

NONVIOLENCE IN ACTION: FREEDOM SUMMER



ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS

How is nonviolence an active form of resistance? How was Freedom Summer a nonviolent response to Black voter suppression?



OBJECTIVES

Students will:

- Define nonviolence and discuss its relationship to direct action.
- Examine how Black people were disenfranchised in the 1960s South.
- Investigate the ways in which Freedom Summer addressed voter suppression.
- Interpret a speech by Fannie Lou Hamer to deepen their understanding of Freedom Summer and the role of this important civil rights leader.



LEARNING STANDARDS

See the [standards alignment chart](#) to learn how this lesson supports New Jersey State Standards.



TIME NEEDED

120 minutes



MATERIALS

- AV equipment for playing audio/video clips and projecting a handout
- *Nonviolence Quotes* handout (one for teacher reference)
- *By th' Way, What's That Big Word?* handout (one to project or one per pair)
- *Fannie Lou Hamer's Testimony at the 1964 Democratic National Convention* handout (one per student)
- Chart paper and markers



VOCABULARY

civil rights	discrimination	poll tax
Civil Rights Act of 1964	Freedom Summer	segregation
civil rights movement	literacy test	voter suppression
direct action	nonviolence	Voting Rights Act of 1965

Procedures

PART 1

What is Nonviolence? (30 mins.)

1 Write each quote from the handout *Nonviolence Quotes* on top of a sheet of chart paper and display around the room. Have students read the quotes and stand next to the one with which they most agree. Direct the small groups that have formed around each quote to discuss the questions below. Select a recorder for each group and have them note responses to the second question on the chart paper.

- Why did you choose this quote over the others?
- What does nonviolence mean to you?

2 Gather the class and post the charts so that all students can see them. Discuss why certain quotes were chosen by many students or not chosen at all. Examine the ways in which their definitions of nonviolence are similar and different. Highlight the assumptions or beliefs behind their ideas. Introduce the following definition.

nonviolence: *a set of values that rejects violence and encourages change through peaceful actions.*

3 Comment that nonviolence is often misunderstood as passive or not standing up for oneself. Play the brief video clip, *Martin Luther King, Jr.—On Love and Nonviolence* [2:03]: <https://bit.ly/3AdyYvd>. Discuss the following questions:

- What does Dr. King say is the difference between nonresistance and nonviolent resistance?
- Do you agree with Dr. King that nonviolence and love are powerful rather than weak? Why?
- What does Dr. King mean by direct action? What are examples of direct action? (*Generate and post a list, e.g. marches, speeches, boycotts, sit-ins, letters, petitions, strikes, etc.*)
- How does nonviolent direct action cause discomfort and change?

NOTE

Make sure students understand that nonviolence is about action rather than inaction; that it is not the absence of violence, but the presence of justice through strategic confrontation. Acknowledge that some groups have advocated more aggressive responses to racist violence and that the civil rights movement is not monolithic.

- Do you think these ideas apply to civil rights challenges in today's world? Explain.
- Have your ideas about nonviolence changed as a result of this discussion? If so, how?

PART 2

Freedom Summer (90 mins.)

4 Project or distribute the handout *By th' Way, What's That Big Word?* As a class or in pairs, have students interpret the political cartoon using some of the following prompts:

- What is a literacy test?
- What voters were required to take a literacy test in 1962? Why?
- Why is it ironic or absurd that the man at the table doesn't know "that big word"?
- Why is the sheriff stationed there?

5 Explain that in the 1960s, voter suppression tactics were used to prevent Black Americans from voting. These included difficult literacy tests and poll taxes that were unaffordable to most Black people. Ask students what percentage of Americans they think are registered to vote today (it was 64 percent in 2016¹⁵). Share and discuss the following statistics from 1960s Mississippi:

- In the 1950s and 1960s, about 45 percent of the population of Mississippi was Black.¹⁶
- In 1964, only 5.1 percent of Black adults in Mississippi were registered to vote—the lowest of any U.S. state.¹⁷
- During this time, some counties in Mississippi had hardly any Black voters. For example, in 1961:¹⁸

Pike County: 200 of 8,000 Black adults were registered

Amite County: 1 of 5,000 was registered

Walthall County: 0 of 3,000 were registered

15 DeSilver, Drew. "In past elections, U.S. trailed most developed countries in voter turnout." Pew Research Center, November 3, 2020. <https://pewrsr.ch/3A7FfZH>.

16 Williams, Juan. *Eyes on the Prize: America's Civil Rights Years, 1954–1965*. New York: Viking Penguin Inc., 1987. <https://bit.ly/3x8dPAK>.

17 Augustin, Stanley. "Freedom Summer: How a Voter Registration Drive Incited Murder in Mississippi." Lawyers' Committee for Civil Rights Under Law. August 4, 2016. <https://bit.ly/3qMoMWB>.

18 Civil Rights Movement Archive. "The Struggle for Voting Rights in Mississippi: The Early Years." https://www.crmvet.org/info/voter_ms.pdf.

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Tell students that *Freedom Summer* (1964) was a nonviolent response to voter suppression in the South, specifically in Mississippi. Allow students to share any prior knowledge they have about this topic. Then show the PBS Learning Media video, *What was “Freedom Summer”* [3:18]: <https://bit.ly/3x5crik>. Have students fold a sheet of paper in half and label the columns “3 Goals of Freedom Summer” and “3 Responses by Authorities.” Direct them to take notes in each column as they watch. After, discuss some of the following questions:

- What challenges do you think volunteers faced as they tried to persuade Black people to register to vote?
- What types of learning happened at Freedom Schools that couldn’t happen at regular schools?
- Why was the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party formed when there was already a Democratic Party?
- How did the goals and methods of Freedom Summer reflect nonviolent direct action?
- If you were a parent in 1964, would you have allowed your child to be a Freedom Summer volunteer? Explain.

7

Introduce students to Fannie Lou Hamer—an organizer and leader of Freedom Summer—using the following background information.

Fannie Lou Hamer (1917–1977) was born into a Mississippi sharecropper family. The youngest of 20 children, Hamer began working in the cotton fields at age six and continued into adulthood. In 1962, she attended a meeting of the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) that changed her life. Hamer traveled with a group to her county courthouse to register to vote and, as a result, was fired from her job, put off the plantation where she lived, and threatened with violence. Hamer became a full-time community organizer with SNCC and organized voter registration drives across the state. In 1964, she helped form the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party and made a bid for Congress in order to oppose the all-white Democratic Party in her state. She also formed organizations to fight poverty and support business opportunities and family services for Black women. Hamer was harassed, beaten and arrested for her activism, but never backed down.

8

Divide students into pairs or small groups and distribute the handout *Fannie Lou Hamer’s Testimony at the 1964 Democratic National Convention*. Direct students to read the excerpts from the speech, which describe her experiences with voter registration in Mississippi. Have students annotate the text using the following instructions:

OPTIONAL

Have students listen to Hamer’s full speech (<https://bit.ly/3w30Ejq>, 8:18) or view the American Experience PBS clip (<https://bit.ly/3w6jw11>, 3:40) on President Lyndon B. Johnson’s impromptu press conference to divert attention from Hamer’s address.

NOTE

Hamer’s testimony describes violence she experienced at the hands of police officers. Her account may be upsetting to some students. Allow students to opt out if you decide to share it.

- Circle examples of nonviolence in action.
- Underline examples of violence used to stop Hamer and other activists.
- Draw a box around concepts that are unclear. Note questions in the margins.

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Discuss students' reactions to the text and any questions they noted. Highlight the ways in which direct, nonviolent action was used by activists to achieve voting rights. Share some of the following results of Freedom Summer:

- A total of 17,000 Black people tried to register in Mississippi and 1,200 were successful.
- More than 40 Freedom Schools were created and attended by 3,000 students.
- The Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party was founded, though the party's delegates were refused seats at the 1964 Democratic National Convention.
- The modest gains resulting from Freedom Summer and extreme racist violence deepened divisions between advocates of nonviolence and more militant factions.
- Organizing throughout this period contributed to the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, banning racial discrimination and segregation, and the Voting Rights Act of 1965, prohibiting racial discrimination in voting.

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Post the following phrase: "I am sick and tired of being sick and tired." Read aloud the longer version below and tell students that these famous words were spoken by Fannie Lou Hamer just a few months after Freedom Summer. Assign students to write a brief essay or journal entry in which they discuss what activists like Hamer—and ordinary Black Americans—were sick and tired of and how they used direct action to change things. Students should draw on evidence from lesson sources in their reflection.

"And you can always hear this long sob story: 'You know it takes time.' For three hundred years, we've given them time. And I've been tired so long, now I am sick and tired of being sick and tired, and we want a change."

—Fannie Lou Hamer, December 20, 1964, Williams Institutional CME Church, Harlem, New York City

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As time allows, have students share their written reflections. Conclude the lesson by discussing some of the questions on the next page.



Discussion Questions

1

How would you describe the purpose of nonviolent direct action? What mistaken beliefs exist about nonviolence?

2

What forms did voter suppression take in the 1960s? What forms does it take today?

3

How have Black activists, like Fannie Lou Hamer, fought for voting rights both then and now?

4

What did Hamer mean when she talked about wanting to become a “first-class citizen”?

5

What will you remember about Hamer’s story? How did she inspire or affect you?

6

Hamer questioned whether the U.S. was “the land of the free and home of the brave.” Do you think the U.S. lives up to this ideal today? Explain.

Lesson Extensions

- Show students the Jim Crow Museum video, *The 1964 murders of Schwerner, Chaney, and Goodman* (<https://bit.ly/3x8xalv>, 8:40), or the documentary *Neshoba: The Price of Freedom* (<https://bit.ly/3duwq28>, 87:00). Have them do a written reflection on the bravery of volunteers who put their lives on the line during Freedom Summer, or the role of white allies in the civil rights movement.
- Screen the film *Ghosts of Mississippi* or have students read *The Assassination of Medgar Evers* (see Additional Resources) in order to learn more about this important civil rights leader. Have students research one way in which he employed nonviolent direct action, such as organizing voter registration drives, boycotts of discriminatory businesses and demonstrations against anti-Black crimes and other injustices.
- Have students read one or more of the “Three Letters From a Freedom School Teacher” (<https://www.crmvet.org/info/chude-fs.htm>), written by Chude Pam Parker Allen about her experiences in Mississippi in 1964. Discuss how volunteers prepared for voter registration drives and other civil rights actions.
- Invite a guest speaker from a local organization, such as the League of Women Voters, to talk about the importance of voting and current-day challenges to voting. Have students visit websites such as Voto Latino (<https://votolatin.org>) and Rock the Vote (<https://www.rockthevote.org>) to learn more about issues that impact traditionally marginalized communities and how young people can get involved.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- + Brown University Choices Program. “Freedom Now: The Civil Rights Movement in Mississippi.” <http://www.choices.edu/resources/detail.php?id=203>.
- + PBS American Experience. *Freedom Summer*. <https://to.pbs.org/3x8dzlo>.
- + Ribeiro, Myra. *The Assassination of Medgar Evers*. New York: Rosen Publishing Group, 2001.
- + University of Southern Mississippi Library. “Civil Rights in Mississippi Digital Archive.” <http://digilib.usm.edu/crmda.php>.
- + Weatherford, Carole Boston. *Voice of Freedom: Fannie Lou Hamer: The Spirit of the Civil Rights Movement*. Somerville, MA: Candlewick Press, 2018.
- + Zinn Education Project. “Freedom Summer 1964.” <https://www.zinnedproject.org/materials/freedom-summer-1964>.



Nonviolence Quotes

“There are many causes I would die for. There is not a single cause I would kill for.”

MAHATMA GANDHI

“Through violence, you may murder the hater, but you do not murder the hate.”

DR. MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR.

“There is no such thing as defeat in nonviolence.”

CESAR CHAVEZ

“Nonviolence is a good policy when the conditions permit.”

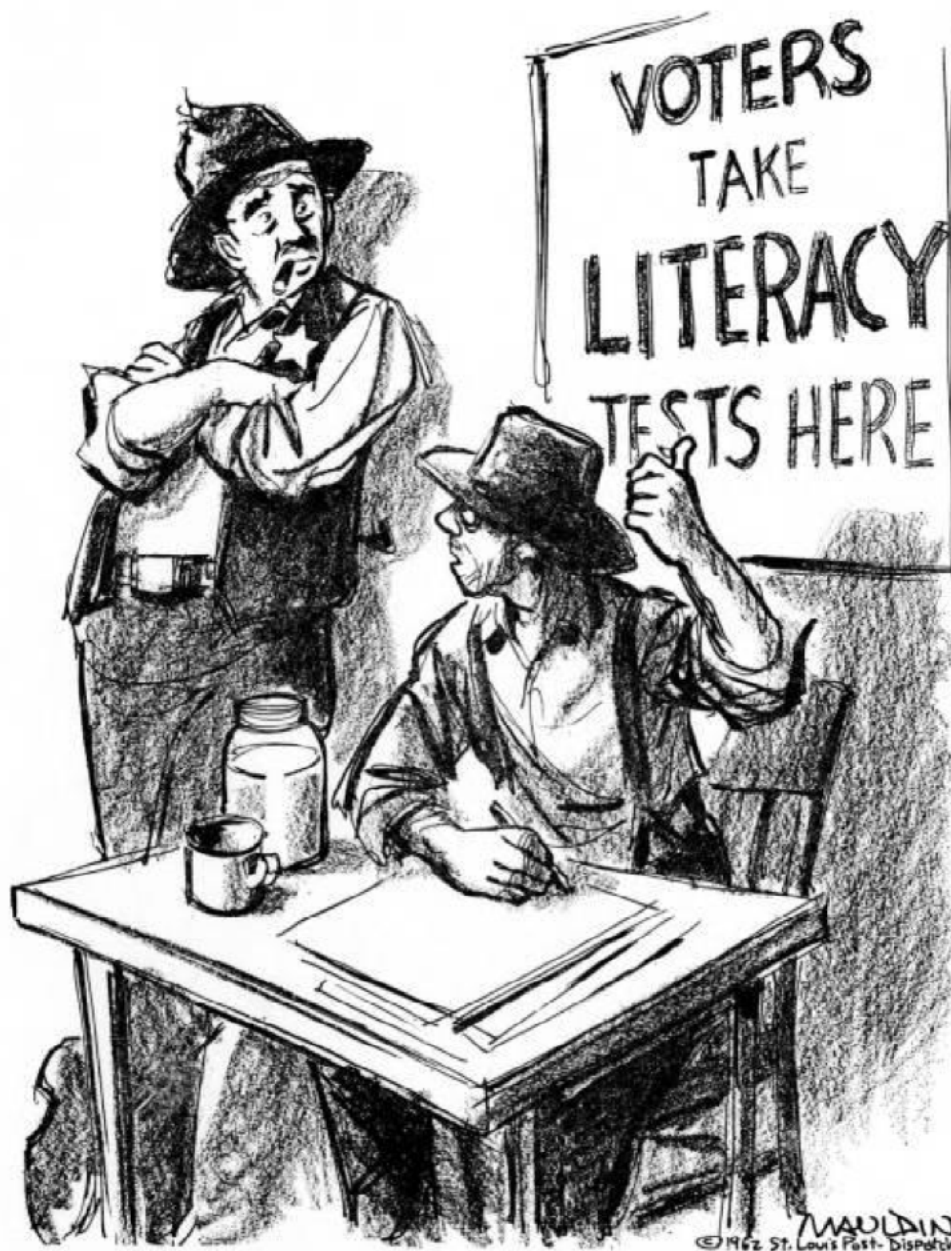
NELSON MANDELA

“Nonviolence is fine as long as it works.”

MALCOLM X



By th' Way, What's That Big Word?



"BY TH' WAY, WHAT'S THAT BIG WORD?"

Tues., May 15, 1962

ST. LOUIS POST-DISPATCH

SOURCE: Mauldin, Bill. *By th' Way, What's That Big Word?* Mechanical print. St. Louis: The St. Louis Post-Dispatch, May 15, 1962. Courtesy of the State Historical Society of Missouri, Columbia Research Center. <https://digital.shsmo.org/digital/collection/ec/id/8548>.



Fannie Lou Hamer's Testimony at the 1964 Democratic National Convention

EXCERPTS FROM THE SPEECH

In 1964, Fannie Lou Hamer ran for Congress as part of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party (MFDP). The MFDP was created to register more Black voters and challenge the all-white Democratic Party in that state.

On August 22, 1964, Hamer spoke at the Democratic National Convention in Atlantic City, New Jersey. She told the nation about her experiences trying to register to vote. The MFDP's attempt to win a seat at the convention failed, but support for Hamer and the party poured in from across the country.

Four years later, the MFDP succeeded and Hamer became Mississippi's first Black woman delegate (representative) at a convention for a national party.



...It was the 31st of August in 1962 that eighteen of us traveled twenty-six miles to the county courthouse in Indianola to try to register to become first-class citizens. We was met in Indianola by policemen, Highway Patrolmen, and they only allowed two of us in to take the literacy test at the time. After we had taken this test and started back to Ruleville, we was held up by the City Police and the State Highway Patrolmen and carried back to Indianola where the bus driver was charged that day with driving a bus the wrong color.

After we paid the fine among us, we continued on to Ruleville, and Reverend Jeff Sunny carried me four miles in the rural area where I had worked as a timekeeper and sharecropper for eighteen years. I was met there by my children, who told me the plantation owner was angry because I had gone down—tried to register.

...The plantation owner came and said, "Fannie Lou...if you don't go down and withdraw your registration, you will have to leave...because we're not ready for that in Mississippi." And I addressed him and told him and said, "I didn't try to register for you. I tried to register for myself." I had to leave that same night.

On the 10th of September 1962, sixteen bullets was fired into the home of Mr. and Mrs. Robert Tucker for me. That same night two girls were shot in Ruleville, Mississippi. Also, Mr. Joe McDonald's house was shot in.

And June the 9th, 1963, I had attended a voter registration workshop; was returning back to Mississippi... When we got to Winona, Mississippi...[some] people got off [the bus] to use the washroom... [and] the restaurant...The...people that had gone in to use the restaurant was ordered out...



FANNIE LOU HAMER'S TESTIMONY AT THE 1964 DEMOCRATIC NATIONAL CONVENTION (CONTINUED)

...As soon as I was seated on the bus, I saw when they began to get the five people in a highway patrolman's car. I stepped off of the bus to see what was happening and somebody screamed..."Get that one there." And 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...After I was placed in the cell...I could hear the sounds of licks and horrible screams...They [were beating a woman], I don't know how long. And after a while she began to pray, and asked God to have mercy on those people.

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 said, "We're 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. And I laid on my face, the first Negro began to beat me. And 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 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...

...All of this is on account of we want to register, to become first-class citizens. And if the [Mississippi] 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 of the hooks because our lives be threatened daily, because we want to live as decent human beings, in America?



The text on this 1964 flier reads:

Fannie Lou Hamer is the candidate of the FREEDOM DEMOCRATIC PARTY for Congress in the Second District. Mrs. Hamer used to work on a plantation near Ruleville. She was fired when she tried to register to vote. And later she was beaten by the police in Winona because she was helping other Negroes to register.

Fannie Lou Hamer and the Freedom Democratic Party want JOBS, JUSTICE, and EDUCATION for all people in Mississippi — black and white. And they want all people to have the right to vote.

That is why the FREEDOM VOTE is being held. Anyone who is 21 or older can vote in the FREEDOM VOTE. You do not have to be registered at the Courthouse to vote in the FREEDOM VOTE. You can vote at churches, barbershops, cafes — at any FREEDOM VOTE polling place.

VOTE for FANNIE LOU HAMER in the FREEDOM VOTE on OCTOBER 30-31 and NOVEMBER 1-2.

SOURCES:

Speech: American Rhetoric Online Speech Bank. "Fannie Lou Hamer, Testimony Before the Credentials Committee, DN Convention, delivered 22 August 1964." <https://bit.ly/3w30Ejg>.

Photo: Leffler, Warren K. "Fannie Lou Hamer, Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party delegate, at the Democratic National Convention, Atlantic City, New Jersey, August 1964." Washington, D.C.: Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division. <https://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/2003688126>.

Flier: Smithsonian National Museum of American History, Behring Center. Freedom Summer Primary Source Documents. <https://americanhistory.si.edu/freedom-summer/primary-sources>.