

## **Telling it from the Mountain: A Rhetorical Analysis of Fannie Lou Hamer's Speech before the Democratic National Convention**

*Erin Ryan*

*Pennsylvania State University*

---

Fannie Lou Hamer delivered a speech on behalf of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party to the credentials committee of the Democratic National Convention in 1964 to highlight the gruesome realities facing African Americans, especially those who attempted to vote. Her revelations about the methods used to withhold voting rights and the violent discrimination against blacks who tried to vote shocked the nation, but the most disturbing aspects of her speech were personal stories of the brutality wrought upon her.

Hamer's speech is reflective of the obstacles she faced throughout her life. Her depiction of racist atrocities gripped the attention of the nation at a time when President Johnson was trying to shift the focus to avoid a divisive reelection issue and segregationists were aligning the integrationists' ideals with a Communist agenda. Hamer's speech ends with a dramatic questioning of America, forcing the congressmen and people throughout the nation watching the event on television to confront and accept the challenge to acknowledge grievous civil rights violations and begin to take steps to improve social and political standards. Fannie Lou Hamer took the horrendous experiences of her life and transformed them into such powerful, persuasive rhetoric that the nation could no longer accept the current state of the Jim Crow-infested South.

---

"All my life I've been sick and tired. Now I'm sick and tired of being sick and tired" ("Fannie Lou Hamer"). Fannie Lou Hamer spoke these famous words in a prominent oration to the credentials committee of the Democratic National Convention on 22 August 1964. On behalf of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party (MFDP), Hamer spoke to the committee about voting rights and violent discrimination against blacks who tried to vote (Simmonds). Hamer's penetrating speech, given in her characteristic booming voice and colloquial language, was intended to challenge President Lyndon B. Johnson and the government to help end voting discrimination. Hamer and the MFDP "used this national forum to manifest the difficulties black Mississippians faced in attempting to participate on the political process" (Asch 211). They were responding to many segregationists' attempt to persuade both local officials and the nation that the low rate of black participation in elections was attributable to African American satisfaction with the status quo and apathy about politics. Hamer and the MFDP used their role at the Democratic National Convention to appeal to the North and prove the absurdity of such propaganda.

Drawing on her personal experiences, Hamer's testimony before the committee was a dramatic appeal to the entire nation to recognize the atrocities borne by so many African Americans. She translated her own life story into an irrefutable argument for the Freedom Movement and fully integrated political participation. She publicized her experiences to elicit tremendous emotion from her audience, establish her credibility, and logically prove the relevancy of her case. Her simple language became powerful rhetoric that gripped the attention of a national audience, finally exposing and publicly decrying the agony that she and other African Americans had to endure in the Jim Crow South.

## Context of the Speech

At the time of Hamer's speech, President Johnson was vying for reelection; the Civil Rights Act had just been passed (though without a strong voting rights' dimension); segregationists were trying to align the numerous freedom riders, protests, and African American attempts to improve their lives with Communistic ideals. The turbulence of 1964 between segregationists and those involved with the Freedom Movement was due to both trying to persuade non-southerners that their cause was morally right. Blacks needed the federal government to enforce the civil laws that state authorities refused to recognize. The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and other movement workers attempted to attain national attention to this end by achieving an integrated delegation at the Democratic National Convention in Atlantic City, New Jersey, on 22 August ("Fannie Lou Hamer"). The convention was to take place in the middle of Freedom Summer. "Freedom" was defined by SNCC members as "an all-encompassing idea uniting voting and education to dignity and economic justice," perfectly mirroring Hamer's own convictions (Asch 205). The Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party was the political arm of SNCC, and Hamer was elected to speak before the credentials committee to convince the congressmen to recognize the MFDP.

The convention was conducted amidst great political unrest. President Johnson, attempting to retain the southern white vote, pledged that he would not recognize the MFDP. In need of support for the social programs he was attempting to initiate, Johnson did not want a fight over the issue of race at the convention (Mills 114). Moreover, many local officials, such as Senator James O. Eastland, were aligning SNCC and MFDP ideals with Communism. Extreme scare tactics were used, such as warning citizens to brace themselves for an invasion of integrationists and inculcating in their supporters a siege mentality against activists (Asch 209).<sup>1</sup>

Even while Hamer was delivering her speech, President Johnson called a press conference to divert media attention and take her speech off the main television news stations. But later that evening the news stations replayed her speech in full, sending shockwaves across the nation (Lee 90). Her immediate audience was the credentials committee, made up of white, male, and primarily religious and conservative politicians, yet she was also appealing to state and federal legislators around the country and the American public as a whole. Her speech moved even seasoned politicians to tears; the stunning testimony "shook the political establishment like Jesus and the money changers" (Asch 212). Finally, after years of suffering, she was given the platform to tell of her hardships and the hardships of other blacks. After her eight-minute speech, she wept and said, "I felt just like I was telling it from the mountain. . . . I'm talking to the world" (Lee 89).

## The Speech

Hamer's speech opens with her stating her name and address, noting that she is a constituent of Senator James O. Eastland and Senator John C. Stennis. This is an important piece of information, as it allows the audience to understand the political atmosphere in which she was living. Senator Eastland of Hamer's home Sunflower County was vociferously outspoken in supporting a coordinated effort to undermine public support for civil rights. He had publicly referred to the Civil Rights Act of 1964 as the "most monstrous and heinous piece of legislation that has ever been proposed in the entire history of the U.S. Congress" and made every attempt to delay the bill's passage (Asch 207). He also linked civil rights to Communism, claiming the Communist Party was exploiting blacks to promote discontent and civil unrest. By referencing Eastland, Hamer establishes a sense of the persecution existing in her community and the unwillingness of local officials and other residents to allow equality or justice for African Americans.

This leads in to Hamer's descriptions of her personal experiences of trying to register to vote, a right that was supposed to be guaranteed by the Constitution. Hamer recounts her experience on

31 August 1962, when she and seventeen others were faced with obvious hostility by the registrar in Indianola, Mississippi. Hamer failed a required registration test because she was unable to properly interpret an obscure part of the Constitution. When she returned to her home on the plantation at which she had worked for eighteen years, her boss offered her an ultimatum: remove her name from the registration forms or leave the farm. She boldly replied, "I didn't go down there to register for you, I went down to register for myself," and left the plantation ("Fannie Lou Hamer"). A few days later, given the chance to come back and continue working as usual, she rejected the offer: "That's what I'm trying to get out of now. Things be like they always was. I want change" (Mills 39). By referencing this experience in her speech, she reinforces the injustice of being punished for an action that was not even a crime, simply because her boss was unwilling to allow her the opportunity to exercise her rights.

Hamer then describes the unwarranted violence shown to other black members of the community that same night, an example of appalling white retaliation against the Freedom Movement. She says, "On the 10th of September 1962, sixteen bullets was fired into the home of Mr. and Mrs. Robert Tucker for me. That same night two girls were shot in Ruleville, Mississippi. Also, Mr. Joe McDonald's house was shot in" ("Fannie Lou Hamer"). By referencing other African Americans who experienced this violence, Hamer shows that hers is not a unique situation.

Hamer then explains the events surrounding her arrest, the key point in her speech. Hamer traveled with SNCC to Charleston, South Carolina, to attend a citizenship school run by the Southern Christian Leadership Conference and Septima Clark,<sup>2</sup> where she learned teaching strategies to help people pass literacy tests in order to register to vote. On the bus ride back, the driver stopped at a terminal in Winona, Mississippi, and several members of the group got off the bus to get food and use restrooms. Police and a mob of angry whites were waiting, and the group was arrested within minutes. When Hamer came out to investigate the situation, she was immediately kicked, cursed, and arrested (Asch 193).

Hamer next tells of her experiences inside the jail. She was called "fatso," and two officers threatened her, "We gon' make you wish you was dead" (Asch 194). Keeping this promise, the officers sanctioned an exercise of racial and sexual brutality against her. Two black men were brought in to beat her relentlessly. In her struggle her dress worked its way up her body; she attempted to pull it down, but one officer quickly pulled it back up again (Lee 52). She never recovered from the assault, and she walked with a limp for the rest of her life. Charged with disorderly conduct and resisting arrest, she was held for two more days.

Hamer heard another African American woman being beaten in the jail: "I began to hear sounds of licks and screams; I could hear the sounds of licks and horrible screams. They beat her, I don't know how long. And after a while she began to pray, and asked god to have mercy on those people" ("Fannie Lou Hamer"). The episode demonstrates the victimization of African Americans, and this particular detail would definitely resonate with Hamer's audience. This reference mirrors many biblical passages, including Jesus asking that his crucifiers be forgiven, and St. Stephen praying for mercy during his martyrdom. This quote would elicit a striking amount of emotion in Hamer's audience, especially in the southern politicians, who often shared a strong Christian background. This would remind them that, as Christians, it was their moral obligation to realize and fulfill the precept to help those in need. By aligning the Freedom Movement to a moral necessity firmly rooted in religious beliefs, Hamer proved that the need to aid the cause transcended any political or social hesitations.

Hamer then gives a lengthy, staggeringly graphic depiction of her own beating:

The first Negro prisoner ordered me, by orders from the State Highway Patrolman, for me to lay down on a bunk bed on my face. I laid on my face and

the first Negro began to beat. I was beat by the first Negro until he was exhausted. I was holding my hands behind me at that time on my left side, because I suffered from polio when I was six years old. After the first Negro had beat until he was exhausted, the State Highway Patrolman ordered the second Negro to take the blackjack. The second Negro began to beat and I began to work my feet, and the State Highway Patrolman ordered the first Negro who had beat me to sit on my feet—to keep me from working my feet. I began to scream and one white man got up and began to beat me in my head and tell me to hush. One white man—my dress had worked up high—he walked over and pulled my dress—I pulled my dress down and he pulled my dress back up.” (“Fannie Lou Hamer”)

This shocking portrayal of police brutality of a defenseless prisoner undoubtedly reinforces the continual oppression of blacks by all factions of society, even those whose duty is to protect the rights of citizens.

Hamer then abruptly interjects, “I was in jail when Medgar Evers was murdered” (“Fannie Lou Hamer”). This perfectly ties in the notion of commonality and universal victimization of all African Americans and the pervasive malice of segregationists. While Hamer, an ordinary citizen, was being brutalized, Evers, the prominent and respected NAACP leader, was viciously gunned down.

These examples of barbaric and ruthless treatment of Hamer and other blacks lead to the conclusion of the speech. Hamer questions how America can truly be the land of the free if it allows its citizens to live in constant fear of violent attacks:

All of this is on account of 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 and the home of the brave, where we have to sleep with our telephones off the hooks because our lives be threatened daily, because we want to live as decent human beings, in America? (“Fannie Lou Hamer”)

Hamer makes a reference to the quest of first-class citizenship, implying that she and other blacks around the nation were not full citizens, despite America’s fundamental belief in and constitutional guarantee of universal equality and the abolishment of slavery. Hamer delegitimizes the very core essence of the American institution since it condones such atrocities; the congressional representatives present—and the nation itself—therefore, could no longer ignore the abuse and violations of civil rights on such a massive scale and would be forced to begin taking steps to improve social and political standards.

By identifying herself and her cause as victims of vicious repression, Hamer successfully disarmed any opposing argument. Her speech would have refuted claims, such as those made by Senator Eastland, that the Freedom Movement was run by radical, militant Communists, when in fact it was officials and authoritative figures in the white community who were unlawfully and violently stifling the right to vote guaranteed by the U.S. Constitution. Therefore, if the president and federal government did not intervene, they would not be fulfilling their moral and sworn obligations to protect American citizens and uphold the Constitution. Her testimony shamed the conscience of the nation into demanding action and supporting the cause, and Hamer and the MFDP immediately received floods of telegrams expressing support from all across the country.

These substantial accounts of her personal experiences allowed Hamer to establish her credibility not only to the members of the committee but also to the national audience viewing the speech on television and to the black community itself. Historian Kay Mills said of Hamer:

Fannie Lou Hamer had a presence. She was smart. And as a poor black southern sharecropper, she represented the soul of the people whom the [freedom] movement wanted to represent. As disfranchised people were starting to assert themselves, she stepped forward, voicing her own concerns and those of her neigh-

bors. She had a personal story, which would only grow more compelling the more she endured. And she had a voice with which to tell it. Virtually everyone whose path crossed hers remembered first and foremost her speaking. (41)

Because she was speaking from personal experience, she knew firsthand the cruelty that many African Americans were facing. Therefore, she was able to give a knowledgeable account of the deplorable conditions that so many black people were reduced to living under. Also, the average black worker could respect a woman who had suffered greatly in her aspirations to exercise her basic right to vote. Her disturbing account also caused a deep emotional response from her audience; many who heard her openly wept, even the politicians of the credentials committee.

Hamer's logical reasoning through personal narrative was established before she even took the witness table to speak to the committee. One of the regular Democrats, Governor David Lawrence of Pennsylvania, had argued that testimonies should be restricted to descriptions of election machinery as opposed to stories of everyday life. But Attorney Joe Rauh, an MFDP member, disagreed, stating, "It is the very terror that these people are living through that is the reason that Negroes aren't voting. They are kept out of the Democratic Party by the terror of the regular party, and what I want the credentials committee to hear is the terror which the regular party uses on the people of Mississippi" (Mills 118). The political climate would improve only when blacks could participate in the electoral process without fear or intimidation (Simmonds). Hamer could not only cathartically voice her struggles but also use her plight as evidence, proving that the need for social change was incontrovertible.

The style in which Hamer delivered her speech was a clear strategic decision. She consistently employed slang and vernacular grammar, used very simple and basic sentence structure, and spoke with a pronounced southern accent. Her use of parochial diction let the average African American identify with her and her story. In addition, this dialect relayed a natural, unassuming, human quality that resulted in a much more profound appeal to the emotions and sympathy of the audience. Hamer's speech was both epideictic and deliberative in that it was intended to reform community values and influence public policy. By questioning America, Hamer invites the audience to question not only the state of the nation but also the state of their own personal morals, both of which were challenged by Hamer's demand for social justice.

### **Conclusion**

Fannie Lou Hamer's testimony before the credentials committee at the Democratic National Convention, then, was a dramatic appeal not just to the committee but to the entire nation to recognize the terror faced by so many African Americans trying to vote. The MFDP failed to unseat the all-white delegation until 1968, but its challenge did not go without immediate recognition. Hamer's speech sent a piercing message to southern white supremacists that blacks would no longer passively accept violations of their rights. It exposed the powerlessness and victimization of blacks at the hands of segregationists and the white bastion of power in the South. It also launched Hamer as a national symbol of courage and inspiration, especially to blacks troubled with consistent fear, uncertainty, and disappointment in their treatment by whites (Lee 101).

Fannie Lou Hamer will always be remembered for this dramatic and bold testimony, for having the courage to stand before 110 committee members and national cameras and profess her personal trials, and for having the consciousness to strategically use her stories and subtle word choice to persuade her audience that her cause, the cause of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party and of the average black person, was unmistakably morally just. Fannie Lou Hamer "embodied the essential qualities that it took to question America and move this country toward a more perfect union with its people" (Targ). A poor, black, uneducated sharecropper's thunderous pleas for social

justice expressed through simple eloquence caught national attention and galvanized sweeping support for the long overdue fulfillment of the rights of African Americans.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> James O. Eastland was a wealthy white planter who became one of the most powerful segregationists in the U.S. Senate. He deemed the states' rights movement against federal civil rights' legislation as the "Battle of the South" against the "destruction of her social institutions" and worked tirelessly to preserve segregation at all levels (Asch 123).

<sup>2</sup> Septima Clark was a South Carolina teacher constantly in trouble with education authorities due to her membership in the NAACP and her insistence that blacks be subject to the same hiring practices as whites and receive equal pay (Mills 52). She was a prime enabler of the voting registration education effort by developing a program to teach blacks how to pass voter literacy tests ("Septima").

### Works Cited

- Asch, Chris Meyers. *The Senator and the Sharecropper*. Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 2008. Print.
- "Fannie Lou Hamer: Testimony before the Credentials Committee, Democratic National Convention." Atlantic City, NJ. 22 August 1964. *American RadioWorks*. Web. 29 Nov. 2011.
- Lee, Chana Kai. *For Freedom's Sake: The Life of Fannie Lou Hamer*. Urbana: U of Illinois P, 1999. Print.
- Mills, Kay. *This Little Light of Mine*. New York: Penguin, 1993. Print.
- "Septima Clark, Rights Activist." *Toronto Star* 17 Dec. 1987, final ed.: A26. Web. 29 Nov. 2011.
- Simmonds, Yussef. "Fannie Lou Hamer." *Los Angeles Sentinel* 2 Oct. 2008: A.10. Web. 29 Nov. 2011.
- Targ, Nicholas. "Human Rights Hero." *Human Rights*. American Bar Association, 2005. Web. 19 Nov. 2011.