Remarks of Norman Thomas and Others  
SNCC Press Conference  
Fourth Annual SNCC Conference  
Washington, D.C.  
November of 1963

Julian Bond:  
Okay, what I am going to do is to introduce the people sitting behind me. They are members of our staff and some members of our coordinating committee. First I would like to introduce one who is neither a member of our staff or a member of our coordinating committee, but the man who will be our speaker this afternoon, Mr. Norman Thomas. After I introduce Mr. Thomas he will answer any questions you might have. Then I would like to go through and introduce all of the other gentlemen sitting behind me at once. And then when I am through you can ask them any questions you might have. But first Mr. Thomas.

Norman Thomas:  
I don't think I want to make any formal statement except to say that I am deeply honored to be invited to speak at this conference. I think that any white man has to speak with a certain humility, a very great humility in a conference like this. Next, I want to say how much I have admired the work of SNCC. I saw something of it in Mississippi in the Freedom vote, in that mock election. And I was deeply impressed. For instance I was at Greenwood. And I want to say that one of the bravest and most useful jobs I think I man could do was done by Bob Moses and other SNCC workers down there trying to get registrations.

Now I am subject to correction, but if memory hasn't failed me, they got about 2500 Negroes in spite of the economic and other pressures against them who tried to register. I think something like 51 succeeded. And this speaks for itself. I happen to believe that it extraordinarily important to get Negroes registered and voting, because I know something about the history of immigration in the United States. And very unpopular immigrant groups became much more popular when they got the vote. They didn't talk about the dirty Irish much in Boston after the Irish were pretty well registered and could vote. And the Jews enormously and rapidly improved their position by the vote.

This doesn't mean for an instant that I think that the only thing is the vote. But it is a thing, to be sought after. I also believe in demonstrations. In the course of my life one way or another I have done considerable myself. I don't think that there is an 11th commandment that says that you must
demonstrate, and there is certainly not an 11th commandment that says that you must not. It is a question of tactics and I admire the general judgement of SNCC, CORE, and others in this way. I don't mean that I would always agree but who does.

I repeat my admiration, my admiration for the extraordinary extent to which this whole movement has kept from aggressive violence in a world as violent as ours. It is a wonderful thing. Good sense and something deeper has kept this movement from aggressive violence.

In some cases you could say that violence has answered violence. But aggressive violence no. And I don't think that we white folks have appreciated that enough.

Now I am going to speak later in the meeting about a difficult subject, namely about employment. Of course I am for fair employment. And I had a good many, I had some ideas about that, especially with relation to the importance of getting unions on the right track. But I am deeply impressed with the fact that there isn't going to be much advantage in the United States of fair unemployment, white and colored on the same plane. And faced with the problems of automation and the rest, I think that we will have to take a different approach to the whole problem.

And this is what I am trying, I am going to try to get the Socialists and others to do more thinking and studying about is this. I think as has been suggested that the government should take upon itself what it has theoretically has taken, that is to say responsibility for employment and unemployment. I think that they should keep records and thanks to automation this is not so hard. I think they should take, keep records sent in where there are jobs open and where there are no jobs open. And I think that the government should through public works and otherwise make it its business to provide work. And where it can't provide work, instead of our present unemployment insurance plan which doesn't cover young people trying to get jobs, I think that there would have to be allowances for unemployed who are duly registered and seeking work out of the general fund to which we all contribute.

You know that there is a theory that we are, most of us won't have too much steady work after the machines get busy, the automation. So that is the general line of what I am going to say. And I am saying this in advance, although I don't like to give previews too well for the benefit of the press.

Reporter: This is perhaps something not directly related but on the other hand it is not completely unrelated either.
How do you think that the assassination of President Kennedy will affect first the Socialist Party which has had rough going at some points in its history, and second the Negro drive which has also had a considerable rough go?

Thomas:

Personally at this point—I don't know whether you would call it optimistic or what—I honestly don't think either that, that it is going to affect either very much. They will continue to have a powerful struggle ahead. I am very thankful that President Johnson has said as much as he has about civil rights and the Civil Rights Bill.

As for the Socialists it doesn't matter. It is one of the preversities of life that Oswald, the presumed almost certain assassin, was a psychopath of what he would call the left. This psychopathic nature for most people in the South is of the right. And the racists. And the general denunciation of these conditions that make such things possible in America is still in order.

Reporter:

(Inaudible)

Thomas:

I am awfully sorry I am getting old and some what deaf. You will have to speak some what loud.

Reporter:

Do you feel that the atmosphere of racism among whites in the South contributed to the assassination attempt?

Thomas:

In a general way, yes. One has no right to be too specific. Of course no rightist, no ultra-racist assassinated the president, that seems pretty clear. And for their sake they ought to be thankful that none of their wild men did. But you must remember that I have seen distributed even in New York a little pamphlet that begins on the outside (title is inaudible). Have any of you ever seen it. I think it was issued, though there is no name on it, by one of the offshoots of the American Nazis. I am not sure which one. And on the back is a picture of a hand holding a noose, a hangman's noose. And it says, "For traitors. Kennedy should be impeached." But the suggestion is hung.

No leftists have done anything so mad, so crazy, so terrible. I was in Mississippi and there was a time when I perhaps romantically thought that if President Eisenhower, or even later President Kennedy, upon himself— I was one of the people who would have liked to see President Eisenhower lead some children in to that school in Arkansas. But after being in Mississippi—our men here know a great
deal more than I— but I would have been afraid to have him go to Mississippi.

Reporter: Do you think that President Johnson will have any better luck ... in gaining an understanding with Southern leaders? Will they accept from him things that they would not accept ...?

Thomas: I think that they may, because he is after all a Texan. And Texas has got a lot to make up for. Dallas is a disgrace. Not so much the assassination of the president, but the subsequent business was and is disgraceful. And its general record is pretty disgraceful. But I think that the great majority of the people want to repudiate it. I am sure that this is an added spur to President Johnson. I like very well the tone of his speech to Congress and his speech to the people. I am quite hopeful. And I think, I even dare to hope, that to some extent some feeling of regret and remorse will make people feel that as a monument to Kennedy we should have a civil rights bill, a very strong one.

Julian Bond: Any further questions?

Thomas: Thank you very much, and I think I owe these people an apology for coming in and talking so much. It is their show and I would like to have you all know I have been in Mississippi and I have been elsewhere. And I want you to all know the enormous respect that I have for SNCC. I would like to see some of us white folks subjected to similar conditions and see if we would do as well (applause).

Julian Bond: I have one announcement. James Baldwin who was to have spoken this morning is grounded in New York and now will not be here until 1:30 pm.

Now I would like to introduce the rest of the people on the platform behind me. I will introduce them all, and then you may ask questions of each of them. On my right is Frank Smith, who is a native of ... Georgia, who directs our project in the first congressional district of Mississippi, and he has been in Mississippi for a year and a half. Next to him is Marion Barry a member of our coordinating committee and our executive committee and the first chairman of SNCC. He is from Knoxville, Tennessee.

Next to him is Worth Long from Little Rock, Arkansas who directs our project in central Alabama with its base in Selma, Alabama. Next to him is William Hanson from Cincinnati, Ohio who directs our project in southeastern Arkansas with its base in Pine Bluff. Next to Mr. Thomas is John Lewis our
chairman, who is from Troy, Alabama. Next to Mr. Lewis is Robert Moses from New York City who directs our project in Mississippi. Behind Mr. Lewis is Charles Sherrod who directs our project in southwest Georgia. And behind me here is James Forman, our executive secretary. And you may direct questions to each of them.

Reporter: This is for anyone that would like to take it. How significant is the statement by Professor Silver of Ole Miss, and his denunciation of the whole state of Mississippi? Do you think this will contribute to a breakthrough ...?

Bob Moses: Well, I think that that is an important breakthrough and that what is hoped for is that the rest of the country will heed what he says. And that what you have down in Mississippi, and I think that it is typical of other parts of the deep South, is that in effect you have a closed society. And that the problem there is a broader than just integration, it is a problem of whether or not you can have in the deep South now an open society.

And I would like to say in connection with that in regard to the question of Kennedy's assassination that Mississippi of course ran an election in which the major theme in this past month and a half was, "Knockout the Kennedys." And now that the Kennedys are in fact knocked out, those billboards if you ride through the state are still up. Big billboards, and they say "Knockout the Kennedys." And the theme for the election for both the Republicans and the Democrats were that the Kennedys are in effect a menace to the national political scene and the administration and themselves have to go.

And I think that that has a great deal to do with creating the kind of atmosphere in which somebody can get away with ....

Thomas: May I butt in and ask Bob if it isn't true that the main issue in that election, that real election in Mississippi was which group hated Kennedy worst?

Moses: That's true. The Republicans were saying that what they had to do was establish a two party system in order to act, each party to act as segregation watchdogs over each other and to prevent the national administration for gaining control in Mississippi. The Democrats were saying was that what you needed was just one party for exactly the same reason. That that was the only way to maintain control. Both of their themes was that they both could outdo the Kennedy brothers.
Mr. Forman, or whoever wants to take it. In view of the circumstances of the last week and as Mr. Thomas pointed out, the forthright statements of the new president, does your organization and those you work with propose to call a suspension or moratorium on active demonstrations and protests? Or what is your view of the best strategy?

Well, I would like to let our chairman answer the question, but I might support what he says by saying that there has been no talk around here about any type of moratorium. But maybe he has something if he wants ...(to Lewis) do you want me to go ahead? There has been no discussion here of moratorium(s) nor has there been any discussion so far as we know of in any of the civil rights organizations. Now nor has anyone approached us about calling a moratorium.

Might just point out that it is very interesting that all over the TV the government sent Henry Cabot Lodge to Viet Nam Sunday night even before the president was buried to continue the work of this country. And in addition to that President Johnson delivered his message Wednesday about the state of the nation. So that the government is not calling a moratorium. Not that we are going to follow the government all the time but I don't see where it is relevant for us to call a moratorium because Negroes are still denied the right to vote. We still can't go in to some of these restaurants just thirty miles from here who (which) will be segregated in parts of Virginia and parts of Maryland. In Cambridge, Maryland you can't even enter a public accomodations place at this moment.

So that it would be so derelict on our part to call any moratorium. What we would would be that the segregationists would feel that they have a sense of responsibility to grant the demands for which the president lived.

Well, the question was the white reaction in Mississippi to the president's death. Now we don't have any real detail on that. We did send one of our field secretaries who is white downtown in Jackson. And he reported back that day that the reaction was one of indifference or suppressed joy. There is a report from Millsaps College of some of the students who expressed real sorrow and shame were being harassed by some of their fellow students.

There is a report of one class of young students who actually shouted and cheered. And I was
reading in the paper where I guess it was a minister from Dallas, Texas who was being berated in Dallas now for having reported that some students cheered there, but in Mississippi of course this was the reaction as we got it from people who were living in the white community. The official reaction of course was that of deep sympathy and regret. Probably the best thing that they could have done would have been to take off those billboard signs if they were really serious.

Bill Hanson: I would like to say something about, in regard to that last question. I was in jail in Helena, Arkansas. They came into, they sent a white trustee over to get us up and make us go to work. And myself and another one of the SNCC workers, John Bradford, went outside, took us outside and we were standing next to the police station. And when the trustee came in to get us out he says, "Hey boys, the president been shot." And he had a grin on his face.

And I looked at him and I said, "What?" And he said, "The president has been shot. You know so no he is not dead yet." They took us outside and John and I were standing there and there were a couple of these guards standing around with their shotguns. And some cops standing around in uniform. The trustee went inside the police station. He comes running out back again and he said, "Hey, he died, he died." Jumping up and down, a grin on his face. The cops all started grinning, all start talking, it is great. It was the most incredible thing I have ever heard.

I have been no ardent admirer of John Kennedy but you know, it was just incredible. The man, you know, the president of the United States gets assassinated. Here is a public official, a man standing there with a gun, you know, and I am standing there, I am in his custody. And it just amazed me. You know, the man was jumping up and down. The police chief was very happy that the president had died, the expression on his face.

And you know I was thinking that man, if he is as cold as that he can turn around and shoot me right now.

Jim Forman: I think that Frank Smith from Columbus, Mississippi ought to tell us something about some of what some of the people came up and told him after the president was shot.

Frank Smith: Well, there were a lot of different reactions. First of all I went up to the bank about 1:45 pm I guess, right after Kennedy had been shot. I didn't know about it. I hadn't heard about it. I was on my way
downtown in the car. And there was some rumors going on, I didn't believe it when I heard it because I, you know, I accuse the people in the state of Mississippi of doing almost anything. You know I thought they had just created us another joke. And it was meant for me as I walked into the bank.

Well, I wasn't paying very much attention but they were just whispering. And some of the ladies were walking away but there were a couple of guys who seemed to be pretty happy about it. One of them was the guy who had been cashing checks for me and who had sort of appeared the friendly kind of attitude. And I think that is a very, to me it is very significant because I don't know if it is right or not but I see most of the white people that I meet on the streets in Mississippi as potential De La Beckwith's (Medgar Evers' assassin).

And this is one of the things that I think that people ought to, that the whole nation ought to understand. One of things that really amazed me was the fact that everybody started talking about we ought to go to church and we ought to mourn for this crazy fanatic killer who went out and shot the president see. But that is a lot of junk see. I know cops who shoot Negroes every Staurday night, and things like this. It is all right if you go out and shoot a Negro on Saturday night but if you shoot the president that is the worst thing that could happen in the world.

I think it is important that we make up our minds about how we feel about people being murdered. You know and the whole nation, the preachers and the deacons and everybody else. You know if it is all right to shoot a Negro just because he is a sharecropper and doesn't have a million dollars and isn't the president of the United States, then I don't see why the hell you ought to have a raise a lot of saying about people going to church when the president gets shot. It seems to me that there is some contradiction in the attitudes and the way people feel about it.

The Negro community reacted in a very strange way. I went to see a man who was one of our leaders. I wouldn't call him militant and I wouldn't call him an Uncle Tom either...

(Tape ends)