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# [*The Classic Organizer – Bob Moses*](https://stansburyforum.com/2019/05/12/the-classic-organizer-bob-moses/')

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Bob Moses was the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) “field secretary”(organizer) who in 1962 began the voter registration and community organizing work that broke the wall of Mississippi segregation. Moses became a legend, but he refused to become a public spokesman for “The Movement”, insisting on the classic organizer role of developing and projecting others. An initial dozen African-American young people, many themselves local Mississippians, began the patient work of encouraging local people to go to the county courthouse to register to vote. By 1964, almost 1,000, mostly northern white, students, and legal, health and other workers, had joined them in the Mississippi Summer Project that was directed by Moses. One result was the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party (MFDP) challenge at the 1964 Democratic Party Convention to the seating of the State’s racist “regulars”. The rejection of that challenge, led by President Johnson and the leadership of the Party, was a key event in the radicalization of the student movement.

Moses refused to be drafted to fight in Vietnam. He left the country, quietly returning after a sojourn working in Africa. More recently, he has developed a pedagogy for teaching algebra to lowest quartile students. That work led to a McArthur “genius” award and The Algebra Project.

Mike Miller

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**Bob Moses on “Earned Insurgency”. (**[**From YouTube, 2007**](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fEpI7tdAsJw)**)**

“My point about insurgency is that we need to have insurgencies to have democracy. In the ‘60s, the sit-ins were insurgencies; the sit-inners were insurgents; they earned their insurgency by people beating up on them, by dressing up in suits and ties so that they could present themselves to the country so that the country could see them.

“Like it or not, if we’re going to have an insurgency that’s going to be effective we have to figure out how we earn our insurgency.   We earned the insurgency of the right to vote in Mississippi by adopting nonviolence as a way to go on the offensive. That’s actually what I think happened.”

“You have to earn the right [to speak]. You have to figure out how to mount such a movement…   You have to pull together the numbers of people, and the way in which you pull it [together], so that the people in power can’t ignore you; they have to go along with you.

**“In Mississippi, we earned our insurgency with local people: we’d get knocked down, and we’d get back up; we didn’t run; we didn’t abandon the local people. We earned our insurgency with the country: the children of the country came to Mississippi for the Summer Project of 1964. And we earned our insurgency with the Justice Department’s Civil Rights Division by carefully developing the case for their intervention. That intervention was based on a provision of the 1957 Civil Rights Act that said the Justice Department could act if local authorities were denying people the right to vote. That provision was the “crawl space” that gave us a way into the Justice Department. Without their intervention, we would have been rotting in jail.”**

“I think, basically, we ran what I think of now as an earned insurgency. And we had to earn it at three different levels. One was the actual farmers and sharecroppers that we were working with. We had to earn the right to ask them to join us in this work, ’cause they were threatened, they were murdered.

“The way we earned their respect was every time—we, as organizers, had to get knocked down enough times and stand back up.

‘We were asking people to risk their lives, so we had to show them that we were actually also willing to do that ourselves. So we did that just by getting knocked down and standing back up. So every time we got knocked down, we stood back up. So you do that enough, then people think you’re real, it’s not just talk.

“[We also had to earn the respect of] the Justice Department, they didn’t have to, they weren’t required to turn the jailhouse key. …They were permitted to do it, but they weren’t required…And so we had to be disciplined ourselves to work on the voter registration, so that every time we got arrested, there was the presumption that that’s what we were arrested for. They were not going to interfere around something other than voter registration, this little legal crawlspace of the ’57 Civil Rights Act.

“And then we had to earn the right to call on the whole country to come take a look at itself in Mississippi, ’cause, yes, we were asking white students to come down into this danger, but we had earned the right by risking that danger ourselves and thinking this is an American issue, this is a constitutional issue, this is not just black people’s problems.”

**On responsibility**

“You’ve got to take responsibility for your government. In the end, you are the government. If you are not involved in this government, it will take you places where you do not want to go.

“The government can take us where we don’t want to go only because we don’t see ourselves as the government.

“We have to develop a culture in which we can have conversations about what we want to do about our condition.”