly because the leaders of the NDPA shared a commitment to freedom rights. In addition, movement outsiders considered the NDPA less radical than the LCFF because of its interracial membership and its support of the national Democratic Party. Joining the NDPA would also allow local people to become part of a statewide network of political activists, further breaking the isolation of the rural Black Belt. Nevertheless, LCFF officials balked at the overture, fearing that the party would lose its autonomy. Cashin, though, allayed their fears by explaining that he was uninterested in curtailing their independence. "[He] had a tremendous amount of respect for people like Charles Smith [and] John Hulett because [they] were the pioneers in terms of a separate party in the state," said Bill Edwards, the NDPA's executive director.³⁷ Satisfied with Cashin's assurances, LCFF leaders invited him to address party supporters at a mass meeting. Although Hulett and the others favored a merger, they understood that the decision to join the statewide party was not theirs to make. After Cashin's presentation, the people debated the merits of his proposal and, in the end, decided that joining the NDPA was the right thing to do.³⁸

The coming together of the two parties signaled the beginning of a new chapter in local black politics. Never again would a snarling black panther appear on a ballot in Alabama. Joining the NDPA, however, did not guarantee victory in the 1970 election, and no one was more aware of this fact than Hulett. He was sure that the merger would attract more black voters, but he doubted that it would bring in enough people to defeat the Democratic nominees. Hulett's skepticism, combined with his eagerness to elect African Americans to public office, prompted him to make a series of decisions that led him and the movement away from freedom politics.

No incumbent was safe in 1970, especially not Judge Hammonds. That year, his Democratic primary opponent was former sheriff Frank Ryals. Ryals had resigned in 1967 after twelve years in office. The job simply did

not pay as well as it used to since the movement curtailed his ability to shakedown African Americans and collect the fees that came with arresting people on bogus charges. As probate judge, however, he could earn a substantial income. Yet he probably would not have challenged Hammonds had the white elite not encouraged him to run. Although Ryals did not come from old money, he was preferable to Hammonds because as sheriff he demonstrated a willingness to defer to his social betters. Ryals was also electable. Support for Hammonds among working-class whites waned considerably following the judge's decision to withhold the names of the Black Panther candidates. At the same time, working-class whites were extremely fond of the former sheriff because of his unwavering commitment to white supremacy.³⁹

Hammonds realized that he needed black votes to stave off defeat, so he sought out John Hulett, figuring that the movement's most visible leader would be able to persuade African Americans to participate in the Democratic primary and vote for him. He was also hopeful that Hulett would be able to keep the third party from running a black candidate against him in the general election. In exchange for Hulett's support, Hammonds was prepared to deliver enough white votes in November 1970 for Hulett to become the county's first black sheriff and for African Americans to become circuit clerk and coroner.⁴⁰

The scheme was pure politics designed not only to allow Hammonds to keep his job, but also to increase his power within the local government by providing him with allies in key courthouse positions. Although the judge would not be able to dictate completely the actions of black elected officials, he would have much more influence over them, having helped them win office, than over the white Democratic nominees who opposed his reelection. Among other things, such influence would give him control of the ballot box since the probate judge, the circuit clerk, and the sheriff (or the coroner if the sheriff's office was vacant) supervised local elections. In a county with a long history of Election Day fraud, whoever controlled the ballot box could determine the outcome of almost any election.

Hammonds shared the details of his plan with Hulett during a private meeting at the courthouse. The judge kept the get-together a secret to avoid further eroding his base of white support, and he asked Hulett to do the same. Hulett respected the judge's request and told only his close friend, James Haynes, a vocational education teacher at Lowndes County Training School. Haynes accompanied Hulett to the courthouse and

afterward the two men discussed the judge's proposal, deciding whether to accept it.⁴¹

The judge's plan had pragmatic appeal. They still did not have enough black votes to defeat white candidates, so they needed the white votes that Hammonds offered. They also had too few black votes to unseat the judge in the general election. Even with diminishing white support, Hammonds controlled enough white votes to beat a black challenger because of the sizeable number of black votes he was sure to receive from the hundreds of newly enfranchised tenant farmers living on his land. "Even though he doesn't give them anything they feel that they are kind of dedicated to [him] or they owe him something," said Hulett. Thus, it did not matter who won the Democratic primary for probate judge because a black candidate was unlikely to defeat that person. At the same time, African Americans cared very little for Frank Ryals because of the way he treated people while in office; Hammonds was no saint, but neither was he the devil that many people considered Ryals to be. African Americans, therefore, would presumably vote for Hammonds over Ryals in the primary. They also could do so without jeopardizing the third party's candidate selection process. Unlike 1966, third-party supporters were free to cast crossover ballots because Alabama recognized the NDPA as an official political party. This meant that the NDPA did not have to hold a nomination convention on the same day as the Democratic primary in order for its candidates to qualify for the general election. Finally, the judge's suggestion that Hulett run for sheriff was worth pursuing because Hammonds believed that he could convince his white supporters to vote for him. Although Hulett showed no previous interest in running for public office, he reasoned that if he was the best chance the people had of electing a black sheriff, then it made sense for him to run.

Although pragmatic, the judge's proposal violated a core principle of freedom politics—transparency in the decision-making process. Heeding the judge's call for discretion, Hulett kept the meeting a secret. He also did not disclose the terms of the proposal, perhaps out of deference to Hammonds, but possibly because of objections that other activists might have raised. Either way, his decision not to tell movement people about the meeting or to brief them on the proposal precluded important discussion and debate. The judge's plan also undermined the practice of selecting candidates democratically. Hammonds was willing to back Hulett for sheriff but unwilling to support anyone else, particularly Sidney Logan,

Jr., the Black Panther candidate in 1966 and the people's choice in 1970. By surreptitiously narrowing the third party's electoral options, the judge's scheme allowed exclusivity to seep into black politics.

Hulett was fully aware of the ways in which the judge's proposal contradicted freedom politics, but he decided to accept it anyway, believing that its pragmatic value offset its democratic shortcomings. There is nothing to suggest that Hulett had anything but the best interests of the people in mind when he made his decision. Nevertheless, by accepting the judge's proposal, he set in motion a series of events that caused the movement to unravel.

To uphold his end of the bargain, Hulett began drumming up support for Hammonds' reelection bid. Convincing African Americans to vote for the judge in the Democratic primary was not difficult. Frank Ryals had done nothing since leaving the sheriff's office to change black people's low opinion of him. At the same time, the judge's refusal to release the names of the Black Panther candidates in 1968, coupled with his decision not to evict tenant farmers for registering to vote and his practice of allowing poor people to live in the sharecroppers' shacks on his land rent-free, caused many African Americans to look favorably on him. In fact, these token gestures of human decency earned him a reputation as the "fairest white man in the county," said Lillian McGill.⁴²

Some 2,500 African Americans participated in the Democratic primary on May 5, 1970, an unprecedented turnout. As expected, they cast ballots mainly in the race for probate judge, and their participation decided that contest. Whites favored Ryals by more than 500 votes, but African Americans gave Hammonds a landslide victory. When election officials tabulated the results, the judge had defeated the former sheriff by 2,000 votes.⁴³

The strong black turnout convinced many within the movement that an African American could unseat Hammonds in November 1970, which made sustaining support for him quite difficult. Nevertheless, Hulett succeeded in persuading third-party supporters not to run a black candidate for probate judge by arguing that despite the impressive primary turnout, the third party still did not have enough black votes to defeat Hammonds. As evidence, he pointed to the sizeable number of non-movement African Americans who voted for the judge in May and who were sure to vote for him again in November. He also argued that supporting the judge would help black candidates in other races secure desperately needed white votes by demonstrating that African Americans were not plotting a revolution,

Ironically, local activists and SNCC organizers criticized this strategy when black professionals in Tuskegee used it several years earlier.⁴⁴

After thwarting the push for a black probate judge, Hulett began hand-picking candidates to run for the other major offices up for election. He convinced Willie Ed McGhee, a member of the board of directors of the poverty program, to run for coroner, and Alma Miller, a recent graduate of Alabama State University, to run for circuit clerk. He turned to them because their movement participation made them electable and because he believed that they would defer to his judgment. He also persuaded Sidney Logan, Jr., not to run for sheriff, but instead to support his own candidacy for that office. He told the World War II veteran that white people would never allow him to win because they were afraid of him—Judge Hammonds had made this point clear. Although Logan wanted to serve, he stepped aside because he wanted African Americans to have a black sheriff even more than he wanted run. Political compromise disguised as political expediency carried the day once again.⁴⁵

As the general election neared, Hammonds quietly encouraged his white supporters to vote for the three black candidates. Meanwhile, his wife, Mary, convinced many of her white friends to do the same by stressing that black elected officials, particularly a black sheriff, would curb their husbands' nefarious sexual escapades in the black community. The whisper campaign worked. On Election Day, about two hundred whites voted for Hulett, McGhee, and Miller. Their votes helped the trio beat the Democratic nominees by margins ranging from 140 to 307 votes. For the first time since Reconstruction, African Americans won prominent government positions.⁴⁶

The 1970 election marked a critical juncture in the African American freedom struggle. Since 1965, movement supporters had worked hard to elect African Americans to public office, believing that this was essential to reducing the gap between the haves and the have-nots. Defeats in 1966 and 1968 tempered their enthusiasm for electoral politics. The outcome of the 1970 contest, however, rekindled their passion and prompted them to make electoral politics their primary focus. It also led them to look to black elected officials to lead the fight for freedom rights. But the inaugural class of black officeholders was not nearly large enough to enact sweeping change. Realizing this, local activists renewed the effort to elect African Americans to every office in the county government.

The push to take over the courthouse began in earnest in 1972. That year, the tax assessor's office, the tax collector's office, and the school

superintendent's office were up for grabs. So too were all five seats on the county commission and three of five seats on the school board. The plum prize, though, was the superintendent's office, which Hulda Coleman had held for three decades. The superintendent controlled a multi-million-dollar budget, the largest of any local official, and, under Coleman, enjoyed final say on all policy and personnel matters. For African Americans, controlling the superintendent's office was the best way to ensure that their children received fair treatment and desperately needed educational resources. For whites, controlling the office was the only way to preserve segregation in public education. Although court-ordered desegregation had prompted a couple hundred white children to leave the public schools, more than four hundred, or about two-thirds of the county's white school-age population, remained. Nearly all of them, though, attended a single K-12 school, Lowndes County High School in Fort Deposit, which also employed nearly all the county's white teachers. A handful of black students attended the school, and some black teachers worked there as well, but only enough to keep the county in technical compliance with federal law.⁴⁷

When the 1972 Democratic primary came around, movement activists urged black voters to participate, but this time they asked them to cast their ballots for the white challengers. They believed that black candidates stood a better chance of defeating white opponents who owed their primary win to black votes. The strategy succeeded in eliminating several white incumbents and cleared the way for the third party to field a full slate of black candidates in the general election. But the NDPA's Lowndes County Executive Committee chose to nominate only a partial ticket. The group decided not to run anyone for the third seat on the school board or for the final two seats on the county commission. Hulett was behind this decision. He wielded tremendous influence over the committee and persuaded its members not to field a full slate in order to preserve a second secret agreement with Hammonds. In an attempt to consolidate power, the judge sponsored several of the primary challengers. This group included his wife Mary, who sought one of the school board nominations. None of his candidates, though, could win without black votes, so he promised Hulett that he would finance the campaign of Hulett's choice for superintendent if Hulett convinced African Americans to support his people in the upcoming election.⁴⁸

The executive committee's decision infuriated veteran activists. The third party's main political objective had always been to control the

courthouse. The exigencies of 1970 caused the party to set aside this goal in that year's election, but now there was no need to concede anything. By all estimates, the party had enough black votes to win every contest outright. For the sake of unity, the activists acquiesced to the committee's decision. They refused, however, to go along with a second committee recommendation to change the party's candidate selection process. Instead of conducting the usual runoff, the committee wanted to appoint the party's nominees. Once again, Hulett was behind the suggestion. He lobbied for the procedural change in order to guarantee that Uralee Haynes, his choice for superintendent, secured the party's nomination.⁴⁸

Uralee Haynes possessed the professional prerequisites to serve as superintendent, having worked in the county's public schools for twenty-nine years, mostly as an instructor of home economics and English at LCTS. The fifty-year-old teacher was Hulett's choice, however, because of his relationship with her husband, James, his close friend and political confidant. Hulett would have chosen James to run for the office but conventional wisdom suggested that a woman ought to challenge a woman. Besides, James's penchant for strong drink cast doubt on his electability. "Haynes was a night man," recalled his wife, and he made no secret of it.⁴⁹

Although well known and well liked within the black community, Uralee Haynes lacked the movement credentials to ensure a third-party nomination. Like most teachers, she remained on the sidelines when the movement began. She and her husband participated surreptitiously by advising Hulett and making cash donations, but her absence from the front line made her a suspect choice in the eyes of many people, especially because there were plenty of folk, including some teachers, who had been much more visible in the fight for freedom rights. Hulett knew that her candidacy would face stiff opposition, so he tried to subvert the established process for selecting candidates. But his end run failed, blocked by activists whose commitment to democratic decision making remained as strong as ever. It even prompted veteran activists, including William Cosby, a cofounder of the LCCMHR, and John Jackson, the former leader of the student protests at LCTS, to run for office. Three others also challenged Haynes, but Hulett's organizing skills and Hammonds's deep pockets gave her the victory.⁵⁰

Discord over the candidate selection process changed the way that black candidates prepared for the 1972 general election. Instead of campaigning for the third party, many embarked on personal crusades. "They campaigned like white folks," said NDPA executive director Bill Edwards.

"You'd go in that county and out of these eight candidates it seemed like about five or six of them had printed their own bumper stickers, had their own posters."⁵¹ This approach hinted at the emergence of a new kind of black politics, one that placed the interests of individuals ahead of the interests of the people. The controversy also revealed simmering class tension. The merger between the LCCP and the NDPA, combined with Hulett's election as sheriff, led black professionals to increase their involvement in the freedom struggle. At first, veteran activists welcomed their participation, but feelings of goodwill began to evaporate when some of the newcomers started questioning the decision-making ability of poor and working-class people. "They said they had the brains and the know-how to lead the Black masses to complete victory and began calling the shots," explained veteran Detroit organizer Simon Owens.⁵² The controversy also unearthed a generational divide. A couple hundred black youth had registered to vote following the ratification of the Twenty-sixth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution in 1971, which lowered the voting age to eighteen, and they were eager to participate in the party. Several even sought third-party nominations. The executive committee, however, was more interested in their votes than in their opinions, a misguided sense of entitlement that cost the party dearly.⁵³

Although conflict over the candidate selection process exposed major fault lines within the movement, most people still expected third-party candidates to ride a wave of black votes into office, but only Charles Smith, the former chairperson of the LCCMHR, prevailed. Smith narrowly won a seat on the county commission, beating his Democratic opponent by a mere eighteen votes. Had a white Republican not split the white vote, he too would have lost by a couple hundred votes.⁵⁴

Low black voter turnout was largely responsible for the party's poor showing. Alienation kept countless young people away from the polls. They were "so fed up with the mess that they did not vote," said activist Simon Owens. Frustration stemming from the candidate selection uproar prompted working-class African Americans to avoid the voting booths. "The grass roots people stayed home in disgust," explained Owens.⁵⁵ In addition, traditional campaigning failed to energize the party's base. The emphasis on individual candidates rather than on the people, the platform, and the party left many people uninterested in the election. Meanwhile, the absence of political education workshops and regular mass meetings left others unprepared. Voting fraud also contributed to the disappointing outcome. Party leaders dropped their guard on Election Day, thinking

that the black poll workers appointed by Judge Hammonds, Sheriff Hulett, and Circuit Clerk Miller could manage the situation, but "quite a bit of shit" occurred, said party leader Bill Edwards, including the dismissal of black poll watchers by the white people they had replaced.⁵⁷ Black support for white candidates played an equally important role in the party's dismal performance. Some African Americans voted for white candidates purely out of fear. Public school employees, for instance, knew that they could lose their jobs if they did not support Superintendent Coleman. Others voted for whites for the same reasons that led many to spurn Black Panther candidates in earlier elections, including their lack of faith in the ability of African Americans to fulfill the duties of elected office.⁵⁸

Infighting and overconfidence caused the third party to squander an excellent opportunity. "We had the ball and sure were moving downfield, deep in their territory. But we fumbled it away and [whites] have recovered it," said a local activist.⁵⁹ Statewide returns confirmed the lost opportunity. The NDPA won more than thirty elections across Alabama and did particularly well in the Black Belt.⁶⁰ The misstep was unfortunate, but at least it made the way forward clear. "The only thing left for us to do is to go back and try to organize all over again," said the same local activist. "We have to bury ourselves in the grass roots people, and let them and the youth take the lead, because I do not think they will trust us again."⁶¹

While most people looked to regroup, Hulett looked to move on. Prior to running for sheriff, his dedication to the third party and to freedom politics had been undeniable. No one had done more to build the party or to promote freedom rights and democratic decision making than he had. But once in office, his interest in the party and in freedom politics began to fade. Almost imperceptibly, he started to put his political career ahead of the people he served, and at some point during his first term he decided to direct his energy toward building a black political machine. A commitment to freedom politics, however, still permeated the third party, so he turned to the Democratic Party to realize his goal.

Not long after the 1972 general election, Hulett joined the Democratic Party. On his way out, he persuaded several movement activists to accompany him. With their help, he intended to take over the Democratic Party and fill the county courthouse with loyal black Democrats. In 1974, he ran for reelection as a Democrat and convinced coroner Willie McGhee to do the same. He also talked Elder Fletcher Fountain and Willie Wilson, Jr., into seeking Democratic nominations for the school board. In addition, he worked to pack the Lowndes County Democratic Executive

Committee—the local party's governing body—with his friends. In the upcoming election, Uralee Haynes, Charles Smith, Sarah Logan, Charlie Whiting, Jr., and Joe Frank Brown all sought seats on the committee. On his own, Hulett sought to strengthen his alliance with Hammonds by rallying black support for the judge's white candidates and involving Hammonds in the effort to elect two African Americans to the school board. Hammonds wanted these particular black candidates to prevail because their success would make his wife, whose term in office did not expire until 1976, the pivotal swing vote on a racially divided five-member board. Hulett even tried to broaden his support among white voters by endorsing George Wallace for governor. Wallace had toned down his race baiting considerably and had even started courting black elected officials by privately granting them personal favors and publicly channeling federal dollars their way. Hulett justified his endorsement by pointing to the governor's acceptance of a grassroots takeover of the Lowndes County Community Health Clinic in Hayneville.⁶²

Hulett's jump to the Democratic Party confounded countless movement activists, the majority of whom still believed that independent politics offered African Americans their best chance for political empowerment. Equally perplexing was Hulett's support of Wallace, a man dubbed the "arch enemy of desegregation" by activist Simon Owens. "We were sad to hear someone like John Hulett, who had been such a strong fighter against Wallace, trying to explain his actions by saying Nixon had made it impossible to get funds for Black clinics without having to go begging to Wallace," said Owens.⁶³ For many people, the endorsement was a disappointing act of political opportunism that portended real trouble.

Hulett's actions transformed local black politics by causing the third party to collapse. The party survived the disastrous 1972 election, but the frustration and alienation that surfaced among key constituencies had weakened it severely. To remain effective, the party needed to concentrate its resources on strengthening its base. Hulett's defection, however, precipitated an exodus of personnel that robbed the party of veteran activists at the precise moment that it desperately needed experienced organizers to canvass and conduct political education workshops. By preventing the party from engaging in sustained organizing, the mass departure precluded a grassroots revival from occurring. Simultaneously, it signaled to African Americans that they no longer needed a third party to fight for freedom rights because there was room for them within the Democratic Party.⁶⁴

The demise of the third party did not eliminate interest in freedom politics. Movement activists, including some of those who switched parties with Hulett, continued to value freedom rights and democratic decision making. Hulett's new brand of politics, however, threatened to undermine the political culture that so many people, including Hulett, labored so hard to create. To preserve the movement way of doing things, a small group of veteran activists organized to remove the black sheriff from office. The disintegration of the third party, however, meant that they had to challenge him in the Democratic primary. J. C. Coleman, a retired civil servant and Korean War veteran, volunteered to run against Hulett and in February 1974 announced his candidacy for the Democratic nomination for sheriff. Publicly, Coleman spoke about promoting intraracial unity and interracial harmony. "I feel that I can be of some help to the county in trying to re-unite the people—both black and white," he told a local reporter.⁶⁵ Privately, he talked about beating Hulett. But Coleman's chances for victory were slim because he lacked Hulett's resources and name recognition. In addition, most black voters were not privy to the movement's internal dynamics. As far as they knew, Hulett's political commitments had not changed. His endorsement of Wallace raised some eyebrows, but most people dismissed it as politics. Hulett was neither the first nor the last black politician to embrace Wallace. Besides, the sheriff's race was not a referendum on Wallace. African Americans had an opportunity to express their displeasure with the governor in the gubernatorial contest, which they did by voting overwhelmingly against him. Instead, it was a referendum on Hulett's performance as sheriff.

"Bloody Lowndes" had always been a dangerous place for African Americans, but during Hulett's first term in office he improved conditions considerably. As chief law enforcement officer, he not only ended police brutality, but also stopped random acts of racial violence perpetrated by ordinary white citizens. The key to his success was his willingness to arrest whites for breaking the law, something many people believed a black person would be too afraid to do. African Americans were grateful for these reforms, and to preserve them they voted ten to one in favor of Hulett in the 1974 primary.⁶⁶

Hulett's victory over Coleman was just one of several primary wins for his group of new black Democrats. Those who sought seats on the Democratic Executive Committee also prevailed, as did the candidates for coroner and school board. Their success all but guaranteed victory in the 1974 general election. As expected, all the new black Democrats won even

though whites crossed party lines and voted for the Alabama Conservative Party's local ticket, which included two of the white candidates who lost in the Democratic primary. The November 1974 sweep enabled African Americans generally, and Hulett and his people specifically, to retain control of the sheriff's office and the coroner's office, and to gain control of two seats on the school board. It also moved the struggle for political power inside the courthouse.⁶⁷

After the 1974 election, the reconfigured board of education, which consisted of the school superintendent and the five members of the school board, became the primary battleground in the fight for control of the government. Black board members Elder Fletcher Fountain and Willie Wilson, Jr., together with Mary Dora Hammonds, wasted little time establishing the school board's authority over personnel matters. Against the wishes of Superintendent Coleman, they suspended R. R. Pierce, the long-standing black principal of Lowndes County Training School (soon to be renamed Central High School), pending the outcome of an investigation into charges of behavioral misconduct and fiscal mismanagement. Concerned Parents and Students for Quality Education in Lowndes County, a local advocacy group cofounded by J. C. Coleman and his wife in the early 1970s, gathered much of the evidence used against Principal Pierce. The board eventually fired Pierce for mishandling several thousand dollars in school money.⁶⁸

The three board members also integrated Coleman's administrative staff by replacing several white employees with black educators. One of the new black hires was Eli Seaborn, a junior high school principal and Hulett protégé, who came on as assistant superintendent. The board's actions infuriated Coleman, who said they "served only to create disunity, distrust and a sense of job insecurity among capable and dedicated employees." She added, "Never in my 36 years as Superintendent has employee morale been as low as it is now," a remarkable statement given the hundreds of black teachers who over the years kept silent about poor school conditions and poor pay for fear of losing their jobs. Coleman's assessment of the future under the reconfigured board was bleak. "Until the Board of Education in Lowndes County realizes that they are a policy-making body and not an administrative body, there will be nothing but chaos and confusion." Given the three board members' "obvious lack of knowledge and understanding of proper Board function," Coleman believed she had only one of two choices. "I can continue in office and watch them destroy

all we have worked a life-time to build, or I can resign with the earnest desire that a Superintendent will be appointed who will be allowed to administer the school program without so much unnecessary interference." Coleman chose to resign on August 31, 1975.⁶⁹

After Coleman stepped down, conflict on the board subsided noticeably. In fact, the board managed to reach a consensus on several important issues, including naming a new superintendent. By a unanimous vote, the board appointed Uralee Haynes to complete Coleman's unexpired term. Despite the new spirit of cooperation, disagreements about policy and personnel continued. Most notably, the board could not agree on a timetable to implement a consent order to integrate the public school faculty. The black board members and Mary Dora Hammonds wanted to break up the cluster of white teachers at Lowndes County High School immediately, but the remaining white board members insisted on delaying the teacher transfers. A divided board eventually voted three to two to proceed with the transfers.⁷⁰

The board's decision prompted Warren McLelland, the white principal of Lowndes County High, and several of the school's seventeen white teachers to resign in protest. McLelland spoke for the disgruntled employees when he said that the transfers would jeopardize the quality of the school's education program. White parents who sent their children to Lowndes County High agreed and began withdrawing their children from the school. At the time, the school enrolled all 204 white children remaining in the school system. Within five years, fewer than a dozen white children attended the public schools.⁷¹

Most of the white parents sent their children to private white academies. Many enrolled them in Fort Deposit Academy, a private white school that white parents and businesspeople in the Fort Deposit area opened in 1974 in anticipation of losing control of Lowndes County High. A few who did not mind the cross-county commute sent their youngsters to Lowndes Academy, which by the mid-1970s was a model private white academy in the Alabama Black Belt, drawing students from throughout the county and from Montgomery, Dallas, and Crenshaw counties. Although principal Mac Champion admitted that the sole purpose of Lowndes Academy was to separate white children from black children, he insisted that the school's supporters "don't hate Negroes. There's a difference between segregation and discrimination. We get along fine with them. Only we believe we should have the right to socialize and study the way we please and with whom we please." He added that the decision to segregate "doesn't mean

we are not Americans. We are, and good ones down here. But America means freedom to choose what school you want to attend."⁷²

The white elite blamed African Americans for the upheaval at Lowndes County High. They also blamed Judge Hammonds because his wife voted consistently with the black school board members. In retaliation, they conspired to oust the judge in the 1976 election by sponsoring their own black candidate in the Democratic primary. Their choice to face Hammonds was William "Sam" Bradley, who worked closely with white power brokers over the years. In the mid-1960s, Bradley lent his name to the effort by white officials to wrest control of War on Poverty initiatives away from movement activists. More recently, he helped Coleman oversee the county Head Start program, which tended to exclude teachers and families with movement connections. By backing an African American, the white elite wagered that black solidarity would trump the ties that bound black voters to the judge. This was shrewd politics, but Hammonds was equally cunning. To shore up support in the black community, he visited a prominent black church, thanked African Americans for their past support, and asked for their votes in the future. This simple gesture of appreciation and respect paid tremendous dividends in the primary. White candidates rarely acknowledged black support and never solicited black votes openly. By reaching out to African Americans publicly, Hammonds reminded black voters why he deserved the label "the fairest white man in the county."⁷³

A lot was at stake in the 1976 primary. In addition to the probate judgeship and the superintendent's office, all five seats on the county commission were up for grabs. As the local governing body, the county commission possessed tremendous power. Its members also enjoyed significant extralegal benefits, including access to public money to construct and maintain roads and buildings on private property, and the use of county vehicles for personal business.⁷⁴ The white elite had already lost one seat on the county commission to former LCCMHR chairperson Charles Smith and were loath to lose anymore. A new district judgeship was also on the line. District judges handled most of the cases that brought people to court, from traffic violations to misdemeanors. Rose Sanders, a black organizer and civil rights attorney with a law degree from Harvard University, was a candidate for the position. Although the thirty-year-old native of North Carolina practiced in Selma, she established residency in Lowndes County in order to run. The legal activist enjoyed the support of Hulett and his people, which gave her a marked advantage over white candidate Ted Bozeman, the county solicitor.⁷⁵

As the primary approached, the white candidates grew more confident about their prospects for victory, while the black candidates grew more distrustful of their opponents. The mood of both groups turned on absentee ballots. By late April 1976, Lowndes County voters had submitted some 350 absentee ballots, nearly twice as many as any previous election, and second only to Jefferson County, which had fifty times as many people. "It really looks suspicious," said Hulett. "Some of these people are getting them because they say they will be out of town on election day. I know that's not so in some of the cases." Hulett added that many of the applicants were black senior citizens with poor reading skills. "A white person is picking them up and taking them to the registrar's home to vote." "White people have never tried to help blacks vote before," he said. "You have to wonder why they're taking this effort to provide free transportation now for blacks." African Americans had real cause for concern because "elections in the Black Belt can be swung by a few votes," said state legislator Alvin Holmes.⁷⁶

As expected, many of the 1976 primary races were extremely close, but not the race for probate judge. Harrell Hammonds trounced Sam Bradley by three thousand votes. The judge's public appeal for black support contributed significantly to the lopsided victory, but it was not the sole determinant. African Americans had long memories. They had not forgotten that Bradley worked with whites to take War on Poverty programs away from movement activists. Nor had they forgotten that he opposed the LCFFP. Thus, they did not simply vote for Hammonds—they also voted against Bradley, whose politics were out of step with their own. To the dismay of the white elite, African Americans considered a vote for Bradley an act of racial disloyalty, not solidarity.⁷⁷

The race for superintendent was also not particularly close: Uralee Haynes defeated her opponent decisively. Every other contest, however, was decided by a narrow margin, and absentee ballots figured prominently in the outcomes. Circuit clerk Alma Miller fell to her white challenger by only thirty-two votes, and Rose Sanders, the people's choice for district judge, lost to Ted Bozeman by fewer than two hundred votes. Two black candidates did prevail in the hotly contested elections for the county commission. Charles Smith retained his seat and Frank Miles, Jr., upset C. A. Day by a single vote. America Daney, meanwhile, managed to force a runoff with C. Raymond Dean by receiving more votes than the white incumbent and a second white candidate. Unlike previous years, the 1976 primary did not automatically decide the outcome of

the November general election. African Americans complained bitterly about irregularities to the state Democratic Executive Committee hoping for new elections in several races, and whites protested Frank Miles's single-vote victory. Runoffs, recounts, and special elections left everyone guessing about the Democratic nominees in key contests for a couple of months, but by the end of the summer everything had been settled. In the runoff for the fifth seat on the county commission, the white incumbent defeated Daney, and in a new election for circuit clerk, Miller fell 328 votes shy of victory. Miles, though, held on to his county commission nomination after state officials dismissed his white opponent's petition for a recount.⁷⁸

Four of the black candidates who failed to secure a nomination ran as independents in the 1976 general election, and a white candidate in the same situation ran on an alternative ticket. Each received more than two thousand votes, but none beat their Democratic opponent.⁷⁹ The courthouse remained divided. Hulett and Hammonds controlled the sheriff's office, the probate judge's office, the coroner's office, and the school board, while the white elite controlled the circuit clerk's office, the tax offices, the new district judgeship, and the county commission. The battle for the courthouse would be decided conclusively during the next two elections, as would the fate of freedom politics.

Although very few people realized the depth of the alliance between Hulett and Hammonds, it was clear to everyone that it was the key to the political insurgency. To drive a wedge between the two men, the white elite persuaded George Hammonds, the judge's brother and an original member of the board of directors of Fort Deposit Academy, to run for sheriff in the 1978 Democratic primary. It was a move as clever as any they tried previously. George Hammonds's candidacy created considerable problems for the political partners because the judge needed Hulett to marshal black votes, and Hulett needed the judge to control the courthouse. To preserve the alliance, the judge agreed not to endorse anyone for sheriff, and Hulett consented to mobilize black support for Virginia Crook, the judge's white clerk and choice for tax assessor. Hulett, though, could not endorse a white candidate publicly because African Americans were determined to field a full slate of black candidates in the primary. Consequently, he campaigned secretly for Virginia Crook for tax assessor and publicly for Elbert Means, a thirty-three-year-old African American from Fort Deposit.⁸⁰

Elbert Means had a passion for black economic self-determination that he traced to a childhood incident involving his parents. One summer, W. E. Pritchett, the white man who owned the land his parents worked, demanded that they sell a considerable portion of their cattle because they owned too much livestock for a black family. Rather than accede to Pritchett's request, his parents exhausted their meager savings and purchased a one-mule farm in Calhoun. Their determination to live autonomous lives also inspired Means to agitate for racial equality. As a high school student in neighboring Selma, he participated in the desegregation campaign that SNCC field secretaries Bernard and Colia Lafayette organized in 1963. He continued his activism at Alabama State University in Montgomery in the mid-1960s until a draft notice sent him to Southeast Asia. The Vietnam War did not extinguish his desire for freedom rights, and, after his discharge in 1968, he reenrolled at Alabama State hoping to pick up where he left off. But money was short, so he withdrew from school after a year and, like thousands before him, moved to Detroit in search of work. While there, he met his wife, Harriet, who not only shared his commitment to freedom rights but also his willingness to agitate for racial equality. Harriet's views and activist spirit stemmed from her father, an official with the United Auto Workers who worked closely with Coleman Young, Detroit's first African American mayor. In 1975, Elbert returned to Lowndes County with Harriet to care for his aging father; after a short while, he became involved in the local struggle.⁴²

Harriet and Elbert believed deeply in the county's black elected officials, and like most African Americans they held Hulett in especially high regard. But a chance encounter with former student organizer John Jackson shook their faith in Hulett and the others. Jackson distanced himself from Hulett around the time the sheriff abandoned the independent party. Having grown up in the movement, he wanted nothing to do with Hulett's new brand of politics. Jackson was brutally honest with Harriet and Elbert when they met while canvassing in White Hall, telling them that Hulett no longer had the people's interests at heart; he pointed to Hulett's deals with Judge Hammonds as evidence. The pair dismissed the disclosures as malicious gossip, not wanting to believe that Hulett could have drifted so far from the movement's center, but as Election Day approached, the rumors began resembling reality. While knocking on doors in Hope Hull, Harriet learned that Hulett had been campaigning for the white candidate for tax assessor. "We're going for Virginia Crook now," people reported him saying before handing them her campaign card. Hulett purposefully

waited until the end of the primary season to rally black voters for Crook to avoid debating the issue publicly. But Elbert drew attention to the matter immediately. At one of the few mass meetings held in 1978, he confronted Hulett and demanded to know why he was soliciting votes for the other candidate. Hulett's dissembling infuriated Elbert, and only a calming word from Harriet kept the Vietnam veteran from knocking the truth out of him.⁴³

Hulett's double-dealing shattered Harriet and Elbert's faith in him. Nevertheless, they continued campaigning, trying to get people to stick with Elbert. On Election Day, their perseverance paid off. Elbert received nearly two thousand votes in the primary, twice as many as Virginia Crook and almost five hundred more than the white incumbent. Meanwhile, Hulett defeated the judge's brother, who received virtually no votes from African Americans. Black incumbent Willie McGhee also won the nomination for coroner, and black candidates Percy Bell and Andrew McCall defeated the white tax collector and a white school board member. For the first time in a local election, not a single white candidate prevailed, not even one backed by Hulett and Hammonds.⁴⁴

Means's victory lifted his spirits, and as soon as he took office he looked for ways to provide poor and working-class blacks with tax relief and make wealthy whites shoulder a fair share of the local tax burden. He began by carefully reviewing the property evaluations and tax assessments of everyone in the county, which revealed egregious errors that universally advantaged whites and disadvantaged African Americans. He found that large landowning whites rarely paid taxes on all they owned. Judge Hammonds was a principal beneficiary of this tendency. Although he owned some fifty thousand acres, he paid taxes on only a fraction of it. After Means recalculated the judge's tax bill, he owed an additional forty thousand dollars. Accurate accounting produced a cash windfall for the county. Means also found that his white predecessors typically assessed property owned by African Americans at the highest allowable rate. In many instances, African Americans paid thirty cents on the dollar in property tax when they should have paid only ten cents. At the same time, whites routinely paid the lowest possible rate. Means corrected the unfair assessments immediately. To provide black senior citizens with additional tax relief, he publicized Alabama's homestead exemption, which excused homeowners older than sixty from having to pay taxes on their houses and lots. At the start of his first term, the single binder that listed the people who received the exemption contained only four black names,

but within a few years the names of black claimants filled four binders. He also expended considerable energy helping African Americans retain possession of their land. Rather than take kickbacks offered by whites for advance notice of land to be sold for back taxes, he reached into his own pocket to cover the cost of locating delinquent landowners, most of whom were African Americans who no longer lived in the county.⁴⁴

Not surprisingly, Means's equal application of the tax code irritated and angered wealthy whites, including Hammonds. After so many years in control, they grew accustomed to reaping the rewards of discriminatory tax policies. Hulett, though, could not have cared less because he gained very little from the traditional way of doing things, though he was bothered by Means's independence and clear sense of right and wrong. Lowndes County sheriffs seemingly always turned a blind eye and extended an upturned palm toward those engaged in illegal moneymaking activities. For a fee, they allowed bootleggers to make and sell hooch and local hustlers to operate gaming dens and prostitution houses. Many people suspected that Hulett continued this practice because illegal businesses remained open even though everyone knew the locations of these enterprises and the identities of the petty criminals who ran them. Others speculated that he made similar arrangements with marijuana growers who in the mid-1980s planted scores of fields with thousands of marijuana plants. Three raids by state narcotics agents in 1986 alone netted a crop worth more than one million dollars.⁴⁵ Means, though, refused to participate in unlawful activities and declined to cover them up. His willingness to assist state auditors investigating major discrepancies in black tax collector Percy Bell's accounting books, which eventually led to Bell's arrest for embezzling almost forty thousand dollars, infuriated Hulett, as did his cooperation with the FBI following Bell's conviction for knowingly registering cars stolen in Detroit.⁴⁶

By 1980, a small group of loosely connected black activists who shared a dislike for Hulett's politics began to coalesce around Means, whose commitment to freedom politics encouraged them. The group consisted of activists like Abdullah Shabazz of Hayneville, who were too young to have participated in the struggles of the 1960s, and grassroots organizers like John Jackson, who took part in the movement as teenagers and remained politically active. Some older movement organizers were also involved, including Ed Moore King, the White Hall resident who convinced the deacons at Mt. Gilliard Baptist to open the doors of the church to the LCCMHR in 1965. In the 1980 Democratic primary, Shabazz ran for

county commission against machine candidate Thomas Pringle and received 25 percent of the black vote—a strong showing for an anti-machine black candidate, but not nearly enough to win. Ed Moore King, who ran for school superintendent against Uralee Haynes, also collected about a quarter of the black vote in a losing effort.⁴⁷

The conflict between black opposition candidates and those aligned with Hulett and Hammonds was much less important to black voters than electing a full contingent of African Americans to the county commission. Consequently, black voters rallied behind commissioners Frank Miles, Jr., and Charles Smith, who retained their seats on the board, and William Cosby and Joe Frank Brown, who defeated the white commissioners who beat them four years earlier. They also supported Thomas Pringle, who completed the electoral sweep by beating black opposition candidate Abdullah Shabazz and three white contenders. After more than a decade of trying, African Americans finally controlled the county commission.⁴⁸

Expectations were high for the black commissioners because conditions for African Americans remained deplorable. The black unemployment rate was 15.8 percent and rising. For the county as a whole, it jumped from 4.7 percent in 1970 to 12.1 percent in 1980. Poverty remained exceedingly high. In 1979, 45 percent of Lowndes County residents lived in poverty, whereas the national average was 11.7 percent. The Reagan administration exacerbated the situation by drastically reducing direct payments to individuals. Food stamp assistance and aid for dependent children declined 31 percent locally between 1985 and 1986. These cuts affected some 5,600 people, almost half the county's total population. The public schools also continued to under-perform. "The main problem confronting the school system is money," said Uralee Haynes. State allocations, which were based on average daily student attendance, declined precipitously when whites abandoned Lowndes County High. Around the same time, federal allocations decreased. Between 1980 and 1982, the Reagan administration cut Title I funds, which the county used for nutrition and education programs, by nearly one hundred thousand dollars, forcing the school board to eliminate several programs and dismiss thirty-six teachers' aides.⁴⁹

The black commissioners lacked the resources to make a real difference in the lives of poor people. In fact, they barely had enough money to meet the operating expenses of the county government. In 1983, they slashed the payroll of every department by 60 percent just to avoid shutting down. Debt inherited from the previous commissioners was a major part of the problem. Equally troublesome was the lack of access to capital

because the only bank in the county refused to extend loans to the board once African Americans controlled it.⁹⁰

In an effort to provide poor people with some relief, the commissioners attempted to work with public agencies and private industrial development groups to bring companies into the county to bolster the local economy. But partners were hard to find. In 1981, when the state convinced General Electric to build a \$1.5 billion plastics production plant in the county, it never consulted the black commissioners. They had no input into the incentives package used to lure the *Fortune* 500 company, which included a state sales tax exemption on all expenses related to the construction of the chemical plant, and a total property tax exemption on the six thousand acres that GE bought in Burkeville, seventeen miles west of Montgomery. The sweetheart deal meant that the county government depended on GE philanthropy to realize a financial gain from the placement of the plant in Burkeville. It also meant that the sole benefit for Lowndes County residents was jobs, but even that proved elusive because GE tended to hire better-educated white workers from Montgomery to meet its labor needs.⁹¹

GE was not the only company interested in Lowndes County. The same year the company announced its plans to construct the Burkeville plant, a waste management firm petitioned the state to put a hazardous waste dump in nearby Lowndesboro. Companies involved in the production and disposal of materials that posed risks to the environment and public health looked to establish sites in poor rural counties, especially those with black majorities, because they tended to lack the political clout to block them. As with GE, no one ever consulted the black commissioners about the dump. But the waste management firm underestimated the resolve of Lowndes County residents, both black and white, rich and poor, to fight the landfill. In a rare display of cooperation across the color line, four hundred residents packed the gymnasium at Hayneville High on October 5, 1981, and formed Lowndes Citizens to Fight Deadly Dumping in Alabama. To chair the organization, they turned to Sam Bradley, the black director of the county's Head Start program. Ted Lingham, the white mayor of Lowndesboro, served as vice chair. That afternoon, Commissioner Thomas Pringle announced that the commissioners had passed a resolution declaring the county's intention to refuse outside hazardous waste. Within two weeks, the group had raised enough money to hire an attorney to fight the landfill in state and federal court and had launched a campaign to pressure Black Belt legislators to oppose the project. By the

end of the year, a bill to block the proposed dump, sponsored by several state representatives from the region, sat on the governor's desk awaiting his signature.⁹²

The successful effort to block the landfill did not deter other companies from trying to locate waste disposal sites in the county, forcing locals to fight attempts to place dumps in the county for a quarter century. The interracial nature of the first anti-landfill campaign, however, did not lead automatically to local organizing across the color line on other issues. It was even hard to sustain interracial organizing around opposition to landfills, evidenced in part by the creation of the mostly black Lowndes County Concerned Citizens Group, chaired by Harriet Means, in the late 1980s.⁹³ Interracial organizing did occur, however, and, like the earlier effort, it was effective.⁹⁴ The initial grassroots campaign also failed to ease conflict within the courthouse. As the 1984 election approached, the tension between Hulett and those who opposed his brand of politics was palpable.

Elbert Means was the most visible and vocal member of the black opposition, and Hulett longed to be rid of him. But ousting Means proved more difficult than he imagined because of the tremendous grassroots support that the tax assessor enjoyed, especially among older African Americans who tended to vote in greater numbers than other segments of the population. To unseat Means in 1984, Hulett turned to his son John Edward Hulett, one of the first African Americans to graduate from Hayneville High School. The younger Hulett returned to the county after receiving a political science degree from Miles College in Birmingham and serving four years in the air force. On the campaign trail, he promised to work closely with his father and others in the courthouse. "I want to establish a harmonious working relationship with all elected officials and agencies," he said. "I believe this is necessary in order to project a positive image of our county to our local residents, as well as throughout the country. Such a relationship is the key to industrial growth."⁹⁵

Anticipating a close race, Hulett dipped into the bag of dirty tricks that the white elite used to steal elections in the 1970s. As soon as the circuit clerk posted the names of those requesting absentee ballots, he and others began visiting them to make sure they voted their way. Means suspected that Hulett would try to manipulate the outcome of the election, but he was still surprised to receive a telephone call from a supporter at the New Hope Seniors' Center urging him to come immediately because Hulett

and school board member Elder Fletcher Fountain were filling out absentee ballots for the center's patrons. When Means arrived, he caught the pair completing the mail-in forms, and "they were not marking those ballots for me," he later quipped. Although the incumbent tax assessor succeeded in having these particular votes disqualified, he remained gravely concerned about fraud.⁹⁶

On Election Day, Means received ninety-one more votes than John Edward Hulett, but after election officials appointed by Sheriff Hulett and Judge Hammonds counted the absentee ballots, which they did behind closed doors, Means lost the primary by four votes. Dismayed, he immediately filed a grievance with the Lowndes County Democratic Committee, but chairperson Eli Seaborn, who also happened to be Hulett's choice to succeed retiring school superintendent Uralee Haynes, upheld the dubious count. Means appealed Seaborn's ruling to the Democratic Party's statewide governing body, which found sufficient evidence of ballot tampering to order a new election. Means prevailed in the closely monitored special election, but the cost of prosecuting the challenge nearly bankrupted his family.⁹⁷

Means was not the only black opposition candidate to win in 1984. Bob Mants, the former SNCC organizer, also won a seat on the board of commissioners. Mants returned to Lowndes County to work with local activists not long after SNCC left. He supported Hulett for several years until he became disillusioned with his politics. Mants's service to the movement and commitment to freedom politics made him extremely popular among working-class blacks, who cast more votes for him in 1984 than they did for anyone else.⁹⁸

Black opposition candidates were gaining momentum by the mid-1980s. With each election, more and more African Americans turned to them, hoping that they could produce better results than did Hulett and his people. But Hulett's extensive personal contacts, along with his organizing expertise, allowed him to marshal sufficient black votes to keep the opposition from stringing together enough victories to dismantle his machine. When Means and Mants won in 1984, Ed Moore King lost to Eli Seaborn in the race for school superintendent, and two years later Abdullah Shabazz failed to unseat Hulett's choice for the school board. Hulett was also willing to use voting fraud to stay in power. In 1990, he helped Willie Ruth Myrick defeat Means in the primary for tax assessor by padding her vote total with absentee ballots. Means again gathered compelling evidence of electoral misconduct, but with two daughters about to enter college he and his wife could not afford another costly challenge.⁹⁹

The black opposition did not let themselves be discouraged by losses to Hulett and those loyal to him. They continued to seek public office throughout the 1980s and 1990s, but instead of running exclusively for positions in the county government they branched out and ran for positions in several of the county's municipal governments. John Jackson, the former student organizer, led the way. In 1979, the two hundred residents of the newly incorporated municipality of White Hall elected him mayor. In this capacity, he did more for the black landowning community than the county ever did. Under his leadership, the municipal government used local tax revenue and federal, state, and private development grants to complete a \$340,000 water system; establish twenty-four-hour ambulance, fire, and police service; start a day care program; and launch an emergency medical technician training program. Jackson credited these first-term accomplishments to lessons learned from SNCC organizers. "SNCC challenged us to dream in Lowndes County, to dream of lawyers who were concerned about justice and not a judgeship," he said. "To dream of county elected officials who would become public servants and not politicians."¹⁰⁰ Jackson's advocacy of freedom rights and democratic governance transformed White Hall. By 1990, the tiny town boasted nearly one thousand residents and once again was a beacon of hope in Lowndes County.¹⁰¹

The success of Jackson and other black opposition candidates at the municipal level had remarkably little effect on Hulett's popularity. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, African Americans continued to elect him to office. In 1982 and 1990, he received more than 75 percent of the total ballots cast when he ran for reelection as sheriff, and in 1994 he beat a field of four when he ran for probate judge (Harrell Hammonds resigned as probate judge in 1984 due to poor health).¹⁰² Initially, African Americans supported Hulett because of his impeccable movement credentials. He was a civil rights hero whose record of activism before becoming sheriff gave them no reason to doubt his willingness or ability to lead the fight for freedom rights. Once in office, they rewarded him for fulfilling his charge as the county's chief law enforcement officer. Ending white lawlessness was no minor feat given the history of local violence. It was especially meaningful to African Americans old enough to recall life before a black sheriff. These core black voters were haunted by indelible memories of racial terrorism. They remembered shakedowns by sheriff Frank Ryals in the sixties, beatings at the hands of sheriff Otto Mooror in the forties and fifties, plantation owners running amuck during sheriff

Robert Woodruff's tenure in the twenties and thirties, and the stories their parents told about sheriff J. W. Dickson terrorizing African Americans at the turn of the century. By ushering in the era of personal safety, Hulett earned the respect, gratitude, and votes of African Americans.¹⁰³ "Black folk were glad to see that Negro with a badge," said John Jackson.¹⁰⁴ Mattie Lee Moorer explained that "he does not kill. He does not shoot. He doesn't beat prisoners," which made him "the best high sheriff" the county had "ever known."¹⁰⁵ Hulett's performance as sheriff took on even greater meaning in the late 1970s and early 1980s when sharp spikes in police brutality occurred in urban areas across the state, most notably in Birmingham, and throughout the rural South.¹⁰⁶ If nothing else, it was safe to travel the roads of Lowndes County. Hulett's popularity, therefore, was not a product of black naivety; African Americans were not simply duped by his charisma and civil rights record. Instead, it stemmed from their long memories and Hulett's actual accomplishments.

Although political fissures within the black community did not substantially lessen Hulett's popularity, they did enable whites to regain a fair amount of power within the local government. White candidates had the upper hand in elections involving more than one black candidate, especially after Judge Hammonds stepped down and whites resumed voting as a solid racial bloc. The advantage was plain to see in 1988 when O. P. Woodruff, the white candidate for probate judge, beat black machine candidate Thomas Pringle and black opposition candidate Ben Davis after they split the black vote.¹⁰⁷ Black political divisions also contributed to a drastic decline in black voter participation. The effectiveness of Hulett's machine at the county level gave African Americans very few electoral alternatives, and rather than vote for white candidates, many people opted not to vote at all, which helped negate their numerical edge. Indeed, by the early 1990s, the majority of African Americans simply stopped voting. In the 1994 Democratic primary, only 34 percent of the voters in Gordonsville and Mosses, two overwhelmingly black precincts, took part in the election.¹⁰⁸ The undemocratic exercise of black political power, which caused black disunity, disillusionment, and disengagement, made the revival of white political power possible.

The political renaissance that whites enjoyed in the late 1980s and early 1990s weakened Hulett's machine considerably. He was still the most popular politician in the county, but he no longer wielded the same degree of influence inside the courthouse that he once enjoyed. With his power fading, he decided not to run for a second term as probate judge in 2000.

His absence from the courthouse after thirty years in office ended black boss politics. He remained relevant, however, through his political heirs, the foremost being his son John Edward Hulett, who succeeded him as probate judge. In 2006, Hulett's son began his second term in office. That same year the venerable civil rights leader and the county's first black sheriff died quietly at his home at age seventy-eight.¹⁰⁹

Movement activists believed that obtaining political power was the key to reducing racial disparities and improving local conditions. It was also a way for African Americans to have a full say in the decisions that affected their lives. Electing African Americans to public office, however, failed to create the kind of sweeping change that movement activists hoped. Although it ended racial terrorism, it did not produce equality of opportunity or outcome. Twenty years after African Americans gained control of the courthouse, the public schools continued to under-perform. In fact, they were in jeopardy of being taken over by the state. Segregation in education also endured. The public schools were 99 percent black, while Lowndes Academy, the original private white academy, was 100 percent white. In addition, glaring wealth disparities persisted. The per capita income for African Americans was \$8,763, while for whites it was \$23,236.¹¹⁰

Despite a keen understanding of county government, movement activists underestimated the strength of structural impediments to racial equality. Black elected officials could only do so much given the limits of their authority. There was no way for them to restructure society to provide the least among them with the means to get ahead. It simply was not possible under existing state and federal law to tax the rich to feed the poor. African Americans also came to power at a time when federal resources were dwindling. By the 1980s, considerably less was trickling down from Washington. The cumulative effect of structural arrangements made it difficult for even the most well-intentioned black officeholders to generate lasting change.

Movement activists also overestimated the sustainability of freedom politics. They assumed that people would continue to adhere to its tenets once African Americans gained power because SNCC's political education program made freedom politics synonymous with black politics. But popular interest in freedom politics waned as soon as movement activists stopped doing political education work. Without the workshops and mass meetings, people lost sight of the importance of grassroots agitation and democratic decision making. This created an opening for those who

rejected freedom politics to introduce a new kind of black politics, one that privileged mobilizing voters over educating them, ranked individual interests higher than group interests, and placed winning reelection above fighting for freedom rights.

The decline in interest in freedom politics was not inevitable. It occurred because of decisions made by a handful of influential people who preferred undemocratic politics. Hulett set the process in motion by agreeing to Hammond's plan in 1970, which robbed people of the right to select their own candidates. He accelerated it by joining the Democratic Party in 1974, which destabilized the third party. Losing the third party prevented those who still believed in freedom politics from having the organizational infrastructure they needed to conduct political education work. He completed the process by using coercive and fraudulent means to defeat black opposition candidates. This prevented advocates of freedom politics from gaining the visibility they needed to renew popular interest in the movement way of doing things. The demise of freedom politics also occurred because of decisions made by the black electorate. By the mid-1980s, it was quite clear that Hulett preferred boss politics to freedom politics, yet African Americans continued to elect him to office. Although their reasons for supporting him reflected his accomplishments as sheriff, they did so knowing that his politics had changed considerably since the 1960s.

Like most democratic projects, freedom politics was hard to keep alive. Although its supporters did not realize how difficult maintaining it would be, they were well aware of the perils of power. The entire enterprise was born of SNCC organizers' awareness of the pitfalls of existing political practices and structures. As SNCC laid the groundwork for freedom politics, they cautioned against replicating the old way of doing things. "Black visibility is not Black Power," wrote Carmichael. "Most black politicians around the country today are not examples of Black Power. The power must be that of a community, and emanate from there. The black politicians must stop being representatives of 'downtown' machines, whatever the cost might be in terms of lost patronage and holiday handouts."²⁰ The proponents of freedom politics did not think that simply putting African Americans in public office would change the world. Instead, they believed that electing people committed to freedom politics, regardless of their race, was the way to make a difference in the lives of ordinary people. Interracial coalitions were not a problem, but the kind of interracial coalitions that emerged locally were. Ironically, the person who worked the

hardest to spread freedom politics during the movement's heyday was the catalyst behind its demise. But there was no way anyone could predict in 1965 that Hulett would become a political boss more than a decade later. There were no obvious signs that he would drift away from the movement's democratic principles and practices. The fact that he did, therefore, is not evidence of some inherent flaw in freedom politics. Instead, it represents a failure on the part of the advocates of freedom politics to execute the viable political program that they had devised.

The African American freedom struggle did not end when freedom politics ceased being the dominant mode of black politics. Throughout the post-civil rights era, African Americans, including some elected officials, continued agitating for basic civil and human rights. Elbert Means fought admirably and effectively as the county tax assessor; so did John Jackson as the mayor of White Hall. But when African Americans started looking exclusively to politicians to lead the fight for freedom rights and made the Democratic Party their primary vehicle for advancing the struggle, collective action stopped almost completely. Over-investing in elected officials and the Democratic Party kept African Americans from developing new grassroots leaders, which eventually created a leadership vacuum. It also caused them to marginalize the LCCMHR, which resulted in the loss of vital organizing capacity. As a result, African Americans were not in a position to resume collective action when their investment in electoral politics yielded a poor return.

During the post-civil rights era, black elected officials squandered the chance to normalize freedom politics, which could have transformed local government and made life a bit more bearable for poor and working-class people. Their failure to take advantage of this opportunity, along with the existence of major structural impediments, allowed poorly performing schools, high unemployment, inadequate housing, and poverty to persist. Consequently, a century after W. E. B. Du Bois visited the county, conditions there remain "unfavorable to the rise of the Negro."