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Uh-mm. [Speaks very slowly, reflectively] And the other one was Byron de la Beckwith in that auditorium that night. When I called attention to the fact that there should be no smoking in there, they got up and left, and that's when I could see them clearly.

I had to leave town . . . to speak over in South Carolina, an engagement I had had for a long time. When I got back in here, back into Atlanta—we had moved to Atlanta by that time, of course—I got a telephone call that he'd been shot. I knew he was dead, even at that moment he had not died. But he died while they were talking to me, and I got the first thing flying back over there, and everybody was in such a state of shock that nobody had done anything about getting the blood cleaned up off the driveway or off his car or anything. So that was the first thing I did—get that blood up—before his wife sees it and before the children come back home. And get the blood off their car.

Byron de la ("DeLay") Beckwith, a Greenwood fertilizer salesman and scion of an old Delta family, was tried twice for the murder of Medgar Evers. He was not convicted. In 1975 Beckwith was convicted in federal court of illegally transporting a dynamite bomb to New Orleans. He testified he had not known the bomb was in his car. New Orleans police were said to suspect that he was on his way to blow up the home of a Jewish leader in New Orleans.

DAVE DENNIS

Freedom Summer

He has a handsomely appointed law office in downtown New Orleans. From the street far below, the roar of afternoon rush-hour traffic drifts up—muted, somehow soothing. He speaks softly, recalling his years in Mississippi. Finally the state had worn him out, and he had gone up to the University of Michigan to take a law degree. But there was no escaping reminders of Mississippi and the Movement. At the checkout desk in the law library was a young woman he recognized as a veteran of Mississippi, too, a white girl he remembered as having survived an ugly incident with the Natchez police. "They had held a pistol to her head and played Russian roulette." It was some time before he learned that her library job was part of her therapy at the hospital she had entered immediately after the Natchez incident. ". . . she's still in a mental institution. That's around eleven years now."

He had helped bring that girl and others like her to Mississippi. In 1961 at the age of twenty-one he became CORE's field director for Mississippi. When CORE, NAACP, SCLC, and SNCC joined forces to form a state-wide organization named COFO (Council of Federated Organizations), he became a field director second in rank only to Bob Moses. Together, he and Moses planned COFO's 1964 Summer Project, which brought hundreds of white college students to Mississippi for Freedom Summer. In planning the summer-long assault on segregation the two of them decided to ignore the conventional warnings that large numbers of white civil rights workers could not survive in Mississippi.

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It's sorta cold, so I'm gonna just tell you what my feeling was about it. We knew that if we had brought in a thousand blacks, the country would have watched them slaughtered without doing anything about it. Bring a thousand whites and the country is going to react to that in two ways. First of all is to protect. We made sure that we had the children, sons and daughters, of some very powerful people in this country over there, including Jerry Brown, who's now governor of California, for instance . . . we made sure of that. . . . The idea was not only to begin to organize for the Democratic Convention, but also to get the country to begin to respond to what was going on there. They were not gonna respond to a thousand blacks working in that area. They would respond to a thousand young white college students, and white college females who were down there. All right? And that's the reason why, and if there were gonna take some deaths to do it, the death of a white college student would bring on more attention to what was going on than for a black college student getting it. That's cold, but that was also in another sense speaking the language of this country. What we were trying to do was get a message over to the country, so we spoke their language. And that had more to do with that decision to bring 'em in by the two of us at the top than anything else.

You [and Bob Moses] discussed it that clearly?

Uh-mm, the two of us did. The two of us discussed it. That was not opened up to the staff and everything else in the meetings, because the fact is that we didn't know who was working for the press or whatever, and most things that happened in staff meetings always got out. And that's something we didn't want to. Now I guess it can be told. . . . We didn't plan anything that happened, for it to happen. That's what the Klan and the rest of 'em did, you know. We didn't plan any of the violence. [Pauses] But we just wanted the country to respond to what was going on.

What sorts of problems, if any, did that decision cause you and Moses?

Well, I can't speak for Bob. It caused problems—I mean, psychologically—for me in terms of the fact that you felt responsible for what happened to people, you know, and I still do. I mean, it's the price that I had to pay and the price that I still pay for the decision. [Pauses] But it was something that had to be done. You see, one of the things is that we were in a war, and it wasn't very romantic for those people involved in it.* You

*The metaphor of Mississippi as a war zone appears over and over again in these interviews. In June of 1964 Mrs. Fannie Lou Hamer went to Oxford, Ohio,

look at that as an era of our time when there were things happening and you look back on it—some people wishing they were involved, those who were involved happy about it . . . they might have demonstrated a couple of times . . . [and can claim] "I was a part of that thing." But the people who were down there staying, that was a real war. We weren't being slapped on the wrist. Every time people got up the next morning, you didn't know whether you were going to see 'em again or not as they went out on different assignments, you see. Everything was a risk. We didn't have much fun. We made our fun. We didn't have many parties. It was work. Work seven days a week. We didn't take off for vacations and things of that nature. We worked. Seven days a week. And a lot of people were making twenty-five dollars per week. . . . It wasn't fun. [Very softly] It was twenty-five dollars per week. That's what George Raymer made.

He had spoken earlier of George Raymer, a co-worker in CORE. He leaves the room to take a telephone call, and when he returns, he brings a newspaper clipping permanently encased in plastic. There is a photograph of a young black man and below it the funeral notice of George Raymer.

At that time, we didn't spend that much time thinking about death. I mean, it was right there. Very seldom did I think about it until something happened . . . then you'd say, "Wow, you know that was close!" Most of my thinking or reflecting on death being that close . . . came after I left Mississippi, and more after I got out of the Movement completely, because it was something you just didn't dwell upon.

There was a shock-fear kinda thing that went through me for several weeks after Chaney and Goodman* were missing in terms of closeness to

to address the Freedom Summer volunteers assembled there for orientation. "Number one, I told 'em what had happened to me in 1963, and I told 'em the same thing could happen to them in 1964. We didn't tell 'em no lies. We prepared 'em for exactly what it was like, and it was like you going into combat. You know, I've heard of combat, but that's exactly what we was having here."

*James Chaney, Andrew Goodman, and Michael Schwerner were the victims in the Movement's most celebrated murder case. On the night of June 21, 1964, after being released from jail by Neshoba County Deputy Sheriff Cecil Price, they were executed by Klansmen on a lonely road outside Philadelphia, Mississippi. However, their fates were not known until six weeks later, when their bodies were discovered under an earthen dam on a farm outside Philadelphia. Goodman, a twenty-one-year-old white college student from New York, was a Summer Project volunteer. Chaney, also twenty-one and a black Mississippian, was a volunteer worker for CORE. Schwerner, twenty-four and white, was a New York social worker who had come South some months earlier to run CORE's office in Meridian. See William Bradford Huie and Dick Gregory.

that. And then one night . . . I said, "I can't deal with this." So I walked out of the COFO office, got in the car and drove into Philadelphia, Mississippi, one night and just drove around, went to the COFO headquarters that we had, talked to people, got in my car, and drove around the city and drove back out. And I had to do that just for myself to basically get that out of my head, which was quite successful and after that it didn't bother me. But I had to do it, and I had to do it by myself.

Schwerner, Goodman, and Chaney . . . that bothers me all the time, because as it's come to me from FBI agents who investigated and also the fact of actual statements by the people who did it . . . they didn't want Goodman. At the time that they stopped the car, they thought that I was in that car. The car belonged to me anyway, you know. It was a car assigned to me by CORE. . . . Mickey Schwerner was over there, Chaney was involved in that, because the fact is that I assigned Schwerner to the Meridian and Philadelphia, Mississippi, areas. I can't help but think quite often . . . maybe, if I had done something differently. You can't help but blame yourself to some extent.

Take . . . George Raymer who died two years ago of a heart attack. He dropped out of high school and came into Mississippi with me and wanted to stay, and he worked day and night, worked hard. And he died of a cardiac condition. . . . According to the doctors he had a heart of a seventy-year-old man. That is, that his heart was just that overworked. It was a old man's heart. That's just like somebody pulling a gun and shooting a man . . . George wasn't even thirty years old when he died of a heart attack. I've had problems with that, too, because I can't but say, well, when I left Mississippi, maybe I should have used my influence to get George outa Mississippi. . . . That's not something easy to deal with.

He ponders a question about chance, living on the edge.

It just seems that through that whole Movement . . . for some reason, I wasn't there at the time, and they were all by chance. All by chance. When Medgar was killed, I had his car all day. I had gone to Canton, Mississippi, came back in, met him at the church, gave him his car, and he told me that why don't I come have a drink. I told him, "Naw, you're a bad risk for me to go with you to have a drink." So we laughed about that. I told him I wasn't going with him; we just laughed. He got in his car and went home, and I got a ride with somebody else that took me home. And a little while later, there was a phone call saying Medgar Evers had just been shot. During that period of time, very seldom I ever, you know,

missed a chance to have a drink, because you didn't get it too often in Mississippi at that period of time. But I said no. . . .

But it just seems as if I was—I was just never there, and that weighs heavy, too, because a lot of things that happened that caused a lot of people to become physically hurt, I started. All right? And I came out of it ninety-nine percent of the time without even getting a scratch . . . when people around me would get it. So that became a problem with me, because I always began to feel as if maybe some way . . . this sounds crazy, but like as if I've been cheated.* I mean, nothing ever happened. You begin to find that you feel guilty about it, because you want to know why him, or why her, not me?

These feelings that you've been talking about, was that the emotional energy behind your speaking at the James Chaney memorial service?

Yeah, you see for a long time in the Movement . . . one of the problems I had was the problem of nonviolence. I had tried it, and I was going around to areas in the backwoods talking to people who were saying, "If they come after me, I'm going to shoot 'em." And I would go through the "love-thy-neighbor" bit: "Put your gun down." And they would get beaten, and again people getting killed. I don't know. When I got up there and I looked at all those faces, everything seemed so useless. I knew the power of the government to do whatever they wanted to do, whenever they wanted to do it. . . . They all told us the same thing: "There's nothing that we can do. It's up to the states to prosecute because there are no laws."

The memorial service was in a small Baptist church in Meridian in August of 1964. James Chaney had been buried that afternoon—or rather, re-buried. For forty-four days Chaney lay with Schwerner and Goodman under the dam in Neshoba County.

*He first observed this fatalism—a readiness for death bordering on the perverse—in the Freedom Rides: "When the group left Montgomery, the first busload to go into Jackson, Mississippi, everyone on that bus was prepared to die. Now what happened there was a very strange scene. . . . We were just arrested and put in jail. Well, everybody was prepared to die. One girl in particular just started pulling hands full of hair out. She just started screaming. Nothing happened, and there was the cold shock. I mean, people just were doing strange things. One guy was beating his head up against the wall. *We didn't die.* . . . It was just that right then and there everybody wanted to die. They had been willing to give up their lives. . . . Now what that means and what it meant then and what does it mean to the individuals now, I don't know. But I know what I saw."