

• C H A R L E S M A R S H •

GOD'S LONG SUMMER

STORIES OF FAITH
AND CIVIL RIGHTS

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ONE

"I'm on My Way, Praise God":

Mrs. Hamer's Fight for Freedom

Sticking with Civil Rights

ON A NIGHT in August of 1962, Fannie Lou Hamer attended a mass meeting at the Williams Chapel Church in Ruleville, Mississippi. A handful of civil rights workers from the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) were in Sunflower County spreading the news of voter registration. Sunflower County, in the heart of that "most southern place on earth," the Mississippi Delta, was perhaps the most solid core of the iceberg of southern segregation. Appropriately, SNCC had recently selected the Delta as one of the strategic points of its voter registration initiative. If the movement could crack the Delta, the reasoning went, it would send unsettling reverberations through the state's recalcitrant white majority.¹

There was great excitement in the chapel as James Bevel, one of Martin Luther King, Jr.'s, young colleagues in the SCLC, stood to address the people. His short sermon was taken from the sixteenth chapter of the Gospel of Matthew. He asked the congregation—mainly black men and women who worked on the nearby cotton plantations—to consider the words of the Lord when he rebuked the Pharisees and Sadducees. He read the Scripture: "Jesus answered and said unto them, When it is evening, ye say, It will be fair weather, for the sky is red. And in the morning, It will be foul weather today; for the sky is red and lowering. O ye hypocrites, ye can discern the face of the sky; but can ye not discern the signs of the times?" How can we discern the signs of the times, Bevel asked. How can we not recognize that the hour has arrived for black men and women to claim what is rightfully their own—indeed the right to vote? To be sure,

most folk are not trained to discern the weather nor to forecast the future. But that is not our demand, Bevel told the people. Our demand is that we not ignore the clear signs before our eyes. God's time is upon us; let us not back down from the challenge.

Bevel's words stirred Mrs. Hamer's tired spirit. She had endured the burdens of white racism for forty-four years, living the hard life of a field hand on the Marlowe cotton plantation near Ruleville, a small town in the Delta. The youngest child born to Ella and Jim Townsend, by the age of seven Fannie Lou Hamer was in the fields picking cotton with her fourteen brothers and five sisters, the family working long days together and still not making "enough money to live on."² "My parents moved to Sunflower County when I was two years old," Mrs. Hamer recalled. "I will never forget, one day [when I] was six years old and I was playing beside the road and this plantation owner drove up to me and stopped and asked me, 'could I pick cotton.' I told him I didn't know and he said, 'Yes, you can. I will give you things that you want from the commissary store,' and he named things like crackerjacks and sardines—and it was a huge list that he called off. So I picked the 30 pounds of cotton that week, but I found out what actually happened was he was trapping me into beginning the work I was to keep doing and I never did get out of his debt again. My parents tried so hard to do what they could to keep us in school, but school didn't last four months out of the year and most of the time we didn't have clothes to wear."³

Fannie Lou Hamer's mother, with her "poor, ragged, rough black hands," raised her children "to be decent" and respect themselves.⁴ Still the family's crushing poverty made her task's every detail an uphill battle:

I used to watch my mother try and keep her family going after we didn't get enough money out of the cotton crop. To feed us during the winter months mama would go round from plantation to plantation and would ask the landowners if she could have the cotton that had been left, which was called scrappin' cotton. When they would tell her that we could have the cotton, we would walk for miles and miles and miles in the run of a week. We wouldn't have on shoes or anything because we didn't have them. She would always tie our feet up with rags because the ground would be froze real hard. We would walk from field to field until we had scrapped a bale of cotton. Then she'd take that bale of cotton and sell it and that would give us some of the food that we would need.

Then she would go from house to house and she would help kill hogs. They would give her the intestines and sometimes the feet and the head and things like that and that would help to keep us going. So many times for dinner we would have greens with no seasoning and flour gravy. Sometimes there'd be nothing but bread and onions.⁵

Her mother's sight was irreparably damaged when an object struck her eye as she was swinging an axe to clear away roots and weeds from the ground. Unable to receive adequate medical attention, Ella Townsend suffered permanent damage to her eyes and would eventually become blind.⁶

Fannie Lou Hamer's father was a resourceful and hard-working plantation hand. But in Mississippi these virtues did not translate into a better life for his family. His agricultural skills and success with his own small farming ventures threatened the cruel and unyielding economic arrangements of white supremacy. In the middle 1940s, Jim Townsend "cleared some money" and bought some wagons, cultivators, plow tools and mules, with the hope of renting a plot of land the following year. But just about the time the family began to see the rewards of the father's labors—when they had "started to fix up the house real nice and had bought a car"—a white man stole one night into the trough where the mules fed and stirred a gallon of Paris Green into the animals' food. "It killed everything we had," Mrs. Hamer recalls. "When we got there, one mule was already dead. The other two mules and the cow had their stomachs all swelled up. It was too late to save them. That poisoning knocked us right back down flat. We never did get back up again. That white man did it just because we were getting somewhere."⁷

Fannie Lou Hamer knew something was wrong with the world she inherited, yet on that night in August 1962, she had not even heard about her civil rights. "We hadn't heard anything about registering to vote because when you see this flat land in here, when the people would get out of the fields, if they had a radio, they'd be too tired to play it. So we didn't know what was going on in the rest of the state even; much less in other places."⁸ But Bevel's sermon, followed by SNCC member James Forman's talk on the constitutional right to vote, spoke deeply to Mrs. Hamer's longing for justice. Her imagination was charged by new moral and spiritual energies; she felt empowered to discern the signs of the time. And with more certainty than a red sky presages a fair tomorrow or a red sunrise stormy weather, Mrs. Hamer understood that her life would be very different from this point on. "When they asked for those to raise their hands who'd go down to the courthouse the next day, I raised mine. Had it up as high as I could get it. I guess if I'd had any sense I'd a-been a little scared, but what was the point of being scared. The only thing [the whites] could do was kill me and it seemed like they'd been trying to do that a little bit at a time since I could remember."⁹ She heard the call of Jesus—and James Bevel—a call demanding sacrifice, but a call also promising freedom and empowerment. She was excited by the speakers' description of the power of the vote. "It made so much sense to me," she said.¹⁰ These very women and men gathered at Williams Chapel Church—dirt-poor sharecroppers, field

hands, and domestics—could force out of office the hateful politicians and sheriffs who had controlled the social oppressive order for as long as anyone could remember.

The call also made sense because the faith of the black church had prepared Mrs. Hamer for this moment. The church had sustained her wearied spirit when all other institutions had served contrary purposes. While Jim Crow society was designed to convince blacks they were nobodies, the black churches—even those that remained quiet on civil rights—preached a gospel that embraced the longings and desires of a disenfranchised people. A new social space took shape, offering an alternative to the social world of the segregated South—a "nation within a nation," as E. Franklin Frazier once wrote—a world displaying the very reversal of the racist patterns embedded in the segregated South.¹¹ After enduring the indignities of demeaning jobs and discriminatory practices six days a week, black people could experience on Sunday mornings a rare though passionate affirmation of their humanity.¹² The last could become first; a field hand or a janitor could become a deacon, the maid or the cook a leader in the women's union.¹³ Moreover, as a "nation within a nation," the black church not only awakened spiritual energies but also inspired the exercise of political ownership through such practices as electing officers and organizing church programs.¹⁴ Thus, by the time James Bevel delivered his testimony in Ruleville, Mississippi, in August of 1962, Mrs. Hamer had been made ready by her involvement in church life to "step out on God's word of promise"—to put her faith into action.¹⁵ She was ready to move, and did the next week when she joined a busload of people heading to the county courthouse to register to vote.

On August 31, Fannie Lou Hamer and seventeen other people boarded a beat-up bus and rode the thirty miles to the county seat of Indianola. No vehicle deserved the honor more. Owned by a black man from a neighboring county, the bus had been used in summers to haul cotton pickers and choppers to the plantations, and in winters to carry the same people to vegetable and fruit farms in Florida because there was not sufficient work in Mississippi to keep food on the table.¹⁶ Yet when the eighteen passengers arrived in front of the courthouse in the sobering light of a mid-morning sun, most of the enthusiasm aroused in the mass meetings and in the bus ride over had disappeared. Everyone on the bus took note of the situation; and nobody moved toward the door. Charles McLaurin, the SNCC worker who had come to Ruleville earlier in the year to coordinate voter registration activities in Sunflower County, described the situation: "[When] we got there most of the people were afraid to get off the bus. Then this one little stocky lady just stepped off the bus and went right on up to the courthouse and into the circuit clerk's office."¹⁷ The others on the

bus slowly followed Mrs. Hamer to the voter registration desk in the courthouse, where they were asked by the circuit clerk to state their business. Mrs. Hamer explained that they had come to the courthouse to register. The clerk replied that all but two of the group would have to leave. Mrs. Hamer and a young man named Ernest Davis remained in the office to complete the application.

The "literacy test," as the registration application was officially called, consisted of twenty-one questions, beginning with such seemingly straightforward queries as "What is your full name?" and "What is the date?"¹⁸ The most trivial of errors—like the absence of a comma in the date or a discrepancy in punctuation—would often result in an immediate failure. The registration form also included the question, "By whom are you employed?"—a question certain to send chills down the spine of all who sought to register. "This meant that you would be fired by the time you got back home," Mrs. Hamer explained.¹⁹ In any case, the local newspapers routinely published the names of the people who had completed an application.²⁰ Even more intimidating to many people seeking to register was the question, "Where is your place of residence in the district?" It was feared—for good reason—that the white Citizens' Council or the Ku Klux Klan would have the applicant's home address by the end of the day. But whenever the literacy test was completed, the clerk would produce a text of the state constitution and select a passage to be copied and given a "reasonable interpretation"—which was to say, interpreted to the satisfaction of the clerk. On the morning she tried to register in August of 1962, Mrs. Hamer realized for the first time in her life—at the age of the forty-four—that the state of Mississippi had a constitution!²¹

The day was long and exhausting. She was assigned a passage from the state constitution dealing with *de facto* laws. In addition to the stressful demands of the exam, the constant flow of white people through the registrar's office heightened her anxiety. Mrs. Hamer described the scene: "People came in and out of the Courthouse with cowboy boots on, and with rifles and with dogs—some of them looked like Jed Clampett of the 'Beverly Hillbillies,' but these men weren't kidding."²² She worked on the answer throughout the afternoon until the office closed at 4:30. "I knowed as much about a *facto* law as a horse knows about Christmas Day," Mrs. Hamer said.²³ Of course, her knowledge of *de facto* law—or lack of it—had nothing to do with her failing the exam. Had she been white, she would have been excused from the impossible requirement of providing an exegesis of the state constitution.²⁴

On the ride back to Ruleville at the end of the day, just two miles beyond the city limits of Indianola, an approaching highway patrolman signalled the bus to a stop. The driver was arrested on the charge of operating a bus that too closely resembled a school bus, and he was taken to jail,

leaving the rest of the people alone to contemplate their prospects for a safe return home. Everyone became frightened, McLaurin recalls. "They didn't know whether they were going to have to sit out there on the road or whether in a few minutes the police were going to come back and put everybody in jail." Then Fannie Lou Hamer, standing toward the back of the bus, started to hum, then sing,

Have a little talk with Jesus
Tell him all about our troubles,
Hear our feeble cry,
Answer by and by,
Feel the little prayer wheel turning,
Feel a fire a burning,
Just a little talk with Jesus makes it right.

Soon the others followed the lead of her deep, strong voice, and the group sang through their fears. They sang other songs as well; "This Little Light of Mine," "Freedom's Coming and It Won't Be Long," "Down by the Riverside." Someone shouted with delight, "That's Fannie Lou, she know how to sing."²⁵

In the end, the driver was fined \$100 for the misdemeanor of driving a bus that was "too yellow" (as the citation stated). Though only \$30 could be scraped together, the officers reluctantly agreed to a lower fine and permitted the bus to carry the tired men and women back home to Ruleville. But Mrs. Hamer's day was far from over. She later remembered that before leaving home that morning, she had had a feeling that "something might happen." She had even packed a pair of shoes and a small bag of clothes just in case. "If I'm arrested or anything I'll have some extra shoes to put on," she said.²⁶ Her intimations proved accurate. When she returned in the late afternoon to her small house near the cotton fields, her daughter rushed out to meet her, explaining that the man she worked for was "blazing mad" and had been "raisin Cain" since she left home that morning.²⁷ Mrs. Hamer's husband "Pap" soon confirmed that an angry B. D. Marlowe was on his way over to talk about her trip to the county seat.

Perry ("Pap") and Fannie Lou Hamer had worked for eighteen years on the Marlowe plantation, mostly as sharecroppers, though in recent years Mrs. Hamer had been given the job of timekeeper. The fields on the Marlowe plantation were rich with cotton. From the first days of planting in early April to the chopping of weeds under the hot suns of June and July to the picking of the completed harvest in the frosty mornings of October and November, Mrs. Hamer and the other field hands had worked from the gray hour before sunrise until long after darkness had descended. "Cain't to cain't," as one local person described; "cain't see in the mornin' 'cause it's too early, cain't see at night 'cause it's too late."²⁸ The work was

monotonous and humiliating. "Oh Lord, you know just how I feel," Mrs. Hamer might drag out as she slowly walked a long row of cotton, filling her sack for what seemed the thousandth time.²⁹

Oh Lord, they said you'd answer prayer,
Oh Lord, we sure do need you now,
Oh Lord, you know just how I feel.

Mrs. Hamer, like her mother and father before her, and her slave ancestors, had looked on the long rows of cotton as the only future white Mississippi would afford black folks in the Delta.

Marlowe arrived at the Hamers' home as expected. The Circuit Clerk had already called him on the telephone with a report of Mrs. Hamer's activities in Indianola. By the time Marlowe pulled his pick-up truck into the dirt road leading to the Hamers' place, he was not only angry but also nervous about the consequences he might face himself for failing to keep his help in order. Mrs. Hamer, who had been resting in bed after the exhausting day, slowly got up and walked to the front porch. "Did Pap tell you what I said about all this?" Marlowe asked. "Yessir," she replied. "Well, you'll have to go back down there and withdraw that thing, or you'll have to leave," he said. Mrs. Hamer's response must have seemed incredible to her white overseer of eighteen years. "Mr. Dee, I didn't go down there to register for you. I went down there to register for myself."³⁰ Marlowe told Mrs. Hamer that she had until morning to decide whether to withdraw her name from the application form. If she did not, she would have to leave the plantation immediately. Mrs. Hamer knew then exactly what she must do. She picked up her bag and departed that night, leaving her husband and two adopted daughters behind. The long road to freedom lay ahead, but there would be no turning back from the journey. Mrs. Hamer said, "I had been workin' at Marlowe's for eighteen years. I had baked cakes and sent them overseas to him during the war; I had nursed his family, cleaned his house, stayed with his kids. I had handled his time book and his payroll. Yet he wanted me out. I made up my mind I was grown, and I was tired. I wouldn't go back."³¹

Mrs. Hamer remained with friends in Ruleville for a few days. One friend, Mary Tucker, insisted that she spend the night with her. "Don't say you ain't got nowhere to stay as long as I got a shelter," Tucker consoled Mrs. Hamer. "If I ain't got but one plank, you stick your head under there, too."³² But Pap Hamer was worried about violent attacks from the Klan, so a few days later Fannie Lou moved from the Tuckers' to a relatives' home in neighboring Tallahatchie County. The next week nightriders driving by the Tuckers opened fire on the bedroom where Mrs. Hamer had slept, spraying the room with sixteen bullets.

Death threats or not, she had said "yes" to the call; what the Lord required, she was now willing to give. And it was not long before the Lord,

and Bob Moses, asked for more. Moses, the Harvard-trained philosophy student who a year earlier had launched the first SNCC projects in Mississippi, sent instructions to Charles McLaurin to go find the "lady who sings the hymns." McLaurin had been captivated by Mrs. Hamer's courage during their trip to the county courthouse in Indianola. Moses wanted Mrs. Hamer to attend SNCC's annual conference in Nashville and to consider working full time for the organization in voter registration. On a stormy night in the late fall of 1962, McLaurin went in search of the woman who would soon become the prophetic voice of the civil rights movement in Mississippi. He described the search:

That evening it was raining like hell. Thundering and lightning and raining, and I was out there searching. Finally, though a few miles out of the way, I was told that I would find a little cabin at the top of a hill in Cascilla, just off the road and that the house would have two sides with a corridor running right down the middle. After driving in the pouring rain for hours, I finally located the little house on the side of the hill right by the road with smoke coming out of the chimney and the two sides as I was told and the corridor right down the middle.

I knocked on the first door to the left and someone said come in. I walked into the building. There was a woman with her back to the door putting wood in this little pot-bellied stove. It was red hot. I never will forget it because it was raining and it was a little bit cool. And I said, "I'm looking for Fannie Lou Hamer." And she turned around and said, "I'm Fannie Lou Hamer."

I told her that Bob Moses and the people at SNCC asked me to pick her up and take her on to the Nashville conference. And she got up and went to getting her stuff. . . . She couldn't have known whether I was kidnapping her or what. But she just got right up and came.³³

Soon after her trip to Nashville, Mrs. Hamer returned to the Tuckers' place, full of the conviction that she must remain with the people who knew her best—the poor people of Sunflower County who looked to her for strength. "She didn't stay gone long before she come back," Mrs. Tucker recalled, "and when she come back, she said, 'Well, killing or no killing, I'm going to stick with civil rights.'"³⁴ By the end of the year, Mrs. Hamer was determined to take the literacy test again. She told the clerk in the Indianola courthouse point blank, "Now, you cain't have me fired 'cause I'm already fired, and I won't have to move now, because I'm not livin' in no white man's house. I'll be back here every thirty days until I become a registered voter."³⁵ She was refused a test on her second effort, but registered successfully on her third attempt. Her success meant further hardships. Pap Hamer was fired from his job at the Marlowe plantation and his car seized. Both Pap and Fannie Lou were now jobless. With their resources exhausted, and facing a new level of impoverishment, they rented a small

house in Ruleville. "That was a rough winter. I hadn't had a chance to do any canning before I got kicked off, so didn't have hardly anything. I always can more than my family can use 'cause there's always people who don't have enough. That winter was bad, though."³⁶

Rough times would not end with the coming of warm weather. In the summer of 1963, Mrs. Hamer was invited by Annelle Ponder, the SCLC field secretary in the Delta town of Greenwood, to attend the organization's citizenship school in South Carolina. Seven black Mississippians were chosen for the long bus ride to Charleston, where they were led by well-known civil rights activist Septima Clark in training sessions on voter registration. A week later, on June 9, near the end of the all-night ride home from South Carolina, the Continental Trailways bus stopped in Winona, Mississippi. When members of the group sat down at the lunch counter and asked to be served, several Winona policemen and highway patrolmen entered the station and forced them to leave. (As in much of the South, town officials had not accepted the ruling of the Interstate Commerce Commission outlawing segregated transportation facilities.)³⁷ Once outside, Annelle Ponder made a point of writing down the license number of one of the patrol cars, so infuriating a police officer that he began arresting everyone in sight. Mrs. Hamer had returned to the bus because her left leg, disfigured from polio as a child, was sore from the strenuous week. But when she saw the officers herding her companions into police cars, she came out and asked Ponder what the folks left on the bus should do. Should they drive on to Greenwood or wait at the station? Before her friend could answer, an officer in one of the police cars noticed Mrs. Hamer and shouted to a colleague, "Get that one there, bring her on down in the other car!" Mrs. Hamer was then shoved into the back seat, kicked in the thigh, and cursed repeatedly on the drive to the jail. "They carried us on to the county jail. It wasn't the city jail, [but] the county jail, so we could be far enough out. [They] didn't care how loud we hollered, wasn't nobody gon' hear us. . . . When we got to the jail they started beatin' the man—his name was James West—and they put us in cells, two to a cell, and I could hear all this hollerin' and goin' on. Then they took Miss Ponder. I could hear these awful sounds and licks and screams, hear her body hit the concrete, and this man was yellin', 'Cain't you say yes sir, you nigger bitch?'"

Each time that Annelle Ponder refused to say "yes sir" to the police officers, the swing of the blackjack was harder. Mrs. Hamer heard the sounds from her cell down the hall. "She kept screamin', and they kept beatin' on her, and finally she started prayin' for 'em, and she asked God to have mercy on 'em, because they didn't know what they was doin'. . . . I don't know how long it lasted before I saw Annelle Ponder passing the cell with both her hands up. Her eyes looked like blood, and her mouth was swollen. Her clothes were torn. It was horrifying."³⁸

June Johnson, a fifteen-year-old black teenager who had attended the voter registration workshop, was the next person led by Mrs. Hamer's cell in this grim parade of tortured bodies. "The blood was runnin' down in her face, and they put her in another cell."³⁹ In the booking room, whence Johnson was coming, the sheriff had pulled the young girl aside for his own personal whipping. He asked her whether she was a member of the NAACP. She told him yes. Then he hit her on the cheek and chin, and when she raised her arms to protect herself, he hit her on the stomach. He continued to ask her questions about the NAACP—"who runs that thing?" "do you know Martin Luther King?" Soon the four men in the room—the sheriff, the chief of police, the highway patrolman, and another white man—threw Johnson onto the floor, beat her, and stomped on her body in concert. The men ripped Johnson's dress and tore her slip off; blood soaked her tattered clothes.

The men came next for Mrs. Hamer. "Get up from there, fatso," one of the policemen barked. When the officers confirmed that this was Fannie Lou Hamer from Ruleville—the same woman stirring up trouble in the Delta—they began to revile her with insulting words. "I have never heard that many names called a human in my life," she said later. "You, bitch, we gon' make you wish you was dead," an officer said, as he brought two black inmates into the bullpen to carry out his ghastly design for torture. Mrs. Hamer asked them, "You mean you would do this to your own race?" But an officer quickly warned the men, "If you don't beat her, you know what we'll do to you." Mrs. Hamer recalled, "So they had me lay down on my face, and they beat with a thick leather thing that was wide. And it had sumpin' in it heavy. I don't know what that was, rocks or lead. But every-time they hit me, I got just as hard, and I put my hands behind my back, and they beat me in my hands 'til my hands . . . was as navy blue as anything you ever seen." She tried to put her hands over the leg that was damaged from polio, but this only made her hands vulnerable to the beating. When the first inmate grew exhausted, the blackjack was passed to the second inmate. "That's when I started screaming and working my feet 'cause I couldn't help it." One of the white officers became so enraged when he heard Mrs. Hamer's cries that "he just run there and started hittin' me on the back of my head." The torture became more brutal. "I remember I tried to smooth my dress which was working up from all the beating. One of the white officers pushed my dress up. I was screaming and going on—and the young officer with the crew cut began to beat me about [the] head and told me to stop my screaming. I then began to bury my head in the mattress and hugged it to kill out the sound of my screams." By the end, the flesh of her beaten body was hard, one of her kidneys was permanently damaged, and a blood clot that formed over her left eye threatened her vision. "They finally told me to get up, and I just couldn't hardly get up, and they kept on tellin' me to get up. I finally could get up, but when I got back

to my cell bed, I couldn't set down. I would *scream*. It hurted me to set down."⁴⁰ Back in her dark cell, Mrs. Hamer was left alone to bear the physical and spiritual effects of torture.

The experience in the Winona jail proved to be a kind of Golgotha for Mrs. Hamer, an experience of intense physical pain and humiliation. Her world was unmade, stripped of inner security, "uncreated" (to borrow from writer Elaine Scarry's austere analysis of torture). Objects, places or situations associated with nurturing or pleasure became brutal and mocking.⁴¹ In the bullpen, Mrs. Hamer was made to lie down on a bed (most jail beds were dark and rusty metal frames covered by a thin, filthy mattress), flat on her stomach, where she received blow upon blow of the hard instrument against her back, making it difficult, if not impossible, to sit normally or sleep afterward since her back was covered with welts and lacerations. "I been sleepin' on my face because I was just as hard as bone," she said.⁴² In the bullpen, she was ordered not to scream, to allow herself that most elemental response to pain. Instead, her voice was muted by the mattress, her protests silenced. Not only was language destroyed for her in this annihilating moment, even the sounds anterior to language were quashed. Mrs. Hamer, "the lady who know how to sing," became voiceless.

The designers of Mrs. Hamer's beating introduced one particular component that deepened the level of degradation, exposing her to the most intimate humiliation. Unlike the beatings of the other civil rights workers in the Winona jail, Mrs. Hamer's torture was not performed by a white police officer, but by two black prisoners who worked in shifts. The black inmates wielded a large blackjack wrapped in black leather with the command to beat the prisoner until she was spent. The police officers stood in a semicircle, watching the hideous pantomime of racial and sexual stereotyping: a black man stinking of whisky (supplied by the white sheriff) abusing a black woman ("bitch," "fatso," "whore," the officers continued to shout) with a large, black iron phallus in the room set aside for interrogations, the "bullpen," conjuring an image of brute energy and enforced sterility. The significance of the pantomime could not have been lost on Mrs. Hamer. In 1961, she had been sterilized by the state of Mississippi without her knowledge. She had gone into the hospital to have a small uterine tumor removed—"a knot on my stomach," she said—when a doctor proceeded to give her a hysterectomy. Mrs. Hamer was in her early forties at the time; she and her husband had adopted two girls. Two earlier pregnancies had ended in stillbirths, but she still hoped to give birth to a child of her own. "If [the doctor] was going to give that sort of operation, then he should have told me. I would have loved to have children. I went to the doctor who did that to me and I asked him, Why? Why had he done that to me? He didn't have to say nothing—and he didn't."⁴³

Now in 1963, in the bullpen of the Winona jail, the state was recreating

a savage mockery of her sexual barrenness. "What was so sad about the situation was that they had made two black inmates beat her," June Johnson said. "The police made them take her legs and pull her dress up, then one of the inmates sat on her feet while the other just constantly beat her. After the beating she couldn't walk that whole time she was in the jailhouse."⁴⁴ The pain engendered no life or rebirth. Rather, the pain invited an anger that could neither be fixed solely on the white police officer—who was not the immediate agent of torture—nor on the black inmates—who were pawns in a hideous game; the pain invited an anger that could too readily be turned against herself. "A person don't know what can happen to they body if they beat like I was beat," Mrs. Hamer said. Mrs. Hamer's body became itself an instrument of torture. "I had been beat 'til I was real hard, just hard like a piece of wood or somethin'."⁴⁵

The fact that there was no confession to elicit from Mrs. Hamer and her colleagues further displayed the sinister design in Winona. The few questions hurriedly addressed to her in the interrogation preceding the beating held no urgency and were quickly dropped. "They came into my cell and asked me why was I demonstrating—and said that they were not going to have such carryings on in Mississippi. They asked me if I had seen Martin Luther King, Jr. I said I could not be demonstrating—I had just got off the bus—and denied that I have seen Martin Luther King. They said 'shut up' and always cut me off."⁴⁶ Mrs. Hamer had nothing to confess; she harbored no information needed by the torturers. She was not abused for the secrets she kept. She was abused, it seems, for *being*—for being a black woman with a voice.

Mrs. Hamer's beating illustrated what Scarry calls a "mimetic of death"; forced to participate in this obscene conflation of sexual and racial tragedy, her body became "emphatically, crushingly *present*," her voice emphatically and crushingly *absent*.⁴⁷ Mrs. Hamer said to a pair of indifferent FBI agents who visited her in jail two days after the beating: "Well, I can tell you one thing: I want to get out of here now! Because this is just a death cell." And later: "That was a death place down there. I don't see how . . . under the sun that a people could do human beins like they're doin' them. It's just a death trap."⁴⁸ ("Characteristic of the Mississippi jails is that you sit and rot," Bob Moses once said.)⁴⁹ The torture of Mrs. Hamer might very well have ended in death had not an unidentified white man come into the bullpen and announced, "That's enough." No one else was beaten that night, even though hours later Mrs. Hamer could hear the police officers in the booking room planning her murder. "They said, 'We could put them son of bitches in Big Black [River], and nobody would never find them.'"⁵⁰ Mrs. Hamer's suffering and humiliation left her with the certainty that death was imminent. There was no singing at this nightfall.

But then the next day something happened that slowly transformed the

killing despair of the jail and dispersed the power of death. "When you're in a brick cell, locked up, and haven't done anything to anybody but still you're locked up there, well sometimes words just begin to come to you and you begin to sing," she said. Song broke free. Mrs. Hamer sang:

Paul and Silas was bound in jail, let my people go.
Had no money for to go their bail, let my people go.

Paul and Silas began to shout, let my people go.
Jail doors open and they walked out, let my people go

"Singing brings out the soul," she said.⁵¹ And at Winona, singing brought out the soul of the black struggle for freedom, for Mrs. Hamer did not sing alone. Sitting in their cells down the hall, June Johnson, Annelle Ponder, Euvester Simpson, and Lawrence Guyot joined her in song. Church broke out, empowering them to "stay on 'the Gospel train' until it reaches the Kingdom."⁵²

Mrs. Hamer "really suffered in that jail from that beating," June Johnson said.⁵³ The physical and psychological effects of Winona stayed with her for a long time—she almost never talked about her life without talking about Winona. Even so, her songs of freedom gave voice to her suffering and the suffering she shared with her friends. Their singing did not remove their suffering or the particularities of their humiliation; rather, it embraced the suffering, named it, and emplotted it in a cosmic story of hope and deliverance. At first tentatively, and then with growing confidence, their song floated freely throughout the jail, exploding the death grip of the cell. "Jail doors open and they walked out, let my people go." Despair turned into a steady resoluteness to keep on going. A miracle happened. And at least for Mrs. Hamer, a peaceable composure, incomprehensible apart from a deep river of faith, transformed not only her diminished self-perception but the perception of her torturers. She said astonishingly, "It wouldn't solve any problem for me to hate whites just because they hate me. Oh, there's so much hate, only God has kept the Negro sane."⁵⁴

During the days in jail that followed Mrs. Hamer's beating, she pondered once again the familiar paradox of white Christians who hate and mistreat black people. She even struck up a conversation with the jailer's wife about the life of faith. When the white woman showed some kindness to the prisoners by offering them cold water, Mrs. Hamer thanked her and remarked that she "must be Christian people." The jailer's wife picked up on Mrs. Hamer's remark, telling her that she really tried her best to live right and to please God. She tried to follow Jesus, she said; she certainly believed in him, and had been baptized as a child. Mrs. Hamer assumed the role of counselor and spiritual gadfly in her response. She told the jailer's wife to get out her Bible and read the verses in Proverbs 26:26 and Acts 17:26.

Mrs. Hamer's counsel, spoken in the spirit of gentleness and edification,

offered at the same time an effective one-two punch of divine judgment and costly forgiveness. There is nothing sanguine about reconciliation in these passages. The jailer's wife could not have missed the barbed irony of Mrs. Hamer's devotional suggestions. The first verse speaks of those "whose hatred is covered by deceit," avowing that they will be brought down by divine wrath and "shall be shewed before the whole congregation." The entire twenty-sixth chapter of Proverbs is a litany of warnings for fools, transgressors, sluggards, and hateful men. "Whoso diggeth a pit shall fall therein: and he that rolleth a stone, it will return upon him," verse 27 adds. The New Testament passage came from St. Paul's address to the Athenians at Mars Hill. Before a people who took great pride in its collective piety—in this respect, a people much like the Mississippi's faithful white churchgoers—the apostle Paul had said, "I perceive that in all things ye are too superstitious" (Acts 17:22). He intended to make clear to the congregation at Athens, as Mrs. Hamer did to the jailer's wife, that the gods they "ignorantly worship" were idols. They must confess their sin of idolatry and worship instead the one true God, the one of whom it may be said, "made the world and all things therein, seeing that he is Lord of heaven and earth, dwelleth not in temples made with hands; neither is worshipped with men's hands, as though he needed any thing, seeing he giveth to all life, and breath, and all things" (Acts 17:24–25). In other words, if you are going to be religious, then you need to understand the rich diversity of God's creation.⁵⁵ Of course, this particular point may have been lost on the white woman in Winona—as it seems to have been lost on the Athenians. What would have hit hard was precisely the verse Mrs. Hamer singled out: "[God] hath made of one blood all nations of men for to dwell on all the face of the earth." Indeed, all races are as one in God's sight. Mrs. Hamer said of the white woman's response, "She's taken that down, but she never come back after then. I don't know what happened."⁵⁶

Later, when Mrs. Hamer was escorted by the jailer himself to her trial, she put the question to the very man who had helped carry out her beating just a few days earlier, "Do you people ever think or wonder how you'll feel when the time comes you'll have to meet God?" His response was full of embarrassment and vigorous denial. "Who you talking about?" he mumbled.⁵⁷ In fact, Mrs. Hamer knew all too well what had happened. "I hit them with the truth, and it hurts them," she said.⁵⁸

In the short term, nothing changed as a result of her beating and incarceration. The cases brought by the Justice Department against the City of Winona would come to a dismal end. June Johnson explained, "They picked an all-white jury to try the policemen, and there were lots of white students from Ole Miss in the courtroom with Confederate flags."⁵⁹ Both civil and criminal charges filed by the Justice Department were decided in favor of local law officials. The defendants—the City of Winona in the civil

suit, and officers Patridge, Herrod, Surrell, Basinger and Perkins in the criminal suit—were found not guilty. But even more disheartening news awaited Mrs. Hamer and her friends when they were released on the afternoon of June 12. They learned that civil rights leader Medgar Evers had been gunned down the night before in front of his own home—just seconds after his wife Myrlie and their three children had walked out into their carport to welcome home the weary traveler. The news of the murder was heavily felt. Evers stood as the animating center of the burgeoning Jackson movement, leading sit-ins and church visits, and organizing a wide range of strategic attacks on the city's segregated institutions. More than ever it seemed that the call to freedom was a call that might very well lead to death.

The torture left Mrs. Hamer in considerable pain. "I wouldn't let my husband see me for a month, I was in such bad shape."⁶⁰ In fact, after her release from jail, she stayed away from her family for six or seven weeks, traveling back and forth to Atlanta, Washington, and New York. Nonetheless, Mrs. Hamer emerged, as the ancient Christian theologian Athanasius wrote of Antony after his years in desert isolation, "with utter equilibrium, like one guided by reason and steadfast in that which accords with nature."⁶¹ Or as she explained with an earthier candor, "If them crackers in Winona thought they'd discouraged me from fighting, I guess they found out different. I'm going to stay in Mississippi and if they shoot me down, I'll be buried here."⁶² The experience brought her face to face with her worst fears about white racist violence, civil rights activism, and herself, but empowered by freedom songs and "the truth" she emerged full of courage and righteous anger. She said, "I'm never sure any more when I leave home whether I'll get back or not. Sometimes it seem like to tell the truth today is to run the risk of being killed. But if I fall, I'll fall five feet four inches forward in the fight for freedom. I'm not backing off."⁶³ Her determination was strong and sure, measured with a boundless generosity.

Mrs. Hamer emerged as the pillar of strength to local people in the struggle. As one of her fellow activists in the Mississippi movement, Mrs. Annie Devine, said, "Myself with others realized that there is a woman that can do all these things. And when she got herself beat in Winona, there was a greater woman. Why not follow somebody like that? Why not just reach out with one hand and say, just take me along?"⁶⁴

The Beginning of a New Kingdom

Despite the threatening climate of violence, a tenacious band of local blacks and SNCC workers continued to plug away in the recalcitrant Delta throughout the summer and fall of 1963. After the Winona jailing, Mrs. Hamer returned to voter registration and organizing in her native Sun-

flower County, employed by SNCC at the rate of ten dollars a week—"if they had the money," she added. As the field secretary for Sunflower County, Mrs. Hamer visited cotton fields by day to encourage workers and solicit voters, and black churches by night to rally men and women with freedom songs and speeches. The mass meetings, with their mixture of freedom singing, strategy making, and testifying, became the religious center of the movement.

In his absorbing narrative of the civil rights movement in the Delta, Charles Payne recounts Mrs. Hamer's electrifying presence in one such meeting at Tougaloo College. Following the singing of Hollis Watkins, a native Mississippian, SNCC worker, and melodious tenor, Mrs. Hamer took the pulpit by storm. She gave a testimony of her involvement in the movement, including a darkly comic description of the various kinds of harassment she had faced. The most recent, she told the congregation, took the form of late-night visits from policemen and their barking dogs, an occurrence so regular she had grown accustomed to it. "Look like now the dogs help me to get to sleep," she exclaimed.⁶⁵ Then her thoughts became more sobering, and more evangelistic. People need to be serious about their faith in the Lord; it's all too easy to say, "Sure, 'I'm a Christian,' and talk a big game. But if you are not putting that claim to the test, where the rubber meets the road, then it's high time to stop talking about being a Christian. You can pray until you faint," she said, "but if you're not gonna get up and do something, God is not gonna put it in your lap."⁶⁶ Never would Mrs. Hamer back away from addressing both whites and blacks with salvation's hard demands. As she would say on another occasion in strikingly less pastoral terms, "Sometimes I get so disgusted I feel like getting my gun after some of these chicken eatin' preachers. I know these Baptist ministers. . . . I'm not anti-church and I'm not anti-religious, but if you go down Highway 49 all the way into Jackson, going through Drew, Ruleville, Blaine, Indianola, Moorhead, all over, you'll see just how many churches are selling out to the white power structure."⁶⁷ (Mrs. Hamer knew all too well that "most black preachers had to be dragged kicking and screaming into supporting the movement.")⁶⁸ In the Tougaloo meeting, however, she took a more upbeat approach, testifying instead of the wonderfully diverse ways movement people had witnessed to their faith, and concluded with the song:

I'm on my way to the freedom land
If you don't go, don't hinder me
I'm on my way, praise God, I'm on my way.⁶⁹

Combining praise and prophetic provocation, Mrs. Hamer set her eyes on the freedom land. If you were not going, you'd better get out of the way.

Although these mass meetings certainly provided a forum for organizational planning and strategy making, their spiritually and psychologically

transformative power left the deepest impression on those gathered in the rural churches throughout the Delta. The language of the Gospel gave the local movement an indefatigable urgency and depth by placing black people's struggle for justice in a familiar and beloved narrative. And in Mrs. Hamer's hands, the meetings helped move the goal of the long journey from the life hereafter to the struggle here and now. As SNCC staff member Jean Wheeler Smith described the effect of the meetings on her own nascent activism, "The religious, the spiritual was like an explosion to me, an emotional explosion. . . . It just lit up my mind."⁷⁰ Through the mass meetings, Mrs. Hamer helped create a great reservoir of energy for all her brothers and sisters in the movement; experiences of sheer joy, as well as the dark nights of the soul when glad emotions were spent, were sustained by the spiritual energy radiating outward. There was, thus, much more to the resiliency they imparted than psychological empowerment. Lamentably, some historians have trivialized the meetings' complex theological character, describing it in terms resembling Alcoholics Anonymous or Weight Watchers—groups that try to change the behavior of their members "by offering a supportive social environment."⁷¹ It ought not to slight the important work of twelve-step groups to insist that Mrs. Hamer's utterly serious devotion to Jesus not be regarded solely as a motivational tool.

What is further lost in such assessments is not only the particularity of Mrs. Hamer's vision of the movement but the shared theological perception of those very social realities local black people sought to change—indeed that they believed God wanted to change. Faith played an important role in motivating social protest, of course, and the meetings unquestionably solidified a sense of community that could not have been so readily formed elsewhere. But Mrs. Hamer's faith was far greater and infinitely more complex than the utility it offered, which was itself indisputably great. For though her faith was certainly inspired by the liberating energies of the mass meetings, it was—much more—charged by all the literal and exquisite detail of the Gospel story. In Mrs. Hamer's mind, the black struggle for justice received its inner sense from the dramatic imagery of the biblical narrative. She said, "We have to realize just how grave the problem is in the United States today, and I think the sixth chapter of Ephesians, the eleventh and twelfth verses helps us to know . . . what it is we are up against. It says, 'Put on the whole armor of God, that we may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. For we wrestle not against flesh and blood but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places.' This is what I think about when I think of my own work in the fight for freedom."⁷² The meetings were not simply pep rallies for wearied foot soldiers—"but a very powerful social ritual."⁷³ As one of Mrs. Hamer's movement colleagues put

it, "These meetings were *church*, and for some who had grown disillusioned with Christian otherworldliness, they were better than church."⁷⁴ Only in church could one apprehend with such intensity both the theological expression of society's wrongs and the hope for decisive change; only there were the memories of the people and the promises of the future secured by trust in God.⁷⁵

Yet hard times lay ahead. During that fall of 1963, financial support and local registrants seemed to have dried up. Mrs. Hamer and her colleagues encountered a series of setbacks. "Too little money was coming in for voter-registration work," biographer Kay Mills explains, "and too many sharecroppers were out of work."⁷⁶ SNCC had been a presence in Mississippi for two years without making great progress either in voter registration or in stirring the conscience of whites outside the South. At the same time, white racist violence against both local black people and civil rights workers surged to a new level of intensity. Laurel businessman Sam Bowers began forming the White Knights of the Ku Klux Klan, with the intention of opposing what he would call "the forces of Satan on this earth," waging a campaign of violence against civil rights activists and anyone who appeared to give ground to their progress.⁷⁷ Beatings and jailings, death threats and murders, church burnings and the constant fear of bombings configured the state's threatening terrain. Although Mrs. Hamer might speak humorously, especially with people who shared her fears, of the daily barking of police dogs at her house, there was nothing funny about the pervasive anti-black violence burgeoning throughout the region. She lamented the constant harassment by automobiles "passing the house loaded with white men, and trucks . . . with guns hanging up in the back" and the threatening phone calls and letters.⁷⁸ Yet white extremists and terrorists were not the only ones busy with the business of massive resistance: conservative whites pursued more insidious forms of retaliation, like withdrawing food and medical supplies from black communities and tightening Jim Crow laws across the board. In any case, both forms of reprisal—extremist and moderate—went largely unchecked by Justice Department officials. To disconcerted civil rights activists who sought greater federal protection against pervasive harassment and criminal assaults, the FBI repeated like a mantra: "We are an investigative not a law-enforcing agency." "The Old Mississippi seemed to be winning," Mills writes.⁷⁹

Movement organizers began to discuss the possibility of a more dramatic form of protest—an event that would shake the foundations of the white power structure and direct the national spotlight on Mississippi, "the middle of the iceberg," as Bob Moses called it. In November of 1963, the Council of Federated Organizations (COFO) inaugurated the "Freedom Ballot Campaign," a mock election aimed to empower black voters and thus exhibit black Mississippians' determination to vote under less restric-

tive conditions. At its convention in Jackson, COFO nominated the respected Clarksdale pharmacist and state representative of the NAACP, Aaron Henry, as its gubernatorial candidate and Reverend Edwin King, the white Mississippi Methodist minister who served as the chaplain at historically black Tougaloo College, as its lieutenant governor. On election day, 83,000 blacks (and a few whites like Ole Miss historian James Silver, who is said to have voted several times) cast their ballots for Henry and King.⁸⁰ Although the number fell short of COFO's goal of 200,000, the turnout of 83,000 voters gave credibility to the claim that blacks were ready to move in large numbers to the polls. Mississippi "nigras" were not content after all, as white politicians had been nervously telling the media, their constituents, and themselves.

The strong turnout invigorated the movement like a shot of adrenaline, demonstrating the effectiveness of extensive grassroots organizing by the various civil rights groups in the state. As activists Lawrence Guyot and Mike Thelwell later concluded, the experience "took the Movement, for the first time, beyond activities affecting a single town, county, municipality, or electoral district, and placed us in the area of state-wide organization."⁸¹ An often contentious relationship between SNCC and the NAACP had even been cast aside for the moment. (Student-based SNCC, along with the Congress of Racial Equality, commonly regarded the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People as overly cautious and fearful of direct acts of social protest.) The strong vote was also a credit to the small cadre of white student volunteers that had been recruited to assist the registration campaign. This inspired Bob Moses to discern in the Freedom Vote the outlines of a much more ambitious voter-registration initiative—one that would connect local activists with a larger group of student volunteers in a comprehensive civil rights campaign. In partnership with activist lawyer and teacher Allard Lowenstein, Moses began to think in more detail of the initiative that would be called the "Mississippi Summer Project," and later more popularly rendered as "Freedom Summer."⁸² But there were controversial issues to iron out. Above all, many SNCC staffers raised the question of what would happen to indigenous black activism when white college students, most of whom were financially and educationally privileged, inundated the state. Would it not be difficult to keep the fragile balance of the various black coalitions with "a bunch of Yalies running around in their Triumphs," as one person worried.⁸³

Numerous concerns surfaced in the subsequent debate about white involvement in the Summer Project. Some SNCC members argued that white college students would be reluctant to take orders from local black men and women. Did not the invitation to northern students only perpetuate the presumption that blacks needed whites to solve their problems? Local activist Willie Peacock tapped into the deepest source of concern when he

explained, "If you bring white people to Mississippi and say, 'Negro, go and vote,' they will say, 'Yassah, we'll go and try to register and vote.'" But when the oppressor tells the oppressed to do something, Peacock said, that's not commitment or movement toward liberation; it is "the same slavery mentality." "I know that's not permanent," he added.⁸⁴

However, John Lewis and Bob Moses argued tirelessly for a highly visible interracial initiative. Lewis, who worked with SNCC in Greenwood, believed that the time had come "to take Mississippi to the nation."⁸⁵ The state was in a crisis situation at every level, with nearly 450,000 blacks of voting age living in a constant state of oppression, and with fewer than 7,000 blacks registered to vote in early 1964.⁸⁶ Lewis said, "We had to find a way to dramatize the crisis and the best way to do this was not only to organize black people but to bring a large number of young whites to the state, and let people live alongside each other, and in the process, educate not only ourselves and the volunteers, but, perhaps more importantly, the whole nation about Mississippi. It was a very dangerous effort but it was something that had to be done."⁸⁷

Moses reminded his fellow staffers (who included several white women and men) that the one thing SNCC could do for the country that no one else could was "be above the race issue."⁸⁸ He said, "I am concerned that we do integrate, because otherwise we'll grow up and have a racist movement. And if the white people don't stand with the Negroes as they go out now, then there will be a danger that after the Negroes get something they'll say, 'Okay, we got this by ourselves.' And the only way you can break that down is to have white people working alongside of you—so then it changes the whole complexion of what you're doing, so it isn't any longer Negro fighting white, it's a question of rational people against irrational people."⁸⁹ The civil rights movement needed to foster this new reality, to seek, as Moses said, a "broader identification, identification with individuals that are going through the same kind of struggle, so that the struggle doesn't remain just a question of racial struggle." Moses also invoked the vision of the beloved community, the ideal of a universal brotherhood and sisterhood of humankind, which Martin Luther King, Jr. had eloquently proclaimed in his recent sermons.⁹⁰ Moses's position was principled and philosophical and ultimately more persuasive.

Although for SNCC as an organization the controversy regarding white involvement was anything but resolved—it would resurface in following years with increasingly devastating intensity—organizers proceeded to make plans for the Summer Project, and Mrs. Hamer's dictum became the rule of thumb. "If we're trying to break down this barrier of segregation, we can't segregate ourselves," she said.⁹¹ Others argued on more pragmatic grounds that white volunteers would bring with them "channels of publicity and communication."⁹² They would surely generate widespread in-

terest—publicity essential for awakening the nation's conscience—and help create a climate conducive to greater federal involvement in civil rights.

By April of 1964, SNCC had drafted a proposal—a manifesto of sorts—that was posted on campus kiosks and bulletin boards throughout the nation. The document announced a program “planned for this summer” and solicited “the massive participation of Americans dedicated to the elimination of racial oppression.” Stated like this, the invitation to white student volunteers was no failure of nerve on the part of local blacks but a cooperative effort appealing to the “the country as a whole, backed by the power and authority of the federal government.”⁹³

In June, a training session for the volunteers was held at the Western College for Women in Oxford, Ohio. Several hundred students, with little understanding of life in Mississippi, gathered for an orientation to the summer that would bring them face to face with hatred, violence, and death—very possibly their own. The volunteer Sally Belfrage described the mood in Oxford: “No one seems quite certain what to do but the singing fills the gaps. They are all very young, very defenseless in all but the purity of their purpose, which connects them in a bond of immediate friendship.”⁹⁴ Belfrage remembered their first anxious hours together: “Out on the lawn again afterwards, [the students] formed in haphazard circles around the guitars, looking at each other self-consciously as they sang the words they scarcely knew. Then there was a change: a woman whose badge read ‘Mrs. Fannie Lou Hamer’ was suddenly leading them, molding their noise into music.

If you miss me from the back of the bus,
You can't find me nowhere,

Come on up to the front of the bus,
I'll be ridin' up there . . .

Her voice gave everything she had, and her circle soon incorporated the others, expanding first in size and in volume and then something else—it gained passion. Few of them knew who she was. . . . But here was clearly someone with force enough for all of them, who knew the meaning of ‘Oh Freedom’ and ‘We Shall Not Be Moved’ in her flesh and spirit as they never would. They lost their shyness and began to sing the choruses with abandon, though their voices all together dimmed beside hers.”⁹⁵ Although a well-known cast of speakers had been organized for the week, and the daily schedule offered a full slate of lectures and workshops, it was Fannie Lou Hamer whose indomitable presence was everywhere felt by those in attendance and who brought the purpose to focus.

In Oxford, as throughout the summer of 1964, Mrs. Hamer bore witness to her faith in a way that both inspired and disarmed the students, many of whom had long grown suspicious of the religious traditions of their par-

ents.⁹⁶ With a pastoral gentleness, she explained the harsh realities for black people in Mississippi. She cautioned against sarcasm and cynicism. She admonished love and nonviolence as the only adequate response to white oppression. She insisted that the volunteers not stereotype Mississippi whites: they should look deeper and try to discern the good that is in them. “Regardless of what they act like, there's some good there,” she insisted. At the same time, she put Christian love in the service of a new revolutionary framework, appearing radical and subversive in ways that jarred liberal sensibilities. To wit: “There is so much hypocrisy in America. The land of the free and the home of the brave is all on paper. It doesn't mean anything to us. The only way we can make this thing a reality in America is to do all we can to destroy this system and bring this thing out to the light that has been under the cover all these years. The scriptures have said, ‘The things that have been done in the dark will be known on the house tops.’”⁹⁷ In the same breath, she could dismay the summer volunteers by her unwavering moral convictions, especially her traditional sexual ethics, and by her motherly fussiness toward social etiquette and sartorial propriety. “Mrs. Hamer was our moma in the movement,” Curtis Hayes confirmed.⁹⁸ She disapproved of interracial dating and overly familiar gestures of affection between men and women in the Summer Project. When she saw the white female volunteers at the Freedom School in Ruleville sitting “out under the trees in the back yard playin' cards with the Negro boys,” or standing around in the front yard “chattin' and laughin',” or (she could not believe her eyes!) waving at cars when they drove by, she exclaimed, “They're good kids, and they seemed to understand [in the training session in Ohio]. But they get down here and nobody's settin' their house on fire, so they act like they're visitin' their boyfriends on college week end!” She concluded irritably, “If they can't obey the rules, call their mothers and tell them to send down their sons instead.”⁹⁹

Mrs. Hamer's irrepressible energy was put to the test during Freedom Summer. Aside from “mothering her brood of teachers” for the Freedom School,¹⁰⁰ traveling on behalf of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party, and keeping order in the Hamer home, she carried her voter-registration activities to a new level of intensity. Tracy Sugarman, a white New Englander who traveled to Ruleville for the summer wearing the two hats of journalist and volunteer, noted the powerful effect of Mrs. Hamer's relentless solicitations—often dreaded by fellow black Mississippians. On a “furiously hot Sunday morning” in July, Sugarman accompanied Mrs. Hamer to a worship service at a local black church. Mrs. Hamer had expressed no small frustration with the timid, albeit good-hearted minister of the small rural chapel. His continued balking at voter-registration efforts could no longer be ignored. Sugarman tells the story:

Our entry was about as unobtrusive as a platoon of tanks. One look at Fannie Lou's purposeful mien must have convinced the young country pastor that he was in for a trying morning. He paused, smiled tentatively, and then plunged ahead in his reading from Exodus. "And I will dwell among the children of Israel, and will be their God. And they shall know that I am the Lord their God that brought them forth out of the land of Egypt, that I may dwell among them: I am the Lord their God."

His voice dropped, and he closed the book. "This ends our readin' from Chapter Twenty-nine." His eyes lifted and he smiled at us. "I'm right pleased that Mrs. Fannie Lou Hamer has joined our service this mornin'. We are all happy to see you, Mrs. Hamer, and your friend. Would you like to say a few words to the congregation?"

Mrs. Hamer rose majestically to her feet. Her magnificent voice rolled through the chapel as she enlisted the Biblical ranks of martyrs and heroes to summon these folk to the Freedom banner. Her mounting, rolling battery of quotations and allusions from the Old and New Testaments stunned the audience with its thunder. "Pharaoh was in Sunflower County! Israel's children were building bricks without straw—at three dollars a day!" Her voice broke, and tears stood in her eyes. "They're tired! And they're tired of being tired."

Suddenly the rhetoric ceased, and a silence rushed into the room. Her finger trembled as she pointed to the shaken minister, and every eye fastened on the man in the pulpit. Fannie Lou's voice was commanding, but its passion came pure from her committed heart. "And you, Reverend Tyler, must be Moses! Leadin' your flock out of the chains and fetters of Egypt—takin' them yourself to register—*tomorra*—in Indianola!"¹⁰¹

God was leading black men and women to freedom in Sunflower County, and Mrs. Hamer was determined to gather as many people as she could for the great journey. The black clergy should help lead the way; but if it did not, God would find leaders from other places—as God always had.

In spite of numerous setbacks in voter registration and increased anti-civil rights violence, Freedom Summer was an exhilarating celebration of this promise to bless—a converging of divine deliverance with human readiness. But since human readiness required ultimate honesty about the Christian faith's capacity to change the South, the summer signaled a decisive transformation in the spiritual outlook of Mrs. Hamer and many of her local fellow travelers in the movement. In face of massive white resistance, black people could no longer assume that the faithful exhibition of Christian virtues would convict white Southerners of their social sins and overhaul Jim Crow's mean rule. Mrs. Hamer had learned all too well the unbending resolve of white racism. Christian love alone could not cure the sickness in Mississippi, she explained. If it could, then Mississippi would be the most just and decent state in America, considering that "[ninety] per cent of the Negro people in Mississippi have gone to church all their lives.

They have lived with the hope that if they kept 'standing up' in a Christian manner, things would change."¹⁰² Instead, Christian love must shape concrete solutions and new visions for the disenfranchised and the poor. Mrs. Hamer said, "Christianity is being concerned about [others], not building a million-dollar church while people are starving right around the corner. Christ was a revolutionary person, out there where it was happening. That's what God is all about, and that's where I get my strength."¹⁰³

And importantly, out there where it's happening, Mrs. Hamer learned that actions themselves can sometimes display the inner sense of faith and thereby witness to God's great goodness. Mrs. Hamer said, "When the people came to Mississippi in 1964, to us it was the result of all our faith—all we had always hoped for. Our prayers and all we had lived for started to be translated into action. Now we have action, and we're doing something that will not only free the black man in Mississippi but hopefully will free the white one as well."¹⁰⁴ In the generous reach of Mrs. Hamer's love of God, the doors and windows of the church swing wide, open to anyone who shows concern for others. Christ is discovered in living for others; in the performance of being out there where it's happening.

Questioning America

By the middle of July, the upcoming Democratic National Convention in Atlantic City, scheduled to begin on August 24, had become the strategic focal point of the Summer Project. SNCC continued to coordinate voter registration and Freedom School activities throughout the state, but the organizing of a new alternative political party moved to center stage. The Mississippi Freedom Democratic party (MFDP), or the Freedom Democrats, as the party was sometimes called, had been formed in April for the purpose of challenging the legitimacy of the all-white state Democratic delegation. As an "independent movement-led party," the MFDP would also introduce black men and women to the empowering prospects of political ownership—which they had experienced almost solely, if at all, in the black church. Bob Moses's "Emergency Memorandum" of July 19 to all COFO field workers stressed the need to convert the summer's successes into concrete political power. He insisted that "everyone who is not working in Freedom Schools or community centers . . . devote all their time to organizing for the convention challenge."¹⁰⁵ The immediate task was to encourage black people to defy the state's traditional Democratic establishment, which had both systematically excluded blacks from all levels of participation and aggressively opposed federal programs assisting minorities and the poor. So committed were the "regular Democrats" to the preservation of the status quo that they had thrown their support behind

the candidacy of Republican Senator Barry Goldwater, spurning their own party's president in office, the much-loathed traitorous Texan whose fondness for civil rights legislation had become an outrage in the South.

However, the Freedom Democrats wanted more than recognition as the authentic delegation from Mississippi to the Atlantic City convention, more even than forcing some of the white regulars to work with them. Cleveland Sellers, a SNCC staff member in Holly Springs, explained, "If our venture there was successful, we intended to utilize similar tactics in other Southern states, particularly Georgia and South Carolina. Our ultimate goal was the destruction of the awesome power of the Dixiecrats, who controlled over 75 percent of the committees in Congress. With the Dixiecrats deposed, the way would have been clear for a wide-ranging redistribution of wealth, power and priorities throughout the nation."¹⁰⁶ The Freedom Democrats would test the limits of liberal democracy, taking to the highest level of the political ladder folks who had fallen through the cracks of the system as it had operated until now.

The MFDP believed it could use to its advantage the discriminatory practices and disloyalty of the Mississippi regulars in persuading the Credentials Committee in Atlantic City of its legitimacy. Party members also hoped that the national scrutiny of the state sustained throughout the long, hot summer would give widespread popular support to the party's challenge. In fact, national scrutiny of Mississippi had reached a new level of intensity. Two days before the MFDP assembled in Jackson for its first state convention, FBI agents uncovered the bodies of James Chaney, Andrew Goodman, and Mickey Schwerner from a dam under construction in Neshoba County, having heard of their whereabouts from a paid informant. When the MFDP convention convened in Jackson on August 6, the two thousand people who overflowed the Masonic Temple in Jackson had good reason to believe that public support had shifted in their favor. In the convention hall, participants listened to speeches by movement veteran Ella Baker and the party's legal council, Joseph Rauh; rallied support for the Atlantic City challenge; and broke out time and again into thunderous renditions of Freedom songs. The electrifying atmosphere helped to give many Mississippi blacks and civil rights workers a new perspective on the struggle. One volunteer wrote excitedly:

Man, this is the stuff democracy is made of. All of us here are pretty emotional about the names of the counties of Mississippi. Amite and Sunflower and Tallahatchie have always meant where this one was shot, where this one was beaten, where civil rights workers feared for their lives the minute they arrived. But on Thursday Amite, and Tallahatchie, and Sunflower, and Neshoba didn't mean another man's gone. They meant people are voting from there, it meant people who work 14 hours a day from sun-up to sun-down picking cotton and live in homes with no plumbing and no paint, were casting bal-

lots to send a delegation to Atlantic City. As [Ella Baker] said, it was not a political convention, it was a demonstration that the people of Mississippi want to be let into America.

Waving American flags and county signs, balanced with "humility and pride, fear and courage," the convention crowd displayed patriotism at its best.¹⁰⁷

The sixty-eight delegates picked to represent the state included a number of established black leaders—the sort one volunteer maladroitly called "the comfortable, middle-aged 'We Don't Want Any Trouble' Uncle Toms"—but it included even more grass-roots organizers. Charles McLaurin, Lawrence Guyot, Annie Devine, E. W. Steptoe, Victoria Gray, and Fannie Lou Hamer were among the latter. Guyot was elected as the party chairman, Aaron Henry the delegation's chairman, Fannie Lou Hamer the vice chairwoman, and Annie Devine the secretary. Victoria Gray, a churchwoman in the forefront of the movement in Hattiesburg, along with Ed King and four other officers, were elected as representatives to the Democratic National Committee.¹⁰⁸

The MFDP hoped, and increasingly believed, that Atlantic City would provide the opportunity for black Mississippians to claim their rightful place in the Democratic party. Personal accounts of black life in Mississippi would be aired not only before the convention delegates but, via television, to a national audience that had heard precious little from poor blacks themselves. Most of the media's interest in the Summer Project had been focused on the white volunteers. An Ivy League man decked in khakis and rumpled-up workshirt conjured just the kind of image that captured white America's moral imagination. Rarely had Americans the chance to hear blacks tell their own stories. Importantly, the MFDP would seize the Democratic National Convention in Atlantic City as the perfect forum for local people's own testimony to the nation, and at the perfect time. Most of the delegates maintained a guarded optimism about the challenge; in fact, during the summer three states (Oregon, New York, and Michigan) had passed resolutions calling for the seating of the party.

Fannie Lou Hamer may have gone to Atlantic City with some trepidation, but once there she shook the political establishment like Jesus among the money changers. On Friday, August 21, the caravan of unairconditioned buses and automobiles arrived at the convention city. Mrs. Hamer and the other MFDP representatives, as well as the handful of summer volunteers who accompanied the delegation, checked into the low-budget Gem Hotel on a back street. The "pop-art, circus quality of Atlantic City" seemed a surreal contrast to the summer's landscapes of dense, withering vegetation, sweltering heat and violence.¹⁰⁹ The large group of black men and women, which included schoolteachers and domestics, plantation workers and businessmen, caught the media's attention—and everyone

else's in Atlantic City—from the moment they arrived. The Freedom Democrats, hoping to spark keen media and popular interest in their presence, brought along numerous artifacts of Mississippi life. Along the boardwalk were displayed notarized depositions from victims of violence and discrimination, photographs of living conditions for black people, reports on economic and medical deprivation, and a list of the churches and homes bombed by the Klan (the White Knights would not systematically target synagogues until 1967).¹¹⁰ The MFDP delegation displayed every available symbol and document that served to bolster support of their seating in place of the regular Mississippi Democrats, including a burned-out Ford stationwagon, transported from Mississippi on the back of a flat-bed truck, which reminded viewers of the one in which Chaney, Goodman, and Schwerner took their fateful ride into Neshoba County; including sketches of the martyred civil rights workers, nailed to pieces of wood and waved in the air to remind the nation of the murders; and including the bell from the Mt. Zion Methodist Church near Philadelphia, which had been burned to the ground after opening its doors to Schwerner's voter-registration initiative. Still, it was Mrs. Hamer—singing her rendition of “Go Tell It on the Mountain to Let My People Go” and addressing the MFDP vigils on the boardwalk—who seemed always to be at the center of the network news shows or a circle of reporters.¹¹¹

The Freedom Democrats' immediate goal was to garner the favor of the Credentials Committee by winning over at least 10 percent of the committee members, which amounted to eleven votes. If successful, a minority report in behalf of the MFDP would come to a discussion on the convention floor. Once on the floor, the support of eight states would be needed to get a roll call, which would then require every state to go on record with its position on the seating. Although earlier in the summer numerous state conventions had voiced support of the MFDP's seating in Atlantic City, the task of getting the 10 percent vote was now an uphill battle. As the official body in charge of reviewing the credentials of all state and territorial delegations, the committee was home to many of the national party's regulars, and their primary interest lay in making sure that the proceedings went off smoothly and without any unexpected problems.¹¹² Certainly the last thing Lyndon Johnson needed was some last-minute glitch in the machinery of his presidential campaign. This would be the year he finally moved into the spotlight, out of shadows of other men.

But with the arrival of the Freedom Democrats, the “Johnson Convention” seemed to be straying from his advisers' script. He was irate that Joseph Rauh, a long-time activist in the Democratic party, had agreed to represent the MFDP as its lawyer. He was angry that the Freedom Democrats had even come to town. When Johnson saw Mrs. Hamer on a news

broadcast leading a group of people in the chant “eleven and eight, eleven and eight,” he called Senator Hubert Humphrey (himself hoping for the vice-presidential spot), and barked, “You tell that bastard goddamn lawyer friend of yours that there ain't gonna be all that eleven and eight shit at the convention.”¹¹³ To make matters worse, Johnson had also been informed that five delegations from the South would walk out of the convention if the black Mississippians were seated in place of the regulars. He worried that excessive patronizing of the MFDP would cost him the entire southern vote.

Nonetheless, all the behind-the-scenes political maneuvering seemed momentarily unimportant when the Credentials Committee proceedings commenced on Saturday afternoon, and all the major networks went live to national coverage. Aaron Henry began with a brief speech outlining his efforts as head of COFO's voter registration during the Summer Project. Henry explained that the very presence of the MFDP delegation in Atlantic City might be cause for arrest when they returned home to Mississippi. Already, the state attorney general had obtained an injunction barring their attendance at the convention on the grounds that they were using the word “Democratic” illegally. Yet in spite of these and other threats, Henry resolved before the committee and the nation, “If jail is the price that we must pay for our efforts to be of benefit to America, to the national Democratic Party, and to Mississippi, then nothing could be more redemptive.”¹¹⁴

Ed King, the vice chairman of the delegation, was the next to testify. On King's face was a bright red arch from his right cheek to his chin, the scar from an automobile accident in Jackson a few weeks after the murder of Medgar Evers, which King believed to have been orchestrated by the Citizens' Council.¹¹⁵ King described how costly, indeed how dangerous, were the consequences of dissent from the prevailing orthodoxy of the closed society. But it was still important to remember that there were whites sympathetic to civil rights for blacks, even though fear had immobilized almost all disagreement and self-criticism, King said. “I know many Mississippians in the last several years, over one hundred ministers and college teachers, [who] have been forced to leave the state. This nation is being populated with refugees from the closed society in Mississippi.”¹¹⁶ Those white men and women courageous enough to speak against the day could expect relentless intimidation by the Citizens' Council or the Ku Klux Klan; and ultimately they could expect to lose their jobs and become exiles in their own country.

When Reverend King concluded, Mrs. Hamer took the microphone. In a proud, solemn voice, she began, “Mr. Chairman and Credentials Committee, my name is Mrs. Fannie Lou Hamer, and I live at 626 East Lafayette Street, Ruleville, Mississippi, Sunflower County, the home of Senator James O. Eastland and Senator Stennis.”¹¹⁷ Mrs. Hamer told her story to

America. Patient and composed, she recalled the ordeal of registering to vote in 1962 and the violent attacks encountered as a result; she recalled the horrors of the Winona jail and concluded her story with the terse observation, "All of this is on account we want to register, to become first-class citizens, and if the Freedom Democratic Party is not seated now, I question America." On the verge of tears, she left her astonished audience with the question, "Is this America, the land of the free and the home of the brave where we have to sleep with our telephones off the hooks because our lives be threatened daily because we want to live as decent human beings—in America?"¹¹⁸ When Mrs. Hamer finished, she was not the only one in the room on the verge of tears. As Cleveland Sellers said, "Some of the rest of us were too."¹¹⁹

The several million Americans watching the Credentials Committee hearings by television were forced to miss the final minutes of live coverage. "In the White House there was panic," civil rights historian Len Holt said.¹²⁰ Or as Joseph Rauh put it, "Johnson saw her and blew his stack." Fearing the damage Mrs. Hamer's account might bring to his long-awaited nomination, the president interrupted live televised coverage for a press conference on an unrelated matter. However, by the end of the afternoon, the major networks, realizing they had been manipulated by the president, responded to his trick by playing one of their own: they broadcast the tape of Mrs. Hamer's testimony from start to finish during the evening convention coverage.¹²¹ Thousands of telephone calls and telegrams poured into the Credentials Committee throughout the afternoon and evening and the next day. Although Johnson's ill-conceived press conference did little to diminish America's sympathy for the black Mississippians, his advisers and convention strategists knew their continued proximity to presidential power depended on keeping "that illiterate woman" (as Johnson called Mrs. Hamer) out of the spotlight and putting a quiet end to the challenge.¹²²

Johnson dispatched his "trustworthy troops," Hubert Humphrey, Walter Mondale, J. Edgar Hoover, and Walter Reuther. Humphrey's task was clear and simple: if he wanted his name to appear as vice president on a Johnson ticket, he would need to dismantle the MFDP challenge. (With regard to his selection of a running-mate, Johnson had stated in no uncertain terms, "Whoever he is, I want his pecker to be in my pocket.")¹²³ In turn, Humphrey assigned the young Walter Mondale to the nitty-gritty work of hammering out a compromise. If Mondale hoped to become the successor of the Minnesota senator, he would have to wield his position as chair of the special subcommittee to convince the MFDP to accept his "two-seat" proposal. Rounding off the team of political insiders was J. Edgar Hoover, who was more than willing to deploy his favorite surveillance techniques in SNCC and MFDP gathering places and in Martin Luther King, Jr.'s, hotel room. For his part, Walter Reuther, president of the

United Auto Workers, interrupted high-level negotiations with General Motors to intervene in the Atlantic City crisis, appealing to his beneficiaries in the Southern Christian Leadership Conference to accept the compromise.¹²⁴ The eventual support of Martin Luther King, Jr., and SCLC for the "two-seat" plan had as much to do with Reuther's dimly veiled threat to withdraw financial support from SCLC as with King's wish to placate Johnson. The MFDP's rich depository of principle was no match for the man who held his hands on the purse strings of the United Auto Worker's treasury.

The proposed compromise hammered out by Senator Humphrey and the White House would preclude any full-scale replacement of the Mississippi regulars, and would grant the MFDP general recognition as honored guests of the convention with only two at-large delegates, Aaron Henry and Ed King. In addition to the two-seat plan, the Humphrey and Mondale compromise recommended that only those Mississippi regulars be seated who supported the convention's nominees, not Barry Goldwater, the Republican presidential nominee whose states rights rhetoric had captivated the white South. The proposal also recommended that the Democratic National Committee require all delegations at the 1968 convention "to assure that voters in the state, regardless of race, color, creed or national origin . . . have the opportunity to participate fully in Party affairs."¹²⁵

Humphrey hoped the Mississippi delegation would not only accept the compromise but would also show some appreciation for the efforts made by the national party in taking their challenge seriously. In arguing the merit of compromise, Humphrey appealed to their political sense. He reminded the party of his liberal views on civil rights, of the president's concern for poverty in America. He encouraged realism, savvy. Concessions must be made at this level of the game. His political future and his job were hanging in the balance. Could the MFDP not appreciate his point?

As a black woman from the South, Mrs. Hamer could certainly understand concessions. But in her mind this was not about concession or compromise. She said to Humphrey, "Do you mean to tell me that your position is more important to you than four hundred thousand black people's lives?"¹²⁶ For Mrs. Hamer, this was about the ascendancy of truth over politics; divine justice over liberal shrewdness. This was about "the beginning of a New Kingdom right here on earth," about curing "America's sickness"—and not with another remedy from the prevailing ethos of utility and power but with an injection of new vision and energy; not with a view toward political expediency but with a view from below.¹²⁷ Mrs. Hamer continued, "Senator Humphrey, I know lots of people in Mississippi who have lost their jobs for trying to register to vote. I had to leave the plantation where I worked in Sunflower County. Now if you lose this job of vice president because you do what is right, because you help the MFDP,

everything will be all right. God will take care of you. But if you take [the vice-presidential nomination] this way, why, you will never be able to do any good for civil rights, for poor people, for peace or any of those things you talk about. Senator Humphrey, I'm gonna pray to Jesus for you."¹²⁸ This was about faithfulness to the call.

The architects of the White House-supported compromise did the rest of their work largely in secret. Fannie Lou Hamer was deliberately excluded from all further discussion. Mrs. Hamer's passionate witness on behalf of the poor seemed as out of place in the war rooms of partisan maneuvering as among the elegantly appointed plantations of the Mississippi Delta. As Kay Mills explains, "She had not been processed through any part of the system that usually renders someone controllable, at least in the eyes of those in power. She wasn't a product of the educational system or a labor union or the political system. She owed nothing to no one. She was uncompromising."¹²⁹ Mrs. Hamer had spoken the truth to power, and power responded with silence and rejection.¹³⁰ Listening to Mrs. Hamer finish her remarks, Humphrey's face bore an "empty sadness" (as Ed King recalls), his genuine sympathy for her story checked by his incapacity to invite her into the political process and to take her witness to heart.¹³¹

By Tuesday, August 25, the eleven votes needed for the Credentials Committee support had evaporated. Lyndon Johnson demonstrated his well-earned reputation as a political heavyweight. In addition to the defection of Martin Luther King, Jr., from the MFDP challenge, one member of the committee reversed her support when told by a Johnson aide that her husband would lose any chance of a federal judgeship. Another member changed sides when threatened with the elimination of all poverty programs in his Congressional district. Yet another learned that a vote for the Freedom Democratic party might guarantee the loss of a government contract his firm was pursuing.¹³² Courtland Cox, a SNCC staffer working for MFDP, recalls, "Every member of that credentials committee who was going to vote for the minority, got a call. . . . And you began to see how things worked in the real world. I mean everybody, including a number of the people in the civil rights movement, a number of people in the religious community, a number of people in the liberal community, all came out and tried to blunt the thrust of the MFDP to take its rightful place as the lawful delegation from Mississippi."¹³³ The MFDP watched as their fragile coalition of backers began to crumble. By the time Johnson and company finished their hard hitting, support on the Credentials Committee for the Mississippi challenge had dropped from 18 to 4.

All the while, in his negotiations with MFDP representatives, Humphrey was brandishing just the sort of political cunning that would soon seal his spot on the presidential ticket. Supported by his new converts, Martin Luther King, Jr., Andrew Young, Bayard Rustin, and Walter Reuther,

Humphrey conferred with MFDP representatives Aaron Henry, Ed King, and Bob Moses at the Pagent Hotel and urged them to accept the compromise—and quickly. Humphrey had to explain that the delegation would not even be allowed to vote on their own two delegates because the president feared the MFDP would elect Hamer. At the same time, Mondale was railroading the compromise through the Credentials Committee hearing. Henry, Ed King, and Moses were under the impression that their conference with Humphrey was pivotal in negotiating the challenge, that the decision of the Freedom Democrats would be taken seriously by the committee, despite the fact that Humphrey clearly wished to settle the issue promptly without further delay. But that illusion was shattered when one of the senator's assistants rushed into the meeting room to announce that an important news report was about to be made on television. The news was that the Credentials Committee had unanimously approved the two-seat plan; that civil rights forces had won a remarkable victory by forcing the president of the United States to compromise. Bob Moses was livid. "You tricked us!" he shouted at Humphrey, as he stormed out of the room, visibly enraged.¹³⁴ Feeling "completely manipulated," Moses hurried to the Union Temple Baptist Church, where he explained to the confused delegates that he had not accepted the compromise.

On Tuesday night, as the temporary chair dismissed any dissenting voices from the floor with a bang of his gavel, the recommendation of the Credentials Committee was approved.¹³⁵ Johnson's convention could now proceed without further aggravation. Aside from an MFDP sit-in in Convention Hall, the continued vigils outside, and the predictable protestations of betrayal and political trickery, the delegation had run out of steam. The challenge was finished.

The Freedom Democrats had only then to meet and decide whether to accept or reject the compromise. Obviously, the two-seat proposal had many enthusiastic supporters, from Humphrey to Martin Luther King, Jr., to the northern news media. Even MFDP's own Aaron Henry and Ed King agreed in the end with the compromise. But Mrs. Hamer and the rank-and-file delegates, particularly the women and the sharecroppers and the poorer members of the party, remained unyielding in their call for true representation. Mrs. Hamer said, "If something was supposed to be ours 300 years ago, no one has the right to hand us only a *part* of it 300 years later."¹³⁶ Having too long accepted the leftovers from the white man's table, Mrs. Hamer refused what she considered a political handout. The compromise was an offense to those thousands of local black men and women, nameless and without voice in the national political scene, who, as Victoria Gray explained, "had not only laid their lives on the line, but had given their lives in order for this particular event to happen."¹³⁷ They would no longer accept the crumbs of liberal charity. Mrs. Hamer said

baldly, "We didn't come all this way for no two seats."¹³⁸ The Freedom Democrats rejected the compromise.

The Mississippi delegation began to cast about for a way to understand the defeat. Some SNCC members seemed ready to wash their hands of the whole political establishment, citing the obvious failures of liberal democracy. "Atlantic City undermined my faith in the democratic process," said one summer volunteer.¹³⁹ "My hopes and dreams of being part of the National Democratic party were dead," said SNCC's Curtis Hayes.¹⁴⁰ Cleveland Sellers gave voice to an anger that propelled many SNCC members toward a more militant agenda in the months to follow. Sellers said, "The National Democratic party's rejection of the MFDP at the 1964 convention was to the civil rights movement what the Civil War was to American history: afterward, things could never be the same. Never again were we lulled into believing that our task was exposing injustices so that the 'good' people of America would eliminate them. We left Atlantic City with the knowledge that the movement had turned into something else. After Atlantic City, our struggle was not for civil rights, but for liberation."¹⁴¹ For his part, veteran SNCC activist Ed Brown left Atlantic City with a intensified awareness of the either/or situation at hand, which he called the new "religious" impulse of the movement. "The world was now defined between us and them," Brown said, "in the way a religious person defines the world between believers and nonbelievers. We were pure and good; all the others were corrupt, even those middle-class blacks who wanted to compromise at the convention."¹⁴²

Most everyone mourned the fact that the Democratic establishment had passed on a rare opportunity to truly be the representative party of the poor and the oppressed.¹⁴³ Bob Moses lamented this failure above all. Perhaps there was room for black professionals in the party, but there was no room for "the grassroots people, the sharecroppers, the common workers and the day workers." Of course, there might be room for them "as recipients of largesse, of poverty programs and the like," he said, but not as "participants in power-sharing."¹⁴⁴ Although Bob Moses returned to Mississippi after the National Democratic Convention, his distrust of organizations had intensified to a feverish high in Atlantic City, making it difficult for him to give much more to the movement. "Go where the spirit says go, and do what the spirit says do," he began urging SNCC workers in late 1964. He withdrew from Mississippi the next year.¹⁴⁵

Mrs. Hamer was also angry and tired. But like most of the local people representing the Mississippi Freedom Democratic party (and unlike most of the younger SNCC staffers), Mrs. Hamer had long possessed a sober realism toward racial politics. She did not need Atlantic City to convince her that "the white man is not going to give up his power to us." Atlantic City only broadened that realism, teaching her that racism "is not Mississippi's

problem, but America's—that 'the land of the free and the home of the brave is all on paper.'¹⁴⁶ The enemy was no longer the familiar cast of bigots and klansmen but "the powers in high places."¹⁴⁷ She questioned America. But she did not despair. In fact, Mrs. Hamer and the Freedom Democrats proved their claim as Mississippi's legitimate Democratic delegation by supporting the Johnson-Humphrey ticket in November, unlike all but a few white regulars, who catapulted Goldwater to an overwhelming victory in the state polls.

In the closing hours of the Atlantic City convention, the MFDP held its final vigil on the boardwalk. Sally Belfrage described the mood that prevailed at the gathering as one of solemn but steadied determination, radiating from the indefatigable presence of Mrs. Hamer. The hard lessons of the summer's end seemed only to strengthen her resolve.

At the vigil again quite late we stood and sang "We Shall Overcome"—remembering all the impossible times, unlike any others, when we had sung it before. The only song that has no clapping, because the hands are holding all the other hands. A suspension from color, hate, recrimination, guilt, suffering—a kind of lesson in miniature of what it's all about. The song begins slowly and somehow without anticipation of these things: just a song, the last one, before we separate. You see the others, and the instant when it comes to each one to think what the words mean, when each merely breaks, wondering: shall we overcome? The hands hold each other tighter. Mrs. Hamer is smiling, flinging out the words, and crying at once. "Black and white together," she leads the next verse, and a sort of joy begins to grow in every face; "We are not afraid"—and for just that second no one is afraid, because they are free.¹⁴⁸

When the vigil ended, Mrs. Hamer, along with her fellow Freedom Democrats, returned to Mississippi—"proud and unbowed."¹⁴⁹

But free? Does not Belfrage's artfulness obscure her historical judgment? On the contrary, her observation is characteristically prescient. In defiance of the compromise, Mrs. Hamer and her Mississippi comrades were freed by the moral clarity that comes from resisting temptation, freed by their refusal to sell out, from the illusion that the solution to their problems would come from the powers of the political establishment.

Their perceptions clouded by fatigue and anger, Mrs. Hamer and the MFDP had no way of realizing that their labors in the Summer Project and at Atlantic City would help usher in the Voting Rights Act. Indeed the victories of the Freedom Democratic party were not moral or spiritual alone. By the summer of 1968, 42 percent of the black people living in Sunflower County had registered to vote. In other Delta counties like Leflore, Coahoma, and Issaquena, the percentage was even higher. Compared to the early 1960s, when only 250 blacks were registered in Leflore County

and fewer in Sunflower, the MFDP and SNCC summer initiative had been a strategic success. As political scientist Leslie McLemore summarized in his analysis of the party, "The FDP's Atlantic City performance represented the coming of political age of Black people in Mississippi in a way that had not been seen since Reconstruction."¹⁵⁰

The Welcome Table

Mrs. Hamer's life after 1964 mirrored her conviction that God's power—God's concrete, worldly presence—was with the poor. After traveling to Africa with Harry Belafonte and a group of SNCC veterans in September 1964, she returned to her home in Ruleville, Mississippi, where she lived in poverty until her death on March 14, 1977. Mrs. Hamer continued to organize Freedom Democratic initiatives to build black power in the state. Although defeated in her own bids for public office and in her 1964 and 1965 congressional challenge, she represented the state as a member of the official (and biracial) delegation of Mississippians in the 1968 National Democratic Convention in Chicago, where she strongly supported anti-Vietnam War actions. She helped organize the Child Development Group of Mississippi, and when that failed became a champion for other grassroots Head Start programs.¹⁵¹ She directed the Freedom Farm Cooperative in Sunflower County, obtaining several hundred acres of land for plantation workers who had lost their jobs to farm mechanization. She also played a critical role in Martin Luther King, Jr.'s, Poor People's Campaign, which worked to create a multiracial political coalition of the poor and dispossessed.¹⁵² In the last years of her life, she battled a devastating assault of cancer, heart disease, and diabetes, along with severe mental strain and depression. Her lack of any disability income intensified the stress and resulted in inconsistent health care.

Through it all, the Summer Project remained for Mrs. Hamer the most powerful memory of the movement, a reminder amidst much personal suffering that God had been present in the struggle. In her final interview, given three months before her death, she recalled: "A living example was Andy Goodman, James Chaney, and Michael Schwerner that come down here. And I remember talking to them the Sunday before they went to Oxford, Ohio, for the orientation where we had to drill or talk [to the volunteers] about what they might be faced with. Even when Christ hung on the cross, he said greater love has no man than the one who is willing to lay down his life for his friends. Even though they was aware they might die, they still came. These are the things we have to think about. These are the things we can't sweep under the rug. And these are the things that still give

me hope."¹⁵³ In Mrs. Hamer's way of seeing, the thought of the three civil rights workers dying like Christ on the cross was not an exhibition of any sort of Christian imperialism—claiming the two Jewish men as martyrs for Christ. Rather, her perception was shaped by the utterly straightforward conviction that if Jesus is the one for others, then surely he welcomes all who follow after, no matter whether they confess some other name or no name at all.

Fannie Lou Hamer gave voice to a distinctive Christian discourse, evangelical in the most vigorous sense of the term, a robust and disciplined love of Jesus of Nazareth, of the whole scandalous story of his life, death, and resurrection. At the same time, her love was a great big love, open to anyone who cared for the weak and the poor. Was this not the message of the Gospel? She believed it was: "The churches have got to remember how Christ dealt with the people," she testified, "like in the 4th chapter of St. Luke, and the 18th verse, when Jesus said, 'The spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he hath anointed me to preach the gospel to the poor; he hath sent me to heal the brokenhearted, to preach deliverance to the captives, and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those that are bruised.'" Jesus was God's son, sacrificed on the bloody cross for the sins of the world, raised miraculously from the dead on the third day, coming again in glory to judge the world and gather home his children. But Jesus was also a "radical" and a "militant," and were he living in the Delta in 1964, he would be branded a "red."¹⁵⁴ Christ was a real revolutionary, "out there where it's happening."

In this context Mrs. Hamer spoke of the Summer Project as "the beginning of a New Kingdom right here on earth." She compared the student volunteers to the Good Samaritan, reading Jesus's famous parable as a description of the New Kingdom emerging amidst the scorched summer fields of the Mississippi Delta. Like the self-righteous priest and the Levite in the biblical account, who passed by the wounded man without concern for his welfare, southern white Christians had turned their sights from black suffering—and "never taken the time to see what was going on." But this was not true of the summer volunteers who came to Mississippi. Although strangers like the Samaritan in Jericho, they never hesitated to act with compassion toward people they found hurting and oppressed. "Although they were strangers, they were the best friends we ever met," Mrs. Hamer said. "This was the beginning of the New Kingdom in Mississippi. To me, if I had to choose today between the church and these young people—and I was brought up in the church and I'm not against the church—I'd choose these young people. They did something in Mississippi that gave us the hope that we had prayed for so many years. We had wondered if there was anybody human enough to see us as human beings instead of animals. These young people were so Christlike." The volunteers, often

boasting secular ideals of justice, appeared to Mrs. Hamer as instruments of divine grace and compassion—their naïveté, bookish agnosticism, and occasional patronizing notwithstanding. In Mrs. Hamer's view, their commitment was a beautiful and holy thing. She said, "If Christ were here today, He would be just like these young people who the Southerners called radicals and beatniks. Christ was called a Beelzebub, called so many names. But He was Christ."¹⁵⁵ In Mrs. Hamer's keen theological imagination, the radical, beatnik Christ was taking shape in the texture of compassionate service for others. ("Bob Moses was my little Jesus," Curtis Hayes once confessed.)¹⁵⁶ This far outweighed, in her mind, the contentious matter of whether the students had purged themselves of whatever cultural stereotypes continued to distort their self-perceptions and perceptions of local people.

Like any good evangelical theologian, Mrs. Hamer's discourse was full of subversive undercurrents and iconoclastic impulses, spirited with energy moving into action. Her words disarmed: they were comforting and familiar on a literal level, agitating and sly beneath the surface. She liked to describe salvation as a welcoming table (as in the well-known spiritual) where everybody was invited to come and eat, even Ross Barnett and James O. Eastland—but they would have to learn some manners. For those who had ears to hear, she added, "It's a funny thing since I started working for Christ; it's kind of like in the 23rd Psalm, when David said, 'Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of my enemies. Thou anointeth my head with oil.'"¹⁵⁷ She would only be working now for Jesus, but look what had happened; in a comic reversal of roles, Jesus had prepared a feast for her, where the governor and the senator would be the strangers in need of hospitality.

Thus, two interconnecting images of Christ shaped her piety: the historical, miraculous, resurrected Christ, on the one hand, and the gritty, revolutionary Christ, on the other. Was there not a contradiction between these images? Though there might be for the intellectual aristocracy, for the folks in high places, there was not for Mrs. Hamer. For she rehearsed a synthetic ingenuity born of experience, as adept as the most sublime philosopher in weaving contradictions into an integrated whole. Yet Mrs. Hamer did not rely on philosophical or theological systems to reconcile opposites. Indeed, it might seem ludicrous to state this, were it not for the fact that her way of holding together the two thoughts of the miraculous and the militant Christ exhibited a creative and conceptual power every bit the equal of our canonized masters of conceptual thought. The animating center of her piety was her voice, which time and again energized people into action. She used the singing of spirituals.¹⁵⁸

Consider the way she combined two slave spirituals, differing in theme and structure, into a new song with resonances specifically attuned to the

movement.¹⁵⁹ Apart from any formal theological training, Mrs. Hamer grasped with keen insight the connection between Easter and Passover, between personal salvation and the liberation of the people of Israel from bondage. She took the Christmas spiritual, "Go Tell It on the Mountain":

Go tell it on the mountain
over the hills and everywhere;
Go tell it on the mountain
that Jesus Christ is born.

She combined it with the song, "Go Down Moses":

When Israel was in Egypt's land, let my people go,
oppressed so hard they could not stand, let my people go.
Go down Moses, way down in Egypt's land;
Tell old Pharaoh, let my people go.

She then sang:

Paul and Silas was bound in jail, let my people go.
Had no money for to go their bail, let my people go.

Paul and Silas began to shout, let my people go.
Jail doors open and they walked out, let my people go.

Who's that yonder dressed in red? Let my people go.
Must be the children that Moses led, let my people go.

Who's that yonder dressed in black? Let my people go.
Must be the hypocrites turning back, let my people go.

Who's that yonder dressed in blue? Let my people go.
Must be the children now passing through, let my people go.

I had a little book he gave to me, let my people go.
And every page spelled victory, let my people go.

Go, tell it on the mountain, over the hills and everywhere.
Go, tell it on the mountain, to let my people go!

Here is Mrs. Hamer's retelling of the Gospel story. My sins are forgiven; my life is made new; the angel of death has passed over me; I have been rescued from an eternal perishing. Still, much more is at stake than the fate of my individual soul. For since the good news is proclaimed, I can stand up to Pharaoh, look him in the eyes and say, "Let my people go." There is a land beyond Egypt.¹⁶⁰ The song builds momentum until the final verse repeats the phrase, but now no longer as a plea but as a demand of the Gospel—"Let my people go." The Gospel—"go tell it"—becomes the theological framework for the liberation of people from oppression.¹⁶¹

Thus, the death for which Christ has atoned—my death, humanity's death—is also the death of bondage to fear and oppression—a resounding “No” to Jim Crow.¹⁶² And importantly, both deaths, the atoning death of Christ and the death to slavery, can—and must—be claimed in the here and now. In Mrs. Hamer's mind, this is what Moses—that is, Bob Moses—had tried to explain when he said, “The thing was not how you're going to die, but how you're going to live.”¹⁶³ The solitariness of one's own death—of one's own self—is taken up in the historical unfolding of the demand, “Let my people go,” a demand that is also a promise, that also gathers up the particularities of our individual stories into the spirit's movement toward freedom. The Good News is this: that the core of who we are as individual selves is no longer enslaved in the cotton fields of the Mississippi Delta or shut up in a Winona prison; it is now free for others, open toward life. The lady who sang understood:

I've got the light of freedom
 I'm gonna let it shine.
 Jesus gave it to me,
 I'm gonna let it shine.
 Gonna shine all over the Delta,
 I'm gonna let it shine.
 Let it shine, let it shine, let it shine.

TWO

High Priest of the Anti-Civil Rights Movement: The Calling of Sam Bowers

The Making of a Christian Militant

WHEN Sam Bowers surveyed America's social landscape from his beloved Mississippi in early 1964, he did not simply lament the changing South—the desecration of “sovereign” southern states, their time-honored practices attacked by liberal politicians, northern media elites, and civil right workers. The world Bowers saw was more menacing and full of dangers greater than even these assaults on caste and custom. Right before his eyes, on the alluvial soil of the very heart of the Confederacy, appeared all the signs of a two-thousand-year war between the idolatrous agents of Baal and the soldiers of the one true God, the “Galilean Jesus Christ.”

As Imperial Wizard of the White Knights of Ku Klux Klan, Bowers ruled over a four-year campaign of pervasive white terrorism during which he was suspected of orchestrating at least nine murders, seventy-five bombings of black churches, and three hundred assaults, bombings, and beatings. From 1964 until his conviction in 1967 on federal civil rights violations in the triple murder of Michael Schwerner, James Chaney, and Andrew Goodman, Bowers was the animating force behind white Mississippi's journey into the heart of militant rage, the Kurtz at the heart of darkness of the anti-civil rights movement. Standing before what he considered a world-historical moment, Bowers believed he was called by God to accomplish the urgent task of eliminating the “heretics.”¹ He described the moment in a recruiting poster that appeared on telephone poles, church bulletin boards, café windows, and front porches throughout the state: