

"A Stalking Horse for the Civil Rights Movement": Head Start and the Legacy of the Freedom Schools

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Reflecting upon his work in a Mississippi Freedom School months earlier, Howard Zinn shared his ideas on the relationship between education and social change in the November 1964 issue of *The Nation*. After describing the schools, the teachers, and the local whites' reaction—which, he pointed out, included the murder of three young civil rights workers, Andrew Goodman, James Chaney, and Mickey Schwerner—Zinn contended that education could be a dangerous thing for “certain people at certain times.” But for others it could be empowering. “There is, to begin with,” he asserted, “the provocative suggestion that an entire school system can be created in any community outside the social order, and critical of its suppositions” (Zinn 371). Well before he gained a reputation as one of the most radical New Left historians in the United States, Zinn suggested that it might be possible “to declare boldly that the aim of the schools is to find solutions for poverty, for injustice, for race and national hatred, and to turn all education efforts into a national striving for those solutions.” Maybe, he hoped, building on the success of the Freedom Schools, the people could lead the government “to set up other pilot ventures, imperfect but suggestive, like the one last summer in Mississippi” (Zinn 374-75).

As he wrote these words, Zinn may or may not have known that others were trying to do just that. James Farmer, a founder and executive director of the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), had met almost a year earlier with newly-sworn-in president Lyndon B. Johnson in December 1963 to propose a major literacy initiative to ensure that “millions of Americans of

all races” would be equipped to enjoy the opportunities to come as a result of the civil rights movement. Now that Freedom Summer had ended, movement activists in Mississippi were already trying to find a way to extend their education initiatives into the next summer and were considering fundraising possibilities. With the development of Johnson’s new War on Poverty, these two streams would converge (Farmer, *Lay Bare* 295).

Six months after Zinn’s article appeared, what looked like just the sort of pilot venture he had called for appeared throughout the US, including in Mississippi, the very state he and his fellow activists had targeted during Freedom Summer. Much to the disgust of the white power structure in the state, the national government was implementing an educational program that addressed poverty and race at the same time. Conceived a month after Zinn’s *Nation* essay appeared, Project Head Start was put in place during the summer of 1965 to bring early education intervention and social services to economically disadvantaged children so they would be ready to begin kindergarten in the public schools that fall.

To an editorial writer with the *Jackson Daily News*, the government was colluding with civil rights “radicals” to force something sinister upon the people of Mississippi. Head Start was nothing less than “one of the most subtle mediums for instilling the acceptance of racial integration and ultimate mongrelization ever perpetrated in this country.” The writer clearly realized and feared not the education that was being offered but the possibility that such an education would stir up the social order. The difference between the vision this writer shared with the local white power structure and that put forth by participants in the civil rights struggle would lead to much tension as the two groups struggled to control Head Start centers throughout the state. Both sides realized that Project Head Start held great potential to further the movement’s agenda and the important question was whether that power would be held in check or harnessed for further gain. The Jackson editorialist, like most whites in Mississippi, hoped to stave off the progress activists had worked to achieve, warning that Head Start could be used to help put an end to segregation: “The most formative years of a child’s life are in this particular area, from [the age of] 1 to 6, and the mixing of children of both races, and both sexes, will be of paramount importance in this program, with the children subconsciously registering such associations as natural and an indelible way of life in future years.” Thus, the Head Start program “fits into the scheme of total integration and overlapping of the races which is being preached and taught throughout the United States today” (*Jackson Daily News* 8).

Clearly, those who resisted civil rights reforms saw Head Start as part and parcel of the civil rights movement. This astute observation would leave

the federal officials who hoped to implement the program in a precarious position. Not only did they have to work to keep control of Head Start and prevent civil rights activists from taking charge, they also had to prevent local whites from gaining control and destroying the program. As a result, they fought to resist linking Head Start too closely to the civil rights movement even though the program was in many ways an outgrowth of the work of men like Zinn and Farmer and civil rights groups like the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and the Delta Ministry. To complicate matters, Polly Greenberg, an idealist within the War on Poverty bureaucracy, shared a grand vision for Project Head Start that was based partly on the lessons she had learned from Freedom Summer.

Insisting that the program live up to its full potential, she would leave the Office of Economic Opportunity (OEO) to help create the Child Development Group of Mississippi (CDGM), an organization that served as a clear link between the civil rights movement and Project Head Start. Education could indeed serve as the key to real progress, and some hoped that Head Start would further the broader educational agenda of the civil rights movement.

Education and Civil Rights

Education was still an important component of the civil rights movement for a number of reasons in the mid-1960s. First, blacks were denied the right to vote throughout the South by means of literacy tests. Thus, it was important to teach southern blacks the basics of literacy so they could pass the tests and gain political power through the franchise. Also, despite orders to desegregate public schools, blacks throughout the South remained in second-class facilities with outdated and worn out books and materials, taught by teachers who were under social and economic pressures to teach them to accept the prevailing social order, which perpetuated racial division. The only way to break this hold was to work outside of the State of Mississippi's educational structure and bring in teachers capable of showing students of all ages that education could empower them to better their lot and that blacks and whites could work together to transcend the existing social order and achieve unity from the bottom up (Howe 145, 152).

Civil rights activists brought education to the forefront through two major initiatives: Citizenship Schools and Freedom Schools. According to David Levine, Citizenship Schools were initiated by Tennessee's Highlander Folk School but were initially put into place in South Carolina, in Charleston and the Sea Islands. They were founded in 1957 by Septima Clark and Myles Horton but were turned over to the Southern Christian Leadership Confer-

ence in 1961 and directed by Andrew Young from that point to 1963. By 1963 they had spread throughout the South. Joe Street shows that Freedom Schools, on the other hand, grew out of the Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee's (SNCC) 1964 Freedom Summer project in Mississippi. First proposed by SNCC field secretary Charles Cobb, the schools were administered through the Council of Federated Organizations (COFO), a union of SNCC, CORE, and other civil rights groups. Staughton Lynd, a white activist and history professor at Spelman College, was chosen to direct the Freedom Schools. Both projects shared the goal of helping blacks register to vote, but there were a number of important differences.

Citizenship Schools played a key role in providing black adults with basic literacy and political education. They also led to empowerment and the cultivation of local black civil rights leaders. The initial focus was on practical adult literacy, and teachers used a student-centered and student-directed curriculum to teach such everyday skills as reading the Bible and newspapers, filling out money orders and mail order forms, writing letters and passing literacy tests (Levine 392, 398).

The Citizenship Schools made important gains in black voter registration. Of the program's original fourteen students, all had registered to vote by the end of their course. After that, teacher Bernice Robinson led a voter registration drive in Charleston, teaching people specifically how to read ballots and managing to register almost seven hundred new voters. By 1960, black voters matched or outnumbered white voters in some of the Sea Islands, and in 1964 the black vote on one island gave Lyndon Johnson his only pocket of support in Charleston County. Citizenship Schools fostered social activism with an emphasis on political participation and community leadership and empowerment. The political and civic mobilization that started in these schools encouraged activists to broaden their efforts by creating community organizations that served in many ways as mutual aid societies by providing clothes and other essential goods to the poor, helping them obtain social services and fight job discrimination and school segregation (Levine 401-14).

The Radical Nature of Freedom Schools

Though Freedom School volunteers also worked to enroll new voters and help them participate in civic life, they had an agenda that was even more radical than that of the Citizenship Schools. Citizenship Schools relied on local African American organizers to educate and empower their neighbors to fight for their rights to participate in the American democratic system. In contrast, the Freedom Schools that became a central component of the

1964 Freedom Summer Project relied on white and black college students and instructors from the North to travel South and encourage students to question the very social order that fought to keep them subservient (Howe 150, 152; Payne 302-04; Perlstein; Rachal; Rothschild). As SNCC field secretary Charles Cobb explained to the volunteer teachers, Mississippi blacks had been taught that having an idea of their own “is a subversion that must be squelched” because independent thought would lead people to “probe into the why of denial.” As education stood in Mississippi, learning meant “only learning to stay in your place,” which was “to be satisfied—a ‘good nigger’” (Cobb). This is what Freedom Schools had to correct by building an interracial movement that would challenge the existing power structure, using black history and a Marxist analysis of the American racial situation to push blacks and whites to transcend the racial barriers that kept them at odds.

This was subversive material indeed, and it proved quite provocative and popular. Freedom Schools saw huge success throughout Mississippi. By the end of July 1964, forty-one of these schools operated in twenty communities across the state, serving over two thousand students—twice the number planners had anticipated. By the end of the summer, the student body neared three thousand and included students from preschool age to senior citizens as old as seventy, and organizers began to consider how they might carry their work over into the fall and beyond. The permanent plans they began to make included a number of projects, including preschools that would supplement rather than replace the public schools. According to Winson Hudson, a lifelong resident of Mississippi who managed to register to vote in 1963 after twenty-six years of trying, “Freedom Summer made us excited about keeping the movement going” (Hudson 88).

According to Freedom School coordinator Liz Fusco, the schools had put the inadequacies of the public schools in high relief by illustrating the possible. Not only had teachers introduced students to positive and powerful role models by teaching black history, they also gave them the confidence to think for themselves. Real transformation occurred “because for the first time in their lives kids were asking questions.” It looked like the transformation was on course to continue, too, as leaders contemplated spreading Freedom Schools throughout the South. She added that “it may well be that the very staffs at the Freedom Schools in Louisiana and Georgia . . . will be the kids who were just this past summer students . . . in Mississippi, and discovered themselves there” (Fusco 7).

By this point civil rights workers were not the only ones pondering the merits of education as a way to improve society. The Johnson administration had started to address the connection between poverty, illiteracy, and poor academic performance and to consider programs that would attack the

problem. Of course, administration officials did not share the grand desire of toppling the social order entirely, but they were willing to push for some degree of change. Polly Greenberg later wrote that the question on her mind at that moment in time was just how much change the administration would advocate and tolerate. "How far would OEO . . . side with those willing and eager to honor civil rights laws, even in rough country?" she asked, and "at what point should cautiousness, fear of rocking the boat, and political bartering cause OEO to take the part of those desirous of defying these laws?" (Greenberg, *Devil* 15).

Head Start as a Compromise Measure

Walking a tightrope between meaningful but non-threatening reform and an obvious attempt to change the nation's social order, the Johnson administration introduced a preschool program called Project Head Start as part of the larger War on Poverty. Johnson did consult movement leaders concerning some of his antipoverty and civil rights initiatives, initially offering a sense of hope for some type of partnership. He reached out to civil rights leaders almost immediately after becoming president, but he also made it clear that he was not prepared to accept the more radical behavior of the two groups most active in Freedom Schools—SNCC and CORE. He sought to no avail on multiple occasions to convince them to stop their public demonstrations and when they did not, he withheld his trust from the leaders.

Even so, according to Head Start historian Edward Zigler, the architects of the War on Poverty did borrow important lessons from the movement. First, civil rights efforts had revealed the depth of the inequality and the enormity of the resistance, showing ultimately that "the government was obligated to help disadvantaged groups in order to compensate for inequality in social or economic conditions" (Zigler and Styfco 6). Just as importantly, civil rights workers had learned that the disadvantaged insisted upon leading their own struggle, and the government benefitted from this insight by allowing the poor to help plan and run anti-poverty programs through the concept of "maximum feasible participation" (Zigler and Styfco 38, 122).

To safeguard this crucial concept, the OEO funneled all funding through local Community Action Programs (CAPs) that developed Head Start programs and brought parents in to help run the centers, serve on boards, and even serve as teachers. Another lesson the civil rights movement taught the founders of Head Start was that southern white agencies, such as local school districts, could not be trusted to administer the new program if the funds are really to be used to benefit poor blacks. The CAPs were crucial here as well

because they allowed funding to flow from federal to community hands, bypassing segregationist state agencies and allowing Head Start to play an important role in pushing forth the civil rights aim of desegregation. Of course the CAPs spurred controversy and outrage among local powers who did not want their authority challenged by the poor, much less by poor people of color with a civil rights agenda (Andrews; Findlay 238).

To say that Head Start benefitted from some of the lessons learned by civil rights activists, however, is not to say that those activists were allowed a voice in the creation and implementation of the program. The program immediately drew fire from southern white leaders, and, had the Johnson administration allowed it to be openly associated with the civil rights movement, it would have had very little chance of survival. Thus, any links between Head Start and the civil rights movement had to be muted.

The standard story is that Head Start was developed as a compensatory education program and anti-poverty measure that grew out of OEO director Sargent Shriver's work with the disadvantaged and developmentally disabled. Indeed, Zigler and Greenberg have both described Shriver as the "father of Head Start" (Zigler and Styfco, xi; Greenberg, *Devil* iv). This description, however, is too celebratory of Shriver's role and ignores the program's distinct connections to the civil rights movement. In crafting Head Start, Shriver and his staff at the OEO drew upon the lessons and insights mentioned above. Their observations of the resistance Freedom Summer faced also revealed to the president and his advisors that their own initiatives would have the best chance for success if approached through class-based programs that muted the issue of race as much as possible. According to Clarence Mitchell, chairman of the Legislative Committee of the Leadership Conference on Civil Rights and one of LBJ's informal advisors, the President had long believed in the standard Democratic Party line that civil rights legislation was needed but that to try to push it through Congress would split the party (25). According to Mitchell, Johnson said that "most of the Democrats were poor people and they needed legislation in the social welfare field." If you could keep them "working together for social welfare legislation then they wouldn't get into these bruising fights in Congress. And the poor people generally would benefit on civil rights" (2).

This idea wedded the War on Poverty to the president's civil rights agenda early on. According to Morris Abram, a co-chairman of the committee that planned LBJ's 1966 conference *To Fulfill These Rights*, civil rights in 1964 was "an economic and social program" that transcended racial lines. When asked if civil rights and the War on Poverty intersected during the 1964-65 planning sessions for the conference, he pointed to Head Start and to a proposed "Freedom Budget" submitted by civil rights leaders A. Philip

Randolph and Bayard Rustin as two examples, stressing that Randolph and Rustin never asked for money specifically to help blacks: "They asked for a freedom budget for all who needed it. It was not racially oriented" (Abram 11). Shriver also realized the importance of emphasizing class rather than race (Ziegler and Valentine 49-52).

Even so, Shriver may well have taken the opportunity to borrow more directly from the ideas of movement leader James Farmer in crafting Project Head Start. Indeed, evidence shows that he may have co-opted the plan Farmer first presented to Johnson in 1963. Immediately upon assuming office after the Kennedy assassination, Johnson reached out to a number of black leaders, including Randolph and Farmer, asking for their input on his agenda. Farmer, who had once served as a program director for the NAACP and worked with the Center for Community Action on Education, followed up by meeting privately with the president and offering an education plan he had been formulating. At that meeting he told the president he was bothered by the fact that they were "opening up doors of opportunity, but that millions of people on whose behalf we are working might not be able to walk through those doors, because of inadequate education and everything else." Farmer suggested "a massive campaign on adult literacy" and, perhaps referring to the success of Citizenship Schools and the enthusiastic planning underway for Freedom Schools, said, "there was sufficient technical knowledge to do it." Johnson responded enthusiastically and cited his history "as an old school teacher" and former head of the Texas chapter of the National Youth Administration under Franklin Roosevelt to highlight his own belief in the importance of education. Johnson asked Farmer to present the plan formally through a memorandum (Farmer, Transcript 8, 1, 10; Farmer, *Lay Bare* 295).

The plan Farmer presented in the October 1964 memo, like the Freedom and Citizenship Schools, was to include "the training and use of nonprofessionals" in teaching illiterate adults to read. Like Head Start nearly a year later, it presented "a carefully phased plan, starting with ten major cities, and proposed yearly expansion until the whole country was covered." Johnson liked the plan but suggested Farmer get other civil rights leaders on board so CORE would not be the only group associated with the program. He told Farmer this was so "he wouldn't be accused of playing favorites," but it was also probably important that he get less "radical" leaders involved since CORE was associated with demonstrations and with SNCC through COFO. Farmer enlisted the support of Martin Luther King Jr. of the SCLC; Whitney Young, head of the National Urban League; John Morsell, an associate executive director of the NAACP; Dorothy Height, president of the National Council of Negro Women; John Lewis, SNCC national chairman; Jerry Wurf, a public-sector union labor leader; and Howard University vice

president Stanton Wormley. Happy with the new recruits, Johnson asked Farmer to submit the proposal to Shriver at the OEO. Shriver wanted to fund the project right away, but Farmer needed time to set up a line of succession in CORE (Farmer, *Lay Bare* 296-97).

This project never saw fruition. One reason was likely Farmer's alienation of Johnson by refusing to support a moratorium on demonstrations in the months before the 1964 election. Johnson had asked the leaders of all of the major civil rights groups to postpone public demonstrations until after the election. Farmer and Lewis refused. Farmer then lost the literacy program, even though Shriver and education specialist Jule Sugarman, another key figure in the founding of Head Start, still claimed to support it. By that point Johnson had come to see efforts of civil rights leaders to push further as evidence of ingratitude (Abram 13-15; Farmer, *Lay Bare* 298, 300; Wilkins 8).

The other reason Farmer's adult literacy plan never materialized was because Shriver came up with a way to make it more palatable to the public by repackaging it into a more acceptable program geared to benefit poor children of both races. In his work with the Joseph P. Kennedy Jr. Foundation, a group that worked "to find cures for mental retardation," Shriver had read a study that concluded that proper intervention could improve social and intellectual development. Perhaps he read this study around the same time Farmer presented him with his proposal for the literacy program in October, because he mulled over the idea for a while before deciding once and for all that December to push for the development of a program to be implemented six months later, in the summer of 1965 (Zigler and Valentine 50-55).

That program would focus on children. According to Polly Greenberg, a member of the OEO team that helped develop Head Start, Shriver "was worried about who the recipients of the War on Poverty would be" because the program's political viability depended upon serving people perceived as "the deserving poor." At one OEO planning session where staff considered possible agendas for the summer of 1965, they decided to focus on children, the most visibly deserving among the poor. According to Shriver, "it wasn't until blacks grew up that white people began to feel animosity or show actual violence toward them," so he hoped that the administration "could overcome a lot of hostility in our society against the poor in general, and specifically against black people who are poor, by aiming for the children" (Greenberg, "Head Start" 43; Zigler and Valentine 52).

With this revelation, Shriver found a way to incorporate education into the civil rights agenda while taming it enough to avoid disturbing the social and political orders too much. He also hoped to build bridges between communities by encouraging middle class volunteers of both colors to join the effort and work together to become "part of the cure" and combat "poverty

in their own backyards.” Greenberg later conceded that, though Head Start “was an obvious, common sense Right Thing To Do,” it was also to some extent a moderating cover for the more radical CAPs which would empower the local communities by bringing in the parents and community leaders (Greenberg, “Head Start” 45).

Even though she realized the camouflaging going on, Greenberg took the OEO at its word when it expressed the importance of allowing the poor to act for themselves and thus break the cycle of dependence and poverty; she immediately set out to find CAPs whose Head Start proposals best embodied this concept. Finding that most fell short of her aspirations, she “engaged in a telephone search for a bold group willing to apply for a Head Start grant that would not be run by ‘establishment’ Mississippi” but would instead “be run by people who believed in equal rights and opportunities for all citizens.” When she found such a group, she encouraged the members to create what would become the model Head Start program in the nation and she left her position at the OEO to join them in Mississippi and see her hopes fulfilled. Her vision for Head Start helped create the clearest bridge between the movement and the preschool program (Mississippi CDGM).

CDGM and the Tug of War for Head Start

The group Greenberg found in her quest for the perfect CAP included four key members who had been involved in Freedom Summer and were already thinking in terms of preschools to carry forth the movement’s agenda. Dr. Tom Levin was a psychoanalyst from New York who had been working to bring “appropriate professionals” into the movement since the previous summer. Reverend Arthur Thomas was the director of the Delta Ministry, a group that had been key to the Mississippi project and would continue to play a leading role in the efforts in that state. Jeannine Herron, a young mother who had moved to Jackson, Mississippi, with her husband, a photographer, to participate in the movement, discovered that the schools were hostile and inadequate for their children and had been teaching them at home. She took the idea for cooperative preschools first to COFO and then to Thomas, who she learned had also been “thinking about Freedom Schools at the nursery level.” The final member of the group, Dr. Sol Gordon, was a psychologist from New Jersey who had decided that “older children and cotton picking parents would be far better teachers for spirited little children than the bored, hostile, and remote public school teachers” they currently faced. Gordon was the one who contacted Greenberg who, at the time, was the senior Head Start program analyst for the Southeast Region at the OEO (Greenberg, *Devil* 3-4).

This group had been working on a project for the summer of 1965 which included five to ten daycare centers modeled after Freedom Schools and staffed by “volunteers from the freedom fighting elements of poor communities.” Greenberg later recalled, “the purpose of the proposed project was to create a program that would build the iron egos needed for children growing up to be future leaders of social change in a semi feudal state.” They also hoped that the day care centers would serve as a nucleus that would allow parents and volunteers to build “an experimental ‘private’ school system” of their own because they had a “hopeless time trying to influence state schools in even the smallest ways, and because this state system is one of the major instruments that perpetuates ‘slavery’ in Mississippi.” Thus, they hoped that “at least a small group” of black children “who already had the tremendous advantage of having parents who were engaged in changing things, could get a psychologically strengthening, thought provoking, reality oriented education, rather than the psychologically crushing, thought controlled, mythically oriented, education currently available to them in public schools” (Greenberg, *Devil* ix, 3-4).

Greenberg was immediately excited about their work and wanted to bring their project into the Head Start fold. She had received a number of proposals from southerners who wanted to create CAPs and open Head Start centers but they were all from school superintendents who hoped to use federal money to create programs that would appear integrated on the surface but in reality perpetuate segregation. Greenberg realized that she “needed to find a group somewhere in the South” that believed in the human potential “of all colors” and she “knew of no group more dedicated to the development of human potential . . . than freedom movement workers in Mississippi.” Her need to find a group “committed to aggressive compliance with the Civil Rights Act” and her belief in the work of the movement led her to pursue Levin’s group. She promised that the civil rights workers could continue their movement work as they wished in their spare time, and she asked the team to present information about Head Start to the communities and let them decide if they wanted to participate (Greenberg, *Devil* 8-9).

Greenberg soon learned that she had given Johnson and her associates at the OEO too much credit. From the beginning the OEO treated their hard-won movement allies as “dangerous carriers of the bubonic plague instead of applauded carriers of last summer’s freedom banner” (Greenberg, *Devil* 48-49). Throughout the state the local white power structures fought to gain control of the Head Start program and take it out of the hands of the poor. This struggle for control began immediately and resulted in some cases with communities developing two centers—one run by the white power structure, usually the school board, with the help of middle class blacks and the

other run by poor people with or without movement affiliations. In Bolivar County, local whites' efforts to control the federal grant led to one program not being funded, but parents kept the program going for months with their own volunteer teachers who raised funds and paid for the children's lunches (Werner, DeMuth). In McComb, the parent-run center worked to develop a "questioning attitude in the free child" while one operated by the school board spent the days teaching "how to use flush toilets and electric lights" (Letter).

CDGM obtained a sizable grant of nearly \$1.5 million and went to work immediately, setting up eighty-four Head Start centers to serve six thousand children in twenty-four counties. According to historian John Dittmer, "It was the largest Head Start program to be funded in the nation that summer." The group managed to bypass state control by convincing officials at Mary Holmes Junior College to support them, and they created an administrative structure that included movement veterans. According to Dittmer, thirteen out of the fifteen top administrators had some sort of civil rights credential and CDGM "was unique in that it was led by people who did not apologize for their civil rights involvement and who saw" their work with Head Start "as an opportunity to provide education and services for poor children while at the same time advancing the movement agenda" (369-70).

Given Mississippi's racial climate and whites' strong preference for state over federal power, this partnership between the national government and civil rights leaders could not stand. Unfortunately, administration and bookkeeping problems at CDGM played right into the hands of Mississippi congressmen and a governor angered by what he described as "an effort on the part of extremists and agitators to subvert lawful authority in Mississippi and create division and dissension between the races." Through his power on the Senate Appropriations Committee, Senator John Stennis was able to force an audit of the group's books, where he found that CDGM had paid fines for staff members jailed during Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party (MFDP) demonstrations in Jackson. While CDGM argued that the money amounted to salary advancements for some of its workers, they had recorded the expenditure as "bail funds" in their ledger. Stennis made as much as he could of the incident, but further investigation revealed a very small margin of error in CDGM accounting that amounted to approximately one percent of the grant. Still, Stennis resented the group's connection to the MFDP and the Delta Ministry and pushed the OEO to do something. The OEO in turn ordered the CDGM, which rented office space in the same building as these groups, to move its offices to the junior college that sponsored it. After resistance, they backtracked, but the controversy "poisoned the atmosphere between OEO administration in Washington and CDGM staff members" (Dittmer 371-72).

CDGM's first year ended successfully despite the problems, but Stennis used national resistance to the War on Poverty to push further in hopes of destroying the group. He managed to convince Shriver to abandon what was once his most celebrated Head Start program and deny it funding for a second year, but the people fought back. They continued to operate their centers without pay, providing their own facilities, food, and transportation for three thousand children. With the support of northern philanthropists, CDGM managed to take two buses full of students to Washington to plead their case and convince the OEO to offer \$5.6 million to fund 125 centers that would serve nine thousand children in twenty-eight counties for six months. This led senators Stennis and James Eastland to cry out that OEO money was funding "the extreme leftist civil rights and beatnik groups in our state, some of which have definite connections with Communist organizations." After that, Mississippi officials who had decried the War on Poverty started creating their own CAPs to keep the money away from groups like CDGM. In the long term, OEO officials spurred the creation of Mississippi Action for Progress (MAP) which, using the help of black "moderates," they hoped would replace CDGM. CDGM obtained its last federal grant in 1967 (Dittmer 375).

As Greenberg and her group fought to maintain Head Start ideals on the ground in Mississippi, Farmer continued the struggle in the nation's capital. Despite his own misgivings about the role of the government in fostering meaningful change, he accepted a position as assistant secretary of administration in the department of Health, Education, and Welfare (HEW) under President Richard Nixon. His first major battle at HEW erupted over the question of where to place Head Start administratively. According to Farmer, the two choices were the Children's Bureau, where he worried it would be rendered ineffective, and the Office of Education, where he feared that it "might become a downward extension of the public school system rather than the community action program it was designed to be." Farmer suggested creating an Office of Child Development (OCD) to administer the program, but a Louisiana senator threatened to make trouble for HEW if Farmer had any control over Head Start. Through careful maneuvering, Farmer managed to keep Head Start under his umbrella at HEW while making it appear that he had no connection to the program (Farmer, *Lay Bare* 319).

A Tamed Dragon

Civil rights education efforts were important, but some of the movement's influence on later, government-sponsored initiatives such as Head Start had

to remain indirect and, as Zinn suggested would be the case, beyond the pale of the government. What made it into the official Head Start program was the federal partnership with local people through the idea of “maximum feasible participation” and a federal (versus state) funding system that provided the tools with which to overrule state efforts at segregation. By putting the Head Start program in local hands through Community Action Programs the federal government did assure the program’s existence, to some extent, in Zinn’s words, “outside the social order” of the Jim Crow South. While some civil rights activists went on to participate in founding and administering the CAPs that would support Head Start centers, more “radical” civil rights activists were left out of that program. The key players in Freedom Schools, such as director Staughton Lynd, were never consulted regarding either Head Start or civil rights initiatives in general.

Were the movement members who shied away from the War on Poverty and the Great Society from the beginning right? Was Head Start merely an effort to extinguish civil rights progress with what amounted to bribes? In his foreword to Greenberg’s book, Sheldon White argued that the “OEO seems to have been at first proud of its pet dragon but then more and more apprehensive as CDGM’s proactive mobilization of community action and its political and administrative vulnerability cast a shadow over the national effort of which it was a part.” That national effort, the War on Poverty, faced a number of obstacles, such as the unravelling of the all-important New Deal coalition as the Democratic Party became committed enough to civil rights to alienate the southern part of its base, leading the administration to temper some of its efforts, but was that the same as deliberately selling out the movement? (Greenberg, *Devil* xiii). Is it more fair to say that the administration tried to mold the movement into a more acceptable form, much like Shriver may have done to Farmer’s education plan, than to silence activists?

According to Kantor and Lowe, by the 1960s organized labor and African American activists had pushed the government to “expand the capacities of the state to serve their interests,” particularly in the field of education. If that is true, then movement leaders actively shaped government initiatives to some degree. There is, however, a catch. “What is most striking about the relationship between black insurgency and the Great Society’s education policy,” they say, “is how the federal government appeared to legitimate black claims for equal education while avoiding the kinds of educational policies that many African Americans most wanted.” They cite Title I as an example. It gave money to help African American students in urban schools, even though what most blacks wanted was school desegregation. In this case, the government tried to trade better facilities through a compensatory system for the real social reform being sought. The same could be said about what happened to CDGM, as Kantor and Lowe add that “Head Start may have

been designed to dampen African American protest” by providing “a politically feasible alternative to school desegregation while still doing something for low income blacks.” But, they caution, “It is difficult to determine . . . whether federal educational legislation was consciously intended to co-opt African American demands” (9).

White sees it more as a wildfire getting out of hand and then being brought back under control than a conspiracy from the beginning. He concludes that “the turbulent, stormy set of Mississippi programs set in train by CDGM was tamed, cooled out, made orderly, managed, subdued, squelched, defused, brought within the compass of the system.” Of course, he adds, “an all-out, merciless idealist such as Polly Greenberg had to feel that something was lost” (in Greenberg, *Devil* xiii, xiv).

Even if she felt disappointed, Greenberg knew firsthand the tightrope the OEO had to walk between those like Stennis who wanted to squash the progress of the civil rights movement and those like some of her friends who wanted to push the agenda forward through the program. She argued that “it would be gross calumny to a dedicated civil rights oriented staff to intimate that they were either consciously or unconsciously used as agents against the movement.” Instead many, like Greenberg herself and the grassroots supporters who fought to make CDGM a successful tool for their communities, saw multiple levels of complicated possibilities and tried their best to work within the parameters of the possible to push forward. After all, as Johnson’s attorney general Ramsey Clark and civil rights activist and SCLC figure Andrew Young have both pointed out, regardless of what the politicians chose to focus on, civil rights activists and members of the black communities were really framing the issues by their actions in the field (Greenberg, *Devil* 279; Clark, Interview 8; Young, Interview 6; Kagan).

Conclusion

In the end, CDGM lost federal support but achieved many of the goals Greenberg and civil rights workers hoped it would. It emboldened local people not only to register and to vote, but to run for office as well. It also created “a sense of community that is not tied to one program, and a new awareness that ‘the system’ can be fought—and beaten.” According to a Delta Ministry article, it “became more than a school program” by bringing families together to deal with large issues. In short, “it became a testing ground for a new community of shared concern” and created “a nucleus of ‘fighting dreamers’. . . in each town and village.” Grassroots changes had occurred (King; Werner; MFDP).

The work of CDGM and similar Head Start groups mattered for the reasons Greenberg said they would. They empowered parents and gave them confidence that, as Greenberg had argued would be the case, spread to their children. Greenberg had also argued that the jobs provided in the centers would give some exploited people an opportunity for economic independence from the local white powers, and she was right there as well. In one case, a Sunflower County man named Matthew Carter dared to challenge the local school system's efforts to defy integration by sending his children to the traditionally-white schools. He then found himself jobless and unable to find work as his white neighbors sought to punish him, but the local Head Start center hired him and he remained part of the staff there for seventeen years. In this case and many like it, Head Start offered a family freedom from economic bullying (Curry 218-28).

CDGM also played a role in preparing grassroots community leaders. After Mississippi representatives in Congress voted against Head Start and other War on Poverty programs, Tougaloo College chaplain Edwin King decided to run for the Democratic nomination for Congress and Clifton Whitley, the chaplain of Rust College, decided to run for the Senate. Emma Sanders, a former Head Start employee, and Annie Mae King, a Head Start volunteer, each filed to run in local elections. Even for those who did not pursue official offices, Head Start offered experience that led to lifelong positions as informal community leaders and educators. After being introduced to the group in 1965, for example, Hudson worked with a number of CAPs and centers first as a teacher and then a center director. As she gained experience she worked her way up to countywide education coordinator and then became a social worker for Friends of the Children, a successor to CDGM. In 1998 that group built a new facility in Carthage and named it after her in honor of her years of work for the community. According to Hudson, who dedicated her life to civil rights, Freedom Summer's legacy included "lots of good things," chief among them Head Start, the knowledge "that some young white people cared," and "lots of hope." As Hudson explained, there was "just no way of measuring" how the programs "made a whole new batch of black kids in Mississippi—made 'em not be so afraid, taught 'em to read and like books and how to make friends." In some cases those friendships even crossed color lines (King; MFDP; Hudson 89, 93; Pack Papers).

One last victory that must not be overlooked is that Head Start achieved exactly what the Jackson editorialist and other segregationists wanted to prevent. It fought not only segregation but racism through the very act of bringing young people of both races together at an early age in integrated classrooms. This in itself contributed to lasting change which became apparent right away in interviews with Head Start parents and teachers. Today

studies of Head Start undertaken by education specialists are showing a long term effect on racial attitudes based on contact across racial lines at early ages. Thus, in the long run, the cross-racial focus that Rustin and Randolph brought to the civil rights conference and, ultimately, into the War on Poverty, helped achieve the Freedom School's original goal of bringing the races together. It also fulfilled the nightmares of the local resistance. As the Jackson editorialist feared, Head Start has played an important role in pushing forth SNCC's dream of the "integration and overlapping of the races...throughout the United States" (*Jackson Daily News* 8; Zigler and Valentine 469-70; Thorman 139, 155; Caditz 634; Surace and Seeman 8).

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