

May 7, 1964

Mr. John Lewis
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Dear John:

I can't make the Executive Committee meeting this weekend - the deadline on my book on SNCC is May 15, and I have two more chapters to do. Let me just pass on a few points which might be injected wherever pertinent at the meeting:

1. Maybe everyone accepts this idea by now, but it deserves emphasis: that every concentration from now to June 9 should be on that Washington gathering. One ounce of energy now will be worth ten once the trouble starts in Mississippi, and every bit of genius in the SNCC staff should be mustered to think up ways of getting the issue before the nation. The phrase everybody should get accustomed to using, so there is no mistake about what is meant, is PRESIDENTIAL PROTECTION.

2. In connection with the same thing, I think it would be a good idea to explore with legal counsel (Bill Higgs or Bill Kunstler or Howard Moore or whoever you can get to do this) the idea of filing, on June 9 perhaps to get the most publicity out of it, a petition in federal court in the District of Columbia for a writ of habeas corpus, directing the president and/or attorney general to create a federal protective force for Mississippi to prevent, or immediately correct, by the use of arrest powers if necessary, any deprivation of a citizen's constitutional rights. Might assemble some legal brains within the next two weeks to explore other imaginative legal devices to storm the Mississippi walls. These suits are designed as much to bring public attention as to gain legal redress, but the latter is not inconceivable. Some means must be found to by-pass the rotten judicial structure of Mississippi - the hanging judges, the hung juries, the from-hunger prosecutors and Justice Dept. officials. If lawsuits against local officials based on Sec. 242, for instance, cannot get fair trials, if ordinary cases in local courts against civil rights workers cannot get fair trials, then attempts should be made to initiate a battery of suits in the District of Columbia, on the basis of the "equal protection" clause of the 14th Amendment, or on the basis of the little-used Sec. 2, Art. IV of the Const, which says: "The Citizens of each State shall be entitled to all Privileges and Immunities of Citizens in the Several States." Moses v. Kennedy should be followed up with a host of other suits: against Kennedy, against Burke Marshall, against J. Edgar Hoover, (incidentally, SNCC could capture a little publicity now by coming out with a statement urging that Hoover retire at 70; you know they're about to ask him to stay on), and against Pres. Johnson himself.

3. When our new Advisory Committee (myself, Len Holt, Miss Baker, Bill Higgs) met in Washington several months ago, one of the many suggestions we made to the Exec. Committee was left hanging (the Exec. Comm. has never taken it up, so far as I recall). And now is the time to invoke it. Our idea was to begin to control and plan demonstrations, so they will be disciplined and effective. I agree that
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spontaneous and unplanned demonstrations have an effect also, but they also involve more bloodshed than may be necessary to get across the point of the demonstration. We mustn't become subject to the kind of desperate frustration which is beginning to grip some of the civil rights leaders in the North who are at their wit's end, and will do almost anything to bring their feelings before the public, without always thinking out carefully the most effective way to do it. This is not a plea for conservatism, or a plea against demonstrations. It is a plea for a controlled radicalism, for planned demonstrations. One of the crucial points in any demonstration is that it must communicate in a clean-cut way to the nation what is the issue involved, what is being asked for. It is not enough to say, as one Nashville civil rights leader said, recently, we are demonstrating just because in general we are angry. To get back to the suggestion of the Advisory Committee, we suggested a National Strategy Committee in Atlanta, of about five people (including Miss Baker, as I recall); and a strategy committee of three people in each locality. The idea was that no demonstration should take place without at least a few people sitting down for a half hour and thinking about it, planning it, controlling it, seeing how the most could be gotten out of it, or even calling it off. (I know the idea of calling off a demonstration is virtual treason in SNCC, but I suggest that guerrilla warfare, which is what the movement is engaged in essentially, as Jim Forman once pointed out, requires an imaginative combination of bold advance at some times, caution at others, picking your spots for the offensive, not letting yourself be forced to engage the opponent on his terms, on his grounds. We need, for one thing, a whole Exec. Comm. meeting on the subject of demonstrations, direct action, tactics, etc. For example, when you have stretched the law to its limit, and you still don't have morality and reason satisfied, then you disobey the law - that's the idea of civil disobedience. But when you haven't even exhausted the possibilities of action within existing law, it might be wise very often to pursue that rather than reach beyond. For instance, in Mississippi it may be wise to concentrate on certain things which are obviously and clearly protected by the Constitution: peaceful picketing, leaflet distribution, voter registration, peaceful assembly. A mass march downtown does not have clear constitutional protection. (I'm not saying therefore, never have such a march, but there are times when we should consider alternatives.) For instance, intermarriage (I have no doubt about the Supreme Court's coming decision on this) will be more clearly protected constitutionally than people blocking traffic. (Miss Baker has the text of the advisory committee suggestion on picketing these strategy committees.)

4. As a first venture of SNCC into areas beyond race, but without which the race business can't really be solved, why doesn't the SNCC Exec. Comm. publicly endorse the report put out by a number of distinguished social critics who call themselves the Ad Hoc Committee for The Triple Revolution? They proposed the govt. should guarantee a minimum income to every American, whatever his job, whether he works or not. In other words, every American would be guaranteed a certain basic minimum standard of living with no questions asked. The country is rich enough to afford this.

Enough for now! Have a good meeting! Regards to everyone. Uhuru.