

“Until I Am Free, You Are Not Free Either,”

*Speech Delivered at the University of Wisconsin, Madison, Wisconsin,
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Of her scores of speaking destinations, perhaps none was visited more frequently by Fannie Lou Hamer than Madison, Wisconsin. Not only was Madison home to many progressives within a progressive state, but Hamer received significant and regular support for her Freedom Farm ventures from Measure for Measure. The organization was founded in 1965 by Madison residents, who had traveled south to forge contacts with rural blacks in Mississippi and Arkansas. Hamer first met with Measure for Measure members during a visit to Madison as part of her Office of Economic Opportunity training in 1966. In 1968, the organization brought thirty-five hundred pounds of clothes to Ruleville, and later in the same year they raised five thousand dollars to help residents of Sunflower County purchase food stamps. Measure for Measure would also be a frequent contributor to Hamer's Freedom Farm Cooperative as it sought to purchase land, farm animals, seeds for crops, and farm machinery.

Before a predominantly white audience at the University of Wisconsin, one that had likely heard her speak before, Hamer strays from her autobiographical calling cards of August 31, 1962, and June 9, 1963. Instead she ranges broadly across several topics, including birth control, black power and black separatism, the story of Freedom Farm, foreign policy, federal bureaucracies, the interrelationship of all classes and races, and the importance of young people to a progressive political agenda. Of note also is the relative absence of religion, specifically the interanimation of movement goals with Old and New Testament parallels. Such an omission was not new for Hamer: often when speaking before northern progressive audiences, she would de-emphasize her literalist and occasionally apocalyptic reading of Scripture.

For one of the first times in her speechmaking, Hamer calls attention to her manner of delivery: she did not work from a manuscript because she liked to

“tell it like it is” to “folk” like her in the audience. A detailed manuscript was a fiction, an elaborate and artificial rhetorical gesture that inhibited her ability to connect with audiences. Public speaking was always personal and imbued with the spiritual for Fannie Lou Hamer. As someone who had spent all of her religious life in the rural southern black church, she understood intimately the power of the impromptu word to connect with listeners—white and black. As such, while a manuscript might mask some of her educational limitations, it would also profoundly interfere with her ability to inspire and move total strangers to action.

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Thank you very much, Martha Smith. I don't know whether I'll have to holler or not because I am just used to talking loud. So, I don't have too much trouble having to carry my voice. But with this kind of introduction—Martha Smith is a very good friend of mine. I remember going on educational television with Martha here about two years ago here at the university in Wisconsin and honest to God this woman tickled me to death. You know, I had all kinds of trouble, but she just brought all of that out and for a while I could relax, just doing this show with Martha Smith. I would like to say this a beautiful audience out here to me this afternoon because I always like people. A couple of weeks ago I was doing a show in New York City for NBC on the role of a black woman and somebody asked a question during the time we was on this panel: how did I feel talking to a lot of people?

I said, “I feel like I always feel because I know out there in front of me is just some more folk,” you know. So, you don't have to worry about other people—no, you get up and tell them the truth.

Now, you might be expecting me to have a long essay written down and I would have to use my glasses every time—[indicating] this and this way. But I don't carry around a manuscript because it's too much trouble. I'm just up here to rap and tell you what it is and to tell it like it is.

As Martha said, I was born fifty-three years ago in Montgomery County. Now Mississippi, you heard about this twister the other week, but it was already a disaster area before the twister. And it's been a disaster area fifty-three years and I know people is older than me said it's been a disaster area before then. Now I was born fifty-three years ago to Mr. and Mrs. Jim Townsend. And I am the twentieth child. And so help me God, I respect my mother so much that they didn't have them birth control pills because if they had them I probably wouldn't be standing here today. So as I made that narrow escape

to be here, I fight for the other kids too to give them a chance. Because if you give them a chance they might come up being Fannie Lou Hamers and something else.

But during the time I was a child my education was very limited because I had to start work when I was six years old. I remember one day I was playing beside a gravel road and the landowner asked me could I pick cotton and I told him I didn't know and he told me he wanted me to go to the field that week and pick thirty pounds of cotton. I went to the field and I did pick thirty pounds of cotton, but the next week I was tasked sixty pounds of cotton and by the time I was thirteen years old I was picking two and three hundred pounds of cotton.

My family was some of the poorest people that was in the state of Mississippi, and we were sharecroppers. Now sharecroppers is really something; it's out of sight. Number one, what I found since I been old enough, it always had too many "its" in it. Number one, you had to plow it. Number two, you had to break it up. Number three, you had to chop it. Number four, you had to pick it. And the last, number five, the landowner took it. So, this left us with nowhere to go; it left us hungry. Because my family would make sixty and seventy bales of cotton and we would pick all of the cotton and then, after we was finished picking the cotton, we would sometimes come out in debt. We never had so many days in my life that we had cornbread and we had milk and sometimes bread and onions. So, I know what the pain of hunger is about.

My father and mother finally got enough money out of one crop to buy some livestock when I was about thirteen years old. And a man went to our lot one night—and he wasn't black—and he take about a gallon of Paris Green and stirred it up in our livestock's food and killed everything we had. At that point my parents had bought three mules and two cows. Ella, Bird, and Henry was the mules and Maude and Della was the two cows. And they killed everything that we had.

I used to watch my mother when she would come out of the fields and she would have a big bundle of things by her side and she would mend our clothes over and over. And I watched her when she would wear things that was so heavy after she had mended them time after time looked like she would have trouble carrying them. At first I couldn't understand why this just always happened to black people so I asked my mother one day how come we wasn't white. The reason I asked her that was because we worked all the time, the white folks never worked and they had everything. Now, this was really curious to me, as it still is. So my mother told me: number one, she wanted me to remember to respect myself as a black child and as I got older she told me to

respect myself as a black woman. And she said, “Maybe you don’t understand what I am talking about now, but one day if you respect yourself other people will have to respect you.”

My grandmother was a slave—Liza Bramlett—Liza Gober Bramlett. She had twenty boys and three girls. And I know what has happened to us in the past, but after I become about thirteen years old and find out how mean that people could be to people, I said that I was going to do something about what was happening in Mississippi. So that’s the reason I become involved in politics in 1964.

But it had been other things in my life that I had done that some of the white people don’t know that I’d done yet. Because number one: I always had to work at their house. So they would tell me that I couldn’t eat with them or I couldn’t bathe in their tub so what I would do was eat before they would eat and bathe when they was gone. I used to have a real ball knowing they didn’t want me in their tub and just relaxing in that bubble bath. Then I would fill up with everything they put on them and walk out and they couldn’t smell mine because they had the same thing on them. So when they was saying that I couldn’t eat with them, it would tickle me because I would say to myself, “Baby, I eat first!” And one of the other things I’d done when I was a kid and after I had grown to be a woman—you know we had to wash, Martha, you know how people had to carry clothes home to wash for the white people—and if they had a dance in fifty miles, I wore the best dress because I wore their clothes. You know—we had—I was rebelling in the only way that I could rebel.

So, what I am saying to you, white America, please don’t say what black people can’t do because some of the things we’ve been already doing. The sad thing that has been in the whole country is what white America done to us and how we can forgive. When I think about the question that comes up so often about how six million Jews was destroyed under Hitler’s administration, I felt a kinship because it wasn’t six million of my people destroyed; it was forty million of my people destroyed as they was bringing my ancestors here on the slave ships of Africa.

When I think about the crime that’s been committed against us, as human beings and as people, I can forgive *easy* for a lot of things, but when white America taken my name, that was a crime. I went sometime ago to Charleston, South Carolina, and I looked at the documents there and some of the documents there would say—would call the name of the person and said, “She doesn’t have any education, but she’s a good breeder: twenty-five dollars.” I saw where my people had been sold as things and not human beings.

And I think about some of our past history when you never taught us, white America, that it was a black doctor that learned to save blood plasma to give a blood transfusion—you never taught that in the institution. And you never taught us that the first man to die in the Revolution was Crispus Attucks, another black man. And so many other things that I found out.

And so many things that I found out about the church—if you really want to see some hypocrites—if you *really* want to see some hypocrites, go at eleven o'clock church service throughout the country. Not only in the black churches, but in the white churches. While they would tell us, and tell you as kids, “Well, those people are all right, but just don't bring them home with you.” But the contribution that we have made in the past—and we know as well as you know—that this country was built on the blood and the sweat of black people. And all we are saying to you today—now, what you have done in the past, you've done that—but we can't let you get away with just trying to wipe us out as human beings.

And some of the black folks have got so confused they talking about setting up seven states with us, which I refuse to let them do. Setting up seven states with us and one night the White Citizens' Council, and the Klu Klux Klan, and the Birchers, which you have here, could wipe us out. And I am not going in seven states by ourselves, we plan to be in this country with you whether you want us here or not. And we plan to make this a better place for all the citizens, both black, red, whites, and browns and we want you to understand this.

I never been hung up in all of my work in just fighting for the black. I've never been hung up in that because I know that a lot of black people have given their lives. But I also know it was people like Andy Goodman, Michael Schwerner, and James Chaney that gave their lives in the state of Mississippi so that all of us would have a better chance. And when they died there they didn't just die for me, but they died for you because your freedom is shackled in chains to mine. And until I am free, you are not free either. And if you think you are free, you drive down to Mississippi with your Wisconsin license plate and you will see what I am talking about.

These are the kind of changes that we have to have and these are the kind of changes we are going about. In 1964, when we went to the Democratic Convention in Atlantic City, and challenged the seating of the representatives of the delegation from Mississippi, when they turned us down and told us to accept two votes at large, I told them at that time, sixty-eight people was there in that delegation and all of us are tired. In 1968, we came back to Chicago and we won our seats. Sixty-four I was in the convention—out of the

convention—wishing I could go in. In 1968, I was in there wishing I could get out. I composed a song when I was there: “Jingle Bells, Machine Gun Shells, Convention All the Way!” Because I had never in my life seen in the land of the free and the home of brave—which we have translated in Mississippi to the land of the tree and the home of the grave—I had never seen a convention that had to be held with fixed bayonets [inaudible]. That mean, they would stick you if you stand there and shoot you if you run.

I was in that convention and I made, I made some of them guys they had trailing me, I made their lives miserable. I don’t know what he was an FBI, a Central Intelligence Agent, or what in the hell he was, but he was there. See, what happened all my life, I’ve been behind white people and I watched them. See, that’s where you made your mistake, white America. You put us behind you and we watched you and now we know you and you don’t know us. So, I watched this guy while he be watching me and whenever I got ready to dodge him, I’d put this dodge to him. And they must have told him, “You better not let her get out of your sight,” because this little man had some of the saddest little blue eyes, and he’d be jumping through that convention and I’d be standing there laughing. And after I would let him go through total hell, I would step out where I could see him and you could see him just relieve all over.

You would have to be in that convention to know what we are faced with today when we say “with the people, for the people, and by the people.” That’s a lie. It’s “with a handful, for a handful, by a handful.” Because I know sometime when some of the votes would come up and they said all in favor of so and so happening say “aye.” Ten people would say “aye,” there were a few say “nay,” half a million said “no,” and they say “ha, ayes have it” and so it’s carried. Some convention. But we had to give up because with the young people of today, we are going to make democracy a reality for all of the people.

And I don’t want you telling me to go back to Africa, unless you going back where you come from. I got a note one day telling me to go back to Africa and ever since that time—it’s been three times a week, I say it, when I am in a white audience—I say we’ll make a deal: after you send all the Koreans back to Korea, the Chinese back to China, the Jewish people back to Jerusalem, the Koreans back to Korea, and you give the Indians their land back and you get on the *Mayflower* from which you come, [inaudible] right? You don’t agree, but as we all here on borrowed land, then we have to figure out how we’re going to make things right for *all* the people of this country.

And we know what has happened in the past with food stamps, welfare, and all of this kind of stuff. And it is not only in the South—it’s up South and down South—where our people have suffered from malnutrition. One of my

daughters stayed in the hospital six weeks, suffering from malnutrition. And I remember other things with other people where kids literally starved almost to death. And then I start traveling throughout this country to try to do something about the problem. So, I would come to Madison, Wisconsin, New York City, California, and all over the country trying to raise funds to purchase food stamps. But the real crime, I think it's a crime, that if a man and woman is hungry, that they have to pay for the food stamps when thousands of people in the state of Mississippi have made less than five hundred dollars in 1970.

So one day, a man called and said he had some land. He had forty acres of land and he wanted to sell the forty acres. So I called a very small organization here in Madison, Wisconsin, called Measure for Measure. Martha Smith is a part of that organization. Jeff Goldstein, Sarah, "Broccoli." And it's a small organization, but I called them and told them about the forty acres of land. And if we could get the forty acres of land to grow our own vegetables, and to grow our cabbage, and to grow our pork, we could wipe out hunger in Sunflower County. I called another friend of mine was at Harvard University—in charge of the political science there—and he also started raising money too. We finally succeeded in getting forty acres of land. And this land is organized and founded in '69 is called Freedom Farms Cooperative. Last summer we fed a lot of people there, but then we needed more land. So it was a man told me one day that he would sell 640 acres of land.

[break in tape]

And, you know, it was just like I'd been hearing in the past, that "ah, there ain't nothing to that, we might get two or three dollars, but we'll have to try." Last April, we were able to put \$20,000 up for the auction on the 640 acres of land. Then on the fourteenth of January 1971, we finished the down payment of \$65,500 on 640 acres of land and we had enough from that same march out of Madison, Buffalo, and Milwaukee to do that. And we also have about sixty-eight people that's living in decent homes. We put the down payment on that land. So now what we plan to do is to grow our own vegetables, is to grow our own cattle, and to grow our own pork and have a hundred houses in that area. Now it's no way on earth that we can gain any kind of political power unless we have some kind of economic power.

And all of the qualifications that you have to have to become a part of the co-op is you have to be poor. This is the first kind of program that has ever been sponsored in this country in letting local people do their thing themselves. Because I've seen government-funded programs with cooperatives and after you get through making the proposal with a stack of paper this high and after you finish paying all the administration from twenty-five thousand

dollars to twelve thousand dollars it would be exactly two dollars to go to the program. The only person that's paid at this point is the secretary.

And you can't—you don't—tell me that you can't change a man's mind by not hating. We have gone through all kinds of pressure, but I refuse to hate a man because he hate me. Because if I hate you because you hate me, it's no different: both of us are miserable. And we going to finally have something in common: hating. But as a result of what I can give of myself that I can love you if you hate me, we have poor whites that's coming into this organization and we're going to feed not only the black people of Sunflower County, but all of the people that's hungry regardless of color.

And the young people are the people that's made this possible for us. You know, I just about fell out with all of the people my age—I am fifty-three—and most of them my age are hopeless cases. But I am fifty-three, but I think nineteen. I catch myself sometimes when I am talking to the young people and they're talking about how old people can't relate to them, I said, "You're not kidding. I don't understand what's wrong with those people!" Because I am not going back with every step, I am going forward.

And it's been a sad thing that happened in Mississippi recently. We had a twister that hit several counties in the state of Mississippi. The Red Cross came and after they was there two days I told them, "If I go to Heaven and see the Red Cross sign, I will tell the administration to let me go back home." Because they were a hopeless case. People are suffering because it didn't just only kill people, but it's people now that want to put the trailer houses where they don't have any kind of sewage.

But you got to care enough to do something because what you do here in Madison, Wisconsin, at this university—you are not only doing this for us in the South, but you're doing it for yourself. I noticed what was happening with the Young World Development with the walk, the walk that would be held on the eighth and ninth of May. I see this as a opportunity of bridging the gap between young people. Bridging the gap because not only do I think that white children and young white men and young white women should walk, but I think it's the responsibility of the black people to walk here, too. And if they walk throughout this country with 350 walks in this country and 40 other countries funding it—sponsoring the walk it would be millions of people walking throughout the country—out the world. Because one thing I found out: that it's not only hungry in the state of Mississippi, but two-thirds of the people in the world are hungry. And we have to be concerned. And you have to be concerned here. Because we know with the administration that we have today it's not too many people going to eat.

But I want you to know one thing—that President Nixon wasn't no fool when he got Agnew because that's his safety. Nobody is going to hurt President Nixon and leave us stranded with Spiro Agnew. But all of you here have to be concerned. Not only do we have to be concerned about hunger, but we also have to be concerned about peace in this country. You know it's something strange to me when they tell me that we are over there in Vietnam fighting for the rights of people to elect their government and all of this kind of crap with Eastland in the Senate helping to make policies when we can't do it in Mississippi. And you young people are going to have to help make this change. Because we can't continue in the same way—expanding the war in Vietnam, killing the people over there. And people being shot down in the streets throughout this country, sometime in the name of law and order.

I've been to jail. And I've been beaten in jail till my body was hard as metal. And I've been charged with disorderly conduct and resisting arrest and there's a lot of other young people throughout this country that has been beaten down, but I want you to know something in this audience today—a house divided against itself cannot stand. A nation divided against itself is on its way out. We are going to have to stand up and make demands that will make this country worthwhile. Because I have trouble today and I've had trouble in the past few years. When I got out of jail and couldn't hardly sit down and a man carried me to see the Statue of Liberty and a woman standing with a torch and facing another problem. I told the man that I was riding with that day, I said, "I would like to see this statue turned around to face her own problems. And the torch out of her hand with her head bowed because we have as many problems in this country as they trying to point to in other countries."

I can't stand today, not with dignity, and sing the national anthem. "Oh say can you see by the dawn's early light what so proudly we hailed . . ." Poor oppressed people throughout this country don't have anything to hail. And I just think that in my own way when I have to stand and sing that song, because you know as well as I know that America is sick and man is on the critical list and when people can be shot down at a college like Kent and at a college like Jackson State College by people that's dodging the army. There's something very wrong. I call the National Guard draft dodgers. Not only have they dodged being drafted, but they was caught looting in southern Mississippi after the storm.

We have to work to make this a better place and we have to deal with politics and the history of this country that's not in the books. You know we've been reading about what was in the book, you know about "Columbus discovered America." And when he got here there was a black brother walked

up there and said, "Let me help you, man." And there was some Indians here too. So how could he discover what was already discovered? The education has got to be changed in these institutions. Because it wasn't many people realize with our challenge in 1965—the congressmen from Mississippi—that we were able to gather fifteen thousand pages of evidence and they still there and the same kind of challenge had been done almost a hundred years ago and they succeeded. But in 1966, Adam Clayton Powell was unseated and he hadn't done any more than any congressman there, the only difference: he was a black man. We got to tell the truth even in these institutions because there's one thing about it, folks—you elderly folks my age is almost hopeless—you got to know now that the children know what's going on and you not going to be able to fool them any longer.

Before I close, I would just like to say that I believe in God and He said He would raise up a nation that would obey Him. So the young people that's out here today, that's fighting for justice for all human beings, I believe are the chosen people that's going to lead this country out if it's not too late.

I have one announcement and then I'll close, the community club of the Third World Development starts March the eighteenth at seven a.m., St. Francis House.

These are the young people that some of you sponsored, that made it possible for us to have today 680 acres of land. Are enabling us to determine some of our destiny. And is enabling us to stand up as human beings. Not to try to take the state of Mississippi, because tonight I figure if the state of Mississippi would become 100 percent black, I would be on my way out. But to make it a state where all human beings will have a chance.

And as I close I would like for you to take a look in the mirror and ask yourself—as we have paid such a big price—ask yourself: "Must I be carried to the sky on flowery beds of ease while others fight to win the prize and sail through bloody seas?" Thank you.