

24 June 1966

The Honorable John J. Conyers, Jr.
U. S. House of Representatives
Cannon Building, Room 426
Washington, D. C., 20405

Dear Congressman Conyers:

The interest in the Democratic primary that had taken place on 7 June in Mississippi, as manifested by your presence and that of your colleagues, has not gone unnoticed or unappreciated by the MFDP. For your information and guidance, a preliminary summary of violations of lawful voting procedures across the State is enclosed. The incidents included are taken from field reports which are still being forwarded to this office. In most cases the U.S. Civil Rights Commission and the Justice Department have been notified. Again, in most cases, the complainants, as usual, are still awaiting response. I have been directed to make the following observations:

1. The Justice Department assigned Federal election observers to only 14 of 24 counties where federal examiners have been assigned. These observers were passive. A good case in point is Winston County where the polling places were changed several times during the day. A federal election observer was reported to have been present during at least one of these changes. This leads up to the question as to how well informed these observers were vis-a-vis voting procedures in Mississippi and the Voting Rights Act of 1965.
2. The barring of MFDP poll watchers as reported clearly intimidated those Negroes who would have voted but who feared that their persons physically and that their rights legally were not being protected. Steps ought to be taken by the Justice Department to rectify this situation. If the elections are run by a racist machinery, the expected results can only be negative.
3. As it stands right now, only 27% of the Negro voting age population are registered to vote (a rise of only 15% since passage of the voting rights act), as compared to 70% whites in Mississippi. The Justice Department can play and has played a positive role in correcting these faults. A good example, as you will recall, is Noxubee County in the 4th Congressional District. In December 1965, only one Negro was listed as a registered voter. On 12 April, 1966 the Justice Department sent in a Federal examiner. By 23 April, 1966 he had registered 1,003 Negroes. According to another independent report, in counties where federal examiners are working, an increase of 43% of registered Negroes is noted. This is in opposition to an increase rate of approximately 15% where there are no Federal examiners. One can hardly talk about voting procedures and the right to vote where there are no registered voters.
4. During the primary---although noting the largest turnout in Mississippi's history of Negroes at the polls---the number of Negroes registered to vote who actually voted was considerably less than those who are registered but who did not vote. Again, our findings indicate that fear of intimidation and reprisal prevails. The shooting of James Meredith,

the distributed Klan leaflets, the speedily circulated rumours true and speculative about intimidation at the polls, all contributed to the absence of nearly half of the Negro registered voters across the State.

5. The psychological barriers to registration and voting are almost as prohibitive as the physical barriers. While it is one thing to persuade Negroes to go to the Courthouse to register to vote, it is still another thing to get them to exercise that right to vote. I think that the events of the past few days in the State---in particular those surrounding the march to Jackson---point up the dire necessity for wielded political power for Negro Mississippians if in fact the glaring injustices are ever to be corrected. It is clear, I think, that the Federal government has no intention of antagonizing Governor Johnson and other Mississippi politicians by acting decisively on behalf of Negro Mississippians. The only recourse, therefore, is applied political pressure from supporters. The MFDP sees as indispensable the need for political power in Mississippi to be in the hands of the people there and not in the hands of the power block.

6. In this connection, we are unshaken in our belief that an aggressive federal presence is mandatory in all 82 counties of Mississippi. This means FEDERAL MOBILE EXAMINERS, for the purpose of registering Negroes, AND federal election observers for the November elections. The abuses suffered by Negroes at the polls must cease if there is to be anything remotely approaching free elections. These federal election observers should do more than mere "observing", they should be well briefed on Mississippi election procedures. They should, at least, point out to election officials all irregularities as violations of the law. Perhaps the Justice Department workers can hold workshops for election managers---since no one seemed to know correct procedures---to show them what should be done during elections. The Justice Department prevailed upon the Secretary of State of South Carolina to do this and it was accomplished with a measure of success. We are under no illusions that Mississippi Secretary of State Heber Ladner will be cooperative, if his past and most recent remarks are any guide to his disposition.

I have raised these questions at the Justice Department earlier this week. The response I received was hardly encouraging. It is our opinion that perhaps the Justice Department would be inclined to take decisive action if our position were reinforced by comment and recommendation from an impartial observer such as yourself. The fact that you were in the state during the primary and have observed the atmosphere in which the election was conducted---together with such reports, if any, made by Justice Department workers in the State, and our own field reports and complaints to the Department---I think these facts would bolster the case for aggressive presence of the federal government in Mississippi.

Through our new public relations man here in Washington, Mr. Sanford Leigh, whom I'm sure you remember, I hope to be able to keep you closely informed with regard to the pressing situation in Mississippi. Again, I would like to thank you for your concern for the people of Mississippi, Mr. Conyers, and I count, perhaps selfishly, on your continued good will and enthusiastic support.

Very sincerely yours,

Victoria J. Gray
Director
Washington Office, MFDP

VJG:srl
Enclosures