

“We Haven’t Arrived Yet,”

Presentation and Responses to Questions at the University of Wisconsin, Madison, Wisconsin, January 29, 1976

On a cold January afternoon in a packed third-floor lecture hall at the University of Wisconsin–Madison campus, Fannie Lou Hamer described the challenge that remained before both Mississippi and the nation. The year was 1976. Four years had passed since Hamer limped her way to the podium at the Democratic National Convention to offer words of support for Frances “Sissy” Farenthold. She had been in and out of the hospital since 1972, when she was first admitted for nervous exhaustion. Her list of illnesses multiplied—she was suffering from exhaustion, hypertension, diabetes, bouts of grave depression, and breast cancer. Her poor health precluded her from honoring the steady stream of speaking requests that poured into her home.

In January of 1976, though, a noticeably weakened Hamer managed to travel one last time to Madison to celebrate the eleventh anniversary of the Measure for Measure organization. Flanked by a travel companion who enabled her mobility, Hamer made the most of this now rare out-of-state trip. Speaking in at least three locations in just two days, she received countless standing ovations, a key to the city of Madison, and keenly focused local media attention. A hand-written poster with the small illustration of a farmer hoeing a row plastered the University of Wisconsin campus and hailed Hamer not only as a “Renowned Black Civil Rights Leader,” but also as a “Dynamic Lecturer and Warm, Loving Human Being.” The poster implored members of the campus community to “Hear and Meet Fannie Lou Hamer. You owe it to Yourself.”

At noon on Thursday, January 29, flashing cameras and rolling tape recorders captured Hamer speaking at a slower pace, but in a no less impassioned tone, about the problems that persist, the progress that has been made, and the power of interracial cooperation. This address carries forth the confrontational candor of Hamer’s speech, as she chastises political figures ranging from the mayor of Ruleville to President Gerald R. Ford, challenges northern black members of

the audience who “think they have arrived,” and exposes the hypocrisy of the nation’s bicentennial celebrations. Hamer pairs her harsh criticism of the country’s ills with a rather surprising cure: she holds the South up as an exemplar of interaction between the races, featuring her more recent experiences there and the larger political advances that the region has made as evidence both of love’s unconditional power and the promise of forgiveness. In this address, one of her final speeches on record, Hamer provides a fresh perspective on race relations, even as she brushes her confrontational candor with a new subtle softness.

Little more than a year after Hamer delivered this address, she was admitted to a hospital in Mound Bayou—just twenty miles from her Ruleville home—where she stayed until the cancer, hypertension, and diabetes caught up with her. Fannie Lou Hamer’s heart failed on March 14, 1977; she was fifty-nine years old.

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Thank you very much. I am glad to be here. As I look out into the audience and look at Sarah and Jeff and I saw Debra’s mother—Mrs. Sweet—a lot of people, yeah, I see you all now again. A lot of my friends here that’s done a tremendous job in helping us in the state of Mississippi.

I want you to become aware—even though we’ve received, you know, quite a bit of assistance from the organization Measure for Measure and this concerned people from Madison, Wisconsin—we haven’t arrived. You know, you here and we there haven’t arrived yet, because this morning before leaving Martha Smith’s house, you know . . . I thought that we, at one time we were really moving forward, but as I looked at George Wallace making his pitch in Boston, Massachusetts, you know, what is really a place they call “Freedom” and a place of democracy—when I looked at him making his pitch this morning and how the people was standing up applauding . . . you know I’m still saying, *Jeff*, “this up South and down South because it ain’t no different.” And these white folks with this power. And I want you to understand that because 1976 we are really living in a crucial time. We were just at the peak of being in dictatorship under Nixon’s administration with his roguish self.

See, some of you all ain’t going to like it because you know, and I am just telling the truth and so you can, you know, you can respect the truth because if changes is not made in this sick country, it’s not going to be *me* crumbling, *we* are going to crumble, because a house divided against itself cannot stand. A nation that’s divided against itself is on its way out and when you see a place that’s so prejudiced that anything is divided, you know anything is divided,

not only for kids is for grown-ups. To brainwash and to give you what America is really, what is all about, you know like everybody is running around talking about the “*bicentennial* year of the two hundred years of American progress.” Now I just want to ask one question: how do you think black people, Indian people, and any other oppressed folk feel celebrating something that, years ago, that destroyed over twenty-five million of my people that was being brought here on the slave ships of Africa? Wiped out our heritage; raised families by our grandmothers; and taking our name and today saying that it’s wrong to bus a child for equal education! See, this kind of crap is nothing but an excuse. See, this is an excuse when they talking about you know, “we don’t want the kids bused,” and folks is buying it! And we saying that we are for democracy and justice and placing mercenaries and Central Intelligence Agents to kill my people in Angola.

And it’s something wrong when any place . . . you know we have supposed to been an example for the rest of the world, but how you think it feel when a man as nonviolent as Dr. Martin Luther King, that preached nothing but love and says it’s wrong to kill, he was assassinated in Memphis, Tennessee? But it was people involved in that from the top to the bottom and they didn’t all live in the South.

You see, we are sick. America is sick and man is on the critical list. You know I have watched in the South, I have watched politics, and it got a beautiful name, because it’s becoming “*politic*” and, you know, saw what they are doing and you know I wonders, will there ever come a time that we will actually have free elections and freedom of speech? It’s people right in this room that’s been fired because of what they said and believed, so that’s not too much of freedom of speech. There were people in this room with twelve and thirteen kids that live on less than a hundred dollars per month and the excuses that they are giving in the institutions and throughout the country “of people on ADC are shiftless and lazy.” And if people had a chance, they would be glad to work. But it’s people, minority people in this country—not only Indians, Puerto Ricans, blacks, and poor whites—that can’t get jobs. And you see, I just can’t see how people can say that we will support people in other countries and give millions of dollars and not doing nothing for their own people. See, I can’t see that. And you can’t see it; you might not want to admit it.

You know, I used to just *love* to go north because I figured that people was, you know, kind of free, but you isn’t—but blacks in the North is in the worse condition, most of them, than we are in the South because we know where we stand! And a lot of you don’t. You know, some of you get a few degrees, a pretty good house, and a bill you can’t hardly pay—trying to live like somebody

else and think you have *arrived*. But, honey, regardless of how you feel, we are in this bag together. And there's nobody at the University of Wisconsin and no other place in this country is free until I am free in the South. And, to be perfectly honest, we got more contact with each other than is here in the cities throughout this country. We can talk and we got more communication than you have in most of the places in the North.

In 1964, I was one of the founders of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party that was organized to challenge the injustices and the different kind of inhumane things that was happening to us in the South. Today across the country other splinter groups have come up and made challenges—challenging not only Mississippi, but challenging America's democracy because it's pretty hard to stand up and pledge allegiance to something we've never had. You know the words really mean something if it was enforced. But the shame that we have before us today is whatever happened to us can have to be legislated. But you can't legislate love. That's one thing that you can't do. And what America and the rest of the world need today—some kids put out a song some time ago is what the world need now is love—but today people is not seeking and trying to find *love*, one of the greatest things of survival on earth, but seeking for more power and power corrupt. And you know what, maybe some of you say, "Well, I'm an atheist, I don't believe in God." But He's there.

And the sixth chapter of Ephesians and the eleventh and the twelfth verse said: "Put on the whole armor of God that He may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil." And the twelfth verse say: "For we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against power. Against principalities. Against the rulers of darkness of this world. Against spiritual wickedness in high places."

And people will go to any limit just for personal power. It doesn't really matter how the masses suffer, but just the few people, you know, controlling. I was really sickened when I watched one day I turned on television and they was saying how much had been put in Angola to help a *handful* of white folk over there exploit *millions* of black people over there. So, what I'm saying, if there's going to be any survival for this country, there must be, we have to make democracy a reality for all people and not just a few.

Because there's no way in the world you can tell me how it feels to be hungry, if you've never been hungry yourself. And you cannot say that you represent me when you don't know how I feel. People is going to have to have a chance to work and work together to bring about a change.

You know today I feel, I feel, very humbled and being in your midst going through some of the problems that we going through, I was almost ready to—I don't know really how to put it in words—but when we had a woman

mayor elected which is a doctor, and a mayor, and a judge, and a justice of the peace and a real goof-off that have goofed up the town of Ruleville, the little town where I'm from. And then you know, I started reading and I read about Eve and about Adam and how when Eve and Adam was in this beautiful garden and all of this temptation was put out there. And finally they were told of the fruit not to eat—now, you know a lot of people say you know well that's *sex*, but it was actually a tree—and it was called the tree of knowledge and out of all of those trees it was just that one tree, the tree of knowledge, were they forbidden not to eat that fruit. And that woman, Eve, was just exactly like the mayor we've got. And you know she, she ate the fruit and then persuaded Adam to eat him a mess of it. Do you all get what I'm saying?

You know I want the women—you know I'm talking to everybody—but I really want the women to think. Because we are living in real perilous times; we are living in the time when people can legislate to you whether you should kill your baby or go on and have your children. And you know somebody put it, said well: "You know they might not be married and what about this kid that come out of wedlock?" I said, "Well, you know they wasn't married before they conceived it, right?" They know they wasn't married. So, you can't legislate how you murder a person.

Take it from me, we are sick. And we've done so many things. A man was driving us, my cousin Sufronia Conway and me, a couple of weeks ago from the National Airport to Bethesda, Maryland, and he was telling us that in the '40s when he was in the service, a black man, when he was in service, they had captured so many Germans, and he said, "You wouldn't believe this Mrs. Hamer," he said, "even though they was prisoners they were given more rights than we were." Said, "They was allowed to go in places and theatres that we were barred out, but we had to stand on the outside to protect them." This is ridiculous!

Where millions of my folks have been destroyed, stripped black men of their heritage—and Indians and any other minority group—but stripped us of our heritage, taken our names, integrated our families—from the beginnings . . . my grandmother was a slave and I just had plenty white blue-eyed uncles . . . and today telling me, George Wallace, in Boston, Massachusetts, that "let the states handle it, and don't bus the kids." Do you realize how sick we are? Because the political science that you are reading and that you are teaching here at the university is not the political situation that we are faced with out there day after day. But I want you to know something: we are not only fighting to free ourselves in the state of Mississippi, but we are fighting to save you here in Madison, Wisconsin, and all over the country!

And our struggle has been very hard from the jailhouses to the graveyard, but we still have put 215 blacks in office in the state of Mississippi. We are going to fight for the kind of education that not only black folks should be aware of, but whites as well. Because you have been conditioned into the system too. I know you don't agree, maybe, with what I'm saying, but there is one thing for sure: you got a feeling it's the truth.

When I watch sometime, I don't allow my kids to watch it, but when I sat down and look at television and this guy playing the role of Tarzan, and the navy—the kind of things that you have distorted and said about my people in Africa and going to Africa, meeting people, and having a chance year after year to meet my people from Africa, it's nothing for us to be ashamed of is being black. And I am not fighting to be equal with you, but I'm fighting for human dignity.

Because we are really *sick* when the kind of stuff that's coming out now, they try to cover it up and they cover it from one side and it leak out over here and they wonder who done the leaking and who is telling on who? And then about all of them is confused as Richard Nixon. I will never forget the time that I went to a conference on nutrition and Nixon spoke to us that night and after that I told him, when the conference was over, I said, "Well, you don't worry about me coming back to a conference on hunger to Washington because they don't even know what they're talking about."

But we are sick, you know when we have a man like President Nixon that finally resigned for stealing, but was powerful enough to dictate who the next president would be, which is your president now, Gerald R. Ford. I was on television in Washington on the panorama and the man said, "Well, President Ford is a good man." Well, we was on television, I didn't want to hit that black man, because that man is powerful. I didn't want to hit him. Not going to see us on television. If he would've been around the corner, we would have been running till now!

But to do just some selected few, a few people out of millions with jobs and people throughout this country suffering from hunger, malnutrition, and this kind of thing. We better straighten up America, because everybody is not going to be as nice as the Indians when they welcomed Columbus and his group here that he said he discovered and it was already fourteen. Just like you know we walked out there and get in a car and said we discovered it, how did we discover it if it was already made?

It's later than you think and it's time for us to work together to make this a better country because together we stand, but divided we all cave. Thank you.

Question and Answer Period

(Questions are represented verbatim when audio quality permits; otherwise, the essence of the query is captured.)

Q: Question about changes in Mississippi since the passage of the Voting Rights Act in 1965.

FLH: There have been changes, but there are still a literacy test—not the kind that it was in the '60s, but people have to still take a literacy test. But we do have 215 elected black officials. And, you know, to say that we have moved some would be really not telling the truth. Because, if I would have to take the chance I would take it in the South because if you convince one that he is wrong you don't have a hypocrite; he's real. And we have made some changes. There haven't been enough changes. But we have made some strides in the state of Mississippi. In fact, what they're going through in Boston we done it ten years ago.

Martha Smith interjects, "Tell them about Senator Eastland's son-in-law, the other day—"

FLH: Well, it was, I been in court against Senator Eastland's son-in-law. We always go in nose to nose. Because if he for it, I was always against it. Even if I hadn't heard what it was. Just knowing who he was, I was against it.

So, it was the fifteenth of January, we were on our way back leaving Rockville, Maryland, where we had gone up to HEW and we was at the National Airport and who walks in but the son-in-law of Senator Eastland, his name is Attorney Terney. And when he walked in—now this is one thing that we have in the South that you don't have in the North that it was hard for me to get used to: nobody speak in the North. But, you know you can be fixing to fight a person in the South and before you hit him you'll say, "Good morning!" You know you got that kind of respect for each other—so, when I saw him in the airport I said, "Good evening, Attorney Terney," and he said, "Well, yes, Mrs. Hamer." So, he shook hands with me and he had another, older guy with him, and he said, "You meet Mrs. Hamer," said, "This is Mrs. Fannie Lou Hamer from Mississippi." So the guy looked at me real funny and he said, "Howdy, Fannie Lou," and I said, "Howdy." So we didn't talk anymore.

But anyway after we got to Memphis we met up again, I was getting on the plane with a huge picture of Dr. King, that I was carrying back from Rockville, Maryland. And I got all kinds of reactions from white folks.

Some of them, you know, would look at it. One stewardess told me, said, "You know you can't carry it on that plane."

And I said, "I brought it from Washington," I said, "I'm carrying it on home." I said, "If I made it from Washington to Memphis, I certainly can go to Greenville with it." So, she know there wasn't going to be no argument.

But anyway when I got on the plane in Memphis, there was Senator Eastland's son-in-law again. So, at this point you know I just felt good going by. And he said, "Hold it, Mrs. Hamer." He said, "You done fought to ride in the front. You ain't going back to the back now; you going to set down here with me." I sat right down. And we talked, you know, from Memphis to Greenville.

And I was telling him about the rotten things they done in the court. You know like they had some girls fired—women—fired at the public school because they said they'd had a baby out of wedlock. So we went in the court and I said, well, "Judge Keady," I said, "you know, if that's who you going to fire then ain't nobody going to be teaching because the white folk been doing the same thing." I said, "And the beautiful thing," I said, "it's a good thing that Mary wasn't here when she was carrying Christ because she'd be going through the same thing." And then one white man screamed and told me to hush.

But what I am saying—what I am saying—I had a chance to talk to Senator Eastland's son-in-law and he told us when we got to the airport, said, "There's nobody there to take you home," said, "I'll carry you on home." So, that's come a long way. Because I know the time that he would have got off the plane and kept from riding with me. As we got to live with each other, he going to see me there a lot of time.

Q: "I am just wondering whatever happened to the feeding co-op, the one in Greenville, I mean, Mound Bayou—"

FLH: One in Mound Bayou and we have one in Sunflower County too—

Q: "You did?"

FLH: *Yeah!* We had the first fifty pigs. You know five males, it was hard on them, but five males and fifty females. And each family had to sign a pig agreement—you know this sound funny to you, but you know you don't believe, we really lived it—each family that signed a pig agreement he couldn't kill the pig or trade him off. If the pig got sick he'd have to report it to the pig chairman. And the pig chairman, you know, would get a doctor for the pig. But as a result, with the pig bank program, we have distributed over four thousand pigs.

Q: "Why don't you tell us a little bit about the jails they have there?"

FLH: Oh, the jails is something else. I went to jail in 1963, the ninth of June. And from the orders of a state highway patrolman, I was beaten by two black prisoners until my body was hard as metal. And the day I was leaving jail, which was the twelfth of June and I was, you know, less than fifty feet from the jail, that's when I was told that Medgar Evers had been shot in the back.

But I want you to know something, that Charles Evers, a lot of people might not understand, but Charles Evers has done a tremendous job in helping his people and helping really people in the state of Mississippi. He is a beautiful human being once you get to know him because he is one human being that got houses out of Nixon's proposal. And I still don't understand it, but he did, you know.

But the jailhouses in Mississippi—not really unbelievable because prisoners, especially black, catch hell in nearly any jail in this country, in the minority.

Q: Question about the police in Mississippi trying to suppress the movement.

FLH: Oh, they tried. They tried. You know I remember once, I know people have read the *Jet* magazine, Larry Steele. Larry Steele was leaving my house one day and he was arrested for being drunk and the reason they said he was drunk, he was driving too careful.

But you see I just kept staying there in Ruleville and I let them know that nobody would determine who come to my house and who don't come to my house. I couldn't boss theirs, and they wasn't going to boss ours. And some of those same people today call me Mrs. Hamer. If you respect yourself, they might not want to do it, but just keep standing there, as long as you right, *somebody's going respect you*.

Q: Question about upcoming Democratic National Convention.

FLH: Well, right now I'm an uncommitted delegate. This is a funny thing that happened, last Saturday was the caucus for who go to the precinct meeting. So I ran in there four minutes before the thing closed and got to be a delegate uncommitted to the county caucus which will be the fourteenth of February. But I ain't got nobody out there. Most of the politicians—ain't too many of them saying nothing. Not too many.

Q: Question about the activity of the Klan in Mississippi.

FLH: Well, I tell you, now we have heard, that the Klans are organizing again. But when they had the last demonstration was in south Mississippi and the little kid was just splitting up laughing at them, you know, with the sheets and that kind of make a person feel a little bad.

Q: “Mrs. Hamer, I was wondering—you’re talking about Mississippi being, perhaps, better than the way we have it up here—”

FLH: I didn’t say we had arrived—

Q: “If you were talking to young people from Ruleville, would you say to them ‘stay here and make your life here.’ Or would you pat them on the back and put them on the bus to Chicago?”

FLH: I would tell them to stay in Ruleville—

Q: “What kind of life would they make?”

FLH: You know a little black child would have just as good a chance in Ruleville, poor and black, as he would have in Madison, Wisconsin, or Chicago, Illinois. So I say stay at home, let’s make that better.

Q: “Can you explain a little of what went on behind the scenes with the Mississippi Freedom—why you refused the two seats at the Democratic National Convention?”

FLH: Oh, that was when we found out a little about how sick politics are. You know people was pressured. You know like I could meet a group today and conference with a delegation and they would almost be afraid of us tomorrow. And the real leaders was threatened. And they told them what they wasn’t going to do. I never will forget like Walter Reuther threatened Dr. King. And President Johnson, you know, told the cameras to “take the cameras off them niggers from Mississippi” when I was testifying before the Credentials Committee. That was a real situation, you know, where I couldn’t fight a man, because if God said he was over every creature on earth than [inaudible]. But anyway, I threatened a guy who wanted to accept the two votes, you know.

Q: “Dr. King and some of the other more moderate civil rights leaders tried to talk you people into taking just the two seats, is that right?”

FLH: Well, he actually did, but in the end, at that convention at first he didn’t, but then when they say, “A compromise [could] be nice for us and we were just local Mississippians who didn’t know nothing about politic and we should go on back to Mississippi because two votes at-large would be a moral victory.” Dr. King did tell us that that would be best and a lot of other people did too. But we refused to accept it whoever told us because that’s all we been doing, you know, compromising our lives in Mississippi.

Q: “Did Senator Humphrey try to work a deal with LBJ?”

FLH: Senator Humphrey, I saw him shed crocodile tears because he told us if we didn’t compromise that President Johnson wasn’t going to be nominated. You see, that ain’t had nothing to do with me because I still wasn’t going to compromise! Finally they stopped making me go to the meetings.

But, you know, they had some men to go and the men had decided to really accept the compromise and coming out of the church building that day is when I heard the man. I am sorry I done that, but I can't accept the compromise and was going to put his throat in the guillotine.

Q: "I used to work with YWD in Washington State and used to hear a lot about Freedom Farm, can you tell us a little more about that?"

FLH: Well, that was organized and founded in 1969 and the purpose of that program was to get some land that we could grow vegetables that people wouldn't have to leave Mississippi because our whole thing was, you give a man food he can eat for a few days, but if you give us the tools we can produce for ourselves. And that was the kind of thing we tried to get set up. And it's played a tremendous role—it hadn't alleviated all of the problem that we have in Sunflower County, but it's been one of the things that we've been working with since the organization Measure for Measure and other concerned people have given money not only to help us grow vegetables, but we got our own machinery and all of that to work it with. But also people are in decent houses for the first time. You know like, what is your loan, Mrs. [inaudible]? Thirty-nine dollars, you know, paying thirty-nine dollars a month and she's getting a house to stack four or five kids in. It's been a tremendous thing in helping people and it hadn't only benefited black people, but white people have been helped by the Freedom Farm.

Q: "Are you helpers helping people, other people in the South? In the state of Georgia—I can't remember any kind of programs like that. They had the 235 come in once that the government paid half of your house bill, but it wasn't as—"

FLH: Well, I'll tell you I know the program is in Mississippi some of the same kind of the program is in Alabama. I don't know what they be wanting to talk about, but I have been invited to come to Georgia in April. And I don't know what kind of thing . . . They might be talking about setting up that kind of a program. But they do have a cooperative in Alabama and not only with Freedom Farms co-op that's in Sunflower County, but Mr. Ronald Thornton—a great human being—is over there in North Bolivar County Co-op—would you stand up, Ron? That's doing a fantastic job. You can fry ham when a lot of you can't even afford to grow it out here.

Q: "What do you see as the benefit of unifying all of the different factions in this country?"

FLH: Well, that would have to be something that happened in the communities not only with the white folk, but I would really like to see the black folk unified and know that there are no difference in us regardless of your

ability and your degree. If you black like me it's no different. And we have to work together and that's one of the reasons I am grateful for being here this evening that I can talk to all of the people and my sisters and brothers.

Q: "How do you feel about black people supporting George Wallace?"

FLH: Well, you see, in 1965, when the voting rights bill was being passed in Washington, D. C., John Lewis from VEP was having his skull fractured on that Selma march. Now, I can't help what nobody else do, but George Wallace will not be getting no vote from Fannie Lou Hamer and people like [inaudible] and folks know what it is to be beat and all of this kind of stuff in jail. Not from the South. You know a lot of folk that hadn't suffered get a little money will do some funny little things, but not to us.

Q: "What are the schools like in Mississippi? How come they don't have mandatory grade school laws requiring your children to go to school?"

FLH: You mean something like a compulsory law?

Q: "Yeah."

FLH: For the first time, the new governor, Cliff Finch, called in the black principal and other people to talk about a compulsory school law. This has never happened you know until, Finch was just inaugurated last week.

An audience member interjects to explain to the group about why Mississippi—a historically agricultural state—wouldn't have compulsory school laws.

FLH: Yeah, because kids, you know, from six years old on work. I was working at six years old.

Q: "Yes, Mrs. Hamer, I wonder if you would tell us about black voting in Mississippi now. How many blacks out of total possible black votes are being cast? And once cast, are they being counted?"

FLH: In some areas they are. And in some areas they are not. You know we still have a problem of dead folks voting and unborn babies—we still have that problem. But, you know, in some areas where they are just almost 70 percent black they is more people that is elected from that. We still have a problem.

Q: "Do the ballots sometimes get cast and not counted—lost on the way or something?"

FLH: That happened, you know, until I remember in the primary we demanded people to be in there and be there on time and it was the first time that we got a lot of people in office because we had people in there to watch—they're called watchers. Because now, Judge Keady in Mississippi ruled that a person not knowing how to read and write could ask anybody they wanted to go in with him and show.

Q: "What is the approximate percentage of black people in Mississippi?"

FLH: They say, you know white folks counted it, we're 45 percent, that lets you know we're 54.

Q: "It's not a question, sir. I'd like to tell you Fannie Lou is featured in two books: *Black Women in White America* and there's a children's book out about her, but we found out on the way in that she's receiving absolutely nothing for the sale of these books. And so we're going to investigate it and see what's going on. And from then on in we will advocate the sale of her book, but as of now she's not receiving anything, but they're beautiful books."

FLH: [To the audience] Thank you.