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Battle of Credentials

Beneath the Barnum & Bailey whirl of Atlantic City, Lyndon Johnson and the Democratic Party faced a question with incalculable implications for November: could the quixotic force of the Southern Negro revolt be stitched into the Democratic family patchwork without sacrificing the loyalist remnants of the white South to Barry Goldwater?

To millions of viewers, the Democrats' painful struggle to find the answer looked like a tragi-comedy of errors—an absurd game of musical folding chairs on the teeming convention floor between unreconstructed Southerners, intransigent Negro demonstrators and harried sergeants-at-arms. But behind the scenes, the drama was far more subtle, a heady blend of principle and pragmatism unfolding in smoke-filled rooms, corridor conferences, and untold telephone calls. Before the week was out, it involved a constellation of party leaders—all the way up to LBJ.

In a year of unprecedented Negro ferment and ominous talk of white backlash, the Democrats knew they were in for trouble over the pesky problem of credentials long before they arrived at Atlantic City. The party loyalty of the 36-vote delegation from Alabama—where Gov. George Wallace had legislated a slate of unpledged Democratic electors—was sure to be challenged. The Mississippi situation was even more explosive. For weeks, Northern liberals

had been canvassing nationwide support for seating a full delegation from the predominantly Negro Freedom Democratic Party. To disregard the Negroes' demands would be to repudiate the moral drive of the Negro revolution; to satisfy them would mean a floor fight almost certain to trigger a Southerners' walkout.

On Sunday, convention eve, the President was ready. As his chief agent, he had a 38-year-old Washington lawyer named Tom Finney, a lean, unflappable former CIA man who had worked with Adlai Stevenson and John F. Kennedy, and had already handled one delicate mission for Mr. Johnson—accompanying Allen Dulles to Mississippi after the disappearance of the three civil-rights workers. In Mississippi, Finney had come to know the firebrands of the Freedom Party, and understood their turbulent and unpredictable approach to politics. The President had also assigned Hubert Humphrey to the problem. As a veteran of Americans for Democratic Action, the senator was close to the white liberals spearheading the Freedom Democrats' cause.

The Plan: And Mr. Johnson had a plan. He had sweated out agreement with key Southern leaders on a formula to avert a disastrous floor fight and, he hoped, pacify the Freedom Democrats: the lily-white regular Mississippi delegation, many of them Goldwater-minded, would be seated if they signed a mild party loyalty oath; the party would pledge to open its Dixie convention process to Negroes; and some gesture—perhaps "honored guest" status, but no vote—would be offered the Freedom Party, which did not legally qualify for seating. The Alabamans would be required to sign a stricter oath.

But the glue came unstuck almost

immediately. With Freedom pickets already plodding the Boardwalk outside Convention Hall, their sympathizers on the 108-man Credentials Committee made clear that the "back-of-the-bus" plan was unacceptable. And while the committee was polishing up its Alabama ultimatum, state committeeman "Bull" Connor, whose police dogs once terrorized Birmingham Negroes, casually strolled into a Convention Hall office and picked up Alabama's credentials from an unbriefed clerk. "Never been treated as nice in my life," twanged Bull, returning to his ocean-front hotel and turning a deaf ear to National Chairman John Bailey's frantic telephone pleas to return the badges and tickets.

Beside Manner: The next day Humphrey and Finney went to work on the Mississippi riddle at the White House command post, the garish new Pageant Motel across from Convention Hall. Plopping down on a bed in his shirt sleeves, Humphrey begged the Rev. Martin Luther King and FDP leaders to accept the LBJ plan. They wouldn't. "Negroes want Negroes to represent them," Mississippi vote worker Bob Moses told Humphrey. "Wait, Bob," Humphrey cried, "I thought we were interested in ending discrimination."

With matters at an impasse, a special credentials subcommittee was put in charge of the Mississippi question as the convention opened. A weeklong stall appealed to some. "Hell," said one big-city boss, "let's lock 'em up with a bottle of whisky and leave them there." But Finney, for one, recognized the folly of the easy out. "Goldwater," he argued, "would tell the country a handful of illegally appointed Negroes had brought this party to its knees." That night Connor and his Alabama band—their loyalty oaths unsigned—bulled their