

■ Testimony of Fannie Lou Hamer before the Credentials Committee of the Democratic National Convention

Date: August 22, 1964

Author: Fannie Lou Hamer

Genre: testimony; speech

Summary Overview

Fannie Hamer's testimony before a committee of the Democratic National Convention in August 1964 occurred during one of the most disturbing periods of racial violence in American history, the two years between President John F. Kennedy's June 1963 public embrace of civil rights and the final passage of the 1965 Voting Rights Act in August of that year. The experience Hamer described represented one instance, but a significant one, in the larger, violent transition to full civil and voting rights for African Americans.

On June 9, 1963, Fannie Lou Hamer, an African American woman who had recently attended a voter registration training, was arrested and beaten in prison, along with several other Black women. A year later she participated in the formation of a new wing of the Democratic Party in order to challenge the entrenched Democratic Party in Mississippi. She testified about her violent experience at the Democratic presidential nominating convention in August 1964 as the delegates from her new group sought to be seated in place of those from the mainstream Democratic Party in Mississippi. Her speech was moving as she described the horrible details of her arrest, imprisonment, and beating. She also simultaneously embraced the fundamental civil rights due her as an American citizen while also questioning the true nature of an America that continued to allow its citizens to be beaten and murdered as they pursued their basic rights.

Defining Moment

Hamer's testimony occurred within the context of what amounted to a revolutionary political challenge to the established Democratic Party in Mississippi. In 1964, Hamer and other activists formed the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party (MFDP) in order to send their own delegates to the party's national presidential nominating convention that year. Altogether, this new branch of the party gained 80,000 supporters and tried



Fannie Lou Hamer in 1964. Photo via Wikimedia Commons. [Public domain.]

to get sixty-four of its members seated at the national convention as representatives of the Democratic Party of Mississippi. As part of the controversy they stimulated when they arrived at the convention, Hamer provided some of her own personal testimony as evidence that the members of the MFDP should be seated either in place of or alongside the regular Democratic delegates. Despite increasing attention to civil rights by the national leaders of the Democratic Party and despite offers of a negotiated arrangement, the MFDP refused any accommodation and ended up failing in this specific endeavor in August 1964.

Beyond the immediate context of the MFDP's efforts to supplant the main Democratic Party's Mississippi delegation in August 1964, the beating that Hamer suffered and the attempts to form a rival branch of the party took place in the larger context of the troubling period between President John F. Kennedy's long overdue public embrace of civil rights in his famous June 1963 speech and the passing of the Voting Rights Act in August 1965. Of course, this period directly included the arrest and beating of Hamer, and overall it was marked by a sharp uptick in violence against African American and white civil rights activists who sought to register Black voters in the South. Even after the 1964 Civil Rights Act became law, voting protections for Black Americans still remained weak, and therefore, voter registration efforts—of the kind that led to Hamer's arrest and beating—continued. Of course, as she notes, her

ordeal occurred because she had been at a "voter registration workshop" and was on the return journey. As historian Taylor Branch notes, in the ten weeks after the end of violence in Birmingham, Alabama, in May 1963, a period that included both Hamer's beating and the murder of activist Medgar Evers, "statisticians counted 758 racial demonstrations and 14,733 arrests in 186 American cities." Support for, and opposition against, Black civil rights was at a fevered pitch across the nation in 1963 and 1964. Hamer's experience was a small, although important and impactful, part of this larger moment in American history before the Voting Rights Act finally passed into law.

Author Biography

Fannie Lou Hamer was born in 1917 and was a politically inactive plantation worker until she tried to register to vote in 1962. She subsequently lost her job and home and then joined the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), despite being in her mid-forties and not being a student, to advocate for civil rights and to help other African Americans register to vote. As Hine, Hine, and Harrold note, after her experiences in jail and at the 1964 Democratic convention and until her death in 1977, she pursued various efforts designed to help impoverished rural African Americans working in agriculture, where she had spent most of her life.



Historical Document

Testimony of Fannie Lou Hamer before the Credentials Committee of the Democratic National Convention

...[On] June the 9th, 1963, I had attended a voter registration workshop; was returning back to Mississippi. Ten of us was traveling by the Continental Trailway bus. When we got to Winona, Mississippi, which is Montgomery County, four of the people got off to use the washroom, and two of the people—to use the restaurant—two of the people wanted to use the washroom. The four people that had gone in to use the restaurant was ordered out... I stepped off of the bus to see what was happening and somebody screamed from the car that the five workers was in and said, “Get that one there.” When I went to get in the car, when the man told me I was under arrest, he kicked me.

I was carried to the county jail and put in the booking room. They left some of the people in the booking room and began to place us in cells. I was placed in a cell with a young woman called Miss Ivesta Simpson. After I was placed in the cell I began to hear sounds of licks and screams, I could hear the sounds of licks and horrible screams...And it wasn't too long before three white men came to my cell. One of these men was a State Highway Patrolman and he asked me where I was from. I told him Ruleville and he said, “We are going to check this.”

They left my cell and it wasn't too long before they came back. He said, “You are from Ruleville all right,” and he used a curse word. And he said, “We are going to make you wish you was dead.”

I was carried out of that cell into another cell where they had two Negro prisoners. The State Highway Patrolmen ordered the first Negro to take the blackjack.

The first Negro prisoner ordered me, by orders from the State Highway Patrolman, for me to lay down on a bunk bed on my face.

I laid on my face and the first Negro began to beat. I was beat by the first Negro until he was exhausted. I was holding my hands behind me at that time on my left side, because I suffered from polio when I was six years old.

After the first Negro had beat until he was exhausted, the State Highway Patrolman ordered the second Negro to take the blackjack.

The second Negro began to beat and I began to work my feet, and the State Highway Patrolman ordered the first Negro who had beat me to sit on my feet—to keep me from working my feet. I began to scream and one white man got up and began to beat me in my head and tell me to hush.

One white man—my dress had worked up high—he walked over and pulled my dress—I pulled my dress down and he pulled my dress back up.

I was in jail when Medgar Evers was murdered.

All of this is on account of we want to register, to become first-class citizens. And if the Freedom Democratic Party is not seated now, I question America. Is this America, the land of the free and the home of the brave, where we have to sleep with our telephones off the hooks because our lives be threatened daily, because we want to live as decent human beings, in America?



Document Analysis

Most of the document is a narrative of the events leading up to her beating, but the details include important windows into the nature and mechanisms of ongoing white control in the South during the early 1960s. Essentially, she faced state-sponsored terrorism in that government officials imprisoned her without cause, simply for attempting to practice her constitutional rights, and then physically assaulted her in prison.

Her arrest, along with several other Black women, occurred at a rural bus stop in Winona, Mississippi, and shows the strict control exercised by whites who disliked the push for Black civil rights. According to historian Taylor Branch, even just the Black women entering the bus stop “caused the waitress behind the counter to wad up her check pad and fling it at them all in disgust, crying out, ‘I can’t take no more.’” Law enforcement officials then arrived and forced them outside. When Annell Ponder, a member of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) who was leading the trip, began to protest, they were arrested.

As Hamer describes, upon arrival in jail they were all beaten, although Hamer was beaten by two fellow Black male prisoners. They likely did not want to participate, but were probably under threat of physical violence themselves. Even as it went on, Hamer noted that she tried to keep her dress down in order to maintain even the tiniest bit of dignity, but the white man pulling her dress back up and the fact that the white officers made two Black men beat her both revealed the extensive efforts that whites went to in order to degrade and humiliate Blacks in the South at this time. She also noted that while in prison, Medgar Evers, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People’s executive secretary in Jackson, Mississippi, and a leading figure of the civil rights movement, was murdered in front of his home. Both the beating of several Black women in Winona and the death of Evers in Jackson showed that in the summer of 1963, white resistance to civil rights in Mississippi was extremely violent.

Essential Themes

In addition to the themes of the violence against African Americans and the humiliation often forced on

them, the final section of Hamer’s speech was a resounding call for the nation to fulfill its promise to all its citizens. She noted once again the constant threat they felt, describing how African Americans had “to sleep with our telephones off the hooks because our lives be threatened daily.” She went on to claim that Black Americans wanted “to become first-class citizens” and “to live as decent human beings.” Key to this, Hamer and many others thought, was the ability of African Americans to vote without intimidation or violence. Beyond human decency in a country that claimed to be democratic, she implicitly invoked the Fourteenth Amendment to the Constitution, which states that everyone born in the United States is a citizen and has certain rights based on that status, including the right to vote as guaranteed in the Fifteenth Amendment to the Constitution. While she did not explicitly invoke these protections in her speech before the Credentials Committee, she was certainly voicing their core ideas and claiming those ideas on behalf of all Black Americans.

Interestingly, there was a bit of a note of doubt in her final statement as well. While Hamer was not herself a young woman at this time, many younger African American activists, often in SNCC, were by the mid-1960s at odds over strategies with groups that usually had older leaders, such as the Congress of Racial Equality or the SCLC. Younger activists pushed for more direct tactics and some would turn to the Black Power movement and the Black Panther Party by the late 1960s as they embraced more direct confrontations with whites in order to challenge both racism and problems related to urban poverty, especially bad housing and unemployment. While Hamer was not specifically invoking those ideas, her note of doubt about what America truly was pointed in that direction. Even while claiming that she, and others, wanted the protections due an American citizen, she said that if they weren’t given, “I question America.” In her next sentence, she noted the threats to Black Americans and asked, “Is this America?” In one way, she was asking if this was the true nature of America. Therefore, she simultaneously sought to invoke the highest ideals of the United States and claim them for African Americans, while also implicitly wondering whether, in fact, violent

racism was closer to the core of the definition of America than she had perhaps realized.

—Kevin Grimm

Bibliography and Additional Reading

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