

## “Give Light and the People Will Find A Way”: Ella Baker and Her Radical Democratic Vision for America

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Ella Jo Baker, though she was born in Norfolk, Virginia, grew up in the rural crossroads of Littleton, North Carolina, and became the most important organizer and intellectual behind the African American freedom movements that transformed the South and the United States American in the last half of the twentieth century.

And yet few Americans—even people in her home county of Halifax—recognize her name, though her political legacy continues to shape their lives. More than two decades after her death in 1986, Baker continues to challenge what Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. called the “thingification” of human beings. Though Baker herself would resist any assessment of herself as a great leader—“strong people don’t need strong leaders,” she liked to say--her grassroots vision reshaped our world. “The most powerful person in the struggle of the sixties,” Stokely Carmichael asserted, “was Miss Ella Baker, not Martin Luther King.”

The Baker’s radicalism was as homegrown as Bright Leaf tobacco. Born in 1903, Baker was raised on her grandparents’ farm in Warren County. Her maternal grandmother, Elizabeth, married Mitchell Ross, a dark-skinned rebel who preached the gospel of black freedom in the tumultuous years after Emancipation.

In 1888, the couple made the last payment on a farm where they once had worked as slaves, and soon built a church. The Ross family rooted their lives in a Christian ethos that valued persons over property; Ella Baker inherited this egalitarian vision of the gospel. “Where we lived,” Baker recalled, “there was no sense of hierarchy in terms of those who have, having the right to look down upon... those who did not have.”

Reared among former slaves and Reconstruction radicals, Baker shined like a jewel in the eyes of her adoring grandfather, who loved to lift her onto the seat of his wagon besides him as he went about his work as a preacher and farmer. She would follow Mitchell Ross into that work, in a sense, her stentorian voice making a mark wherever she went, her brilliant tenacity cultivating the African American freedom struggle in the South. Baker became valedictorian of the Class of 1927 at Shaw University, the oldest historically black college in the South and the first to admit women. Her prim demeanor and stylish hats masked an unfashionably independent woman and a champion debater.

Hoping to attend graduate school but having no money to do so, Baker moved to Harlem in 1927 and was amazed at the bustle and bombast of this cosmopolitan “hotbed of radical thinking,” as she put it. Political debates between

Communists, Socialists, Garveyites raged on every street corner. Stepladder speakers like Hubert Harrison, Audley “Queen Mother” Moore, and Cyril V. Briggs captivated crowds at 125<sup>th</sup> Street and Lenox Avenue in the late 1920s and 1930s. Communists like Grace Campbell and Richard B. Moore of the Harlem Tenants League denounced the NAACP. The Universal Negro Improvement Association founded by Marcus Garvey took on all comers. A wide array of West Indian benevolent associations jostled for their own agendas. Black Nationalists of the Harlem Labor Union and the African Patriotic League battled Socialists like Frank Crosswaith of the Negro Labor Committee and A. Philip Randolph of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters. Baker took truth wherever she found it, and usually found a little on all sides.

Baker’s wide-ranging curiosity brought her into the company of nearly all of the clashing factions of dreamers, poets, organizers and politicians. The economic self-sufficiency and race pride of the Garveyites resonated powerfully with the young woman reared on Mitchell Ross’s farm. She read the *Negro World*, and debated politics with Garvey’s many followers and critics in Harlem, though she tended toward the eclectic democratic socialism of the budding cooperative movement. In such an environment, small wonder that Baker put her graduate education on hold and became an organizer.

“By force of circumstances,” George Schuyler, an iconoclastic black intellectual who became Baker’s friend and mentor, wrote of her in 1932, “her ‘post graduate’ work has included domestic service, factory work, and other freelance labors, which ‘courses’ she credits her education.” Baker also spent a semester at Brookwood Labor College in Katonah, New York, a school established by socialists and pacifists to train organizers in democratic and nontraditional theories, histories and ways of speaking and writing.

Baker co-authored an article for the *Crisis* with Marvel Jackson Cooke, the daughter of black Debsian socialists from Minnesota who worked as an assistant for W.E.B. Du Bois. Their study of race, class and gender in the lives of black domestic workers, “The Bronx Slave Market,” explored the humiliations facing women who gathered on street corners at dawn, hoping for a day’s domestic work and sometimes becoming ensnared in prostitution. With Schuyler, Baker helped found the Young Negro Cooperative League, a visionary effort “to prove to ourselves and others than the Negro can and will save himself from economic death” in the early years of the Great Depression,” she wrote.

Working at the Harlem branch public library and frequenting the 137<sup>th</sup> Street YWCA, Baker came into contact with radical women whose lives were redefining black womanhood, among them Pauli Murray of North Carolina, who would become Baker’s lifelong friend. “None of these women would have called themselves feminists in the 1930s,” Murray wrote later, “they were strong

independent personalities who, because of their concerted efforts to rise above the limitations of race and sex, and to help younger women do the same, shared a sisterhood that foreshadowed the revival of the feminist movement in the 1960s.”

In 1936, Baker followed Murray into the New Deal’s Works Progress Administration office in Manhattan, landing a job as a consumer educator in the Worker Education Project. Here she found represented virtually every shade on the spectrum of the American left: communists, socialists, anarchists and independent radicals of all stripes. “[W]henver there was a discussion I’d go,” she said years later. “It didn’t matter if it was all men. I’ve been in many groups where there were men, and maybe I was the only woman, or the only black... I was open to all kind of discussions,” Baker recounted of those years of ferment. “You had every spectrum of radical thinking on the WPA,” Baker recalled. “We had a lovely time. Boy, it was good, stimulating.”

Learning to hold her own in any conversation, Ella Baker became a radical democrat, confronting Stalinists and Republicans with equal fervor. She was particularly drawn into economic cooperatives and other self-help efforts, and often kept company with the follows of Jay Lovestone, who led a CP splinter group. Baker, the affable organizer, generally rejected all dogma. “She would argue her point one day,” one of her companions recalled, “and see you on the street and hug you the next.”

A talented and now seasoned organizer, Baker joined the staff at the national office of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People in 1940 as a field secretary, spending as much as five or six months a year crisscrossing the South, helping communities organize NAACP chapters and serving her vision of a grassroots movement. “I was never working for an organization,” she said years later. “I have always tried to work for a cause. And the cause was bigger than any organization.”

From the outset, there was tension. The conservative NAACP pursued litigation and legislation and had a tendency to put the brakes on mass organizing wherever it occurred. Though its history had seen much grassroots organizing, the NAACP had become bureaucratic and plodding. The national office also resisted any show of leadership by women. But Ella Baker used her talent and influence to encourage a more energetic style of organizing. She remained determined to “place the NAACP and its program on the lips of all the people, the uncouth MASSES included,” as she sniped in a sarcastic letter.

Baker’s calm intelligence and persistent competence lifted her to national director of branches in 1943, even though she battled sexism at every turn. In this role, she managed to create a mass base for the NAACP across the South in only a few years. Baker patched together a quilt of quiet revolt from Virginia to Texas. One of her workshops at the Highlander Folk School in Tennessee, “Give Light

and the People Will Find a Way,” inspired an unknown seamstress named Rosa Parks to imagine organizing a mass movement in Montgomery, Alabama.

Under Baker’s leadership, the NAACP grew roughly 900 percent in three years, from 50,000 members to almost 450,000, becoming a truly national organization that linked small Southern towns with big Northern cities and with each other, too. In North Carolina, she organized the state conference of NAACP branches in 1943, a model that she replicated across the region.

In 1946, disappointed that the NAACP seemed determined to remain a male-dominated, top-down bureaucracy, Baker resigned her position, though she continued to remain an active NAACP life member and local officer. Despite her persistent differences with the national office, Baker was instrumental in building a mass base for the NAACP in the South. These structures laid a solid foundation for the emergence of the modern civil rights movement.

One of Baker’s pillars of belief was that those who want to push for social change, rather than launching a new crusade, should find people already doing the necessary work and support them in it. In the wake of the Montgomery Bus Boycott, Stanley Levison, friend and writer for Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and Bayard Rustin, noted pacifist and one of the best strategists of the movement, joined with Ella Baker to organize a national network called “In Friendship.”

Their contacts with people like Harry Belafonte and Duke Ellington raised money in the North to sustain the Montgomery Improvement Association. When that struggle seemed to fade, In Friendship tried hard to keep effective local organizers in the South alive during a period of violent backlash and economic reprisals against anyone who pushed for African American citizenship rights.

Baker’s beneficiaries were local people that Baker had come to know and respect during her work for the NAACP.

The most important was probably Amzie Moore, the NAACP branch president in Cleveland, Mississippi. A World War II veteran who worked with NAACP field secretary Medgar Evers, Clarksdale branch president Aaron Henry, and Mound Bayou physician T.R.M. Howard. In 1951, these brave few founded the Regional Council on Negro Leadership; in 1955, they had a voting rights rally in all-black Mound Bayou with 13,000 in attendance, depicted in *Ebony* magazine.

During the Emmett Till trial, they ran a Mississippi underground to find and protect African American witnesses to the murder and to get the story of the brutal lynching of a 14-year-old boy out to the world. They and their friends ended up on Klan assassination lists; Dr. Howard eventually fled to Chicago, while a White Citizens Council assassin killed Evers in 1963. Moore and his colleagues experienced persistent economic reprisals and the unsolved murders of many of their friends and colleagues.

They did not simply pray for God's deliverance. "Like most politically active Blacks in the Delta," historian Charles Payne writes, "Moore often carried a gun. His home was well-armed, and at night the area around his house may have been the best-lit spot in Cleveland." Despite his determination to stay alive, Moore might have been forced to leave Mississippi had it not been for the financial assistance of *In Friendship*.

And if Moore had been forced to flee, Ella Baker might never have been able to introduce him to Bob Moses and the young insurgents of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee; as it happened, Moore's house and his networks became their irreplaceable stronghold in Mississippi. "We needed a person to provide contacts on a local basis, to provide an entree for us into the counties," said SNCC field secretary Lawrence Guyot, "and that person was Amzie Moore."

In the years between the Montgomery Bus Boycott and the sit-in movement that gave birth to SNCC, Moore was a key patch in Ella Baker's South-wide quilt.

This came in handy in the late 1950s, when she insisted that Dr. King not allow the impetus of the historic bus boycott to fade. The women of Montgomery, she knew, still had a powerful organization. "These were women who had demonstrated a kind of dedication and who had enough intelligence and had enough contacts with other people to have been useful," Baker said later, but "no role was provided for them." Miss Baker challenged King to build upon the momentum out of Montgomery.

King thought initially that instead a "cooling off period" might be appropriate. "[His] rationale was... that after a big demonstrative type of action, there was a natural letdown and a need for people to sort of catch their breath," Baker recounted. "I don't think that the leadership in Montgomery was prepared to capitalize... on what had come out of the Montgomery situation." Nor did she think that the federal government would act on its own accord, either to enforce the U.S. Supreme Court's rulings or to uphold civil rights legislation. The Little Rock crisis of 1957 soon proved her right. Pressure from below and a new organization were needed.

With the Montgomery Improvement Association in mothballs and King himself indecisive, Ella Baker, Bayard Rustin, and Stanley Levison sat up night after night and devised a new framework for the Southern struggle. African American ministers would become the spear and Dr. King its head. In 1957, only two months after the final triumph in Montgomery, roughly a hundred of the South's best-known black pastors met at Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta to form the Southern Christian Leadership Conference. Though Dr. King preferred that someone other than Baker—a man, certainly, and preferably a minister—serve as executive director, there was no good alternative.

Over King's initial resistance, Baker became the first director. King agreed to the arrangement only if she agreed to work as "acting" director, holding a place for a man to be named later. "I also knew from the beginning that having a woman be an executive director of SCLC was not something that would go over with the male-dominated leadership," Baker explained. "And then of course my personality wasn't right, in the sense that I was not afraid to disagree with the higher authorities. I was not one to say, yes, because it came from Reverend King."

Despite their personal differences, Baker organized a new umbrella network of local affiliates, many of them religious groups like Reverend Fred Shuttlesworth's Alabama Christian Movement for Human Rights in Birmingham. But the fledgling SCLC had not provided her with a salary or an office. "I had to function out of a telephone booth and my pocketbook," she laughed.

Under these narrow and uncertain circumstances, Baker launched the SCLC, whose campaigns would mobilize the black South. The new organization unleashed powerful morality plays in which children faced police dogs and fire hoses. They created global news footage that helped topple Jim Crow, win passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965, and capture the moral imagination of the world.

SCLC would broadcast the gospel in black and white, a new politics of televised storytelling that the world had never seen. SCLC's achievements, however, were not merely the product of inspired oratory at the podium, courageous leadership in the streets, and political imagination in a new world of mass media. Instead, these complex triumphs could not have happened without the slow, patient "spadework" of Ella Baker and her students and untold thousands, most of them women whose names would not make it into the history books but whose labors lifted up a prophet and a movement, local people who knew the organizing traditions of the black South.

Like the NAACP, the SCLC would not live up to Baker's vision of grassroots mobilization. In fact, it failed to accomplish much at all for the first few years of its existence. Political stalemate and segregationist reaction prevailed in the South in the late 1950s. Eventually, after the sit-in movement broke the logjam, SCLC would launch high-profile, short-term crusades in Birmingham, St. Augustine, and Selma. The campaigns lifted up local freedom movements for national and even international audiences but tended to operate as a vehicle for King's ascendant celebrity.

As usual, Baker had a different vision: "Instead of the leader as a person who was supposed to be a magic man," she said, "you could develop individuals who were bound together by a concept that benefited the larger number of individuals and provided an opportunity for them to grow into being responsible for carrying out a program." That program, she insisted, should harness the

energies of women and elevate local leadership. Social change was more about local “spadework,” she said, than national celebrity. “I have always thought that what is needed is the development of people who are interested not in being leaders as much as in developing leadership in others,” Baker wrote later.

SCLC’s hidebound preachers resisted Baker, and accomplished almost nothing until impatient black college students in Greensboro sat down at Woolworth’s lunch counter in 1960. When the sit-ins spread to more than 100 Southern communities within a few weeks, Baker knew that this fresh energy had to be harnessed—and protected from the civil rights establishment. Young people who did not have jobs, institutional commitments and bank loans, whose investment in the status quo was low but whose expectations of life were high, these were the ones who would make real her vision of a grassroots movement in the South. “This may be only a dream of mine,” she confided to a friend, “but I think it can be made real.”

Organizing an Easter weekend conference at Shaw University, Baker helped found the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee. These young shock troops took the South by storm. Baker kept SNCC, pronounced “Snick,” from coming under the control of their elders, Dr. King and the NAACP, in particular. Baker knew that the fearless spirit of youth should lead, not follow, the “adult” organizations. Forty years older than many SNCC members, Baker kept minutes, wrote press releases, raised funds, and served as a one-woman think tank; her philosophy of “participatory democracy” was the most important influence on the young SNCC organizers.

The most important of those young organizers, Bob Moses, grew up in a Harlem housing project, graduated from Hamilton College, and earned a master’s degree in philosophy at Harvard University before becoming a math teacher at Horace Mann High School in New York. Looking at photographs of the sit-ins in the South, Moses recalled, “I could feel myself in the faces of the people they had there on the front pages.” Moses made his way to the SCLC office in Atlanta, where he met Ella Baker. Impressed, Baker selected Moses for an exploratory trip for SNCC to Mississippi in 1961.

Bob Moses got off the bus in Clarksdale, where Aaron Henry and some students met him and directed him to Cleveland, where his long and important friendship with Amzie Moore began. Here in the Mississippi Delta he gained a foothold for SNCC to begin the “spadework” Ella Baker knew was necessary for a mass movement in the South. Moses gave Amzie Moore new hope that something could be done. But Moore gave Moses, and hence SNCC, entrée to something far more vital: a network of local people across Mississippi and a tradition of resistance to white supremacy. Specifically, Moore introduced Moses and SNCC

to the political tradition of which he was a part, which focused on voter registration, not direct action at public facilities.

Cleveland itself was not ripe for a voter registration campaign, Moore believed, and so he directed Moses to launch SNCC's first efforts in McComb, the small county seat of Pike County. Here they met local leaders like C.C. Bryant, Webb Owens, and Aylene Quin, and recruited two young men who became SNCC field secretaries, Hollis Watkins and Curtis Hayes. In nearby Amite County, Moses made alliance with E.W. Steptoe, an NAACP leader of legendary courage and pluck who welcomed SNCC organizers to his home and, as one of his grateful visitors put it, "would open up the night table and there would be a large .45 automatic sitting next to you. Just guns all over the house, under pillows, under chairs. It was just marvelous."

Armed self-defense was simply a fact of life in rural Mississippi but Amzie Moore and a generation of homegrown black activists in the Magnolia State believed that the ballot was the weapon that would free them. Simply put, black Mississippians could count and saw power to address their problems in the electoral process. Consequently, voter registration had been their central political goal for 75 years or so; much as whites might protest, this was not an external agenda pressed upon them by "outside agitators."

Of course, white Mississippians could also count, and saw widespread African American voting as a revolutionary notion. The campaign seemed dangerous to most African Americans in the state and unimaginable to many others. Some thought "dat mess," as many referred to such efforts, would only bring trouble that none of them could handle. And so it took SNCC and their growing statewide networks several years and a lot of slow, patient organizing to persuade black Mississippians to try to register, knowing that it almost certainly meant the loss of their employment, and could easily mean the loss of their lives. But embattled black Mississippi taught SNCC what Ella Baker had meant by "spadework."

Ella Baker's intellectual and political influence had helped the young people of SNCC come to Mississippi with a uniquely democratic social ethos. "If you talk differently, and somehow talk down to people," Baker taught, "they can sense it. They can feel it. And they know whether you are talking *with* them, or talking *at* them, or talking *about* them." Bob Moses and his fellow SNCC organizers took Baker's vision to the South and found that they had carried water to the well. What they found in Mississippi was a rich, rural black culture, rooted in a powerful humanitarian vision and a radically democratic spirit that transcended anything America had offered the young activists. They took the warm, respectful, accepting style and substance of the black South and elevated these folkways to a new level of political relevance.

SNCC toiled in Mississippi for three years, trying to register voters with very limited success. Registrars had a wide array of evasive tactics: literacy tests that asked “How many bubbles in a bar of soap?” or demanded that the would-be registrant recite the Mississippi state constitution. Violence against SNCC workers was pervasive, and there was no protection from law enforcement or the federal government. When Herbert Lee, a black dairy farmer in Amite County, helped the SNCC organizers in his community, a white state legislator, E. H. Hurst, shot him dead in the presence of a number of witnesses. A coroner’s jury refused to indict Hurst; the only person willing to testify, a black man named Louis Allen, was later murdered, too.

By the end of 1963, Moses and his organizers had only registered less than five per cent of the state’s black residents. SNCC organized a “Freedom Vote” in 1963 to demonstrate that African Americans in Mississippi would vote if given the opportunity. Ella Baker worked alongside Fannie Lou Hamer, Amzie Moore, and other local people to make it all happen. Allard Lowenstein, a peripatetic white liberal organizer, persuaded SNCC to let him bring roughly a hundred volunteers from Yale and Stanford.

The following summer, the Council of Federated Organizations (COFO), which comprised the NAACP, SNCC, and CORE, brought volunteers from across the country to support the Voter Education Project in Mississippi. It was called Freedom Summer. Some SNCC staff opposed the wholesale importation of white volunteers, saying that white organizers might try to dominate the voter education project and that they brought more danger from white terrorists than their labors could be worth. The whole concept, some argued, violated the SNCC philosophy of cultivating local grassroots leadership. But Bob Moses and others saw it differently. “If we’re trying to break down segregation,” Fannie Lou Hamer argued, “we can’t be segregated ourselves.”

Baker approved of the project and, according to Mary King, used her special intellectual and political influence to persuade SNCC that Freedom Summer should go forward. Baker’s remarkable style of listening was one source of her sway with SNCC. “I watched as Miss Baker, without being instructive or judgmental, and without even offering her opinion, but using only her nondirective approach,” Mary King recalled, “thus gave the final push in support of the plan for the summer project.”

In many respects, though Baker would never have expressed it so crudely, violence was part of the plan. None of the Freedom Summer Project’s organizers believed the summer would be peaceful or safe for the volunteers. “We made sure that we had the children, the sons and daughters, of some very powerful people in this country,” Dave Dennis of CORE recalled. “If there were gonna take some deaths to do it, the death of a white college student would bring on more

attention...” If the law would not protect black people in Mississippi, some SNCC folks argued, then they would bring those whom the law did protect—affluent white people—to Mississippi. “We thought it would bring federal protection,” said Lawrence Guyot.

The Freedom Summer Project brought several hundred volunteers from colleges across the country, most of them white and forty percent of them women. Ella Baker served as a logistical coordinator and worked on funding, housing and publicity. The volunteers trained for a few days in Oxford, Ohio before setting out for the Deep South, during which time they heard that three civil rights workers from the project were missing and presumed dead. Every single one of the volunteers decided to stay with the project nonetheless. One diarist described her fellow volunteers as “a strange combination of children headed for summer camp and soldiers going off to war.”

White Mississippians, too, geared up for war, fearful that their state faced communist invaders who would besiege and befoul everything they held dear, including their wives, mothers, and daughters. Guns and ammunition and memberships in the Ku Klux Klan and the White Citizens Council moved faster than free beer at an Ole Miss homecoming.

Andrew Goodman, a white Northern volunteer, had driven down to Mississippi down with James Chaney, a black native Mississippian, and Michael Schwerner, a CORE staff member. On June 16, the trio met with black citizens at a church near Philadelphia, Mississippi. The Ku Klux Klan soon came and burned the church in retaliation for hosting the meeting. Returning to the scene of the church burning, the three civil rights workers were arrested by the Neshoba County Sheriff’s Department, who called the Klan and released the three young men later that night. Deputy Sheriff Cecil Price, who had arrested them earlier, followed them and pulled them over, and a waiting KKK mob drove them to a remote area and killed them, burying their bodies in an earthen dam.

Front pages around the world flashed the tragic news. Many white commentators in Mississippi speculated that the disappearances were a politically motivated hoax, but the COFO staff and volunteers knew the young men were dead. When the reality of the murders hit home around the country, the public reaction to the killings of privileged white college students—as opposed to Herbert Lee or Louis Allen or any of the many other black Mississippians assassinated for advocating racial equality in the previous decade--was almost too much to bear.

President Lyndon sent search teams to look for the bodies of the three young men, which turned up at least three other black bodies while they looked for the murdered organizers; one, a headless black body wearing a CORE tee-shirt, appeared to be about 14 years old. On top of those deaths, the summer of 1964 Mississippi saw 67 churches burned, 80 beatings, and several other murders; for

many years, law enforcement would not even pursue, and most of the crimes would never be solved.

In the spring prior to that tumultuous summer of 1964, black Mississippians and the COFO organizers decided to form an independent, movement-led political party called the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party. (MFDP) Excluded from the regular Democratic Party, African Americans in Mississippi decided to select their own delegates, operating within the rules of the Democratic Party in order to credibly demand recognition at the Democratic national convention in Atlantic City in August. Ella Baker strongly supported the MFDP challenge and saw it as a promising organizing tool and political gambit. This grassroots party would mobilize local people on their own behalf and encouraged them to organize themselves against their own dilemmas, in accordance with the philosophy of participatory democracy that Baker already had engraved upon SNCC. The MFDP would not only address their own problems but also create a new sense of self-affirmation and self-determination among impoverished black people in Mississippi. On the other hand, Baker believed, the MFDP challenge would either work in practical political terms, dislodging the all-white Mississippi delegation in Atlantic City whose selection had been far from democratic, or else it would reveal the deep corruption of mainstream American liberalism and point the movement toward other alternatives.

Ella Baker served as keynote speaker on August 6, 1964, when the MFDP gathered in Jackson to elect its delegates to the Democratic national convention. Two days earlier, the authorities had unearthed the bodies of Chaney, Goodman and Schwerner in Neshoba County. Baker tenderly eulogized the three young men and urged their friends and families to follow in their brave footsteps. But she angrily denounced the clearly lesser value the larger society placed on African American lives. “Until the killing of black mothers’ sons is as important as the killing of white mothers’ sons,” she declared, “we who believe in freedom cannot rest.” And Baker herself barely rested at all. That summer, she spoke, lobbied, and organized tirelessly for the MFDP, taking a post as director of the MFDP’s Washington office.

At the Atlantic City convention, the MFDP delegation hoped to unseat the segregated Mississippi delegation, which refused even to support the candidacy of incumbent President Lyndon B. Johnson. In large measure because President Johnson signed the Civil Rights Act of 1964 that summer, the Democratic Party regulars from Mississippi preferred Republican candidate Barry Goldwater, who opposed the measure to outlaw segregation in public accommodations and grant black Southerners the right to vote. Even so, the national party apparatus denied official status to the MFDP. Through political chicanery, Lyndon Johnson and Hubert Humphrey pushed through a compromise that seated two members of the

MFDP delegation, Aaron Henry and Ed King, as honored guests, but refused to recognize any of the MFDP representatives as legitimate delegates. “We didn’t come all this way for no two seats,” huffed Fannie Lou Hamer, who had horrified President Johnson and riveted the nation by telling the story of her beating in the Winona jail by Mississippi law enforcement.

The failure of the Democratic Party to support the MFDP challenge widened the growing fissure between the black freedom movement and its liberal white allies. “In the final analysis,” historian Barbara Ransby observes, “what appeared to be SNCC’s and the MFDP’s plea for inclusion into mainstream politics actually became the watershed that signaled SNCC’s departure from the liberal fold toward much more radical directions.”

The Atlantic City challenge, though it left a bad taste in many mouths, politicized many poor black people in Mississippi, developed new grassroots leaders, and lifted the movement’s concerns to national attention. It changed the rules by which the Democratic Party selected its delegates in the future, requiring a much more representative selection process. But the MFDP delegation felt completely betrayed by the white liberal political establishment. Ella Baker, of course, saw this as an opportunity to develop a more radically creative and independent politics.

While the years after Freedom Summer would see SNCC almost unable to digest its successes or its failures, the children of Ella Baker had achieved remarkable things. Under her influence more than anyone else’s, SNCC became the most interracial, the most democratic, and the most vibrant civil rights organization of the postwar era.

The NAACP’s mass base and the SCLC’s very existence were also attributable to Baker. Whether one regards SNCC, the NAACP, or SCLC as the most decisively influential movement organization—and there is a case for all three, and for CORE, too--Ella Baker deserves great credit for the influence of all three of these organizations in the Southern struggle. Baker would likely resist taking any credit and try to frame the question in a less dogmatic way. “She taught me one of the most important lessons I have learned in life,” SNCC’s Mary King recalled: “There are many legitimate and effective avenues for social change and there is no single right way. She helped me see that the profound changes we were seeking in the social order could not be won without multiple strategies. She encouraged me to avoid being doctrinaire.”

Baker’s homegrown philosophy of cultivating local leadership and her faith in the wisdom of the black poor came from her North Carolina upbringing and set her sharply apart from the conventional wisdom of her day--and ours. Its origins were as various as the aspirations and resistance of the enslaved black South, the freedom vision of Reconstruction-era militants, the black Baptist women’s

movement of the early twentieth century, the eclectic nationalism and internationalism of Harlem in the Great Depression, and American traditions of democratic radicalism. The mass base that Ella Baker built for the NAACP made possible the decisive courtroom victories like *Brown v. Board of Education*.

SCLC's campaigns in Birmingham and Selma won the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965. And the young insurgents of SNCC overran the armies of segregation and remade American democracy. Without Ella Baker's efforts as an organizer and intellectual, two of these organizations probably would not have existed and all of these battles might have ended differently. Her radical democratic vision, first forged on her grandparents' North Carolina farm, blended African American self-reliance, the distinctive Afro-Christianity of the black South and Southern populism.

Though popular white backlash against the freedom movement lifted Southern demagogues like George Wallace and Jesse Helms, their conservative movement failed to uproot the blossoming of American democracy that Baker nurtured. The backlash had its own enduring power, but nothing could turn back the efforts of the people and organizations Ella Baker had cultivated in the fields of her homeland. Baker died in 1986, but her work lives on at the grassroots of American life. At a time when unaccountable corporations virtually dictate public policy, when candidates for public office are measured by the pile of money they can suck up, ordinary citizens often feel powerless. But Ella Baker's life reminds us that "we who believe in freedom cannot rest," as Baker told the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party in 1964—and that we can sometimes prevail, too, if we don't forget our way home.

Note: This is an interpretive essay rather than a work of original scholarship. It began, in fact, as a book review of Barbara Ransby's pathbreaking biography, [Ella Baker and the Black Freedom Movement](#), (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003). My sources, in rough order of their importance to the content here, include Ransby's excellent book first and foremost, but also the work of other scholars: Charles Payne, [I've Got the Light of Freedom: The Organizing Tradition and the Mississippi Freedom Struggle](#), (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995); Lynne Olson, [Freedom's Daughters](#), (New York: Scribner, 2001); John Dittmer, [Local People: The Struggle for Civil Rights in Mississippi](#), (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1994); Marilyn De Laure, "Planting Seeds of Change: Ella Baker's Radical Rhetoric," *Women's Studies in Communication*, Vol. 34, No. 1 (Spring 2008): 1-22; Katherine Charron, [Freedom's Teacher: the Life of Septima Clark](#), (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009).