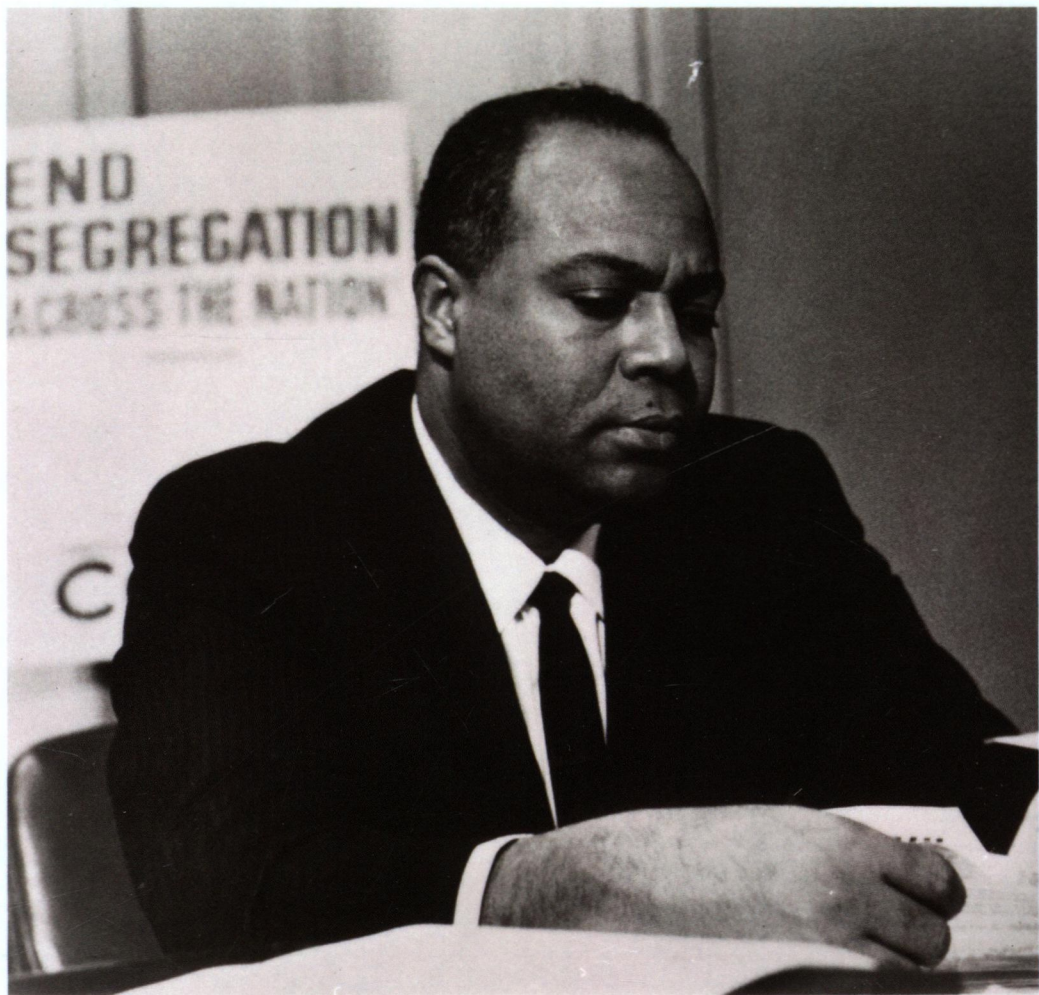




JAMES FARMER JR.

The Great Debater

BEN VOTH

COMMUNICATIONS | HISTORY

Lexington Studies in Political Communication

Series Editor: Robert E. Denton Jr., Virginia Tech

"Ben Voth vividly recounts the story of perhaps the greatest forgotten hero of the Civil Rights Movement. This book is an inspiring chronicle of a forgotten legacy, which is unknowingly embedded in the very fabric of the lives of all Americans."

—CHRISTOPHER MEDINA, director of debate at Wiley College

"James Farmer Jr. was considered by many to be the intellectual of the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s. He was one of those charismatic leaders whose words and actions affected change not only in the United States but also all over the world. Now he's been largely forgotten, but Voth, in his book *James Farmer Jr.: The Great Debater*, sheds new light on Farmer and one of the great reasons that he was able to do what he did. It adds new light to Farmer's enduring legend." —GAIL BEIL, independent researcher

James Farmer Jr.: The Great Debater provides a rhetorical and biographical guide to how the American Civil Rights Movement came into being. It details James Farmer Jr.'s intellectual emergence as a young debater at Wiley College, an HBCU in Marshall, Texas, and ultimately chronicles how this led to the emergence of the first nonviolent sit-in against segregation in 1942 in Chicago. Farmer was a key founder of the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) that pioneered the nonviolent strategies that would later be used by Martin Luther King. He debated important figures like Malcolm X to provide a powerful advocacy grounded in the praxis of argumentation. Ben Voth demonstrates the ongoing relevance of Farmer's successful debate methodology in resolving contemporary race problems in the twenty-first century.

Ben Voth is associate professor of corporate communications and public affairs and director of debate at Southern Methodist University.



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Rowman & Littlefield

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Cover image: James and Lula Farmer Papers, Dolph Briscoe Center for American History, The University of Texas at Austin.

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LEXINGTON BOOKS

Lanham • Boulder • New York • London

Published by Lexington Books
An imprint of The Rowman & Littlefield Publishing Group, Inc.
4501 Forbes Boulevard, Suite 200, Lanham, Maryland 20706
www.rowman.com

Unit A, Whitacre Mews, 26-34 Stannary Street, London SE11 4AB

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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Information Available

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data Available

ISBN: 978-1-4985-3963-0 (cloth : alk. paper)
ISBN: 978-1-4985-3964-7 (electronic)

™ The paper used in this publication meets the minimum requirements of American National Standard for Information Sciences Permanence of Paper for Printed Library Materials, ANSI/NISO Z39.48-1992.

Printed in the United States of America

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James Farmer Jr.: The Great Debater, by Ben Voth

*To my debaters past and present—I have always believed you
can change the world!*

Acknowledgments

Many great professionals and institutions helped me along the path of writing this book. Jackie Johnson at Miami University's Freedom Summer Library, the librarians at the Briscoe Center at the University of Texas, where Farmer's papers are kept, and the librarians at the National Archives in Washington, DC, provided indispensable assistance to my work. The resources created by Tim O'Donnell and the Mary Washington University online site dedicated to preserving James Farmer Jr.'s legacy were a tremendous help. Chris Medina and the great debaters of Wiley College and Jean Michel Habineza and the Rwandan debate team, inspired me to see how history matters today. Friends and colleagues Amity Shlaes and Matthew Denhart at the Coolidge Foundation encouraged my love of debate and also helped me see how debate touches so many points of the American political biography. Gail Beil is an extraordinary expert and one of the most important people who helped me complete this project. She is personable, knowledgeable and compelling, and she made me feel comfortable about being a Farmer fanatic.

I would also like to thank my original speech and debate teacher from too many years ago, Mary Beth McLemore. You gave me my voice in junior high school, and I am eternally grateful. My wonderful Christian community at SMU and at my church at Lakepointe Rockwall gave me much support to make this book as true and strong as possible. God matters. Out of that knowledge, we can create more meaning for the lives of others as we live out what Farmer and his dad knew as the Social Gospel. I would also like to thank my students and debaters who continually inspire me and help me see the incredible possibilities of the future.

Finally, my family has been incredibly supportive. My daughters Rebecca, Sarah, and Anna remind me that they are the greatest argument I can ever hope to make in the world. You make me feel great about being a dad when there is so much going on around me. Thank you, Anna, for allowing me to use your great photography and for teaching me that, indeed, great history revolves around donuts. My wife, Kelli, deserves much more than this book can probably give because she believed in it so much. That fits with her profoundly supportive ways, and I could not have written this book without her.

Preface

James Farmer Jr. was important to my life and passions long before I realized this truth in the winter of 2007. The long educational process whereby my role as a professor of rhetoric and director of debate became transformed by the life and advocacy of the Great Debater, James Farmer Jr., began at that time. This book is an attempt to share for a broader public what James Farmer Jr. has done for me and my students and to, thereby, enable a further advance of the unique debate pedagogy that destroyed segregation in the United States. It is my hope that this ideal example can be an academic catalyst to further more profound and positive changes to this world like those initiated by Farmer.

Where to begin on this tapestry is its own challenge. In the beginning is Oxford, Ohio. Oxford, Ohio, is the home of Miami University—the first university I worked at after completing my PhD at the University of Kansas in 1994. I worked at Miami for fourteen years, from 1994 to 2008. For most of my time at Miami, the first day of class began at a special place—the Freedom Summer Memorial on the Western Campus. Whether in a graduate class on rhetorical theory, a basic public speaking class, a debate class, or an undergraduate class in advocacy, students would take a seat in the classroom as I held up sheets of paper each with a single word. The slow string of words held up in silence, often began with the word, “Rhetoric” and would define rhetoric word by word and then suggest how the world could be changed by human persuasion. I would conclude with the words, “Follow,” “Me” and leave to go to the Western Campus. After some hesitating, students would follow and walk with me to the outdoor Freedom Summer Memorial. This memorial commemorates the 1964 training of young activists to go into Mississippi and attempt both education of African Americans and registrations to vote. The memorial focuses particularly on the dramatic moments preceding the deaths of civil rights activists Mickey Schwerner, James Chaney, and Andrew Goodman who trained in Oxford, Ohio, in the summer of 1964 and then were killed shortly after arriving in Mississippi to do their work. At the memorial, I would hold up a sign that said, “Read.”

The major stone at the front of the memorial reads:

James Chaney, 21, Andrew Goodman, 20, and Michael Schwerner, 24
trained at the Western College for Women before heading south to
register black voters as part of the Mississippi Freedom Project. They



Figure 0.1. Freedom Summer Memorial at Kumler Chapel on the campus of Miami University of Oxford, Ohio. The memorial commemorates the activism of CORE and SNCC activists who trained there in 1964. Photo by Ben Voth

left Oxford on June 20, 1964 and disappeared the next day in Mississippi. Their bodies were found in an earthen dam six weeks later.

The students would mill around the memorial reading the various newspaper headlines inscribed in the stone amphitheater near Kumler Chapel.¹ The architecture of the stones is one that begins with despairing rough hewn stones and progresses toward smoother more hopeful and careful cut stones. Indeed, almost fifty years prior, students their ages walked these grounds in preparation to change the world from one of despair to hope. After a period of study, I would hold up a sign saying, "Listen." Using a portable sound system, I would play Martin Luther King's 1963 speech "I Have a Dream," given less than one year before

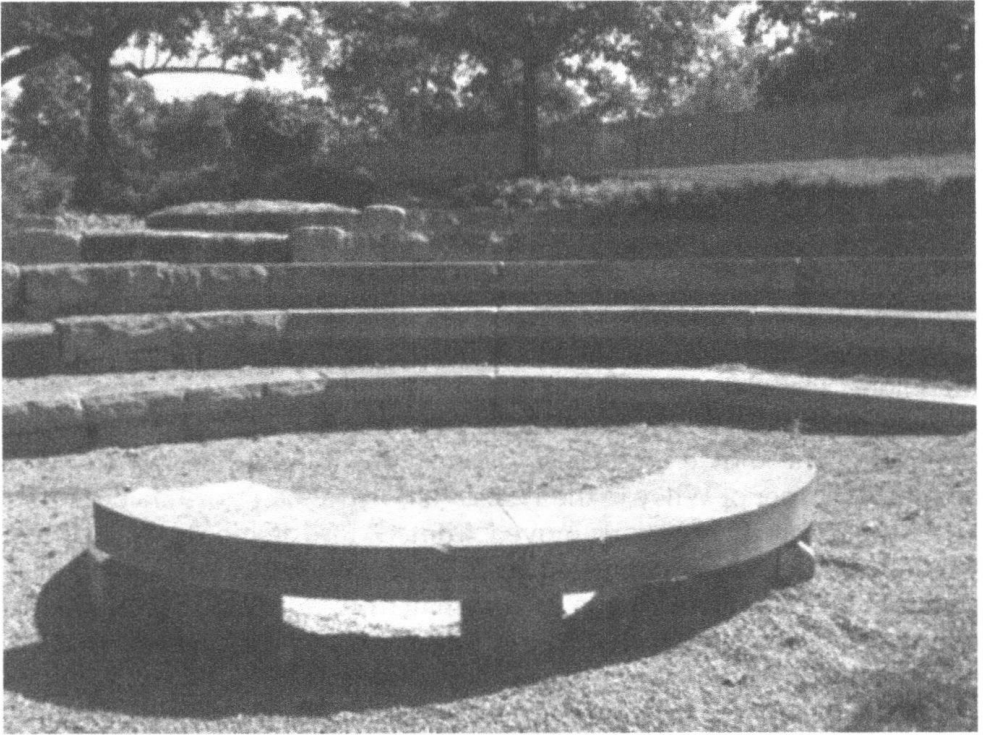


Figure 0.2. Freedom Summer Memorial Amphitheater on the campus of Miami University in Oxford, Ohio. Photo by Ben Voth.

Freedom Summer 1964. An ever-changing slideshow that played with images from Freedom Summer 1964 conveyed the urgency of activism from that time. At the end of that speech, I would speak for the first time and ask the students how this rhetoric on August 28, 1963, could have motivated young people—not unlike themselves—to give up all the comforts of life and risk it all to help African Americans in the South. Was that even possible? More importantly, was such risk and reward in rhetorical study still possible today? For fourteen years I felt and heard the idealism, energy and youth of students answering this question and rising to the challenges contained within those exercises.

I was always drawn to that memorial at Miami and that speech because its message haunted and inspired me every time I heard it. When I left Miami in 2008, I still wondered how it all happened. How did Mickey Schwerner, James Chaney, and Andy Goodman freely give up their lives for the desperate dream of greater equality in Mississippi? I was sad to leave the beautiful campus at Miami knowing the debate program that I had built would likely die with my departure.

However, the existential lightning bolt of leaving Miami and returning home to Dallas—at Southern Methodist University to rebuild their debate program, was alluring. I would later discover that it was more

fulfilling and fateful than imagined. The first step in this direction came with the 2007 film *The Great Debaters*, by Denzel Washington. The movie captivated me like so many viewers with a tantalizing view of how debate changes lives, as recounted in the incredible experiences of a 1930s debate team at the historically black college that was and still is Wiley College. I contacted Wiley College and asked if there was anything I could do to help debate at the school. I did not know that Denzel Washington and Wiley administrators were already conspiring to re-create a debate program in 2008—just as SMU administrators were on their own campus. I was asked to join an advisory board to help put a million dollar gift from Denzel Washington to Wiley toward the task of rebuilding Wiley's long lost debate program. I was delighted that two Methodist schools in Texas—Wiley and SMU—would be rebuilding their debate programs. The movie, *The Great Debaters*, mentioned SMU twice as a historical partner of Wiley in the 1930s.

As the orbit of my work moved from Oxford, Ohio, to Dallas, my mental energies became directed toward Texas. Wiley College was two and a half hours from Dallas in Marshall, Texas. My mind's eye was drawn to one prominent character of the cinematic study offered by *The Great Debaters*: James Farmer Jr. As I began to unravel the historical puzzle pieces of Wiley's debate program, a shocking connection to Oxford, Ohio, emerged: James Farmer Jr. was a central architect of Freedom Summer 1964. It was as if someone had thrown down 900 pieces onto a 100 piece intellectual puzzle I thought I had already solved. Freedom Summer did not happen because of King's 1963 speech—it had historical precursors traceable to this great debater. I would later discover that young James Farmer Jr., ironically, traveled to Oxford, Ohio, in the 1930s as a Methodist delegate to a national conference. There, he would engage in a floor debate about a possible law to federally ban lynching. In his biography, *Lay Bare the Heart*, Farmer explained that this was the moment he became inspired by the power of public speaking and argument. The young Texan would form in his mind under the guidance of a college debate coach, Melvin Tolson, the idea of destroying segregation in the United States.

Washington's film, focused on roughly five years of debating at Wiley College, unearthed an intellectual thread I could not release. Who was James Farmer Jr.? How did the study of debate impact who he was and what he achieved? Where did he go from Wiley? What advocacy did he create to bring about his dream of destroying segregation? Realizing that these questions directly impacted the questions I was asking students in Oxford, Ohio, continues to shock and motivate me with regard to teaching rhetoric, argumentation and debate. Today's debate students can be tomorrow's James Farmer Juniors.

All my classes begin at SMU with a similar hearing of MLK's "I Have a Dream" speech. However, we examine the First Amendment etched

into the stone of our building and the university seal that extols Jesus' words how "the Truth shall set us free" in the Latin phrase *veritas liberabit vos*. We ponder that uncomfortable possibility that Methodism as embodied by SMU in 1915, may have factored into important changes like those sought by Martin Luther King. The Methodist reality of James Farmer Jr.—whose father was a Methodist minister and professor at a Methodist university—exposed a conspiracy of Methodist higher education that was working to unravel the injustices of racism.

SMU is mentioned twice in *The Great Debaters*, because SMU invited Wiley to come and debate at its all white campus during the 1930s. Unfortunately that debate did not happen as scheduled. Therefore, as an advisory board member for the Wiley debate program and the new director of the SMU Debate program, I set about correcting that historical miscarriage of a great dream these two Methodist schools conspired to accomplish. I suggested that SMU should come to Wiley and debate at a public event. Wiley could then return in February 2009 to complete our original invitation from the 1930s. I was sad, but inspired, to realize that when my SMU debaters and I arrived at Wiley's campus on January 23, 2009, it was the first time since the school's founding in 1873 that a predominantly white college had come to their campus to debate.²

It was a night full of energy, enthusiasm, and excitement. The Wiley community of more than 200 observers was witnessing the rebirth of their debate program. We debated the proposition: "Resolved: A good leader knows that the Pen is mightier than the Sword." SMU would negate the proposition. I was stunned by the first sentence of the first affirmative speaker from Wiley College—the incomparable and compelling Caress Russell,³ "We stand here tonight firmly resolved, that *President Barack Obama* knows that the Pen is mightier than the Sword." The auditorium erupted into the pounding of tabletops—a gesture meant to convey enthusiasm and support for the speaker. We had not seen this strategic maneuver coming when we left our Dallas campus. Wiley narrowed the affirmative resolution, as was their right as the affirmative team, to the localized and profound question of the nation's first African American president Barack Obama, who had been inaugurated two days before. For me, it was one of the most staggering realizations of my debate career: On this campus, Melvin Tolson and James Farmer Jr. had unleashed, seventy-five years before, the catalysts of social change that would bring the first African American man to the most powerful position of authority in the known world. My SMU debaters gave it a valiant fight—arguing that the sword was sometimes necessary to stop genocide, but there was no turning back the clock Farmer had set in motion. We were witnessing the triumph of Farmer's vision, and the hopes of the African American community soared that night on a campus that was once the African American Harvard of the West.⁴ I told the newspapers: "This was the best debate we ever lost." And it was. Debate was reborn at

Wiley and at SMU. More than that, the kind of incredible social changes that come from introducing young minds to debate was more profoundly evident than ever.

In the years to come, the Rwandan debate team—visiting SMU for exhibition debates in 2014 and 2015—would ask me: “What can you tell us about James Farmer Jr.?” They had seen the movie and knew he was from Texas. The movie is a staple of debate education in Africa and deemed an important way to learn about debate. It was an honor to take them to Marshall, Texas. I showed them Tolson’s house where Farmer debated. I showed them the Paramount movie theater where Farmer allowed himself to be segregated in the 1930s in downtown Marshall. I had the privilege of seeing in those young eyes of high school debaters from Rwanda, the hope that can arise in the aftermath of great suffering. It was overwhelming and inspiring. Debate can heal. Debate can change. Debate can empower.

On a more personal note, Farmer’s biography and life trajectory is inescapable for me. I learned how to debate under the tutelage of my junior high speech coach Mary Beth McLemore. I won my first debate trophy when I was fourteen years old in Richardson, Texas. I prepared to go into the Baptist ministry when I came upon the debate squad at Baylor. I was part of a debate squad that won two national titles in 1987 and 1989. The intellectual fireworks of debate pulled me out of conventional church ministry and into one of ministry aimed at reinvigorating debate as a true social empowerment tool. I believe debate can change young people in profound ways because I saw this in my own life, and I have seen it hundreds of times since I started coaching at places like Baylor, the University of Kansas, Miami University, and Southern Methodist University. To some small and lesser extent, James Farmer Jr.’s story is my story and I hope to make it the story of many more hopeful students and teachers in this book.

This book is an attempt to fully inform the flood of questions that arise from seeing how an eighteen-year-old Texan, James Farmer Jr., graduated from Wiley College and launched a war on segregation rooted in a theology of the Social Gospel found in Matthew 25. After examining tens of thousands of pages of archival materials from the Briscoe Center archives holding the personal papers of James Farmer Jr. in Austin, Texas, to the Freedom Summer Library at Miami, Ohio, to the national archives in Washington, DC, it is apparent that Farmer was an intellectual iceberg that intentionally sank the *Titanic* legal vessel of American racial segregation embodied in Jim Crow. This is certainly an initial but comprehensive examination of that effort that was decades in the making.

Why more than 80,000 people—mostly a mix of white and black students—joined Farmer’s cause of destroying segregation remains a matter of awe for me. I cannot say after so many hundreds of hours of writing,