

December 14, 1965

To: A. Philip Randolph, chairman
Morris Abrams and William Coleman, co-chairman
White House Conference Planning Commission
1800 G. St., N.W.
Washington, D.C.

From: John Lewis, Chairman, SNCC; Marion S. Barry, Jr.
Director, Washington SNCC office and Betty Garman,
SNCC Federal Programs Coordinator.

The outline below represents some of our thoughts about
a possible White House Conference on Civil Rights.

I. Projected Purposes of the Conference:

From our experience, it appears that the Planning Session for the Spring White House Conference and, indeed, other White House Conference on topics such as employment, health and so on have served only a limited function. The fact that a White House Conference took place gave the Administration a chance to prove, to the press and to some of the participants, that the Administration is interested in a certain topic or concerned about solutions to a certain problem. But this purpose is meaningless--and, in face, dishonest--unless there is some assurance that action will flow from the conference recommendations--action which reaches to the people who are faced with such problems. It is irrelevant in the outrage suggestions for new legislation if present legislation in the area of civil rights is not going to be enforced and it is dishonest to encourage recommendations if the recommendations will not be carried out.

Therefore, we recommend that no White House Conference on Civil Rights be held until the Administration is willing to take steps to enforce existing legislation well--and not half heartedly. We hardly need to cite examples but Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1965 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965 stand as the best examples. The money spent on such conferences--\$18.50 a day hotel accommodations and round trip air fares could be better spent in helping to staff a Title VI enforcement agency or in funding a local project from which people would actually benefit. Civil Rights activists and scholars hardly need a free trip to the capitol to continue their work organizing and generating new ideas and approaches to the problems of disenfranchised voters, bad schools, ghettos, unemployment and discrimination.

page two

We believe very strongly that the Administration must be honest about the purpose of a White House Conference. If the meeting is called to generate new ideas which will end up in a report in someone's file, then this should be known in advance. If the conference is to be a "rubber stamps" for the Administrations "do practically nothing and made the nation think it cares" policy, then this should also be said.

If, on the other hand, the Administration wants to collect scholars and activists and poor people and Negroes in a meeting room and wants to hear them talk, then they should say so and the agenda and participants should be so arranged to allow that open forum, anything goes atmosphere.

II. Agenda and Participants

Given the fact that a White House Conference will take place, and given the fact that we don't want it used primarily for "show" we are making the following recommendations for the agenda and the type of participants who should be involved.

A. Who should be involved in the planning? It is always difficult to decide who should decide because the group that one selects' ends up determining the character of the event. We suggest that the planning committee be comprised of people who are committed to scheduling a conference where debate can be open and honest, where questions of "stepping on toes if we say that" will not be relevant, and where no attempt will be made to produce a certain result or "consensus." We suggest that a group of 20-25 individuals be chosen who would have control of all decisions relating to the character of the conference. That is to say that changes will not be made by "higher-ups" who fear that the conferees might be too difficult of the Administration. The group of planners should include representatives from the major civil rights organizations, a few businessmen, people from the labor movement, a few scholars, people from the religious community, several government officials, and some representatives from community movements or grass roots organizations. Civil Rights and community groups should make up the bulk of the planners.

We cannot emphasize enough, however, that all people on the planning committee be committed to planning as open a conference as possible. Those who are asked to serve must be required to keep this always in mind.

B. What should the agenda be? The agenda should simply outline problem areas for discussion and should not be any more structures than that. The problem areas selected should be those of concern to poor people, Negroes,

page three

civil rights people and people in the power structure we seek to change. Problem areas such as those used in the Planning Conference for the White House Conference are adequate with some additions: Education, Community, Voting, Administration of Justice, Family, Neighborhood, Jobs and Job Training, Health and Welfare (those used in November). The additions or changes would be: Health and Welfare to be divided to two work groups; 2) The Poverty Program (DEO); 3) The role of Political Parties, i.e. Democrat and Republican.

No internal structure would be given to these problem work groups. No papers should be presented and discussed in a formal way. All participants would be asked, if they so desire, to submit written statements (either by themselves or someone else) as background papers for the work group meetings. These papers would be distributed in advance but would not serve to limit discussion. No one who participates in the work group sessions should be designated as an expert on a particular topic: This does not mean that people who have experience in certain areas will not be involved but it means they will not be labeled as "experts" or "consultants." This hopefully, will serve in the beginning of the meeting to set the tone for participation by all--those who are not highly educated and don't know the intellectual intricacy's of each social argument.

Each work group would have an administrator or administrators--persons to make certain that papers are sent out, travel arrangements made and so forth. The administrator would convene the work group meeting on the opening day and the first order of business would be selection of a chairman. The group might call for volunteers or might decide upon someone. The chairman should rotate, but most important he should not be chosen beforehand. If any reporting to the press or to other participants is required, the individual to do this should be selected in some manner by the group and should not be appointed by the chairman or by the conference planning committee. The work group should also determine what points this reporter would stress to those not in the work group session.

Each work group section should be small, the number of participants not to exceed 30 and the ideal number fixed at 20-25. Several work groups, then, would be meeting to deal with the same problems. If 2,000 participants are projected for the meeting and if approximately 15 problem areas are defined, then each problem area would have six subsections. The larger work group (150) or so people) might meet on the first morning and decide that 6 sub-problems could be defined and that each of the six groups would consider one of the sub-problems. Or, the larger group might just decide that each smaller group would consider what it wanted to. On the last day, the sub-problem groups would come together in a plenary session,

page four

report to each other, and then decide what, if anything, to do with the ideas and suggestions debated. If the work group wanted to pass resolutions it could. But this would not be required or forbidden. And, if the work group (either the sub-group or larger group) wanted to request time to speak to the other participants--or to the press--it could. This, too, would not be required or forbidden. The same would be true of the entire conference.

The conference should have not speeches except those by top government officials at meal hours. And, these officials must be committed in advance to answering questions in an open forum.

If any post-conference work is to be done on transcripts or reports, the work group participants should be able to direct the nature of reporting--by instructing the administrator to do certain things.

C. Who should participate?

A broad cross section of people who are in some way involved in discussing or determining the direction of solutions to the problems which face the civil rights movement and the anti-poverty movement should be invited to attend. This group would include: (1) civil rights activists, community organizers, poor people and Negroes who are both the leadership and the base of the twin movements. It is very important to make certain that welfare recipients, unemployed folks, rural and ghetto Negroes are invited as well as the executives of civil rights organizations.

This group would constitute the bulk of the participants since they are the ones most often unable to play major roles in determining policy. The rest of the participants would be a good sampling of the following groups: academics who think or might have had experience with the problem; businessmen who are thinking or are doing something about that problems as well as businessmen who ought to be thinking about what to do; welfare and other program administrators (school board members, etc.) who implement programs related to poor people and Negroes--both from the North and the South; government officials who administer programs and services in Washington and in agency regional offices.

Another way of explaining this concept of participation would be to say that two groups of people would be represented: (1) Those who hold power in the structures and over the program which now exists and which the movement seeks to change and (2) people who are working to change those programs and/or who are affected by the present operation of those programs.

The largest group, again, would be those affected by or seeking to change those programs or structure since they

page five

hold less power.

When organizations or groups are invited to participate, they would be asked to send a "representative" --in other words, the president or a certain individual in that group would not be invited directly. Most community groups, we know, would elect their delegates which would help to get around the whole question of "how come he was invited and we weren't. Groups would know that their person was chosen by them and not by the Administration and the individual would feel freer to speak for his group openly.

We would like to mention, too, that we think that representatives of such groups as the Deacons for Defense and Justice, the Muslims and various Afro-American groups should be included in the concept of community groups as well as such groups as the Coordinating Council of Community Organizations, the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party (MFDP), the Lowndes County Freedom Organizations, the Newark Community Union Project, the National Farm Workers Association, and the Mississippi and Tennessee Freedom Labor Unions, which would normally be selected by send representatives.

In additions the planning committee would be free to invite anyone it so desired.

D. Regional meetings or pre-conference meetings would be conducted by the Civil Rights Commission on much the same basis as the above. Since these meetings would presumably allow for greater participation by larger numbers and since they would be regional in nature, they could probably dig deeper into certain problems than the Washington meeting. And, if regional work groups were so moved, they should be given an opportunity to suggest names of participants in the national meeting.

We would be willing to discuss these proposals further with anyone who is interested.