COMMENTARY

A sequel of injustice 60 years in the making

For perspective on the 2024 DNC, we mustn't look to 1968, but rather 1964

By RANN MILLER

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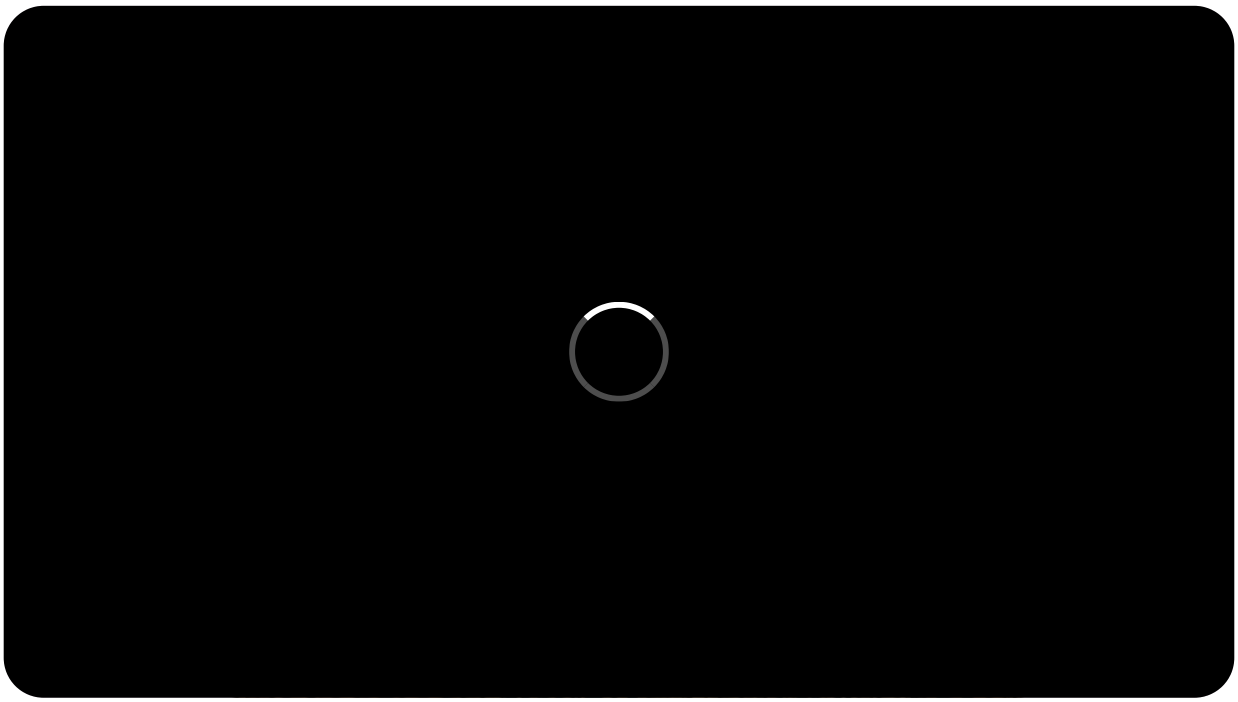
'Uncommitted' Democratic delegates from several US states outside the United Center during the 2024 Democratic National Convention, in Chicago on August 22, 2024. | Demonstrators in support of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party (MFDP), outside Boardwalk Hall during the 1964 Democratic National Convention, Atlantic City, New Jersey, August 25, 1964. (Photo illustration by Salon/Getty Images)

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Democrats did their due diligence and achieved a "united" convention. President Biden's decision to no longer seek re-election could have facilitated a contested convention. However, Democrats — starting with Biden — quickly got behind Vice President Kamala Harris as the Democratic nominee. That was the test before the convention. The test in Chicago was Palestine.

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The Biden Administration’s complicity in Israel’s genocide in Gaza and the vice president’s ambiguous posture on the campaign trail made for a potential confrontation between moderates and progressives. However, congressional progressives, from AOC to Bernie Sanders, have toed the party line and have backed the Harris Campaign.

Pro-Palestinian uncommitted activists' protests outside the United Center in Chicago were smaller than advertised and largely ignored. As for those uncommitted activists on the inside—the thirty delegates as a result of voting uncommitted in the Democratic primary for president—they were delayed… only to be denied.

Uncommitted activists were given space to host a panel discussion with Palestinian doctors to explain conditions in Gaza hospitals. They also were allowed to hold meetings with party

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officials. But were denied the opportunity to speak on the main stage during primetime after earlier consideration. Space was given to Jon Polin and Rachel Goldberg, Jewish parents of an American hostage of Hamas—with the support of uncommitted activists.

The irony of hosting a convention in the home of the largest Palestinian population in the nation—Chicago—and denying the voice of Palestinians is not lost in this moment. In response, uncommitted activists engaged in a sit-in outside the convention.

All the partying and falling in line to show a display of strength, diversity, and unity does anything but. There is tyranny amongst Democrats because of their inaction—if not outright support—for tyranny in Palestine by way of occupation, apartheid, and genocide.

The political tension leading up to and during convention week reminds some of the 1968 DNC. Democrats convened in the shadow of the assassinations of RFK and MLK, as well as protests of the Vietnam War, with their incumbent choosing to abandon a re-election bid. However, the attempted silencing of uncommitted activists at the convention is a reminder of the DNC of 1964.

In 1964, the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party (MFDP) was founded—by Fannie Lou Hamer, Ella Baker, Bob Moses, and James W. Wright—to counter the white supremacist politics of the Mississippi Democratic Party. The idea was birthed from Black voter registration and voting initiatives by the Council of Federated Organizations (COFO). MFDP organized a state convention to send electors to the 1964 DNC in Atlantic City, NJ; representing the scores of disenfranchised Black voters in their state. The convention was held on the backdrop of the murders of Michael Schwerner, Andrew Goodman, and James Chaney; killed near Philadelphia, Mississippi for working to register Black people to vote.

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Further inspired by their murders, the MFDP resolved to send their electors to be seated in the general assembly of electors at the DNC.

Once in Atlantic City, the MFDP challenged the validity of the Mississippi Democratic delegation participation in 1964 due to Jim Crow policies that disenfranchised Black voters. The Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), and the NAACP all worked behind the scenes to get MFDP delegates a seat at the convention.

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At the convention, Ms. Hamer gave impassioned testimony of the brutality of anti-Black racism inflicted upon her simply for attempting to vote. Her testimony, told to the DNC credentials committee, was televised for all of America to hear. They heard how Ms. Hamer was made to leave her home for registering to vote. They heard of the many Black folks whose homes rang with gunshots on account of her registration attempt.

They heard that Ms. Hamer was taken to jail. They heard how the highway patrolman told Ms. Hamer, “We are going to make you wish you was dead.” They heard that two incarcerated Black men were forced to beat Ms. Hamer with a blackjack until they physically couldn’t; in the same jail where Medgar Evers was murdered. They finally heard these words from Ms. Hamer:

“All of this is on account we want to register, to become first-class citizens, and if the freedom Democratic Party is not seated now, I question America, is this America, the land of the free

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and the home of the brave where we have to sleep with our telephones off of the hooks because our lives be threatened daily because we want to live as decent human beings, in America?"

None of it moved the committee.

Democrats would not allow the MFDP a seat at the convention.

President Lyndon Johnson was fearful of losing the support of the Mississippi Democrats. So like any good liberal, he suggested a compromise: The DNC would provide seats for two MFDP members in exchange for seating the all-white Mississippi delegation. MLK agreed with the compromise, but Ms. Hamer made clear: "We didn't come all this way for no two seats, cause all of us is tired."

Oregon Congresswoman Edith Green offered her take on a compromise: seating loyal democrats from both parties. The Mississippi Democrats rejected that and departed from the convention after all the talk of compromise. All but three to five of the sixty-eight got up and left the convention, to which MFDP delegates took their seats with passes donated to them. The next day, the party returned to find the seats removed. Their response was to stand where the seats were and sing freedom songs.

Sadly, Democrats have a history of attempting to shut down freedom fighters and justice seekers.

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While the Democrats of 2024 aren't the Southern Democrats of 1964, they've forgotten their history because were they aware of it, maybe, they wouldn't have repeated it. There is one Democrat aware of history; Democratic State Rep. Ruwa Romman, of Georgia, who is a Palestinian American. In the speech she was prepared to give at the convention, she referenced an awareness and respect for the history that informs the moment:

"For 320 days, we've stood together, demanding to enforce our laws on friend and foe alike to reach a ceasefire, end the killing of Palestinians, free all the Israeli and Palestinian hostages, and to begin the difficult work of building a path to collective peace and safety… They'll say this is how it's always been, that nothing can change. But remember Fannie Lou Hamer—shunned for her courage, yet she paved the way for an integrated Democratic Party. Her legacy lives on, and it's her example we follow."

Uncommitted activists seem to recognize the mighty shoulders they stand on to secure justice for Palestinians and justice for all. The Harris Campaign and Democrats stand on the memory of the Trump Presidency. Thus, they walk the tightrope to salvage every vote from each constituency under their tent. A second Trump presidency isn't optimal, but attempting to silence dissent isn't a show of unity. It is the sort of fear that fuels a Trump election in the first place.

Howard Thurman said, "There is one overmastering problem that the socially and politically disinherited always face: under what terms is survival possible?" The DNC of 2024 leaves an equally perilous question for us to consider: for the socially and politically disinherited, under what terms is survival too good an outcome?

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Democrats may learn the consequences of their answer in November.

By **RANN MILLER**

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