

## TEACHER GUIDE

**1964 DOC. #4: MFDP Televised Testimony****BACKGROUND INFORMATION**

Civil rights and the voting rights of African Americans in the South were major issues during this campaign. Several months before the Democratic convention in August of 1964, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) organized the Freedom Summer campaign in Mississippi to work for fair representation for African American people in the voting process. They organized the multi-racial Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party (MFDP) to challenge the official all-white state delegation to the Democratic convention. Mrs. Fannie Lou Hamer and two other women were their nominees to Congress.

The MFDP traveled by bus to Atlantic City to assert their right to be seated at the convention in place of the all-white delegation. The official Mississippi Democratic Party delegation was headed by Senators Eastland and Stennis who opposed President Johnson's civil rights programs.

This confrontation provided great drama during a convention that President Johnson hoped would be a pep rally for his candidacy. Although Johnson supported civil rights, he did not want to offend white southerners whose votes he needed. In an attempt at a compromise, the MFDP was offered two at-large non-voting seats at the convention while the official delegation would be seated. The MFDP rejected this idea. Mrs. Hamer said, "We didn't come all this way for no two seats, when all of us is tired."

The clip you will see is a brief portion of the MFDP's televised testimony in front of the Democratic Convention Credentials Committee on August 22. The first speaker is Washington attorney Joseph Rauh. The "terror" he refers to is the attacks on African American people and their allies who were working for voting rights in Mississippi. He then introduces Mrs. Hamer who describes in horrific detail the murder of civil rights leader, Medgar Evers, and the brutality she herself had experienced from racists as she attempted to vote.

President Johnson was determined to silence Mrs. Hamer's testimony. He arranged a speech on the spur of the moment in order to pre-empt television coverage of her remarks. This is the reason that her speech is cut short. Of Mrs. Hamer's testimony Johnson said, "We can't ever buy spots that'll equal this. . . . We've got five million budgeted [for TV commercials] but we can't undo what they've done these past few days" (Mayer).

> **Play** the video clip.

**1964 DOC. #4****MFDP Testimony****Video Clip**

LENGTH: 1 minute 33 seconds

QUESTION **What are the messages that Joseph Rauh is communicating?**

SUGGESTED ANSWER The Democratic Party in Mississippi had used terror tactics to prevent African American people from voting.

EVIDENCE "The very terror that these people are living through is the reason Negroes aren't voting."

QUESTION **What are the messages that Mrs. Fannie Lou Hamer is communicating?**

SUGGESTED ANSWER The MFDP should be seated at the convention.

EVIDENCE "If the Freedom Democratic Party is not seated now, I question America."

SUGGESTED ANSWER The attacks on the MFDP call into question U.S. commitment to ideals of freedom and democracy.

EVIDENCE "Is this America, the land of the free and home of the brave, where we have to sleep with our telephones off the hook because our lives are threatened daily?"

QUESTION **How did the MFDP members use television to further their cause?**

SUGGESTED ANSWER By appearing at the Democratic convention and demanding their rights to be seated and be heard they were gaining access to the television cameras that would already be covering the convention.

QUESTION **How did the President use television to silence the MFDP?**

SUGGESTED ANSWER By announcing that he would speak, he interrupted coverage of the Credentials Committee hearings knowing that the networks would consider the President's words to be more important.

**FURTHER QUESTIONS**

Can you think of other times when citizens have used television to gain visibility and support for their positions?

Should the President have the right to command airtime whenever he or she wants? Why or why not?

**ADDITIONAL INFO**

Johnson ordered the FBI to spy on the MFDP and he pressured Martin Luther King to negotiate a compromise to satisfy both sides. He also tried to stop the TV cameras from showing a break in party unity. LBJ was outraged that he could not manage press coverage of the convention as he had planned. Even though his speech pre-empted Mrs. Hamer's testimony, Mrs. Hamer's remarks nevertheless got wide publicity on the evening news.

Before the campaign Goldwater and Johnson met privately and agreed not to make issues of civil rights or the Vietnam War (Troy 217). Johnson was especially worried about the inroads that Goldwater's conservative appeal might have in the South. He was aware of the potential that the Democrats could lose the once "solid South" to Republicans. In fact, five of the six states that Johnson lost in the landslide of 1964 were in the South. In the next election Republican Richard Nixon and American Independent Party candidate George Wallace carried the entire South with the exception of Texas.

Although the MFDP did not win its desired seats at the convention, the Democratic Party was nevertheless changed by their courageous work. In subsequent years the Democratic convention was opened to previously unrepresented and underrepresented groups. Mississippi went on to elect more African American officials than any other state. When Mrs. Hamer died in 1977, the Mississippi legislature passed a unanimous resolution praising her service to the state.

**CONNECTIONS**

(see thematic listing)

**Media Bias**

**Race**

**Reaching Voters (TV news)**