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BLOODY LOWNDES

Civil Rights and Black Power in Alabama's Black Belt

By Hasan Kwame Jeffries

“Jeffries has written the book historians of the black freedom movement have been waiting for. His beautifully written account rescues Lowndes County from its role as merely a backdrop to ‘Black Power,’ to being one of the key battlegrounds for democracy in the United States. Here are local people whose local struggles have contributed mightily to the kind of politics we desperately need in the Obama age—the politics of ‘freedom democracy,’ a politics born in Reconstruction, rooted in social justice and human rights, and honed in the Alabama cotton belt.”—**Robin D. G. Kelley**, author of *Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination*

“Jeffries is at the top of a very short list of ‘young lions’ paving the way for a new interpretation of the history of the Civil Rights-Black Power movement. His work on the legendary Lowndes County Freedom Organization is outstanding in terms of the breadth and carefulness of research, depth and clarity of conceptualization, organization and presentation of material, and the originality and the wealth of the results.”—**Komozi Woodard**, author of *A Nation within a Nation*

Early in 1966, African Americans in rural Lowndes County, Alabama, aided by activists from the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), established an all-black, independent political party called the Lowndes County Freedom Organization (LCFO). The group, whose ballot symbol was a snarling black panther, was formed in part to protest the barriers to black enfranchisement that had for decades kept every single African American of voting age off the county's registration books. Even after the passage of the Voting Rights Act, most African Americans in this overwhelmingly black county remained too scared even to try to register. Their fear stemmed from the county's long, bloody history of whites retaliating against blacks who strove to exert the freedom granted to them after the Civil War.

Amid this environment of intimidation and disempowerment, African Americans in Lowndes County viewed the LCFO as the best vehicle for concrete change. Their radical experiment in democratic politics inspired black people throughout the country, from SNCC organizer Stokely Carmichael who used the Lowndes County program as the blueprint for Black Power, to California-based activists Bobby Seale and Huey P. Newton, who adopted the LCFO panther as the namesake for their new, grassroots organization: the Black Panther Party for Self Defense. This party and its adopted symbol went on to become the national organization of black militancy in the 1960s and 1970s, yet long-obscured is the crucial role that Lowndes County—historically a bastion of white supremacy—played in spurring black activists nationwide to fight for civil and human rights in new and more radical ways.

Drawing on an impressive array of sources ranging from government documents to personal interviews with Lowndes County residents and SNCC activists, Hasan Kwame Jeffries tells, for the first time, the remarkable full story of the Lowndes County freedom struggle and its contribution to the larger civil rights movement. Bridging the gaping hole in the literature between civil rights organizing and Black Power politics, ***BLOODY LOWNDES*** offers a new paradigm for understanding the civil rights movement.

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