

Chapter Nine: Freedom Summer

In early June, the Western College for Women in Oxford, Ohio, welcomed volunteers for Freedom Summer. The participants came from diverse backgrounds and states, with a majority being white and male. The training emphasized real and potentially dangerous scenarios, recreating the atmosphere of activism John Lewis had experienced five years earlier. Historical figures like Fannie Lou Hamer and Bayard Rustin led sessions, emphasizing the significance of nonviolence and mutual respect, not just in political contexts but personal ones.

Concern over potential violence loomed large. Lewis and others were warned that they might never return home, foreshadowing the danger they would face. Tensions in discussions illuminated differing opinions within the group regarding the movement's direction. Despite the worries, Lewis felt encouraged by the unity between the Students Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) during training.

Just days into Freedom Summer, tragic news emerged: three civil rights workers—Mickey Schwerner, James Chaney, and Andrew Goodman—went missing in Neshoba County. They had been investigating a church burning and were arrested under false pretenses by the local deputy, Cecil Price. After their release, they vanished, prompting fears for their safety and rapid media attention on the crisis. As searches by both federal agents and locals ensued, the men's car was discovered burned and submerged in a creek, raising the alarm about their fate.

Lewis's arrival in Meridian revealed a scene of heightened tension; police presence was overwhelming, and officials denied knowledge of any wrongdoing. Heartbreakingly, the men's bodies were later discovered buried under an earthen dam. Lewis grieved for the men, grappling with the realization of the violence that those trying to register Black voters faced. Public outrage surged, although Lewis noted that media attention was often disproportionate—showing a stark racial bias in society's empathy regarding who had gone missing.

While the struggle for civil rights continued, demonstrating how entrenched racial divisions were, Lewis remained committed to activism. He understood the vital role advocacy played in confronting injustices, despite the threats and violence that they led to. Unfortunately, the political landscape forced civil rights activists to navigate complex challenges, including how to unify the movement while responding to national issues and local violence against Black citizens. The chapter concludes with a reflection on the deep and painful implications of the Freedom Summer—a pivotal campaign changing the trajectory for civil rights in the United States .