IS THIS AMER-ICA?

FANNIE LOU HAMER AND THE MISSISSIPPI FREEDOM DEMOCRATIC PARTY

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In 1964, before the Democratic Party Credential Committee and millions of television viewers, Mrs. Fannie Lou Hamer posed the question, "Is this America?"

"Is this America" referred to the overall climate of near hysteria that permeated the very fiber of the United States as African Americans battled to achieve justice and equality. "Is this America" called to mind the constant violence being levied against African Americans, including Mrs. Hammer herself. "Is this America" acknowledged that a vital segment of American society was being constantly and continually subjugated. In that one question, Fannie Lou Hamer, the twentieth child of a Mississippi sharecropper family, brought America face to face with itself -- its racism, bigotry, intolerance, hatred, and hypocrisy.

Fannie Lou Hamer risked her life and livlihood when she registered to vote in 1962. In defying the laws and political mores of Mississippi, she was launched into a life that would remain politically active until her untimely death, at the age of 59, in 1977. The focus of this paper will be on one important aspect of Mrs. Hamer's life, her legacy of leadership in the formation and activities of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party (MFDP) and her continued fight for the rights of the disadvantaged through grassroots organizing. She captivated the American conscience at the Democratic National Convention in Atlantic City in 1964, singing "Go Tell It on the Mountain" and asking "Is this America?" At that point in her life she became a symbol of the movement and a role model for the powerless.

The image of Mississippi prior to and during the civil rights movement is legendary. It can best be summarized as, in James Silver's view, "a closed society." In the 1960s Silver argued that "within its own borders the closed society of Mississippi comes as near to approximating a police state as anything we have yet seen in America."[1] It is within this closed society that trailblazing women like Fannie Lou Hamer were born and struggled against multiple odds. These same women made lasting contributions to the African American and female struggles for equality in the United States.

During the civil rights movement, black women became the key element in organizing and mobilizing the black community around the struggle. Many of them were thrust into the limelight because of their articulation of the concerns of blacks, women and the poor. Fannie Lou Hamer became one of the most significant of those champions of civil rights causes.

Born Fannie Lou Townsend in rural Montgomery County in 1917, Mrs. Hamer was the youngest of twenty children. When she was two years old, the family moved to Sunflower County where she spent the remainder of her life. Watching her parents struggle in a system of segregation and sharecropping designed to keep them subjugated, Mrs. Hamer came to the

realization at an early age that something was wrong with Mississippi. She also became a very determined woman, determined to change things even at the expense of her own life.2

After marrying Perry Hamer, Fannie Lou worked as a sharecropper and timekeeper on a Sunflower County Plantation, a job she held for eighteen years. It appeared as though she was destined for a routine life of rural poverty, but two events spurred her to political action. In 1961, she was hospitalized for the removal of a uterine tumor. In actuality, doctors performed a hysterectomy. The anger over this incident precipitated her action in the next. In August, 1962, she went to the first mass meeting held in her hometown of Ruleville, where James Forman of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and James Bevel of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) emphasized the importance of voting. Mrs. Hamer was so inspired by the speeches that she volunteered along with seventeen others to go to the county courthouse in Indianola to try to register. She subsequently became the group's leader.3

Upon arrival at the courthouse the group was met with hostility. As the group spokesperson, Mrs. Hamer indicated to the clerk their desire to register. They were told only two persons could enter at a time, a request with which the group readily complied. The kind of information sought (i.e., residence, employment, etc.) would be used at a later time by organizations like the Citizens' Councils, a white supremacist group, to intimidate the applicants. The applicants also had to take the required literacy tests by reading and interpreting sections of the Mississippi state constitution, a process that took all day for them to complete. At the end of this process, they were not informed if they passed or failed.

After leaving the courthouse, the bus of the applicants was intercepted by local authorities who ordered them back to Indianola. The driver was fined $100.00 for driving a bus of the "wrong color." After the judge accepted a $30.00 fine, the group continued on its journey back to Ruleville. When Mrs. Hamer finally reached home, she was told by her daughter that her boss was angry because Mrs. Hamer had been among the group going to the courthouse. Because she refused to withdraw her name, Mrs. Hamer was fired and ordered off the plantation. She also received word that she had not passed the literacy test, but she informed the registrar that she would return every thirty days until she did pass. She eventually did so in January, 1963. She could not vote immediately, however, because of another obstacle, the infamous poll tax.4

Because she stood up for her rights, Mrs. Hamer and her family faced intimidation and harrassment on a daily basis. Her husband and daughter were arrested and lost their jobs. She received a $9,000.00 water bill for a house that did not have running water. She faced gunfire from a speeding car and endured police entering her home without search warrants. Despite this, she became an active member of the movement, serving as a field secretary for SNCC, working with voter registration, helping develop welfare programs and circulating petitions to secure federal commodities for needy black families. After becoming a political activist, Mrs. Hamer had to deal with intermittent employment because few would hire her.5 The highlight of her political activism occurred when she and several others set wheels in motion for the formation of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party.

Before discussing the MFDP, a brief examination of Democratic Party politics in Mississippi prior to the formation of the organization is in order. By the time John F. Kennedy was inaugurated in 1961, many Mississippians and southern whites had withdrawn themselves from the national Democratic Party. Although many still used the label, they called themselves, "state Democrats" or "true" Democrats. In fact, they were any type of Democrat except a national one. Regular Mississippi Democrats resented the attack by the national party upon their belief in segregation and felt that because of such a confrontation, a strain had been placed upon their Democratic identification. Since the party was considered to be more conservative than the national party, Mississippians felt justified in calling themselves the true Democrats, claiming that the leaders of the national party had betrayed the underlying principles of the party.6 Of course, their own principles were designed to uphold segregation laws in the South.

As the civil rights movement gained momentum in the South in general and Mississippi in particular, the desire to keep blacks from becoming registered voters was heightened. The most effective device was economic pressure.

A law was approved by the state legislature in 1962 which provided for the publication of the names and addresses of applicants in the newspapers. With the publication of names in the newspapers, retaliatory action by whites was easier to accomplish. Further, blacks who attempted to register were threatened with the loss of their jobs, loss of credit, and other economic reprisals.

The establishment of the MFDP in 1964 was one of the most compelling actions taken as a part of the "Freedom Summer" program initiated by the Council of Federated Organizations (COFO).7 The primary goal of the new organization was to dramatize to the nation the principles of the Mississippi Regulars (the state Democratic Party) which, as a matter of praxis, excluded black participation in voting. The MFDP favored the liberal principles of the national party and rejected the "old politics" of the Regulars by attempting to replace it with a system based on participatory democracy.8 Fannie Lou Hamer was one of the party's cofounders and was eventually appointed as the co-chair along with the delegation headed for the national convention.

Initially the Freedom Democrats attempted to participate in precinct, county and state conventions of the traditional state party apparatus. They were either barred from meetings or limited in their rights and participation when they did get in. As a result of such denials, they decided to challenge the all-white Regulars at the national convention to be held in Atlantic City, New Jersey. The Regulars would be charged with the responsibility for violence and voter intimidation in the state. The Freedom Democrats hoped the regular delegation would be barred from the convention by virtue of the fact that they constantly declared themselves independent of the national party. It was the contention of the MFDP that they were the only democratic organization in Mississippi which could be relied upon to support the nominees of the national party.9

It was quite apparent to the MFDP and its supporters that the Regulars did not want to be a part of the national party structure. However, the Regulars did not want any other group representing the national party in Mississippi. Therefore, the Regulars obtained a temporary restraining order forbidding the Freedom Democrats from using the word "democratic" in its name. At the same time, the Regulars adopted a platform that not only opposed civil rights but rejected the national party platform as well.10

After being excluded from participation in the state party procedures, the MFDP held their own state convention and selected 68 delegates to send to Atlantic City. The group established an office in Washington and began to solicit support for their challenge. The party received endorsements from several state delegations, including California, Michigan, Massachusetts, and Colorado. They also received support from 25 congressmen. The Regulars had the support of other southern states, and although not overtly at the time, the support of Lyndon Johnson. The southern states threatened to walk out of the convention if Johnson did not back the Regulars. Johnson did not want anything to mar his nomination for the presidency and sought ways to prevent the upstart MFDP from stealing the headlines.11

As the co-chair of the MFDP, Mrs. Hamer spoke on behalf of the organization on the first day of the convention. In her testimony to the Credentials Committee, Mrs. Hamer explicitly told of the atrocities committed against the black citizens of Mississippi. She told of the murder of Medger Evers, the violence associated with the enrollment of James Meredith at the University of Mississippi, and the murders of three civil rights workers, James Chaney, Michael Schwerner, and Andrew Goodman. She also spoke of the abuse she herself had suffered at the hands of Mississippi law enforcement officers when she was beaten so badly in a Winona (Montgomery County) jail that she had no feeling left in her arms.12 She stated:

> *If the Democratic Party is not seated now, I question America...Is this America? The land of the free and the home of the brave? Where we have to sleep with our tele phone off the hook, because our lives be threatened daily?*13

After giving such dramatic testimony, Mrs. Hamer wept before the committee and before the many millions of Americans watching the proceedings on television. President Johnson, again trying to prevent the MFDP from stealing the show, attempted to block the live coverage of the Credentials Committee by hastily scheduling a press conference to pre-empt the proceedings. Although he managed to block

committee proceedings, he was not able to prevent the broadcast of Mrs. Hamer's testimony on the evening news programs. This coverage led to a deluge of calls and telegrams to the Credentials Committee in support of the MFDP challenge.[14]

After all arguments had been heard, the 1964 convention adopted what they called a "compromise proposal" which had been developed by Hubert Humphrey and Walter Mondale. It stated that (1) no Mississipian would be seated without a pledge to support the national party ticket; (2) two members (not selected by the MFDP, but by Humphrey) of the MFDP would sit in the convention, officially representing Mississippi, but as delegates "at large"; and (3) no future convention would seat state delegations which excluded citizens from participation by reason of race or color.[15] It was also proposed that a committee be created to help states comply with the reforms. The Regulars denounced this compromise and all but three of them walked out of the convention. The MFDP also rejected the compromise, walked out and held a press conference stating their objections. Mrs. Hamer argued that the two "at large" seats were "token rights, on the back row, the same as we got in Mississippi. We didn't come all this way for that mess again."[16]

Mrs. Hamer further demonstrated the desire of the MFDP to reject any compromises by leading the delegation onto the convention floor. After borrowing passes from supportive delegates, they managed to occupy the vacant seats allocated for Mississippi before the guards escorted them out. Determined to thwart further disruptions, President Johnson ordered the removal of all except three seats (for the Regulars who had not walked out) from the Mississippi area. This did not prevent the MFDP delegation from going onto the convention floor once again and occupying the space reserved for Mississippi. Mrs. Hamer led her delegation in singing freedom songs right on the floor.[17]

The MFDP lost its challenge, but Mrs. Hamer stressed the importance of not succumbing to the compromise, for to have done so would have compromised the people of Mississippi. She and others were disillusioned by the leadership, both black and white, in Atlantic City who urged acceptance of the compromise. Since she argued so vehemently against the compromise, Mrs. Hamer was barred from other meetings held to discuss the dilemma. However, she did not give up the struggle for what she felt was right, even as the defeated group headed back to Mississippi.

Under Mrs. Hamer's leadership, the Freedom Democrats continued their fight against the legitimacy of the lily-white faction. The Party decided to have candidates run against the regular candidates in the next congressional election. Candidates, of which Mrs. Hamer, was one, acquired the signaturesnecessary to qualify as independents, then petitioned the Secretary of State to place their names on the November ballot. They were told that each name on the petition had to be certified by the local clerk. For all practical purposes this was a rejection, for no satisfaction would be obtained from county registrars.[18]

As a candidate for Congress from the Second Congressional District, Mrs. Hamer knew that her chances of winning were very slim. She argued that she was running because she wanted to show people that a black person could run for public office. Further, when confronted by a white man who said that whites were getting tired and tense at the movement, Mrs. Hamer responded:

> *I have been tired for 46 years and my parents were tired before me and their parents were tired; and I have always wanted to do some thing that would help some of the things I would see going on among Negroes that I didn't like and I don't like now...*
>
> *All my life, I've been sick and tired. Now, I'm sick and tired of being sick and tired...*[19]

With this iron-willed determination, she challenged the political structure of Mississippi by seeking a congressional seat. Although unsuccessful, her struggles did not end.

The MFDP next planned to challenge the seating in the United States House of Representatives of Mississippi's five congressmen in January, 1965. The challenge was based upon a little known Mississippi statute which made it possible to protest the validity of state elections. The statute in question dated back to 1870 when Mississippi had to be readmitted to Congress during Reconstruction. Under the statute's provisions, the state was not to change

its existing suffrage qualifications and disfranchise any citizens. Counselors for the Freedom Democrats argued that Mississippi had violated this law by enacting the poll tax and literacy tests as suffrage requirements.[20]

House Majority Leader Carl Albert of Oklahoma introduced a resolution which would have the five Mississippi Congressmen sworn in. There was no full hearing on the matter; the House simply ended all discussion. However, the Freedom Democrats conducted their own hearings inthe state and had taken over six hundred depositions filled with charges of racial bias. The material was filed with the Clerk of the House. Nine months after the challenge had been filed, the House Administration, after conducting three hours of closed hearings, rejected the claims of the Freedom Democrats. The rationale of the panel was that the congressional members had a prima facie right to their seats because the House had sworn them in the past January, this despite the fact that the challenge preceded the delegation's being sworn in. The panel also stated that the Voting Rights Act, which had subsequently passed during the course of the nine month wait, had rendered the question of disfranchisement obsolete.[21]

With little national support, the party continued to struggle in Mississippi in local elections. There were some successes (e.g., the election of Robert Clark to the state legislature in 1967), but the party had to contend with efforts to discredit them, most notably by state Congressman G. V. Montgomery. Before the House of Representatives he argued:

> *I do not believe the members of this House approve of the type of politics advocated by the militant organization which is trying to take control of the State of Mississippi... In fact the Freedom Democratic Party should be recognized and branded by responsible conservatives and liberals alike as a vicious advocate of race hatred and revolution....*[22]

These efforts at discrediting the MFDP had an impact as the time for the 1968 national convention approached. Internal dissension in the ranks led to an eventual split of some from the MFDP to form a biracial coalition, the Loyalist Democrats of Mississippi. The Loyalists managed to unseat the Regulars at the violence laden Democratic National Convention in Chicago.

The MFDP then began a slow descent into obscurity, but it left its mark on national Democratic Party politics. Despite the decline in MFDP activities in the latter 1960s, Mrs. Hamer characterized the organization as a grassroots party serving the needs of the poor and the unrepresented. It was the kind of politics she wanted to see continued in Mississippi.[23] It was also the kind of grassroots politics in which black women could actively be involved. More importantly, the MFDP catapulted to fame a magnificent woman who sought to expose America's hypocrisy and dispel the image of America as the land of the brave and the home of the free. She sought to transform the ideal into reality. Through the MFDP and other grassroots efforts, Fannie Lou Hamer was able to bring America one step closer to dismantling the barriers which kept African-Americans on the periphery of political involvement. This strong, invincible woman, without benefit of formal education, showed the country that knowledge, wisdom and organizational skills did not come with the acquisition of an academic degree. As Mrs. Hamer stated,

> *...whether you have a Ph.D., D.D., or no D., we're in this bag together. And whether you're from Morehouse or Nohouse, we're still in thi s bag together.*[24]

Mrs. Hamer further stated that she believed,

> *there will be more interest generated in politics at the grassroots level by the everyday kind of people who have lost confidence in the democratic process becauseof corrupt politicians and their desire to perpetuate themselves in office while causing the masses to suffer.*[25]

Fannie Lou Hamer was one of those "everyday kind of people" who stood firm in her beliefs and became a symbol of the struggle for survival in a racist, hostile environment. She did not capitalize on her fame to benefit herself as she so easily could have done. Her primary concern was always for the people of Ruleville, Sunflower County, Mississippi though she did not ignore the nation. As she repeatedly stated in many addresses, "This ain't just Mississippi's problem, it's America's problem." Never satisfied with incremental changes, she felt it was her

responsibility to rectify problems in whatever way she could, right where she lived.

After the 1964 convention, Mrs. Hamer used her national recognition to initiate a fund-raising campaign which brought thousands of dollars into the county to improve the economic conditions of the poor in Ruleville. Her efforts at economic development led to the founding of the Freedom Farm Cooperative, a project owned and operated by the Black citizens of Ruleville. Mrs. Hamer organized the cooperative in order to provide homes and food for low-income and "no-income" families. The cooperative purchased nearly 680 acres of farm land in Sunflower County and bought modern farm equipment to aid poor families. By 1973, it provided the third largest payroll for Black workers in the county.[26] Unfortunately, since Mrs. Hamer's death the cooperative has nearly folded due to leadership problems and encounters with the city of Ruleville. Much of the original land has been lost to the city of Ruleville as a result of its being deeded over to the city in order for Mrs. Hamer's body to be interred within the city limits.

Through a grant from NCNW Mrs. Hamer initiated a pig banks project in Sunflower County to provide food and income to needy families. This program allowed pigs to be bought, loaned to families, bred, and then loaned to another family.[27]

Fannie Lou Hamer also paid attention to the subordination of women, especially poor black women. She understood that the exploitation and oppression of black women did not begin in the 1960s, but had existed for centuries. She also was aware that the burgeoning women's movement was opening up dissension between white and black women. In a speech in the early 1970s she stated:

> *sometimes I feel sorrier for the white woman than I feel for ourselves because she been caught up in this thing, caught up feeling very special...you've been caught up in this thing because, you know, you worked my grandmother, and after that you worked my mother, and then finally you got hold of me...you thought that you was more because you was a woman, and especially a white woman, you had this kind of angel feeling that you were untouchable... There's nothing under the sun that made you believe that you was just like me...so we was used as black women over and over and over...*[28]

Mrs. Hamer had the capacity to look squarely at a problem and call it like it was. She often stated that her job was not to make people feel comfortable. Consequently, she pointed out inconsistencies and racism in the women's movement and the nature of patriarchy. In the same speech cited above, she further stated:

> *In the past, I don't care how poor this white woman was, in the South she still felt like she was more than us. In the North, I don't care how poor or how rich this white has been, she still felt like she was more than us. But coming to the realization of the thing, her freedom is shackled in chains to mine, and she realizes for the first time that she is not free until I am free...the male influence in this country — you know the white male, he didn't go and brainwash the black man and the black woman, he brainwashed his wife too...He made her think that she was a angel...*[29]

Mrs. Hamer's insight came in the early stages of the women's movement, at a time when very few black women were critical of its activities. It is that very insight that led to her continued leadership in both black and women's organizations. She was a featured speaker at the initial meeting of the National Women's Political Caucus in 1971 and was elected to that organization's steering committee. Her presence at the 1972 Democratic National Convention was felt through her speech supporting the nomination of Sissy Farenthold for vice-president. As a sought after speaker, she was often quoted because of her astuteness and keen insight that went above and beyond that of the polished politician.

As a grassroots organizer Fannie Lou Hamer commanded the respect of blacks and whites alike. In a 1976 interview she commented that:

> *The same white folks who used to drive by in pickup trucks with guns hanging up in the back giving us hate stares now call me Mrs. Hamer. They respect people*

*who respect themselves. If we hadn't got people registered to vote, I don't think we would have had the kind of change here But... we've still got a long way to go...*30

She felt that changes would continue to be made as long as blacks understood the importance of entering the political arena and "developing the skills necessary to find solutions to the problems of 'mass confusion.'"31 She strongly believed that the situation for blacks could and must be changed if we were to throw off the shackles of slavery and claim all the rights and privileges of American citizenship. Rather than merely articulate her concerns and wishes, Fannie Lou Hamer led by example.

In reflecting on Fannie Lou Hamer's life shortly after her death, Eleanor Holmes Norton noted that Mrs. Hamer

*had a singular capacity to impart courage and to chase timidity. She was a mixture of strength, humor, love, and determined honesty. She did not know the meaning of self-pity.*32

Mrs. Hamer had a fighting spirit that guided her life, a spirit that allowed her to serve as a model to poor black people who felt the system had left them behind. She used her life as a shining example to others, of what could be accomplished if one persevered. And because she lived, others have been able to overcome what appear to be insurmountable odds to becoming active participants in the American political system.

In March, 1977, Fannie Lou Hamer died somewhat as she had lived, poor, humble, and much loved. Because she dedicated her life to improving the lives of others, she has become more than a footnote in civil rights history. In every sense of the word, Fannie Lou Hamer was the consumate trailblazer, of black rights, women's rights, and, above all, human rights.

ENDNOTES

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25 Fannie Lou Hamer, "If the Name of the Game is Survive, Survive," in Nathan Wright, ed., What Black Politicians Are Saying (New York: Hawthorn Books, 1972), 44.

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29 Ibid, p. 611.

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31 Hamer, "If the Name of the Game is Survive...," 44.

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