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-October 2013
O: Well, first of all, Mr. Guyot, thank you for taking time out of your schedule to talk with us. You were mentioning in the beginning, talking to the Freedom Riders about Dr. King. Some people, like when I was first learning about the movement, people would say, oh, Dr. King was way up top and he was a distraction; we were doing the real organizing work. Could you talk about that?

G: Dr. Martin Luther King’s record in Mississippi is impeccable. He was frightened to death of Mississippi. Andy Young wrote Bob Moses a letter saying, look, we really don’t want King to come to Mississippi, but, if he comes, make sure there are a lot of tall people—he is very—despite that, we asked him to come to support the Freedom Election. He comes down, he flies into five cities, he gives speeches, and he supports it. We ask him to support the summer project. He comes into Mississippi, moves across the state, and he vigorously supports it. We ask him to support the Congressional—hello, there.

B: I didn’t know you all were having a meeting.

G: —to support the Congressional Challenge, and he does that. We asked him to sign a memorandum. When we know that the Voting Rights Act is going to pass, it’s going to be a detriment for some congressmen to vote for the Congressional Challenge, he signs the memorandum, which is covered in David Garrow’s book, called Selma and the Fifteenth Amendment [Protest at Selma]. Now David Garrow, as you know, is a
biographer of King, so he makes it very, very clear that this memorandum changed the policy, because, before the memorandum, the Voting Rights Act said that in order for the—if there are twenty complaints, the president may send in an examiner. Well, that got changed once the memorandum began to circulate, because we—SNCC, MDFP—led the fight, and we got this document. And, in a book called the Auditors of Liberation, written by Mike Sistren, as yet unpublished, that says, look. We can't have this kind of trivia. And what we got, instead, was the most beautiful language ever written, called Section Five of the Voting Rights Act. Section Five, as you remember, very simple. It's the most powerful language in civil rights history. It says, any covered political subdivision, if the state wants to change any law that has to do with voting, that has the possibility of diluting the vote, they must either submit that for pre-clearance to the Department of Justice or they must litigate it on the merits in the Court of Appeals in the District of Columbia only. Those are the only two options. I bring, along with the Freedom Democratic Party, the only private lawsuit filed under the Voting Rights Act. We get the Department of Justice to file an amicus with us called, Whitley versus the Board of Elections. It then becomes Allen versus the Board of Elections. What it does: it says, according to Section Five, these laws, these twenty-four laws, are unconstitutional. We also believe that Section Five should be broadly interpreted. Before our court case, the law was written in such a way that only the attorney general of the United
States could file Section Five cases. The Supreme Court modifies that. It says, you know, the Supreme Court—the Attorney General is a very busy person. Anyone who is aggrieved under Section Five can bring a Section Five case. This changes the whole way lawyers are practicing throughout the South, because we win that Supreme Court decision eight to one. It broadens Section Five and covers everything from moving polling places to requirements for candidates. It does away with all literacy tests, and it says very clearly, you either pre-clear, you litigate, or it’s unconstitutional. They’re null and void. Which meant that the state of Mississippi had passed twenty-four laws to get under the coverage of the Voting Rights Act. I’d gone to jail, I’d gotten twelve hundred other people to go to jail with me to prevent them from the doing that, but the Supreme Court overturned every one of those cases. So, we learned that the Voting Rights Act was a powerful weapon. We then start using it on reapportioning. It took us twenty years to reapportion the state of Mississippi. There’s a whole chronology of events that led to that, but you had Coleman, Cox, and Russell. They’re the worst judges you can possibly have. And Coleman was in the leadership. I’m sorry, but our lawyers were able to stick with us through that twenty-year battle, which created single-member districts. Single-member districts then created a different kind of politics. There’s a book called *Mississippi Politics* by Jere Nash and Andy Taggart, and he makes the point that this new kind of politics by the Freedom Democratic—and he mentions favorably the
Congressional Challenge and the passage of the Voting Rights Act—and he says, it was this new kind of politics that’s created a new constituency that was voting that led to a new kind of legislature. Now, if you want something done in it, you got fifty blacks in the legislature. You want something done, you can’t go down there and say, I’ll only deal with white legislators. It don’t get passed that way. You’ve got to deal with white and black legislators, which creates a different kind of climate. I was on when Kitchens [Killens] was tried for the killing of Schwerner, Chaney, and Goodman. The attorney general of Mississippi and I were on court T.V. together, talking nationally about this trial. He said, well, you know, anybody could have brought this case at any time. I said, that’s just not true. You needed to have a climate in the state where people could sit down in a jury, listen to the facts, come up with an opinion, and not go home and expect crosses to be burning in front of their houses. We’re past that. But the way we got past that was by changing the contours of who and what the electorate is. Now, Martin Luther King helps us in every way that he can. We are attacked for our association with the Lawyer’s Guild. Early on, myself, Dave Dennis, Bob Moses, meet in New Orleans with Kuntsler, Kinoy, Martin Stathis, and Ben Smith. All left. They’re all members of the Lawyer’s Guild. James Farmer was there, also. We raised one question: if y’all agree that we do the, make the decisions, and we all litigate what we want done—they did, they stuck to it—there was a lot of pressure applied to SNCC and to the MFDP, break away from those
lawyers. We never did. Joe Rauh was threatened early to not represent
the MFDP. And he said, well, look, if I don’t represent them, the Lawyer’s
Guild’s going to represent them.

O: [Laughter] He was a counsel for UAW, right?

G: That’s exactly right. There’s a book that’s been written about him now
called Citizen Rauh. But our relationship with the Guild worked very, very
well. They were the lawyers for—Kuntsler and Kinoy were the lawyers for
the Congressional Challenge. We got a 149 votes initially, which allowed
us to then conduct subpoenas—federally-supported subpoenas—and
take depositions of anyone we wanted. So we’d bring the governor, we’d
bring anybody from we want in the government, into black churches. And
we have them, they have a lawyer, then we have people—I never will
forget Mr. Gule from Hattiesburg, Mississippi. Gets to interrogate J.P.
Coleman. He does a masterful job. Mr. Gule is Peggy Jean Connor’s
father. Peggy-Jean Connor is the one who reopened the litigation on—
one, the reapportionment suit. She was also a delegate to Atlantic City.
Peggy Jean Connor was the little, sweet, nice lady who, when the bus
was coming back from Atlantic City, there was some whites trying to stop
it. So she got up to the bus driver and took a long knife. She said, now, if
this bus stops, your head comes off.

O: [Laughter]

G: The bus didn’t stop, see. Now, what I’m saying is that, when you look at
the people who were in that delegation, you had Hartman Turnbow, you
had E.W. Steptoe, you had Peggy Jean Connor, you had a guy from . . . a lot of people. All those people understood that the right to vote was tied to the right to live and die. We all knew somebody who had been killed for the right to vote, and they all knew that they were risking everything they had by going publically. You can’t be any more public than that. You’re going to take on the Democratic Party. You’ve got to remember, at that time, there was no Republican Party in Mississippi. There was no Republican Party in the South. So you’re taking on the most—and we did it. And then we forced a situation where it took Lyndon Johnson himself to stop us. And I’m rather proud of that, see, because I’m—he had to exert everything he had control of. There were twenty-five FBI agents that had infiltrated that delegation—

O: The MFDP?

G: The MFDP Delegation and their responsibility was two things: infiltrate the MFDP delegation and keep an eye on Kennedy, Robert Kennedy. Because, remember, he was still alive then. So, I’m very proud of that. Now, then, we come back, and of course we’ve been involved in—we support the election of Hubert Humphrey in [19]64, to a fullest extent than anyone else. And we’d catch hell from SNCC on that, and they decided, we’re going to go to Mississippi and clean MFDP up. But Bob Moses said, no, if we do that, we got to take on Guyot. We’re not going to take on Guyot. So, now . . .
O: Can you talk about what made MFDP so resilient and democratic? Like, small-d democratic?

G: I’d be glad to. What we were able to do with MFDP is cull the best organizers from throughout the state, get them first involved in the Freedom Elections, where they could see that we could run a statewide operation, with very, very little money, with a lot of oppression, and that Freedom Election brought a lot of press which diminished violence. So, we learned then that violence wasn’t spontaneous; violence could be, if it could be stopped, it can be stopped at other times. We also saw that we had to drive home a point, and that point was that, if blacks were unimpeded when it comes to voting, we would vote in large numbers. We got a hundred thousand people to vote; some people say it was eighty. It was really, factually, a hundred thousand.

O: In the Freedom Vote?

G: In the Freedom Election. Which then leads ups to a consideration of, why not have a summer project? Summer project leads to the Freedom Summer. Now, there’s some people—and this is all documented, that all of these meetings went on for three days in Greenville and they were all taped at the time, so you have access to those tapes. There’s one school of thought that say, well, no, we don’t want to bring white, educated, competent people down here to compete with us. We’re the leaders. Some of the SNCC people said this. Me and Fannie Lou Hamer take a different picture. We said, look. We can’t protect ourselves. They know
everything there is to know about every one of us. Through infiltration—
they know who we’re sleeping with, what positions we in, they know
everything.

O: Right. [Laughter]

G: So, let’s not, let’s not think this. While the meeting is going on, the witness
to the killing of Herbert Lee was killed. That’s when he’s killed, okay? That
clinches Moses. Moses comes back. He said, look, there’s no way to
protect ourselves. We’ve got to do that, and I’m not going to be a part of
anything all-black. This was before he goes into his black mood. And
we’re going to do this. And that’s it. Dave Dennis is chairing the first
meeting; this is all taped. Now, what we found in the summer project was
that we could organize leadership, we could—see, part of your question
goes back to the early methodology of SNCC. See, SNCC was not about
organizing SNCC chapters. SNCC was about empowering local leaders,
and-or creating local leaders, but if they were already local—we didn’t
create E.W. Steptoe or Hartman Turnbow or Fannie Lou Hamer. We
discovered them, enhanced their skills, put them in contact with one
another, and started operations that they could grow in. That’s why we
build a foundation of—some people go in to organize people. We go in to
organize with people, to empower with people. To get people to
understand that the greatest asset we had in this state was the people
themselves; their churches, their religious institutions, their social
institutions: the Elks, the Masons, the Masonics—not to an extent the
Knights of Pythias as we would find in some other, another great state, but—and that’s what we did. So, that carries right over into how the Freedom Democratic Party is going to react. I’m a pure political animal. I got elected as Chairman of the Freedom Democratic Party because I worked very closely with Fannie Lou Hamer, Peggy Jean Connor, Victoria Gray, Annie Devine, and Fannie Lou Hamer. Those are the women who supported me. I ran against Aaron Henry and Leslie Macklemore, but they were the key to getting me in there. And I knew, very, very—why? Because I worked with each one of them, and each one of them understood that my idea of the Freedom Democratic Party was that it would be a long time. That Atlantic City would be something we did, but that would be just the beginning. And we got to a point where—another thing that held us together was, a lot of people on the Board of Directors, on the Executive Committee of the Freedom, were tied into the churches. And they come from a history of liberation, and they bring those skills in. Victoria Gray is tied into SCLC. Victoria Gray is tied into the operation in Hattiesburg. Victoria Gray is one of the people that Theron Lynd doesn’t register. And who was Theron Lynd? Theron Lynd is the register that did more to pass the Voting Rights Act than I did. [Laughter] Theron Lynd was a registrar in Forrest County who registered illiterate whites but wouldn’t register post-graduate degree blacks. The Department of Justice makes a special case out of him. They find—I, myself, I watch the Department of Justice, the Fifth Circuit Court of Appeals, try Theron Lynd in Hattiesburg,
Mississippi. They find him guilty of contempt. The only reason they don’t want to send him to jail is because this is right the time you got the Meredith thing going on, right? And the United States does not want to occupy the university. Which, it was a consideration for them. And they say, well . . . then, there’s a great book that’s being written now that has just been released, that is—and I’ve been promoting it all over the place. It’s called, Count Them One by One by Gordon Martin. This was the book that led to the conclusion that we’ve got to get away from this litigation by litigation, and what we’ve got to do, we’ve got to have something like the Voting Rights Act. That’s when the Voting Rights Act begins consideration. So, I am convinced that what kept the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party so powerful, so committed to local people and so committed to group decision-making was, it comes out of SNCC when SNCC was at its best. There was no such thing as hierarchy or criteria. There were no—you didn’t get roses and you weren’t fettered for who you were or what you were, it’s what you were doing. If you could get it, go in to a town and organize it, and if you could get people to take on attempts to register to vote, you were treated as a—you were rewarded for that, okay? But it wasn’t like a, well, you know, your daddy’s an author, a professor, and somehow—no, no, we didn’t have that kind of hierarchy. Our hierarchy, was who is doing the most to empower people? And we believed very strongly that anyone had the right to empower anyone else. We believed that empowerment was as satisfying as sex and as addictive
as crack. We also knew that no movement had ever succeeded without it. We couldn’t just ask people to risk their lives unless they were risking their lives for a higher purpose, even of themselves. And that was their children. More people got involved in the civil rights movement to provide a better life for their children than for any other single reason. The church was a great motivation, because once you start hooking up liberation theology before it was called that—because, you know, I find it ironical. Reverend Wright was pilloried for what he taught in his church. There’s not a black church anywhere that was in any way unfamiliar with the Reverend Wright’s teaching. Black religion for black people was ecclesiastical, but it was also pragmatic. It was, yes, we’re going to heaven, and but by heaven, if we work like hell, we can have heaven on Earth. That it is your responsibility to get free. Don’t tell me you love Jesus and you love to be a slave. See, it’s amazing when blacks come out of slavery: first thing they start doing is organizing churches and schools. Then they start meeting, go find their relatives. So, Freedom Democratic Party’s greatness lies in its ability to do anything. We say, okay. We’re going to take on a challenge to a sitting president and the most successful political party in the country. And we’re going to do it because they have an iron policy of segregation. That is the policy of the Democratic Party of Mississippi. And we are opposed to that policy. We’re going to do it because they’re not supporting Lyndon B. Johnson and Hubert Humphrey, they’re supporting Goldwater. We . . . don’t win that time, but
what we do is, we change the way the process is run. [19]64 calls for the creation of a firm position that never again will a segregated delegation be seated in a national convention; that blacks must be encouraged to participate in every level of development of the state delegation that’s sent to them, and then, in 1972, that law is amended. It was amended by the people working with Carter, and some of the people from Mississippi who wouldn’t touch the Freedom Democratic Party. But they get the law amended to read that now, fifty percent of every delegation must be half female. So, that comes from Freedom Democratic Party, okay? Now, what we were able to do in that party is take the position that, no limits to what we’ll attack. We’ll attack anything that impedes the right to vote; we’ll attack anything that stops us from being the Democratic Party of the state. There’s an injunction filed against us that says, you can’t use the word democratic. And some people said, oh, we’ve got to change this. I said, no, we’re not going to change anything. We’re going right ahead. And a couple years later, we get them to drop that because of the Voting Rights Act. The state passes a law saying, Clifford Whitley got too many votes. Some of them little counties down there, so we’re going to—right now, the state passed this law, saying, we have the right to consolidate into adjoining counties to make sure a black majority in never arises. Just that simple. If you’ve got two adjoining counties and you need to hook them up into one county to stop blacks from—you can go ahead and do that. We take them, under Section Five of the Voting Rights Act, we take them and
we got to get us—if you’ll notice, they never did that. Because the Voting Rights Act said they couldn’t do it. We then said, look. After Atlantic City, where we should go now to is the Congress. The reason we should go to the Congress is, they’re the most vulnerable. We got people sitting up there, been there for years and years; because, remember, we’re dealing with seniority. We’re dealing with control of committees, we’re dealing with—the sequel. If you go back from the Truman administration to the Johnson administration, what’d you have to deal with? The South had control of the committees by seniority. Truman deals with it by putting his poker-playing buddies on the Supreme Court. He can’t deal with the Congress, so he goes to another and he—as you know, desegregates the army. Now, what we got to do is say, okay. The law is clear. Section Two of the Fourteen Amendment is just—a four-year-old could understand it. If you deny people the right to vote, you can’t be represented in the Congress. It don’t say if they left-handed.

O: [Laughter] Yeah, right.

G: What we do is then bring that challenge. In bringing that challenge, we gather a lot of support, and there’s some people who are conspicuously absent. NAACP’s not with us, and this other thing. And we just keep moving. We build enough support, which—we’re lucky. I run across a guy named Ryan, William Fitts Ryan, a new member of Congress, a maverick, who says, okay, I’ll support this challenge. We then gather, and we run into—we learn something from politics. There’s a guy named Curtis from
Michigan—no, he’s not from Michigan, he’s . . . Congressman Curtis is a conservative Republican member, and he writes a letter attacking the challenge. And Michael Fellwell responds to him. Once he found out that this is serious, and that this could really be made to happen, he, then, writes a letter to some Republicans in support of the Congressional Challenge. On the day that we challenge the Mississippi delegation, Congressman Curtis arrives up, say, I want a teller vote. Now, a teller vote means that everybody—you divide the house. If you voting for the motion, you get on one side. If you’re voting against, you get on another side. So there can’t be any who-shot-John or, I was recorded as . . . so, we get a hundred and forty-nine votes. Now, up until then, J.P. Coleman, who was the lawyer for the Congressman, hadn’t responded to the—once we get a hundred and forty-nine votes, then they respond. Then the state of Mississippi said, look, there’s going to be no violence for the next six months. Then they start destroying the files in the Civil Rights Commission—in the Sovereignty Commission, about voting. Because now they understand, they have the possibility of losing their Congressional seating. They understand, during this period, they agree to school desegregation because they don’t want that to be part of the record. They don’t want to lose federal funds. They become damn near a model state for six months. And in that six months, we build support, and we conduct those depositions. Again, what—see, everything, the reason, the democratization of the Freedom Democratic Party was tied into the fact
that everything we did was political and educational. We didn’t say the Executive Committee is going to conduct these depositions; we’re going to conduct them in DeSoto County. And as many people in DeSoto County as we can get to come and witness them, and testify, and be a part of it—and then, what we did was, we made sure that we now have the tapes of those depositions. So, what we do is, when there’s a big meeting in the county, we go ahead and pass them out and we watched people break into tears. Because one thing to say, your father supported the challenge; it’s another thing to say, here’s what he said when he had a lawyer and the state had a lawyer, see?

O: So the key was to get people to participate, not just to challenge, but to get as many people as you could participating.

G: To participate, to understand. And, in some instances, re-establish with certainty that they could make things; that anything that was political, they could impact on. And our position was, there ain’t nothing non-political. Now, you may not know the technical thing; you may not know how to do this and the other, but you have as much right to be involved in this as possible. We took the position early in SNCC, in Greenwood, that it was totally unfair to not educate people and then say, because they’re not educated, you can’t register to vote. We consciously brought illiterates down. Freedom Smith couldn’t read a lick, but every time we went down there, he went down there. And they told him, they said, now, Mr. Smith, now, you know you can’t read and write. He said, I know that. Said, but I
know how to vote. [Laughter] I want to vote. I’m going to come down here every time until I get the right to vote. We persuaded the Department of Justice to that, and it wasn’t easy, but we said, look, man; look, man. The state can’t have it both ways. We were also able to show that there were a lot of businesspeople who were totally illiterate who ran good businesses. There were a lot of illiterates who were members of the Elks and the Masons, and to be members of those, you got to do memorization that will shock you. But they were able to do it. Said, no, we can’t, you’ve got—anyway, the Department of Justice goes along with us; that’s written into the Voting Rights Act. When Cassius Back testifies before the House Judiciary Committee on Voting Rights, he said, now, I’m convinced that everything is constitutional in here except the registration of illiterates. The Congress said, hell, don’t talk to us about that, because we support that a hundred percent. So, what we were able to do was built the tools that built together that legislation. Now, Kennedy—I mean, a lot of historians say, well, you know, Selma passed the Voting Rights Act. If you go look at the history, Mississippi was simply voting rights state mobilization. From the Freedom Election to the summer project to the Congressional Challenge to you name it. We started running counties before anyone else did. We started conducting our own elections. We challenged the foundation of the Democratic Party in this state and in this country. And what we found was that we were building up our allies all over the place, because what we’d then do is, while we’re working on the Congressional Challenge—the
voter work I got, in 1963, I write a letter to the National Council of Churches. I say, I’m going to have a demonstration in Hattiesburg around Theron Lynd and I want every major denomination to come. This is at the time—Paul Johnson had just been elected, and he talked like a moderate. He talked like, you know, we’re all Americans, we’re not going to . . . so, Robert Spike, who is with the National Council of Churches, doesn’t support us in sending ministers down, right? This is all covered very well in Pillar of Fire by Taylor Branch. But, every major religious denomination sends—you got your bishops, your head of the things, and so on. And this is written about in a book called God’s Holy Warriors by Newman. There are no arrests, for the first time. Here you have a major demonstration in Hattiesburg; the police are not arresting any—people who are not in the demonstration said, I better get in the demonstration, make sure I don’t get arrested. [Laughter] We continued for days, right? And, as a result of this, we had a working relationship with the National Council of Churches, which leads to the creation of the Delta Ministry, and it also leads to us establishing a working relationship—How y’all doing? —A working relationship with them, so that when the challenge is conducted, they come to us. They say, look, can we help y’all with the challenge? And we said, of course. Of course you can. Because, Paul, as you know, in every Congressional district you got Presbyterian and Episcopalian, and so on. Well, you don’t have many NAACP chapters. So, open; call your members, and tell them, meet with the Freedom Democratic Party about
the Congressional Challenge. So James Farmer and I get to meet with Ford while he’s still in the House of Representatives, and he tells us, my bishop told me to meet with y’all, so I want y’all to come meet at 10 o’clock. Now, my point is this: we now had the organized church on our side. They were clearly in support of unseating. Then, what we discover is that, while this is going on . . . well, a little later, but not too later, there’s a fight around CDGM. We, of course, support CDGM, because CDGM means that we can now pay people who’ve been doing—because, remember, from [19]62, we’ve had people coming from all over the state to statewide meetings, barely able to pay their gas. Now, if you get this Head Start program and it’s tied—it’s not tied in, directly, to MFDP, but by God, it hires a lot of MFDP people, and they can’t—and then, what we find, is that there’s such an urge for it. When people find out about this, they start building centers, they start manning centers. See, this gets right into the whole history of nurturing. See? Black people never had kids who didn’t have a place to stay or didn’t have a place to eat. But now, there’s some federal money to do it. And CDGM launches off the ground. CDGM begins to hire a large number of people; is then attacked by Stennis. And they do a demonstration project before Adam Clayton Powell’s committee. We still get some money. Then there’s the Foundations grouped together, and fund the Friends of the Children of Mississippi, okay, which is—anyway, my point is this: we were able to move, and we also are now working with the Mississippi Freedom Union, the organization of the
people, people working in the Delta. We don’t win that, but we stick with them. SNCC—let’s move down to [19]66—SNCC is bringing itself up, out, after [19]64 and [19]65. The best thing you can do is leave.

O: SNCC.

G: Yeah. Because they’re fighting one another.

B: Mm-hm.

G: But it’s the age-old story, for centuries. When warriors don’t have an external enemy, they fight internally. We get rid of SNCC, and I was part of the caravan ushering them out, because there was just nothing left there. There was no energy left there. A lot of them go to Alabama and they do some great things there. And Hassan writes about it, see.

O: Yeah.

G: I think that what Carmichael did there was astounding. And Taylor Branch pays him credit. Hassan Jefferies pays him credit. I pay him credit. But a lot of people did not pay him credit because they looked at him just from the—he’s a Black Power person: therefore, he can’t have done anything good. That’s tragic. But Michael Fellwell, who wrote the book about Stokely Carmichael, Ready for the Revolution, was the key person in running the office for the Congressional Challenge. He and Jan Goodman, they knew how to deal with people. They knew how to deal with the leadership conference. They knew how to lobby congressmen. They had very little money, but whenever there was a meeting, they would set up a little, small office right beside the congressmen, make sure they
talk to them; constantly building. Find out who they listen to, build them. One day, Hartman Turnbow called—Michael Fellwell wrote a letter. He said, Mr. President, I'm amazed. He said, the Freedom Democratic Party did more to campaign for you in Mississippi, and they haven't received any invitations to the inauguration. [Laughter] And Michael didn't think much of it. I mean, who's going to—? [Laughter] What are they going to do about this?

O: [Laughter] Right.

G: So, a couple of weeks later, Mr. Turnbow called and he said, Michael, you know that little man that delivers mail for me? I said, Mr. Turnbow, I don't know him. He said, well, this morning, before I had my coffee, he brought me a big envelope from the president of the United States. And he said, Michael. Michael said, well, what, Mr. Turnbow? He said, I want you to find out what ball the governor's going to. And Michael was damn near astounded. He said, well, why? He said, I want to dance with the governor's wife. [Laughter] See, my point is, you keep these people out of power; you keep them in a place, and as soon as they get a chance to jump out of that place, they're out of it. It's gone.

B: Mm-hm.

G: Ten years earlier, Hartman Turnbow would have never made that connection. But, you see—

O: Well, it seems that the Freedom Democratic Party—I mean, it went from zero to sixty in no time, and so that's what you're really addressing, is how
they so quickly leap-frogged, democratically, over any existing institution
in American society, from what I can see. Became—yeah.

G: The key to our doing it was we had good history with our base. We had
good history with the leadership. And it was open to anybody. We didn’t
say, you got to be such-and-such or . . . we want fighters. Our job is to
fight to extend our political power, and by that, we meant for blacks,
whites, anybody. But we’re not going to be nice and dandy in doing this.
We’re going to fight, and if you want to fight, you come with us. We’ll fight
you—we will help you fight. The state legislature said, we’re going to pass
these laws to throw out the Voting Rights Act. I said, let’s go to jail. Twelve
hundred people come go with me. Bronstein raises the money and gets
us out, okay? But no. And we say, now that we have—because once we
win, the Allen versus the Board—which began as Whitley versus
Johnson—all the lawyers in the South stopped using the Fifteen
Amendment and start using Section Five. That’s why, in the most recent
Supreme Court attack on the Voting Rights, they attack Section Five. And
they going to keep attacking Section Five. That’s why I’m promoting count
them one-by-one, so we can build public knowledge that, if you want
president re-elected, we better start learning what are the tools they’re
going to so we can start—and, see, my position is, my newsletter exists
for one reason: to retire Republicans. [Laughter] See, they’re proving it
there; I find it unfair when people say, well, you know, there’s some
balance between the Republican Party and the Democratic Party. There is
none. The Democratic Party is about building and servicing and about being responsible for providing the needs of people. The Republican Party is about debt, death, and the nihilism of the political process as they know it. They want a government that’s worn for them; what they’re talking about is, let’s starve the beast. That’s all right, they have a right to all of that. But we don’t have a right to agree to it. See, the good thing about it is, 212 decides that. We know clearly what the consequences are; there’s no—you know? And I’m always struck by people saying, well, you know, if y’all would just talk to the Republicans, you know—

O: Dialogue.

G: Yeah. Y’all could dialogue some humanity into them. No, no, you can’t do that.

O: Well, how does the history—because, now, what you’re implying is that it’s pretty clear now; the Republicans are going after Section Five. They’re already fighting the election campaign of 2012, like, right now. How can the history of the movement educate people to get them to a point where they understand this is serious?

G: I think—I love that question. The fiftieth anniversary of SNCC brought together—and every tape of every panel is available for sale right now. Just call the Legacy Project, Cortland Cox, and they can tell you how to—we can send you a catalogue and you can purchase them, purchase the ones you want. And you got books; you got books that are absolutely great, that demonstrate that these books are worthy of being put in the
arsenal of weapons, like *Emancipation Betrayed*, like Taylor Branch, the trilogy about Taylor Branch. Like *I’ve Got the Light of Freedom* by Charles Payne. You’ve got *One Mind, Many Hearts* by Wesley Coleman—

B: Wesley, yeah.

G: You’ve got a series of books that document the activities of SNCC, and we have to recognize that—judge, rather pragmatically, SNCC is the greatest political organization cadre in American history. Nobody else could—the only people who come close are the suffragettes and the Prohibition Party, the anti-saloon league. You know? They took their hatches and they went . . . so, what we gotta do is simply say, okay. Here’s the methodology that they used. This is the time. What they were faced with, we’re now faced with. Because we’re now faced with the decision, in 2012, what’s going to be the nature, form, origin, and size of government? What is self-governance really going to mean? And what is citizenship? What is—what is our relationship to one another? Because, if the only thing that America is about is personal survival of individual Americans, that ain’t America. And that’s what we were being offered by the Republicans. So, all I’m simply saying is, the value of that history is that we can—it can offer practical information. How do you organize people? It should prove, very, very clearly, that we now know, and this literature will help us support the fact that anybody can organize. Whether you can read or write or not, you can organize. That, when you get people operating in their self-interest, that’s one of the greatest motivators that
there is, and that it is impossible to find people to get them to do something that doesn't change them forever. You like the old saying that you can’t step in the same river? Well, once a person makes something happen, they’re different from the person they used to be the day before. The day after they make something happen, they look around and say, well, what am I going to do today? That’s completely different from, I wonder if somebody going to help, come help do something for me today. So that’s why. I promote that history; I think that history is valid. I think it’s been very clearly tested, and look at the documentaries you got on our side. Well, let’s use them.

O: Did you see the *Freedom Rider* documentary?

G: I saw it.

O: I haven’t seen it yet. What did you think about it?

G: I thought it was excellent.

B: Me, too.

G: I thought it was excellent, but except the way King was treated. And I’m going to do everything I—I’ve been doing everything I can to clear that up. But no, it’s a good piece of work.

B: It sure was.

G: Now, there’s another one being written. I’m working with a young man named Stephen Mayroot who’s from Greenwood. And he’s going to enter into a partnership with The Veterans, because The Veterans, as a 501-C3 organization, can have access to the tapes at a much cheaper price than
he can. And I’m promoting that, because I worked with him in Washington; he’s won a Humanitarian Award for a small segment on the Freedom Rides. He went to the meeting in Chicago out there.

O: When you were mentioning earlier, Mr. Guyot, about the day after—when someone is able to accomplish something and get something changed, and they become a new person, what are some of the memories you have, in the [19]60s, about people who do those things? Who may not have been active before, but all of the sudden, get involved with SNCC or MDFP and actually do something. Like, you mentioned this gentleman, Freedom—

G: Freedom Smith.

O: Yeah. I mean, it sounds like he had that experience.

G: Well, let’s put it this way: the problem I have with your question—and it’s an excellent question—is that this is so universally true of people who are involved in social movements that it’s like saying, well, you know, we can go down and register to—Hardy Lott said it best. Hardy Lott was the guy who defended Byron de la Beckwith killing Medgar Evers. He said, Guyot, you know, you should be very proud. Y’all got more people coming down in Greenwood than any other place in the state. I said, yeah, but you and I both understand, they’re coming down, they’re not getting registered. He said, oh, that’s a different story. But my point is: what he was looking at was the effort. What I was looking at was, that’s why—I guess a better example is, after the Freedom Election, the voter education that had been
pouring foundation money into COFO, say, we can’t do this anymore. Not
because—and you know what the reason they said, Paul? They said, well,
look, you know, y’all are not registering voters, and we’ve got to where
we’re going—now, Mississippi was the most creative project in America.
We were light years ahead of everybody else. We may not have been
registering people to vote, but we were building political systems. We built
COFO. We built the Freedom Election. We built, see—and they said, well
. . . and I understood very clearly. Instead of us being judged on what we
were producing, other than simply numbers, they said, well, y’all are not
registering voters. Now, I understood very clearly that they were
responding to politics, not mathematics. And I use that negatively as an
example, saying: organizing is about getting people to understand that
there’s absolutely nothing they can’t do something about. Nothing. That
they can impact on federal policy, they can impact on international policy,
and that anybody who is in the public sphere can be attacked by them on
the merits if you do the work. And you can’t, you’ve got to be—we learned
over and over again, you got to be prepared. There’s no—spontaneity is
the refuge of the unprepared. But, if you are willing to prepare yourself,
there’s forums to do battle in. If you don’t have a forum, create one. We
created COFO, we created the MFDP. We utilized the existing laws for
the Congressional Challenge. We litigated on any goddamn thing that was
moving. If we didn’t like it—they said, y’all can’t run. Y’all are running in
the Democratic Party, y’all can’t run as Independents. Say, yes, we can.
[Laughter] We took them to court and they say, put them on the ballot. So. Fannie Lou Hamer, you can’t overturn this election in Sunflower—yes, she did. The Department of Justice goes down to Walthall County, and we bring them down. SNCC brings them down and they introduce him. We had an insurrection going on in Walthall, Amite, and Pike County. It wasn’t going to register no black people. State goes down there. John Hardy takes some people to register to vote, and the registrar hit him in the head with a pistol and with a stick and drive them out of the office. They charge him with disturbing the peace. The Department of Justice goes into federal court and says, look. We want to stay this prosecution. Now, I went to law school and I learned, you can’t do that. The Department of Justice says, well, yes, we are. We can’t force these judges to make a decision, but while they’re making a decision, we want an injunction pending appeal. Because we know they’re going to try to arrest him, and you know the reason they give for this? They said, well, if you arrest him, this is a threat to every black person in Walthall County who wants to register to vote. Never heard of before, but they win it. The reason they win it is because they bring it before the Fifth Circuit Court of Appeals. Judge Reeves said, that’s fine, that’s all right. Now, Judge Reeves becomes thoroughly committed to civil rights because his son was committed to thorough civil rights. His son is killed in an automobile accident, Reeves spends the rest of his life supporting. There’s a book called *Unsung Heroes* by Jack Bass that talks about Reeves, Brown,
Tuttle and Wisdom. They were the backbone for us. We knew, whatever case we lost in Meridian or Jackson, all we had to do was go past the pelicans into New Orleans. [Laughter] And that was it. They supported us in every way they could. And they helped change the South. So, and it’s interesting. Their history is very, very interesting. Each one of them led a challenge delegation in the Republican Party, just like MFDP did, only they led it for Eisenhower. Eisenhower then said, what do y’all want, boys? And put them all on the Fifth Circuit Court of Appeals. And that changed America. So, MFDP had the advantage of having some of the big, greatest lawyers in the country. Frank Parker, Armand Derfner, and others. They’re some of the best. They were experts on Section Five. Section Five was my idea; I read a book called *Gideon’s Trumpet*. That’s why I push books.

B: Mm-hm.

G: Books can validate your assumption or it can decimate them. But I read this book about Gideon’s trumpet, about an indigent’s right to have a lawyer. And he’s represented by Abe Fortas. Abe Fortas is Lyndon Johnson’s lawyer. And Abe Fortas lays out that Lyndon Johnson stole his senatorial election. Sixty-seven votes in alphabetical order. And I said, by God, I’m going to go back and reread the Voting Rights Act. Because, if I’m given a choice of going to a bishop and asking him about . . . thieving, a crook, I’m going to go to the crook, because I know the bishop’s going to
tell you, the Lord would not want you to steal. It is a sin. The crook can tell you how to do it and how not to do it.

B: [Laughter] Mm-hm.

G: And I knew Lyndon to be a megalomanic enough that, after having stolen elections, he wanted to make sure nobody else was going to be stealing any elections. And I found Section Five. And then they said, well, yeah. Because I directed Jim Lewis, who’s now a U.S. attorney in Springfield, Illinois, and Brownstein to start looking at it. They said, we got your case. We brought it before the Supreme Court and we won it and that’s history. My point is this: when you look at the American political system, it is a system built on opportunity after opportunity on opportunity, for those that are prepared to move. That’s what we did. I mean, we found that, if people were organizing anything, we said, okay. The Department of Justice got a court decision that, in Panola County, they were going to only ask the first six decisions, six questions on the voting thing. We sent people in there. They joined with us in our Section Five case. They were indispensable, because the Supreme Court listens to the Department of Justice, okay? But we win. First time that there’s a private lawsuit under the Voting Rights Act, it’s my baby. But now: I don’t win just by myself. Everybody in the South wins, because now, if they want to change any law that has to do with voting, they either get it pre-cleared or it’s null and void. You can’t do it.

O: What kind of work are you doing now?

There’s some books I don’t promote. Sisprano has written a book called, *Mother Country*. Sisprano is a guy who defends Senators—Sisprano’s book said, well, you know the state of Mississippi was just too smart for the civil rights movement there. They got outfoxed on every way. So, I met Sisprano at the university, at Ole Miss. I said, boy, I been around a long time, but yours is the trashiest goddamn compilation of shit ever put together. [Laughter] You ought to burn it. You ought to be ashamed of it.

And then, I read a book not so long ago that’s out right now, called *Civil Rights from the Ground Up*. You got John—you got all of my good people. You got Ditmer, you got Payne, you got Emilye Crosby, you got Wesley Hogan, all talking about how good they are to one another. I ain’t interested in that.

O: Now, wait a minute. How good they are to one another—

G: As far as their work. We worked; I’m so proud to have, and yada, yada, yada. And then, they said, we got a newfound friend, Sisprano. Now, I don’t think I’d want to be associated with book burning, but that book makes you feel a little inclined in that area. [Laughter]

B: Cut it up.

G: I read that book six times. I sit down, I’ve got to intellectually give them the benefit of the doubt. I got to. Not, do I like them individually, and their work, with the exception of Sisprano? Of course I do, and I’m very proud of their work. But I’m not interested, Ortiz, in how you and seven other
people get along and how good y’all late, and how productive you all are.

Save that for somebody else. I want to know, I want some challenging information that’s stimulating that I can use as a weapon.

B: Mm-hm.

G: And when you break away from that and start talking about, well, let’s consolidate our niche, I don’t want to be a part of that. So I never mentioned the book, but I want it, still, on this tape. There was somebody asked me, said, Guyot, what do you think? I said, it’d be best for me not to tell you what I think of it. You know? Because I have high standards. See, I know what we’re capable of, so I just . . . I don’t suffer fools lightly. I tried. One thing I’ve learned, over and over and over in life is, I’ve never met anybody I haven’t learned something from. And that has anewed to my benefit, because I don’t look at people and say—because I’ve learned that the man who is the janitor at the bank may be Chairman of the Deacon Board in his church.

B: Mm-hm.

G: And we have that kind of history, that people can do anything. And I am just very proud to have been a part of a movement that inherently and pragmatically wasn’t supposed to succeed. But I’m very confident in saying that the most creative civil rights movement in American history happened in the sovereign state of Mississippi. No one else has done what we’ve been able to do with the people that we had to do it with and get them totally enmeshed in it. See, this wasn’t somebody else’s; this
was our movement. That’s what I tell people. I say, I’m a resident of the District of Columbia and I’m a citizen of the state of Mississippi. There’s nothing that we left undone once we started the fight.

O: What do you say to people now? You know, people are getting ready for the presidential election already, and a lot of people are saying, you know, we elected Obama to end the war, the wars, and do this and that, and nothing has happened. There’s a lot of people throwing up their hands and saying, well, maybe this organizing doesn’t work. I mean, what do you say to them?

G: What I say to them—I’d begin by saying Wisconsin, Idaho, Ohio—

B: Michigan.

G: No, I’d speak to those—I’d say, the best thing that ever happened to the labor was they were threatened with destruction in those states.

B: Yeah.

G: And what did they do? They started organizing voters. They started recalling.

B: Mm-hm.

G: We start winning elections like the New York Congressional Election. There’s no way out in hell that woman was supposed to win. But recently, the Republicans said, yes, I support Ryan’s budget proposal. That was it. You got, now, you got people—good, rock-rib, conservative Republicans, going to their council and said, what exactly do you mean, you’re going to take away my Medicare?
B: Yeah.

G: Were you drunk when you said that? And congressman don’t know where, now, I . . . I voted for it, but I didn’t really mean it. No, no, no. No, no. See, it’s the old story. You can’t free people, then tell them they don’t really need their freedom. You’ve had it too long, now.

B: [Laughter]

G: You can exercise it, now I’ve got to put you back in your place. And they go along with it. I say to people who say Obama is not perfect, I say, yes, he’s not. He’s really not perfect. Now, tell me what Republican president you want. In fact, I’ll give you three weeks. You pick one.

B: What did you think of Cornell West when he called him a mascot?

G: I don’t have no problem with anything Cornell said.

B: I don’t either, but I thought it was hysterical. [Laughter]

G: But I’ll tell you what we’ve got to understand—and I said this in a public speech, so I’m just going to share it with y’all, ‘cause y’all are nice people. On the day Obama was inaugurated, I was speaking to twelve hundred people in Springfield, Illinois. I said, I’m so glad to be here, I have never seen people like y’all. I say, I saw people getting killed for the right to vote; I saw them lose their land. I saw them get their property taken away from them, and y’all have voluntarily disenfranchised y’all’s selves.

B: I got to use that.

G: And their mouths flew open. I said, yes, y’all did. Y’all said, it’s better for us to have one senator than two senators. And y’all asked the president,
and the president said, well, we want a solution that doesn’t involve the
governor. And I said, now, let me explain something to y’all. My lawyer put
out Clayton Powell in the Congress after they kicked him out. And I knew
the controlling standard was Powell versus McCormack. I know Mr.
Rossum was going into the Senate. And the president did, too, but the
president didn’t want to antagonize y’all. He needs y’all. He didn’t want to
antagonize the Senate. Why do that? All he had to do was wait until me
and others start saying, Mr. President, how else you going to get a black
in the Senate? Then he changed his mind. He said, well, yes, you know,
Mr. Whosey—what’s is a good man. Come from my state. And if he’s in the
Senate, I’m going to treat him just like every other senator. After he had
already told the Senate, put him in. I said, what you got to understand is,
when it comes to reparation, Affirmative Action, and economic
redistribution, the president’s not going to—and gay rights. President’s not
going to have anything to say about you for the next four years. Now, the
work will get done, but he ain’t going to be talking about it, because he’s
going to keep his—you know what I mean? I said, you must understand. If
I knew what the Supreme Court decision, the president taught
constitutional law, so he knew, also. He was just waiting for y’all to change
so he could change. And he’s going to be doing that for the next eight
years. And they looked at me like I was stone crazy. I said, let me tell y’all
something further. President don’t support Affirmative Action. I do.
President don’t support reparations. I do. And if y’all just go ahead and
read one book, called *Slave Nation* by Alfred Blumrosen, y’all will support it, too. So, my point was: I worked as hard to elect him president as anybody. And I believe in him. I think that he is . . . has, he’s the kind of guy, every time you underestimate him, you find a knife in your neck and you wonder why he’s still shaking your hand. Look at what he does to the Republicans. He’s not supposed to be able to get any money from them. He gets ten times more than anybody thought he was going to get. I think what we’re going to see—and, see, he was very smart. He makes Ryan the enemy. This is the man who wants to . . . make it impossible for y’all to survive. I’ll offer an alternative. Now, choose between me and him. And mind you, if we can stop him from crying long enough, we might get some legislation out of him.

B: Yeah. [Laughter]

G: But I’m not too worried. I think that—see, what we have with Obama is this: we got some people who are going to vote for him in 2012 who might not vote for the next ten years. Now, I recognized the dissatisfaction; I don’t have no problem with it, it’s clear. I don’t have any problem with anybody. See, my position is, people ask me, they raised all kind of hell about him and his wife inviting the poet to the White House.

B: Yeah.

G: I went on Hannity and Colmes, Hannity’s show. I said, the poet, historically, is not supposed to tell us what we like to hear.

B: That’s right.
G: The role of the poet is to be the critic of the king, of the president, or whoever’s in charge; to carry us where we should be, rather than where we are. I wholeheartedly support him. You mean—I said, I wholeheartedly support it. I said, now, when Laura Bush brought black writers there, that some of them were radical, I supported that. And I think it’s right, because if there’s any place where it should stand as an edifice for the First Amendment, it’s the White House. Any place in the country. Oh . . . my point is this. I was very glad they didn’t back down, because they were very pressured to. Y’all know what I’m talking about?

B: Mm-hm.

G: So, no. I think that people—see, I think we have a responsibility to say, okay. What is the best we can do? And we should, if you’re not organizing now, you ought to go and join the Republican Party. I mean, if you haven’t made up your mind that I’m going to do everything I can to get him reelected, I’m going to do everything I can to get the Senate and the Congress in the control of the Democratic Party. And I don’t want to hear this bullshit about we need a thirty party. I don’t want to hear this bullshit about, well, they’re not committed to us. The issues are so clear that Ray Charles can see the difference. I mean, it’s just—so, I’m publically consolidating as much support as I can to carry the day for the Democratic Party. I mean, it would be ideal if he did everything—I mean, I certainly don’t defend any of those wars. I damn sure don’t. I believe that taxes should be raised on the wealthy. I wholeheartedly support Social
Security, Medicaid. And we’ve got to remember, those two programs began in 1965. When you look at them, you’d say, well, this must have come from FDR.

O: [Laughter] Right.

G: Just look at them in this scope, okay. Now, I think that I, personally, would like for us to move to something that was proposed by Nixon, and that is guaranteed annual income.

O: Mm-hm.

B: Mm-hm.

G: I think work, as we know it, is being redefined. It's not being redefined to the advantage of the average working person. Let's do that. Let's say, okay. You’ve got an annuity; each citizen. You’ve got whatever. And you also got, separate from that, you also got coverage for your medical insurance, okay? That's a separate issue. And you got welfare and you got Social Security, you got Medicaid. See, my thing is: look. It is the responsibility of government to either create jobs or remove the need for jobs to exist. FDR did it. FDR put everybody who knew what a shovel was to work, digging. I don’t a goddamn if you dig it and put it right back and re-dig it again, I don't give a damn. Just put money in people's pockets. That’s it. I believe that it is—this country has lost the narrative on the question, debt is more important than people. See, once you do that, you stop—you entered into the arena of inhumanity.

O: Yeah.
Then you say, well, you know these Hispanics. We’re going to tighten up on their ass so tight that, even if you’re born in America, you’re not really a citizen. The Constitution says that, very clearly, but we got to change that. See, my thing is very simple. I support the Dream Act and I support beyond that. I say, look, we’re not going to send twelve million people away from this country. I don’t care what happens; we’re not going to do it. So, let’s cut the next—see, an interesting thing is, we were close to it until people starting saying, well, let’s do it in the legal way. People who are already here, somehow they got a greater right than the people who came over here. Let me say this very clearly so we understand one another: if I was born in Mexico and I knew that I could feed my children and I could get some medical services for them—may not be the best, but if I can find a place to live, I’m coming.

Mm-hm.

Now, if you arrest me twenty times, still coming. And so I understand that, and I’m simply saying, it won’t hurt us at all in the presidential election. Because let me tell you, they’re growing by leaps and bounds and they’re voting by leaps and bounds now. The question is, see, we’re doing all right by gay people. We’re doing all right by blacks. Because, even with the general dissatisfaction from some blacks, we’re going to vote for Obama.

Mm-hm.
G: He damn not join the Klan, and we’re going to vote for him, okay? That’s that.

O: Margaret, do you have questions you want to ask?

B: No. But what do you think about Obama now and Libya? That’s what I want to ask you about. Libya, what do you think about the position that he took in Libya?

G: Well, Libya is a tight one. Libya is tight because he understands that what he can’t afford is to have the key hierarchy of the family—the Saudis. I mean, he’s got to try and keep everybody off their behind. And so my preference would have been for him to say, okay. Go in and destroy Qaddafi. And I don’t think Qaddafi got too much longer to live, because, see, once he start talking about it’s time for him to get out, either you heighten your insurance policy or you get out. I mean, you know. So, I think that’s going to happen. I’ll tell you one thing I disagree with the way he handled, was the . . . the killing of—

B: Osama.

G: bin Laden.

B: Yeah.

G: I think what he should have done there is make sure that the pictures are shown.

B: Mm-hm.
G: Because—and I don’t care if he says, you know, the DNA and all of that. It’s still too . . . I think one thing we learned in politics is, you never leave anything unclear.

B: Yeah.

O: Mm-hm.

G: But . . . I think it took courage for him to call it, and I’m glad he called it the way he did.

B: Murder of Osama bin Laden. Why couldn’t they use the Nuremberg—what is that, you know, and captured him?

G: Well, I tell you why . . .

B: —captured and getting his information, ‘cause a dead person can’t talk.

G: No, but I tell you why. See, what this country needs in his instance was—the only thing acceptable to many as revenge would have been retribution for his atrocities. I mean, now, I have to say, that was a creative way to kill people. It may not be—wasn’t humane, but it was damn creative.

B: It remind me of the Fred Hampton murder, same thing.

G: Mm-hm, mm-hm.

B: The same thing.

G: Again, again. No, it’s not the same thing, see, because Fred Hampton didn’t really do anything wrong.

B: No, it wasn’t—I’m saying, it’s inhumane, and you know how I am still. I totally violence, any kind of violence.
G: I understand. I understand. Yes, and I know who you are and I know how you think and you're right. I'm not going to quibble with you on that. You and I know each other too well.

B: Yeah.

O: Shall we go ahead and hit the stop button?

[End of interview]

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