

SNCC Digital Gateway: Our Voices

The Black Panther: Coming Out of Lowndes County

Clip 1 (audio) Courtland Cox “Whether you won or not”

Courtland Cox: So to have that number to having contested elections, whether you won or not in that thing, as Mao would say, is a great leap forward. So my sense is that, you know, there was a sense of progress because evidently they kept going. So my assumption is that, you know, great progress between '65 and '66 and moving forward. I mean going from, not only just registering to vote but forming a party. Having all the information. Doing all this stuff in 18 months. That's huge.

Clip 2 (audio) Jennifer Lawson “You know who controls this”

Jennifer Lawson: These were discussions that were, included Courtland, included Stokely, included Ralph Featherstone, included Bob Mants. I can't say specifically when, but these discussions to me would then bring in the economic side too, and that was something that especially Featherstone would bring into the discussion about there's a limit to where the economic power is going to get, I mean the political power is going to get you unless you have the economic. And then the relationships between the economic and the political. And then it's how do you enforce, you know who controls this. Then it becomes this growing thing where you can't say, "Well, we'll have our county, our county will be intact," because your county is subject to the laws of the state of Alabama. So then if you say, "Well what if we had the entire state of Alabama" then you go next to sort of saying, "Well, then we need the entire Southeast." And then you suddenly begin to realize that you need power at the next level and the next level, so it becomes this escalating notion of where the real authority and the power resides, and the importance then, in our case, of the federal government and also how that then relates as a person of color, as Black people, how that related to the independent countries in Africa, the countries that were becoming independent, that had already gained their independence. So you end up going from the very local to the global.

Clip 3 (audio) Courtland Cox “What was radical was who we did it for”

Courtland Cox: One of the things, one of the things that, you know, Bob talks about and we discuss is what we did in terms, around the vote and organizing, was not radical. What was radical was who we did it for, and that is the same issue that we face today: who gets to be in the conversation. You know, you have a pyramid, you know both politically and economically, and the fight is to maintain that pyramid. And anybody who tries to bring, you know broaden the base and broaden the decision-making, and broaden the ability to decide is being very disruptive. Once we did that, we had the statements that, you know, we had from Hosea Williams. We had editorials. You know Roy Wilkins was out jumping up and down about how could this, this is reverse racism. They came in with the reverse racism discussion, and you know, our basic point was: and the horse you rode in on. So [Laughs. Charlie Cobb: Go ahead] So my sense is that we not only did not feel intimidated by what they had to say, but we felt, we started thinking about how we could go further. How we needed to broaden the base. How we need to take this discussion further and broader, so we're now. So what was beginning to happen was the beginning of counterforce to what was already the establishment. You know, basically, you know, as a result of the fifties and early sixties and stuff, you had an establishment that was really father knows best kind of people. You know, white male dominated and so forth. Now you had a group that was beginning, very small, beginning to have another view, and there was no discussion about pulling them back into this

view. I mean, that's just that's what I see...And basically again, out of Lowndes, it was clear that articulating a view and talking to the powers that be, and talking truth to power, we no longer believed in any of that. We believed that we had to set our own path, move in our own direction, and no longer try to make America better in that sense, using the same actors. Because we saw what happened in '64, we took action in '65, and we were on a path based on that action in '65 to set our own path, to set our own definitions. And we weren't gonna be engaged in a whole lot of energized actions trying to deal with these people. So I think it, it set our worldview, at least set the world view for me. Lowndes set the world view for me that I still have today, which is over fifty years ago or some number. [Laughter]

Clip 4 (audio) Jennifer Lawson & Courtland Cox “Stokely’s election”

Jennifer Lawson: Stokely's election to me signified a change from the people who were more, it was a point at which it was being made clear to me that it was no longer the SNCC of the SCLC-like. [Charlie: Diane, John, etc.] Exactly, and that John then, and the nonviolent as not a tactic, but nonviolence as a way of life and as a Gandhian connection to the sort of moral movement, that it was the evolution of that group out, in one sense...I think it was the, it was one, sort of an affirmation that there was an interest in creating independent Black organizations and exploring sort of Black Consciousness, Black Nationalism. That it was, it was saying goodbye to demonstrations towards integration, towards sort of activities towards purely desegregation. It was saying, you know, that it is not an automatic thing that we will align with the Democratic Party or any particular party for that matter, but that we will seek to try to build independent Black entities and organizations and think independently about the future.

Courtland Cox: I think Lowndes crystallized, I mean for the organization, what had been something that it started, I guess earlier. As again, back to '64, while, while some of us began to move in that particular direction, it did not, you didn't have a very visible manifestation of that view. Lowndes allowed us to have that manifestation, and therefore then be able to seize the opportunity to move the organization in a different direction.

Clip 5 (audio) Courtland Cox “Impact the institutions of the United States”

Courtland Cox: After having executed on Lowndes County, it was very clear to me that other things had to be done beyond that because while even if you got all the political offices, you were not able to deal with the economic issues. And that we had to think more broadly about how you deal with the concerns that face the black community in a much broader terms. So you had to look beyond what you say in front of you and so as you looked to Dan River Mills, if you were going to impact Lowndes/Dan River Mills, you had to think beyond Lowndes County. You had to think where their corporate headquarters existed; how do you impact Dan River Mills. How do you do a number of things. So each action - the solution to each problem created its own problems. Understanding - I think so that one trust. I think that you're right, other concerns besides the rural South started becoming major to what we're doing. Because I think a person like Ivanhoe started thinking about how you engage in electoral politics beyond the vote. He started thinking about that. I think that because we were all subject to the draft, you had your thing and wanted to know who made the decision and who - we were all of draft age but a number of us got 1Ys which would not to be called except in a case of extreme national emergency. So that was impacting us. I think we were - I also think that we became smarted. We became smarted as we did a number of things and understood that all the things that control the people, the environment that we lived didn't all exist in the places that people lived. And we had to think much broader than we had been thinking. So we started, some of us started thinking, how to do you affect or impact the institutions of

the United States. Some of us started thinking, how do you bring in international partners. That's where Stokely went to pan-Africanism.