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Medgar Wiley Evers Lecture on June 2, 2014

by *Bob Moses*

Thank you. So Les [Leslie-Burl McLemore] has made me change my talk. There is one person that we should all acknowledge here. There was one Black doctor in southwest Mississippi. And when I was attacked in Liberty, Dr. [James] Anderson sewed me up. And Doc got involved with the movement, and so they drafted him and sent him out to the army. Dr. Anderson. [applause] So one of the things about the movement in Mississippi was, I think of it in one way as a guerilla struggle that we were involved in and you know, for a guerilla struggle, you need a base. You need a local population that you disappear into and from which you do whatever your operations are. Doc was part of that base. And he still is, so when I come to Mississippi, I call up Selena, his wife, at the last minute and say, "I'm coming in." So it's my home.

During the sixties—it was the only time in my life really—where I could get in a car anytime day or night and hit the road and knock on a door. Someone was gonna let me in, give me a bed to sleep in, feed me, and watch my back. They were gonna sit up at night with the shotguns across their knees and make sure that we were protected. So that was the nature of the movement as I experienced it. You have to think about it as a guerilla struggle, where there was a local population, and Les has talked about some of the members of it. And certainly that local population was built on the work of the NAACP. Those were the insurgents that formed the base of the guerilla. The particular ones that were my fathers and uncles in that struggle were Amzie Moore, C. C. Bryant down in McComb, E. W. Steptoe out in Amite County. So that was the nature of the struggle.

What I would like us to do is think about the nature of the country we live in, and how that struggle relates to the country that we live in. I've been trying to have a picture—a story—in my mind about our country that helps me explain what's going on. What went on, but also what's going on as we sit here. It begins in 1787 with the Constitutional Convention. And I think of it as a story that's

BOB MOSES *came to Mississippi in 1961 to organize voter registration efforts for the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). He was the architect of the 1964 Freedom Summer Project and the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party. He delivered the Medgar Wiley Evers Lecture in Jackson on June 2, 2014.*

divided into units of time that are three quarters of a century long. And we are celebrating the fiftieth anniversary of Freedom Summer, so last time I checked, fifty was still two-thirds of seventy-five.

And so we are two-thirds of our way into what I think of as a third constitutional unit of time. And what we need to ask ourselves is, how have we evolved? We're a young country, but how have we evolved around our fundamental constitutional stance? So for the first unit of time, from 1787 roughly down to the war of the constitutional people, we had two very different and very antagonistic constitutional concepts of constitutional personhood.

The first, we find in the preamble—the “We the People” statement—which says that the constitutional people, the “we the people,” ordained and established the constitution. They own it. But in Article 4, Section 2, Paragraph 3, we find a very different idea about constitution and people, that's the idea of constitutional property. Now it's a peculiar idea in that article there. It's the idea that we think a lot and talk a lot about states' rights, but what's in that article is not so much about the rights of states versus the federal government that is to be, but the rights of individuals to own property.

And it says that they have the right, if their property wants to own itself, to ask the federal government—really to demand—the federal government to go fetch it and bring it back to its own. Across state lines, did not matter what the jurisdiction of the state was, what was important was the right to own property, including property that might want to own itself. So we go that way, and Thomas Jefferson had a metaphor about that problem. What he said in a letter around 1821 or '23, was that “We have the wolf by the ear, and you can't hold on to it, but neither can we let it go.” So the constitutional people had their constitutional property by the ear, and they were desperately trying to hold on to it and desperately afraid of letting it go.

So we went that way for about three quarters of a century, and then the constitutional people had this huge falling out among themselves. And they slaughtered one another, 618,000—perhaps a million—casualties. And we came out of that with the understanding that we should no longer have constitutional property. The Thirteenth Amendment, that the idea of constitutional property was not an idea that the country could move forward with, and even Mississippi agreed belatedly—1990s—that the Thirteenth Amendment was real, and that we should not have constitutional property.

What we could not quite get ourselves to agree to was that the former constitutional property and their descendants should become constitutional people. The Fourteenth and the Fifteenth Amendments, and so today even today, the country is still grappling with the question of well, who are the constitutional people and what does it really mean to be a constitutional person? What happened after the war of the constitutional people over their constitutional property was we had a period known as Reconstruction. Mississippi had decided not to acknowledge the Fourteenth Amendment, and so President Grant sent Adelbert Ames, who had been a general in the Union Army, down to oversee a military administration for the State of Mississippi and other parts of the Deep South.

Then in 1870, we passed the Fifteenth Amendment, which gave constitutional people the right to vote. And I think it was 1873, but somewhere right in there the constitutional people of Mississippi put Adelbert Ames in as governor. Now it happened at that time that the majority of the eligible male voters—constitutional people male voters—were Black. And they voted in Adelbert Ames to be governor. Now there's a great deal of controversy about that period of American history and Mississippi history. It's being looked at through different lenses today. I'm not going to talk about that.

What I want to talk about, though, is how it changed. And one of the things about Mississippi is that Mississippi has throughout this long history set itself up as the place that knows best what the country should do. And it did so in 1875. Now what happened in Mississippi in 1875 began in Colfax, Louisiana, the year before when under this new voting law, Republicans and Democrats—Republicans in those days are Black, Democrats in those days are White. Stuff has changed. But they both had elected administrations, so there was a face off, and it ended up with violence. And the Democrats obliterated the Republicans. They got them together in one place and annihilated them.

And then they took that movement into Mississippi, first in Vicksburg. I think it was in the spring of 1875 and then all across the state, so that in the fall of 1875—and you can read about this in the Boutwell Report. Senator [George] Boutwell of Massachusetts, couple of thousand pages of the report about the reign of terror and violence of the Democrats murdering the Republicans and taking office in 1875. The idea being that Republicans shouldn't vote, and the Democrats should take over. Now, again, those Republicans are

Black, and the Democrats are White. But we should think of them as Democrats and Republicans. We should think of them as constitutional people who are trying to figure out, what does it mean to be a constitutional nation? What is the role of violence in such an enterprise?

The Percys were a family that was central to the evolution of how things happened in the South, and William Alexander Percy became in my story the respectable face of Democratic terror. And he arranged to be elected for just one term and took over the writing of the articles of impeachment against Adelbert Ames. And he was concerned with one policy issue—the money that had been allocated for the education of the freed slaves—that it should be used to build the railroad infrastructure that was needed to revive the economic arrangements in the Delta. And so sharecropping became the economic instrument after this Reconstruction.

Now remember 1876 is the year that the country couldn't decide through the actual legislative process—the voting process—who the president should be. And [President Ulysses] Grant later told your senator from Mississippi when he was asked, "Well, why didn't you send troops?" He said, "Well, I guess I was thinking more like the head of the Republican Party rather than the president of the United States." What had happened was that [Rutherford] Hayes was up for election for governor of Ohio in 1875, and the Republicans from Ohio sent a delegation to Grant because Ohio hadn't ratified the Fifteenth Amendment. And they said if you send troops to Mississippi, then Hayes will not be elected governor.

So Grant didn't send the troops. Hayes was elected governor. And then eventually in the big election of Hayes and Tilden, the compromise was made. Hayes should be president. The Republicans should get the presidency, and the Democrats should get the South. Well, that arrangement—the Democrats owning the South—lasted for another three-quarters of a century.

There was a young kid born the very summer that Freedom Summer took place, Douglas Blackmon, born in Leland, Mississippi, near Deer Creek where the Percys established their first plantation. Blackmon reached the first grade in 1970. That was the year Mississippi was forced to open—not just Mississippi but across the South—to open its schools. He says that his parents weren't of the wealth class, of the White wealth class, but they weren't poor. And he says that they had a sense that they should do what was right and that the integration of the public schools was the law. There is this issue in the South of the majesty, majesty of the law, right?

And so they sent Douglas to the Black school. That was 1970. When he hit the middle school, for some reason and he isn't sure what the reason was, he entered a contest and decided to write about Strike City. Well, Strike City happened in 1965 right after Freedom Summer, and workers on the plantation near Leland struck for more money—left—and set up a little town called Strike City. So this young, White middle schooler is thinking he's writing about ancient history. And when his mother and his teacher asked him to present his prize-winning essay to the Rotary Club, he finds out something different. Because one of the night riders who was shooting in Strike City back in the 1960s came after him and was furious.

So Doug went on to college, became a writer for the *Wall Street Journal*, spent time in Eastern Europe looking at the Iron Curtain, all of that, and asked himself a really fundamental question that I don't think anyone else asked. He said, "What would we find if we took a look at American corporations during the period when the country was industrializing in the same way as we have taken a look at German corporations around the Holocaust?" And so he wrote his first article about that. It appeared on the front page of the *Wall Street Journal*, and his life changed because he got hundreds and hundreds of letters from all over the country from people whose relatives had been incarcerated under vagabond laws.

So Francis Biddle was attorney general of the United States under the Roosevelt administration, and on December 12, 1941, he issued a circular to every state attorney general. And he advised them—this circular 3951, I think—he advised them that henceforth, the FBI should not prosecute peonage as vagrancy, but they should prosecute those cases as involuntary servitude and slavery. And what Blackmon had unearthed was documents all across the South, tens of thousands of documents, documenting how in the period after Reconstruction, right down to World War II, young Black men had been conscripted into involuntary servitude and slavery to build the industrial might of the country.

So that was what was going on in our second three-quarters of a century. Talking about the period from 1875, when Mississippi overthrows the Republican administration, and Democrats ruled the South, right down to World War II. Now why was Roosevelt concerned? Why did he ask his attorney general to look into this matter? Well, five days earlier Pearl Harbor happened, December 7, 1941. And Roosevelt knew now that he needed Black men, and he was afraid that the Japanese would propagandize Black soldiers and ask them, "Why are you over here? Why aren't you fighting

back where you live?" So, that's what Amzie Moore had told me.

When the sit-ins broke out, I was teaching school, Horace Mann School in New York, and the sit-ins grabbed me. I knew that I had to see what was happening. And so I went down to my Uncle Bill, my father's older brother, who was teaching at Hampton Institute in Hampton, Virginia. And the students at Hampton were sitting in at *Newport News*. I walked over with them, walked on the picket line while they sat in. And that evening Wyatt Tee Walker came down from Petersburg to give the mass meeting. Wyatt eventually became the executive director of SCLC [Southern Christian Leadership Conference]. And he announced that SCLC was going to set up an office in Harlem.

So I went to the organizing meeting for that office, and Bayard Rustin, who later organized the March on Washington, ran the meeting. Bayard organized the big fundraising event at the 369th Armory. My father was a janitor there. And Harry Belafonte and Sydney Poitier headlined the event. When it was over, I asked Bayard if I could come work for King. I thought he was still in Alabama, but Bayard sent me to Ella [Baker], who was the executive director of King's organization in Atlanta. And Jane Stembridge was a young, White volunteer who was running the SNCC [Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee] desk in Ella's office.

That spring Ella had organized the meeting at Shaw for the leaders of the sit-in movement. And that summer, the first group of leaders came through Atlanta and made plans to hold their first South-wide organizing event in the fall of 1960. And Jane had a problem because she didn't have names from the Deep South—Alabama, Mississippi, and Louisiana. And so she asked Ella if she would work to give her contacts, and then she asked me if I would go scout for SNCC.

And so I took off on the Greyhound bus, hit Birmingham. Fred Shuttlesworth was there. Hit Clarksdale, Aaron Henry was there. And hit Cleveland, Mississippi, Amzie Moore. And it was Amzie who said what we should do. He says there's no sense coming in here to do public accommodations. What you need to do is the right to vote. And so we were part of the second big lurch forward. I think of our country as a country that lurches around this fundamental issue of who the constitutional people are, and what are their really constitutional obligations, as well as their constitutional privileges.

So I think of that Civil Rights Movement that I became part of—that opened up with the sit-ins for me—as the second big lurch forward. And if I ask myself, "Well, what did we accomplish?" The

period from 1875 down to World War II has come down to history as Jim Crow. Douglas Blackmon has a book. It's called *Slavery by Another Name*, the issue of rounding up young, Black men on charges of vagrancy and actually putting them into a form of slavery. So I think of Jim Crow as slavery by another name. And I think of that as the period from 1875 right down to the Civil Rights Movement.

And so we lurched forward. We got Jim Crow out of three distinct areas of the national life. We got it out of public accommodations. We got it out of the right to vote. And we got it out of the national Democratic Party. Fannie Lou Hamer. So I met Fannie Lou Hamer on August 31, 1962. Amzie had organized a school bus to bring people from Ruleville down to Indianola. And on the bus were mostly women, mostly older, but there was one woman who sat at the front and faced the back and began singing as the bus started. And it's like she knew every song that had ever been sung in any Black church. And she sang away fear. And that was Fannie Lou Hamer.

So when we organized the Freedom Democratic Party, which was the singular event of Freedom Summer in terms of actually unlocking the key to Mississippi, we had no idea that the key to Mississippi lay in the national Democratic Party. But if we had known our history better, if we had known what happened in 1875. If we had known about William Alexander Percy. And if we had understood the lock on the South that came through control of a mechanism of the Democratic Party, then perhaps we would have understood that, yes, that was where the key was. But when Fannie Lou Hamer appeared before the convention, and the thing about Mrs. Hamer was that she was incapable of being inauthentic, so that when she spoke, she spoke from the whole history of not just herself, but of the state which she loved so much. And so, her testimony was inescapable, and it forced the country to take a look at the Democratic Party. Freedom Summer forced the country to take a look at itself.

But so, we got Jim Crow out of those three areas: public accommodations, the right to vote, the National Democratic Party structure, but we didn't get it out of education. So the young people here and across the country who are from ten to forty years old—thirty years from now, you will be from forty to seventy years old. And you will be running this country. So one thing you need to think about now is, what kind of country do you want to run? And who will be the constitutional people in your country?

What we can say about our country is that in spite of itself, all across

these centuries, it has managed to expand the reach of its preamble. Not in the sense of what it says, but in the sense of what it does. The preamble establishes a class of people, the constitutional people, the people who ordain and establish the Constitution. Now you can think, "Well, that only happened once." And it was those people in 1787 at the Constitutional Convention who did that, and it's done. But you don't have to think that. You can think otherwise. You can think, I am a part of this "We the People," and I take on personal responsibility for constitutional personhood.

Now there's a lot of talk about personal responsibility in this country, but we need to talk about who takes on the personal responsibility for the constitutional personhood of people in this country, because that's how I think about the movement.

So when we began, White male property owners were the constitutional people in this country, and over the centuries we've managed to expand the reach. White male, freed slaves, women, different categories of adults. Your job—the young people, ten to forty years old—you got to think, do young people deserve constitutional status? Do young people deserve constitutional status for purposes of their education?

I would like for you to do one thing with me. Let's try to say the preamble together. Those who know it can say it with me as I say it, and then those can repeat it after us. Okay, and as you say it, think about what it does. It establishes a class of constitutional people, and there's nothing stopping us as a country from continuing to think that our constitutional job is to keep working what the preamble allows us to do. No one can stop us from doing that.

"We the People of the United States in order to form a more perfect Union, establish justice..." Okay so let's do it this way. I will say it. Anyone wants to say it with me, but then allow everyone else to say it after. All right. "We the people of the United States [audience repeats], in order to form a more perfect Union [audience], establish justice [audience], insure domestic tranquility [audience], provide for the common defense [audience], promote the general welfare [audience], and secure the blessings of liberty [audience] to ourselves and our posterity [audience], do ordain and establish [audience], this Constitution [audience] for the United States of America [audience]." It didn't say, "We the president," there was none. It didn't say, "We the Congress" or "We the Supreme Court." They hadn't been established. And note it did not say, "We the citizens of the several states." It could have, and if it had, we would be a very different nation. It simply said, "We the People." Thank you. [applause]