

Introduction

Jim Crow was a grim reality in Lowndes County, Alabama, at the beginning of 1965. African Americans attended separate and unequal schools, lived in dilapidated and deteriorating housing, and toiled as underpaid and overworked domestics and farm laborers. They were also completely shut out of the political process. There were five thousand African Americans of voting age in the overwhelmingly black rural county, but not a single one was registered.¹ Most were too scared even to try. Francis Moss, born nearly seventy years earlier, was among those immobilized by an overwhelming fear of white violence. “I used to run in the house whenever I saw a white man coming down the road,” she said. “I was afraid I’d be killed. And I wasn’t a baby then, but a grown woman.”²

By the end of 1966, however, Jim Crow was crumbling. The most obvious sign of its demise could be found on the voter rolls, which listed the names of nearly three thousand African Americans. In a remarkable display of collective courage, African Americans managed to set aside their fear and act on the powerful impulse to end segregation immediately. “Negroes ain’t planning on scaring no more,” said a black farmer. Their fierce determination to take action also led them to embark on a radical experiment in democracy. With the help of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), they created the Lowndes County Freedom Organization (LCFO), an all-black, independent political party whose ballot symbol was a snarling black panther. “We ain’t backing up,” said Sidney Logan, Jr., the LCFO candidate for sheriff. “We’re looking for power.”³ Their bold bid to take over the local government transformed Lowndes County from an unheard of bastion of white supremacy to the center of southern black militancy.

This startling change seemed to appear out of nowhere, but it was actually more than a century in the making. When the Civil War ended, emancipated African Americans laid the groundwork for the movement in Lowndes County by initiating a broadly configured struggle to exercise

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the privileges of American citizenship and enjoy the full benefits of their human rights.⁴ But after Reconstruction, white violence rose steadily, forcing African Americans to make strategic decisions about which rights to pursue publicly. The surge in white violence did not abate quickly. Instead, it endured in extreme form far into the twentieth century, earning the county the epithet “Bloody Lowndes” and causing African Americans to refrain from challenging white supremacy openly.⁵

African Americans resumed protesting publicly in 1965, several years after collective action surfaced elsewhere in the South. Although “Bloody Lowndes” remained extraordinarily violent, black protest quickly reached an intensity that surpassed that of any other period. Very soon, a genuine social movement emerged.⁶ SNCC field secretaries, led by twenty-three-year-old Stokely Carmichael, helped organize the grassroots insurgency. They also helped radicalize the uprising by introducing the idea of forming an independent political party.⁷

The creation of the LCFO was the defining event of the Lowndes movement. It transformed local black political behavior by providing African Americans with a framework for a new kind of political engagement. It inspired black activists and emboldened black radicals nationwide, including Oakland-based organizers Bobby Seale and Huey P. Newton, who named the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense after the LCFO ballot symbol. It also provided SNCC organizers with a new, more radical, organizing program that they famously called Black Power.⁸

African Americans continued to fight for basic civil and human rights long after the movement’s heyday.⁹ In the early 1970s, however, the leaders of the movement made electoral politics, rather than freedom rights, their singular focus. This fateful decision profoundly affected the freedom struggle, and its consequences are still being felt today.¹⁰

Lowndes (pronounced “Loundz”) is tucked away in south central Alabama, nestled quietly between Montgomery to the east and Selma to the west. The twists and turns of the Alabama River form much of its northern border, while a simple straight line separates it from Butler County to the south. The tiny town of Fort Deposit sits just above the southern boundary, right where the Louisville & Nashville Railroad built a switching station long ago. In 1960, Fort Deposit had only 1,446 inhabitants, yet it was the most populated town in the county. Although small by every measure—the town is only five square miles—it was the county’s commercial hub. In addition, Fort Deposit’s black population, which hovered

around 60 percent, fell noticeably below the local standard; at the time, the black population in the entire county was 80 percent. The relatively low concentration of African Americans made Fort Deposit an oasis of sorts for whites and a particularly dangerous place for blacks.¹¹

Hayneville, the county seat, is about a dozen miles north of Fort Deposit. It has never been much more than a town square ringed by storefronts and anchored at one end by the turn-of-the-century, two-story county courthouse. For the longest time, the best way to get to Hayneville from Fort Deposit was through the unincorporated village of Calhoun, the county's oldest black landowning community. White Hall, the other leading settlement of black landowners, is located some thirty miles away in the northwest corner of the county. Both Calhoun and White Hall were epicenters of black protest, due in no small part to the greater economic independence that owning land conferred on black farmers.

U.S. Route 80, the county's main east-west thoroughfare, passes about six miles north of Hayneville. Also known as the Jefferson Davis Highway, it provides local people with direct access to Selma and Montgomery. In 1965, this two-lane stretch of blacktop entered the nation's consciousness when civil rights activists from around the country traversed it by foot during the Selma to Montgomery March. Route 80 also runs just south of Lowndesboro, an old antebellum town that served as the seat of the white aristocracy for more than a century. Well-preserved plantation mansions and long-forgotten sharecroppers' shacks dot its landscape. More than any place else, Lowndesboro embodies the tremendous wealth and acute poverty that has always existed in the area.

Lowndes County is also situated in the heart of the Alabama Black Belt, a string of seventeen counties with fertile black clay soil that stretches 170 miles from the border with Georgia to the Mississippi state line. Like Lowndes County, Black Belt counties are decidedly rural; Montgomery and Dallas counties are the only ones with sizeable urban centers. These rural counties have extremely large black populations (many of which exceed 60 percent), they are remarkably poor (consistently ranking dead last in per capita income in the state and near the bottom in per capita income in the nation), and, until recently, their economies revolved almost exclusively around low-wage cotton production.¹²

Lowndes County is representative of the Black Belt in another important way: the freedom struggle in the county was emblematic of local struggles throughout the region.¹³ The arc of black protest followed the same general trajectory—there was an explosion of organizing after

emancipation, an eerie absence of visible protest during the World War II era, and the emergence of a genuine social movement in the mid-1960s. African Americans also pursued a similar set of broadly configured goals, faced the usual entrenched white opposition, tapped into the same kinds of indigenous social networks to recruit people and mobilize resources, and attempted to use the War on Poverty to improve local conditions.

At the same time, the freedom struggle in the county was distinct. Traditional black leaders—preachers, teachers, and businesspersons—were peripheral to the movement, whereas outside organizers played a vital role. African Americans also rejected nonviolence and embraced armed self-defense. Although they never created a formal defense group, such as the Louisiana-based Deacons for Defense and Justice, they were fully prepared to meet violence with violence. And of course, they formed their own political party.¹⁴

In the pages ahead, I tell the story of the Lowndes County freedom struggle. My purpose is fourfold. First, I aim to provide a more comprehensive framework for understanding the civil rights movement. This new paradigm revolves around the concept of freedom rights—the assortment of civil and human rights that emancipated African Americans identified as the crux of freedom. Framing the civil rights movement as a fight for freedom rights acknowledges the centrality of slavery and emancipation to conceptualizations of freedom; incorporates the long history of black protest dating back to the daybreak of freedom and extending beyond the Black Power era; recognizes African Americans' civil and human rights objectives; and captures the universality of these goals. Moreover, it allows for regional and temporal differentiation, moments of ideological radicalization, and periods of social movement formation.¹⁵

Second, I strive to offer new insights into the mechanics of the civil rights movement. The struggle in Lowndes County elucidates the movement's key organizing elements, including recruitment efforts that tapped into the Diaspora of black southerners who migrated north. It underscores the breadth of black protest, which extended far beyond voting rights. It draws attention to the special character of grassroots insurgency in the rural South.¹⁶ It highlights the outside forces that affected movement activism, especially white resistance and federal involvement. It helps explain the demise of movement organizing. And it complicates the movement's standard chronology, partly by underscoring the importance of exploring black protest in the post-Voting Rights Act era.¹⁷

Third, I seek to provide a better understanding of SNCC and the emergence of Black Power. The Lowndes County freedom struggle shines much needed light on SNCC organizing outside Mississippi and after 1964. It renders plain the actual origin and meaning of SNCC's call for Black Power. It shows how civil rights and Black Power activism were interrelated yet distinct forms of protest. It reveals the unique nature of Black Power in the rural South. It debunks the popular notion that SNCC's decline was the result of a sharp move away from grassroots organizing caused by frustration, disillusionment, and a sudden infatuation with sloganeering. And it makes clear that the radicalization of local people stemmed from specific movement experiences rather than from general interaction with supposed movement messiahs.¹⁸

Lastly, I aim to retrieve a remarkable experiment in democracy from the margins of history. The creation of the LCFO gave rise to what I call freedom politics. This new kind of political engagement combined SNCC's egalitarian organizing methods with the people's civil and human rights goals. Freedom politics was a substitute for the undemocratic traditions that defined American politics, which ranged from disenfranchising poor people to choosing candidates exclusively from the propertied and the privileged. By embracing the LCFO, African Americans transformed local black political behavior. More importantly, they created a model for exporting freedom politics beyond the black community to democratize American politics.

African Americans were at the center of the Lowndes County freedom struggle. Local people, from the former slaves who tried to acquire a parcel of land to the domestic workers who helped organize the first voter registration campaign, were its lifeblood. Their experiences, therefore, are the focus of this narrative and the pivot around which it turns. During the Lowndes movement, though, local people worked closely and effectively with SNCC field secretaries. As a result, the organizing experiences of SNCC workers are a key component of this narrative. Lowndes County whites were central actors in this drama as well. Their approach to negotiating the color line helped shape the contours of the freedom struggle. For this reason, they too are an integral part of this narrative.

The Lowndes County freedom struggle unfolds chronologically in the pages that follow. The narrative begins with the evolution of black protest before the civil rights era, from emancipation in 1865 to the advent of the Lowndes movement a century later. It continues with the development of

the local movement, from the initial voter registration campaign in March 1965 to the attempt by the LCFO to win control of the county courthouse in November 1966. The chapters in this section form the heart of the book and are arranged both chronologically and thematically to capture the full impact that organizing experiences had on the maturation and radicalization of the movement. The narrative concludes with the transition from black protest to black electoral politics during the 1970s, which dramatically affected the tenor, tempo, and effectiveness of the movement.

The Lowndes County freedom struggle is a remarkable story of persistence and possibility. It is also a cautionary tale of the perils of power. In fundamental ways, the experiences of African Americans in this out-of-the-way county in Alabama represent a common black experience and a basic American experience.