OUR STRUGGLE: WHY THE STUDENT NONVIOLENT COORDINATING COMMITTEE EXPELLED ITS WHITE MEMBERS

Introduction

Nowhere in the United States was there a more dangerous place for interracial groups during the 1960s than the Deep South. Violence and mayhem potentially awaited any person that dared defy the segregationist practices that had been established by centuries of racial hatred and cruel intimidation. Rural African Americans in Mississippi, Alabama, and Georgia faced greater threats to their constitutional rights (not to mention their lives) than any other group in the country. In their daily lives a great number of them shouldered poverty, violence, and disenfranchisement in the relentlessly oppressive South. Leading civil rights organizations, like the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), often seemed unable to fully grapple with the challenges presented by such deeply ingrained discrimination. They expressed views that assumed the obstacles to a successful struggle in the South would be insurmountable until a later time. The only organization willing to put lives and adequate resources on the line in the Deep South to register voters and desegregate buses and lunch counters was the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (or SNCC, pronounced “snick”), a black student-led group formed in the wake of the 1960 sit-in demonstrations which had reinvigorated the civil rights movement with new direction and purpose.

SNCC began as a small organization of just sixteen full-time members, formed upon democratic, nonviolent, and interracial principles. This racially integrated group of young men

---

1 The title “Our Struggle” is taken from Martin Luther King, Jr.’s, book about the Montgomery Bus Boycott, Our Struggle: The Story of Montgomery (New York: Congress of Racial Equality, 1956).
and women were essential to numerous anti-discrimination battles throughout the South during the 1960s, such as the Freedom Rides, Freedom Summer, and the marches in Selma, Alabama that would eventually lead to the end of legal segregation in the United States. Nonviolent direct action and voter registration were their primary means of facilitating such dramatic change. Their leadership was all-black, and they sought above all to empower local leaders throughout the South who would mobilize their communities and demand full equality in the most dangerous areas in the country. Until 1966, African American members worked hand-in-hand with dedicated white activists to achieve their goals. In December of that year, however, white members were expelled from the organization, and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee became led and staffed entirely by African Americans.

This schism, a departure from the group’s core founding principles, was not absolutely sudden. Internal friction regarding race had been minimally affecting SNCC since the organization’s earliest days. Yet it was after the Mississippi Summer Project of 1964, which brought more than a thousand well-educated, Northern student volunteers into the Deep South to register poor black people to vote, that these simmering tensions began seething to the surface. SNCC had invited the white students hesitantly, fearing the development of African American leaders would be hindered by white involvement. That summer was traumatic and only minimally successful at best, and activists white and black faced the full scourge of white Southern tyranny. At the end of the summer, SNCC members suffered a disappointing failure at the Democratic National Convention in Atlantic City. By 1966, an exceptionally dramatic year in the United States, the divisions over race were tearing the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee apart. Violence at home and abroad pushed the young but experienced civil rights activists to the brink of total exhaustion. Black Power emerged that summer as a source of both
empowerment and dissonance. Eventually, a SNCC local office known as the Atlanta Project pushed racial separatism to the forefront of an internal debate and managed to instigate a vote that removed whites from active membership in the organization.

Was this expulsion inevitable, and why did it happen? The wealth of literature left by former SNCC members indicates that a majority of the leadership (all African American) favored an integrated group that organized poor people in both black and white communities. Many of the leaders had long argued for whites to work in white communities, but not for a complete separation of the races, which appeared to most as contradictory to their vision of a society free from racism. Yet black members in SNCC were constantly struggling to forge for themselves and their community a new pride and identity, and an ownership of themselves and the direction of the civil rights movement. Black activists saw the white volunteers through a prism, at times as paternalistic representatives of white dominance, at other times as hard-working radicals committed to racial justice. This dynamic array of discordant elements within SNCC and throughout the broader black freedom movement makes it difficult to place responsibility entirely on the Atlanta Project’s calls for racial exclusion. The seeds of discontent and racial conflict had in fact been planted years before. The continual threat of violence, the sluggish pace of reform and progress, and the difficulties of addressing the myriad complexities of racism transformed these unresolved matters of identity and policy into explosive divisions which would accelerate the demise of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee.

**SNCC’s Origins and the Importance of Ella Baker**

In 1960, SNCC had seemed fully capable of harnessing the energy of explosive events. The sit-in movement had begun with a spark in February of that year when four black college

---

2 “Leadership” here refers to those who held executive positions within the organization, such as James Forman or John Lewis. However, SNCC was a highly democratic organization that sought consensus and grew wary of giving too much power to those in leadership positions.
students had politely asked for service at a Greensboro, North Carolina Woolworth’s to challenge the seemingly indomitable Jim Crow segregation of the South. The sit-ins spread from Greensboro throughout the South, with thousands of young black and white students directly and nonviolently protesting the ugliness of segregation in countless Southern cities. Black students spoke of being empowered by the experience, and for the first time many felt pride in being black. They believed they were overcoming the sense of racial inferiority that had been inculcated in them by years of accommodation to the discriminating white power structure. The civil rights movement saw potential in this youthful and invigorating energy.

No one recognized the promise of student power more than Ella Baker, a lifelong activist and organizer who in 1960 was also executive director of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), Dr. Martin Luther King’s coalition of Southern ministers fighting for civil rights. In mid-April 1960, Baker organized a meeting of student sit-in leaders from around the country at Shaw University in Raleigh, North Carolina, which resulted in a provisional coordinating body that eventually became the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee. Their initial “Statement of Purpose,” issued May 14, 1960, declared the students’ commitment to nonviolence and Judeo-Christian justice. By using “integration of human endeavor” to change society, they wanted to create “the atmosphere in which reconciliation and justice become actual possibilities.” A month later, Baker wrote a position paper that claimed the students were after something “bigger than a hamburger” at a Southern lunch counter. They were in fact committed to ending discrimination not only in the South, but throughout the entire world. She emphasized the necessity of “group-centered leadership,” which focused on democratic decision-making and

---

the fostering of local leaders.\(^5\) These traits would become hallmarks of SNCC’s working philosophy.

Her influence in the group is undeniable. James Forman said that “without her there would be no story of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee.”\(^6\) Countless SNCC members spoke of her in almost reverential terms. She garnered such affection not only for the years of experience and organization skills she brought to the fledgling organization, but also for the personal interest she took in the young people of SNCC. Baker was unlike the other somewhat paternal and patriarchal civil rights leaders who gave heavy-handed advice to the students. As Bob Moses, an important leader in SNCC during the 1960s, put it: “Miss Baker was actually talking to me.”\(^7\) Her “gentle” and “unobtrusive” style guided SNCC members to question their beliefs and tactics in a way that brought them to better understand the implications of each action they undertook.\(^8\)

Ella Baker’s concept of interracial organizing placed special emphasis on the self-determination of African Americans. She believed that with the right education and guidance, black people in the South and throughout the country could lead themselves in business, schooling, and governance. Among her many efforts, she had helped establish all-black cooperatives in Harlem during the 1930s. But Baker was realistic, pragmatic, and compassionate, and she had worked alongside white organizers and leaders for decades, in a variety of struggles for economic and racial justice. She understood the value of interracial alliances. Her work over the years showed a resounding commitment to the development of a

\(^5\) Ella Baker, “Bigger than a Hamburger,” in *The Eyes on the Prize Reader*, 120-122.


more fair, equal society for all people, black and white. Throughout her life, African Americans had been striving for fair opportunity and an end to their oppressive discrimination. Baker valued anyone who was willing to work toward the fulfillment of that goal. The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, profoundly influenced by Baker for several years after its formation, followed the same course of integrated efforts in its initial attempts to end segregation in the Jim Crow South.

**White Activists in SNCC’s Early Years**

SNCC was originally a small, intimate group of full-time activists that focused their efforts on community outreach and voter registration. Only one of the original sixteen members was a white person, a young college student named Bob Zellner. Zellner had grown up in Birmingham, in a family and city dominated by the racism of the Ku Klux Klan. However, by the time he reached college and attended a nonviolent workshop in Montgomery, he became fully committed to the civil rights cause. Zellner initially joined SNCC after the sit-ins, when the new organization was looking for white activists to organize students on white campuses. From the earliest moments, SNCC was an interracial organization—staffed by blacks and a handful of whites, led entirely by African Americans—but it was suggested even then that white members would do better to organize in white communities, to establish what James Forman called “nonracist beachheads” that would prime these places for the end of Jim Crow. However, white members were always reluctant to do so. Such endeavors seemed to offer little chance of success, and more importantly, white communities were often far away from where the more confrontational actions of the movement occurred. Zellner—who endured numerous beatings

---


and excessive hardship during his years with SNCC—had in fact been willing to work on white outreach but at the time this proved logistically impossible. In May of 1961, the Freedom Rides began. This series of direct action protests would thrust SNCC and segregation into the national consciousness.

The sit-ins had already brought civil rights issues to the public’s attention. They had subsequently aroused the courage, determination and guilt of young white liberals across the country. With the Freedom Rides, SNCC’s goal was to induce the federal government to enforce the statutes that declared segregation on interstate buses illegal. SNCC would draw the attention of the media and the Kennedy Administration when panicky Southern segregationists predictably attacked the riders. Hundreds of black and white people from all areas of the United States responded to SNCC’s call for courageous youth to board the buses. They joined the Freedom Rides to travel with integrated teams on interstate buses heading deep into the South. One such person was Philip Posner, a Jewish UCLA student who boarded the buses in July of 1961 after 300 people had already been arrested by Southern authorities, some of them violently beaten. Posner was prompted by his faith in God and a belief that his actions should match his principles of equality and social justice for all people. Eventually, he spent thirty-nine days in Mississippi’s notorious Parchman Penitentiary in a six by nine-foot cell. Throughout the ordeal, Posner found comfort and solidarity among black and white Freedom Riders as they sang freedom songs and spent hours discussing the movement. The mutually endured hardship built a sense of community among black and white activists throughout the movement and within

---

11 Forman, Black Revolutionaries, xiv, 421.
12 The Freedom Rides were originally organized by the Congress for Racial Equality (CORE). SNCC, who already had several members participating, took over from CORE when one of the first buses burned and its riders attacked in Albany, Georgia.
SNCC. Shortly thereafter, the federal government was better addressing segregation on interstate travel and more adequately enforcing its laws. The Freedom Rides were a SNCC-led victory for the civil rights movement that illustrated the power of interracial desegregation actions.

But views on race within the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee were far more complex than just this example can illustrate. In 1961, while SNCC struggled to find its direction and tactical approach, several SNCC activists had gone into Mississippi and Georgia to test the waters and try to register voters there. As organizers witnessed the extreme poverty of the Deep South firsthand, a rising militancy, idealism, and a feeling of urgency began to permeate the organization.14 Bob Moses, a New York schoolteacher turned full-time activist, established numerous contacts in McComb, Mississippi, and began to have some success encouraging black residents to go down to the courthouse to register to vote. However, due to intimidation and the unfair practices of the county registrars, the effort yielded few registered voters (as well as the murder of a black farmer named Herbert Lee, as well as several weeks in jail for Moses and others).15 In Albany, Georgia, SNCC members Charles Sherrod, Cordell Reagon, and Charles “Chuck” Jones also spent countless hours ingratiating themselves in the community, convincing local residents that they were fully committed to the cause of voter registration and entirely willing to take risks to ensure their success.16

Until 1963, these registration drives were all-black efforts. The racial climate in both regions seemed to promise violence, and possibly death, to any integrated groups attempting to rattle the cage of white dominance.17 But by the spring of 1963, Sherrod’s small team of eleven

---

16 Charles Sherrod, “Organizing in Albany, Georgia,” in The Eyes on the Prize Reader, 138-139.
17 Carson, *In Struggle*, 75, 144.
workers included five Northern white student volunteers. Sherrod’s views represented one of the myriad opinions on the use of white students in SNCC’s activities: he idealistically believed that interracial teams were essential to “strike at the very root of segregation… [and] the idea that white is superior… We can only do this if [locals] see white and black working together, side by side, the white man no more and no less than his black brother, but human beings together.”

Bob Moses, who would become the driving force of SNCC’s most ambitious use of white volunteers, took a more practical approach toward integrated efforts in Mississippi. He was quite wary to use white organizers because he did not want whites to inhibit the development of local black leadership, a view expressed by several other SNCC field secretaries. Strongly influenced by Ella Baker, he believed that poor and illiterate African Americans should be engaged participants in the political process and leaders on their own terms. Moses was actually one of the leading defenders of interracial organizing, but he understood the possible threat it posed to black autonomy in rural communities.

**Freedom Summer and the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party**

However, by April 1964, when the Mississippi Summer Project (or Freedom Summer) was being planned, Bob Moses and the SNCC offices in Mississippi had experiences of successful interracial organizing on which to build. Their efforts were remarkable when one considers that the state was probably the most dangerous and oppressive place in the country for African Americans and their allies. Between August and November of 1963, SNCC had invited about one hundred white volunteers from Northern colleges to participate in was called the Aaron Henry Freedom Ballot. Though few local black Mississippians had been registered within

---

19 Carson, *In Struggle*, 77, 144.
20 Carson, *In Struggle*, 82.
their counties since 1961, SNCC managed to pull off an extraordinary victory in a mock election, in which eighty thousand African Americans registered and voted. The Freedom Vote encouraged SNCC leaders, illustrated the prowess of their advanced organizing skills, and convinced the skeptical Moses that it was possible for white volunteers to gainfully contribute to voter registration drives in the South. Yet is also cast light on the cracks spreading in SNCC’s foundation of interracial solidarity. The seismic summer of 1964 would rupture that foundation irreparably.

SNCC’s goals that summer were ambitious. The organization was not simply out to register disfranchised Southern blacks, but to build a party that would stand in opposition to Mississippi’s regular Democratic Party delegation. They wanted to provoke a confrontation at the 1964 Democratic National Convention in Atlantic City that August to force President Johnson and the Democrats to address civil rights in more direct ways. Their opposition party, the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party (MFDP), had been born in April 1964. John Lewis, serving as SNCC’s chairman from 1963 to 1966, along with Moses and other Freedom Summer planners, wanted to educate rural blacks in Freedom Schools set up around the state, then register them and get them involved with the MFDP. Nearly all of the planners acknowledged that this could not be done with SNCC’s limited staff and funding. Though the Council of Federated Organizations (COFO), a conglomerate of civil rights organizations, had been formed to plan Freedom Summer’s framework, the execution of the ambitious project was left almost entirely to SNCC, which would provide 90-95% of the funding and 95% of the staff for the program. Charged with such a monumental undertaking, SNCC members came to realize that, despite

---

23 McAdam, Freedom Summer, 28-29.
misgivings, they needed the assistance and publicity which only the use of white volunteers could bring.24

Lewis, SNCC’s chairman, and Moses, Freedom Summer’s chief architect, had been made aware of the varied implications of using white volunteers during the Freedom Vote campaign. First, local blacks and veteran SNCC workers felt that the national press had focused their attention entirely on this small group of elite white college students who had spent only a couple of weeks in Mississippi, when the longtime organizers (not coincidentally all African Americans) had been in state for years. Those years had been filled with tireless work in the face of brutal intimidation and bloodshed, and the press and government officials had virtually ignored the Mississippi activists’ efforts.25 Additionally, many of the whites, who brought with them higher educational backgrounds and experiences, assumed leadership roles in meetings and in the field, further increasing a sense of inferiority in local blacks, which activists like Moses had long been assiduously attempting to eradicate.26 SNCC’s chief strategy in Mississippi had been to guide Southern blacks, despite their limited access to education and economic opportunity, to organize and lead themselves within their communities and advocate for social change. But Lewis made the observation that the white volunteers were “working alongside poor, nameless, faceless blacks, as if those black people had no names or faces. That caused a lot of resentment.”27

Despite these reservations, prominent SNCC members like James Forman, Moses, and Lewis realized that the very effectiveness of the campaign relied on the use of white volunteers. The fact was that, despite having made inroads with rural African Americans, little had changed

24 Lewis, Walking with the Wind, 242.
25 Lewis, Walking with the Wind, 243.
27 Lewis, Walking with the Wind, 242, 243.
in Mississippi. SNCC had also enflamed the vehemence of local racists, appearing to white Mississippians as outside agitators who threatened the social structure of white supremacy that had dominated the South since the end of Reconstruction. Bob Moses, organizing in McComb since 1961, had himself been shot at, and also carried the burden of the murders of two activist associates. First, Herbert Lee, a NAACP member active in voter registration, had been gunned down by a white Mississippi state representative in 1961. The murderer walked free, claiming self-defense.28 Then, in January 1964, Louis Allen, a farmer and activist who had come forward to implicate Lee’s murderer was killed with two shotgun blasts to the head. Moses was wracked by guilt, and he felt a “personal responsibility” for Allen’s death.29

Yet his dedication to the cause of black enfranchisement and progress overrode his trepidations. Moses explained the rationale behind the decision to use middle class whites despite the possible subversion of local black control: “Bring the nation’s children, and the parents will have to focus on Mississippi… If the parents raised their voices, the political establishment would be forced to listen.”30 Never able to attract the frequent press attention that Martin Luther King and his group SCLC did, SNCC leaders realized they could draw the attention of the American middle class (and thus the political structure) with images of well-to-do white youth assisting stereotypically impoverished Southern African Americans.31 They could also anticipate the national reaction if and when these young white students were subjected to the type of violence which Mississippi blacks and SNCC activists were already familiar. But this strategic use of white volunteers created bitterness among black field secretaries. SNCC activists, risking their lives in the state since 1961, were forced to painfully and openly

29 Lewis, Walking with the Wind, 241.
30 Moses, Radical Equations, 73.
31 McAdam, Freedom Summer, 39, 36.
acknowledge the simple fact they already knew: that in American society white lives were simply of more value than black lives. For action to be taken by federal authorities, the national conscience had to be awakened. That this could only be done by the use of white volunteers widened the rift within SNCC regarding interracial organizing.\textsuperscript{32} But commitment to the ultimate goal of self-determination for African Americans pushed the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee to sacrifice complete autonomy of blacks and to accept the harsh truth of societal racism. They were willing to do this because they expected the Johnson Administration to offer protection and support for the registration efforts. Just as the federal government had been forced to legislate and protect against segregation on interstate travel following the violent and sensational 1961 Freedom Rides, SNCC hoped to draw similar attention to voting rights when the inevitable racist backlash occurred.\textsuperscript{33}

Eventually, one thousand white volunteers entered the state as Freedom School teachers, Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party organizers, and voting registrars. As they spread throughout the state, violence followed, and so did the national press. In McComb alone, where Moses had first set up shop in 1961, there were seventeen bombings between July and September.\textsuperscript{34} Interracial groups (especially of men and women) became targets of ridicule and hostility, making racist whites, in the words of future SNCC chairman Stokely Carmichael, “killing crazy.”\textsuperscript{35} On June 20\textsuperscript{th}, three civil rights workers, James Chaney, a twenty-one-year-old local African American, Michael Schwerner, a white CORE activist since 1963, and Andrew Goodman, a Freedom Summer volunteer, drove through Philadelphia, Mississippi on their way

\textsuperscript{32} McAdam, \textit{Freedom Summer}, 38.
\textsuperscript{33} It is important to note that white volunteers were not simply tricked into entering this precarious and dangerous situation. John Lewis noted that the optimistic and courageous volunteers were briefed fully on what they might expect in the South’s most inflammatory area. They were idealistic, service-minded young people who had no illusions about what might happen to them. Lewis, \textit{Walking with the Wind}, 245.
\textsuperscript{34} Carson, \textit{In Struggle}, 122.
\textsuperscript{35} Carmichael, \textit{Ready for Revolution}, 566.
to Neshoba County. They were going to touch base with the locals there, some of whom had been beaten as they watched a church—meant to be used as a Freedom School—burn to the ground. After attempting to investigate, as well as raise hope among the residents for the continuation of the Summer Project in Neshoba, the activists drove back through Philadelphia, where they were arrested by the local sheriff on a trumped up charge of speeding. Later that night, the sheriff drove the three men to a deserted Mississippi road. A gathering of Ku Klux Klansmen awaited them. After Goodman and Schwerner were shot in the chest and killed, Chaney was viciously beaten, then shot. Their car was set on fire, and a bulldozer was used to bury their bodies.³⁶

In response, the federal government went into action, but not as expected. Rather than offering protection to the civil rights workers in the state, the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) did little more than send agents to investigate the disappearance of the three men. The constitutional rights of African Americans were being demonstrably violated throughout the state but the FBI stated that protection of Mississippi blacks or the activists attempting to register them was not a high priority. President Lyndon Johnson, looking toward his nomination at the Democratic National Convention that August, did not want to ruffle feathers with Southern Democrats. He spoke supportively of civil rights at press conferences but took little action to assist Southern blacks. Bombings, arrests, church burnings and shootings continued throughout the summer as Johnson pledged federal support that only minimally addressed rights abuses, while the murderers of Goodman, Chaney and Schwerner remained at large. The media focused heavily on the murders, but this only created more friction within SNCC. All the members knew that the media attention and FBI investigation were only the result of the fact that two white men had been killed. Had Chaney died alone, his murder, like those of so many African Americans in

³⁶ Sitkoff, Struggle for Black Equality, 161-165.
decades prior, would have gone almost entirely unnoticed by mainstream America. The Summer Project had anticipated such a reaction from the start. Nonetheless, as the ravaging stressors of the confrontational summer wore on, African Americans within SNCC became increasingly resentful toward the news media, the government, and their white coworkers.\textsuperscript{37}

Tensions continued to mount as the activists began to account for the successes and failures of the Mississippi Summer Project and prepare for the Democratic National Convention. The dramatic violence and media interest in response to the use of white volunteers had occurred as projected, but the results were far from satisfactory to the beaten and weary activists. The federal government had not been propelled into action in Mississippi to protect the registrars, and as a result many rural African Americans remained unregistered at the end of the summer. Though eighty thousand had enlisted in the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party, only a meager 1,600 ended up on the rolls in their local counties, which attested to the entrenched nature of Southern white authority and the necessity of federal action to ensure constitutional fairness.\textsuperscript{38} Despite the lack of assistance in Mississippi, that July the Civil Rights Act of 1964 was passed, legally ending discrimination based on race in voting and employment. It also ended racial segregation in schools and public accommodations. Though the Act lacked a powerful enforcement mechanism, it was a landmark legal victory for the civil rights movement.

There were more subtle victories—and failures—too. SNCC had gained the trust of local blacks in Mississippi, and given many of them certain organizing tools with which to carry on the struggle after the summer ended. The innovative curriculum of the Freedom Schools provided a framework for future alternative schools throughout the country.\textsuperscript{39} Black SNCC workers had fostered connections in the communities of impoverished sharecroppers who had

\textsuperscript{37} Sitkoff, \textit{Struggle for Black Equality}, 163-165. See also: Carson, \textit{In Struggle}, 121.
\textsuperscript{38} Carson, \textit{In Struggle}, 117-118.
\textsuperscript{39} Carson, \textit{In Struggle}, 115-116, 120-121.
risked their lives and livelihoods by sharing their homes with the young people.\footnote{Cleveland Sellers, \textit{The River of No Return: The Autobiography of a Black Militant and the Life and Death of SNCC} (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1973), 53.} John Lewis also noted a burgeoning sense of energizing racial pride which had been building in young African Americans since the 1960 sit-ins.\footnote{Lewis, \textit{Walking with the Wind}, 242.} But this racial pride, as well as growing bitterness toward white volunteers, continued kindling debates about interracial organizing in SNCC.

Disputes intensified after eighty-five additional white members joined SNCC at the end of the summer, making the group more than 20\% white.\footnote{Carson, \textit{In Struggle}, 100.} James Forman feared that such a change would redirect the decision-making process of the organization and hinder its African American leadership. However, he still saw the growing racial animosity toward whites as counterproductive and anathema to SNCC’s goals and principles. He regretfully observed that SNCC members were losing their faith in interracial solidarity and no longer felt like “a band of brothers, a circle of trust.”\footnote{Forman, \textit{Black Revolutionaries}, 420, 412-414, xv, 418-419.} SNCC’s black rank-and-file had followed Bob Moses into the darkest pits of the Southern racist machinery. Their pragmatic attempt to attract the attention of sympathetic white liberals and the federal government had yielded few concrete successes, which ignited resentments and cynicism previously unseen in the group during previous campaigns.\footnote{McAdam, \textit{Freedom Summer}, 29.} The summer left even the most seasoned and committed activists in utter “exhaustion, weariness, despair, frustration, and rage.”\footnote{McAdam, \textit{Freedom Summer}, 33.} Nonetheless, a delegation of over sixty MFDP members bussed to Atlantic City in the hopes of challenging the regular Mississippi delegation at the Democratic National Convention.

The Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party, comprised of rural Mississippians and several SNCC members, was attempting to unseat the all-white Mississippi convention
delegation and put in its place a primarily black group which would more accurately reflect the demographics of the state. Theirs was a direct challenge to put Lyndon Johnson and the Democratic Party on the defensive and force them to take action against the blatant racism and legal violations in the electoral processes of the South. The group eventually made it to the Credentials Committee, where former sharecropper and SNCC activist Fannie Lou Hamer testified about her struggles in attempting to register to vote. She had been fired from the plantation where she worked, thrown in jail and severely beaten several times while trying to exercise a fundamental right of American citizenship. Her impassioned speech had a profound effect on the committee, but the political wrangling of Johnson and Democratic strategists kept the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party from gaining recognition. The MFDP was offered the seating of two delegates at large. They voted down the proposal based on principle. After the hot, deadly summer, MFDP and SNCC leaders like Bob Moses had expected more. They left the convention defeated, reassessing their tactics and utterly disillusioned with mainstream politics.46

The loss at the convention pushed SNCC in new directions. They began searching for more radical means of reconciling the depredations of racial discrimination in America. By the time the Voting Rights Act of 1965 was passed, young people in the civil rights movement were already exploring broader goals than voter registration, such as equal access to housing, education, and employment.47 SNCC activists were also looking inward. Charles Sherrod’s idealism of 1961 had given way to a fomenting frustration in the wake of the MFDP’s defeat in Atlantic City. In October 1964 he declared: “We are a country of racists with a racist heritage, a racist economy, a racist language, a racist religion, a racist philosophy of living, and we need

46 Sitkoff, Struggle for Black Equality, 167-171.
47 The Voting Rights Act was a significant piece of legislation. It outlawed literacy tests and established federal oversight in states with a history of voter discrimination.
naked confrontation with ourselves. Americans, both black and white, would have to reevaluate what “equality" truly meant, and how it might be realistically achieved.

The Atlanta Project, Black Power and the Turmoil of 1966

By 1966, the year the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee voted to exclude whites from the organization, African Americans had undoubtedly made significant strides in the previous decade that years before could only have been imagined by the most optimistic activists. Through legislative victories, mass protest, and concerted organizing efforts by SNCC and other civil rights groups, African Americans, especially in the South, had gained access to schools, interstate travel, business places, and voting rights, from which they had been segregated for nearly one hundred years. The American economy boomed, liberalism was flourishing, and the civil rights movement seemed united. But once the victories over de jure segregation and voting rights had been achieved, a broader, deeper range of problems presented themselves to the movement.

Longtime activists and many SNCC members were well aware of the poverty, unemployment, police brutality and general discrimination in all areas of life that blacks faced throughout the country. Because of the civil rights movement, African Americans had gained a new sense of racial pride and consciousness, as well as an expectation that they be treated equally in American society. But inequities in housing and jobs persisted. Many blacks (especially in urban centers in the North) lived in squalor in tenement slums, burdened by crime, drugs, and poverty. In the poorest ghettos of the country, impatience and feelings of futility toward an unjust system led to an explosion of urban rebellions (often referred to as “race riots”) in every major US city between 1965 and 1968, three hundred in all. Often ignited by incidents of violence between white police and unarmed black men, many African Americans, especially

---

48 Charles M. Sherrod, “Mississippi in Atlantic City,” in The Eyes on the Prize Reader, 189.
young men, took to the streets in fury over the palpable injustices of the ghetto. Fed up with their exclusion from mainstream American life, these primarily working class blacks destroyed (for the most part) white-owned businesses and tenements that had a history of prejudicial activity toward the urban African American community. All the achievements in the South toward equality had done little more than bolster the aspirations of ghetto blacks, whose daily life had been little affected by the legal victories of 1964 and 1965. 49

By the summer of 1966, the civil rights movement was struggling to address nationwide economic inequities and other injustices that the landmark legislation had failed to address. Many young blacks were absorbing the potent ideas of Malcolm X, and some had begun to call for racial separatism. Malcolm spoke of a Black Nationalist revolution against white domination that advocated at the very least armed black self-defense, as well as black ownership and directorship of black businesses and institutions. He insisted that African Americans must proudly embrace their blackness and reject whites, even those attempting help the movement. He criticized leaders like Martin Luther King, Jr., whom he saw as tools of the oppressive white power structure. 50 The SNCC members who echoed these opinions were shifting far away from SNCC’s earlier philosophy of interracial solidarity. Their increasingly radical rhetoric was sparking controversy throughout the country.

The militancy and radicalism that was emanating from the youth wing of the civil rights movement fully ignited that summer when SNCC’s new chairman, Stokely Carmichael, introduced the Black Power slogan to the world. 51 Carmichael and SNCC had joined the

49 Information on the urban rebellions of the late 1960s given in this section is taken primarily from Sitkoff’s vivid and effective descriptions. His research is often drawn from government documents like the Kerner Commission, which offer dynamic and complex views on the causes and participants of the rebellions. Sitkoff, Struggle for Black Equality (New York: Hill and Wang, 2008), 185, 192-193.


51 Carmichael replaced John Lewis in May 1966.
Meredith March Against Fear that had begun June 5th, when James Meredith (famously the first African American admitted to the University of Mississippi) had been shot attempting a one-man march from Memphis to Jackson to take a stand against white violence. When they heard about the shooting (which Meredith had survived), Dr. King’s SCLC, Floyd McKissick and the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), and SNCC decided to continue the march. When the march made its way to Greenwood, Mississippi, Carmichael addressed a rally of some three thousand African Americans gathered on the grounds of a black high school. A powerful and dynamic speaker, Carmichael expressed the intensifying frustration felt in the poor rural black communities. To the crowd, he said, “We been saying freedom for six years and we ain’t got nothin’. What we gonna start saying now is Black Power!”

According to Cleveland Sellers, a longtime SNCC organizer present at the gathering, “the crowd was right with [Carmichael]. They picked up his thoughts immediately.” They shouted back the phrase again and again. Carmichael had apparently provided a simple expression off all the exasperation and pain that poor blacks felt but had previously been unable to articulate. By the end of the summer, African Americans around the country were raising their fists in the air and calling for “Black Power!”

Very quickly, SNCC was both emboldened and divided by the implications of Black Power. Carmichael became internationally famous as he traveled the country militantly and provocatively criticizing racism in American society and around the world. By this point, he and many other SNCC members had already firmly spoken out against the war in Vietnam. They asserted that the war was diverting funds away from the War on Poverty and other economic

52 Stokely Carmichael, quoted in “From Black Consciousness to Black Power,” Cleveland Sellers with Robert Terrell, The Eyes on the Prize Reader, 281.
53 Cleveland Sellers with Robert Terrell, “From Black Consciousness to Black Power,” The Eyes on the Prize Reader, 281.
programs, as well as adding disproportionate black casualties to the ever-increasing death toll.\textsuperscript{54} In the discontented maelstrom of the mid-1960s, riots followed several of Carmichael’s speeches.\textsuperscript{55} In many speeches and position papers, he eloquently clarified his conception of the ideology of Black Power. To him, it was not as threatening as the white establishment believed it to be, nor did it advocate complete racial separatism. He stressed that blacks had been victims of centuries of oppression, and that now they must “create our own terms to define ourselves and our relationship to the society, and… [we must] have these terms recognized.”\textsuperscript{56} He argued, as black leaders (including Ella Baker and Malcolm X) had for decades, for a community-based movement that addressed race, education, and poverty throughout society. Integration of blacks into mainstream capitalist American society was not Black Power’s goal.\textsuperscript{57} Instead, African Americans would have the power to direct and nourish their own communities on their own terms. Sympathetic whites would work best in their own communities, until a coalition between the races was possible.\textsuperscript{58} The speeches resonated especially with poor rural African Americans.\textsuperscript{59} Carmichael’s pleas were often thoughtful and direct, and encouraged what even less radical leaders like Dr. King believed was necessary racial dignity. But they also sometimes had a tendency toward bombast. As such, they drew press attention to SNCC, but often distracted the group from rigorously developing new programs to match the Black Power rhetoric. The organization was no longer as influential in the civil rights movement as it had been, and the fervid intellectual debates within the group continued to create discord that

\textsuperscript{54} Carson, \textit{In Struggle}, 187-88.
\textsuperscript{55} Carson, \textit{In Struggle}, 203.
\textsuperscript{57} Stokely Carmichael, “What We Want,” in \textit{The Eyes on the Prize Reader}, 282-286.
\textsuperscript{58} Carmichael, “Toward Black Liberation,” 37.
\textsuperscript{59} Sellers, \textit{River of No Return}, 184.
weakened morale and led to numerous resignations, limiting the organization’s overall effectiveness.\footnote{Carson, \textit{In Struggle}, 221-223, 230, 225, 232.}

The Atlanta Project, the group that initiated the vote for the final removal of full-time white workers within SNCC in December 1966, was a direct embodiment of this fundamental shift within the organization. They were led by Bill Ware, who had been a Peace Corps volunteer and involved in voter registration before becoming a full-time SNCC organizer in 1964. Ahead of his time in many ways, Ware embraced a Pan-Africanist philosophy and wore African clothing which set him apart from many of his more conservatively dressed coworkers.\footnote{Carson, \textit{In Struggle}, 192-193.} He was also somewhat of a rogue. According to Cleveland Sellers, he often “refused to take orders” and “ignored memos” from SNCC’s central office.\footnote{Sellers, \textit{River of No Return}, 185.} Though initially not a separatist, Ware began pushing for racial separatism and black empowerment as a way to gain support in Atlanta. His group hoped that the ideal of separatism would arouse racial consciousness in black Atlanta residents and initiate a new era of the civil rights movement.\footnote{Carson, \textit{In Struggle}, 191.} But the Atlanta group was fueled more by ideas than practical experience. Forgoing the implementation of innovative organizing strategies, they issued numerous incendiary press statements that fueled controversy and tarnished SNCC’s already tenuous public image. Though they had been relatively unsuccessful in organizing Atlanta blacks, they sought to gain control over SNCC’s direction, using racial separatism to divide the organization.\footnote{Carmichael, \textit{Ready for Revolution}, 570.}

Many of SNCC’s leaders, like Stokely Carmichael and James Forman, supported black autonomy in American society and fully endorsed the emerging tenets of Black Power. But most of them were rankled by the dogmatic stance of the Atlanta Project. To many SNCC veterans,
separatism was simply unviable as an effective strategy. Those leaders especially touched by the
guiding presence of Ella Baker believed the practical goals of the movement for black equality
should be rooted in sensible programs, not just ideological preferences. Reflecting on the
dedication and sacrifice of SNCC members in the summer of 1964, John Lewis remarked, “We
were almost entirely about the work. That was all that mattered. Not politics. Not money. Just
the work, the people.” Lewis, Bob Moses, and others understood that the movement would only
be successful if black people could take control of their own situation and be leaders in their
communities, but that this goal could not be realized without an alliance with white Americans.
They believed in the principle of an integrated movement working together to address the
problem of racial justice, because racism was not just the burden of the black community. It was
ultimately “society’s problem.” Stokely Carmichael, who succeeded Lewis as chairman in
1966, abhorred the idea of “integration” because it implied that white society was only willing to
accept those African Americans whose manners and lifestyles they condoned. But he valued
interracial organizing as “a consequence of the work… The goal was liberation, the ending of
our people’s oppression, period.” He respected and valued the dedication and sacrifice of the
handful of full-time white activists, like Bob Zellner, who had worked in SNCC under black
leadership and faced the worst of white racial hostility alongside African Americans.
Nonetheless, he also recognized that SNCC’s political orientation, along with the complex racial
dynamics of the movement, had changed in the last several years.

Carmichael acknowledged that external pressures in the world around them made it very
difficult for SNCC to transcend the barriers of race, class, and gender as they had once

65 Lewis, Walking with the Wind, 242.
66 Italics are my emphasis. Carmichael, Ready for Revolution, 566.
conceived. In Atlanta, pervasive racial turmoil and economic frustration spilled out into the streets when a four-day urban rebellion shook the city’s slums in early September. Like the other disturbances of previous years, the riot began after police wounded a black man who had “ignored their orders to halt.” Shortly after the incident occurred, Bill Ware manned a vehicle equipped with a megaphone and drove through Atlanta. Police later arrested him and charged him with inciting a riot. In all, one thousand impoverished African Americans spilled into the streets, throwing rocks and bottles, some fighting each other. Seventy rioters were arrested. Atlanta Mayor Ivan Allen directly blamed SNCC and Stokely Carmichael for inciting the riot. Apparently Ware’s office, with its provocative press releases and vocal (though ineffective) presence in the black community, had gotten under the skin of Atlanta’s leaders.

Ware and his group’s tendency for provocation carried over into the December 1st SNCC meeting at the estate of black performer “Peg Leg” Bates. The gathering was meant to be an opportunity for SNCC’s staff to regroup and to address the issues raised by the emergent Black Power “controversy.” Discussion on the role of whites was the first item on the agenda, intended to be quickly resolved before more rigorous discussion of applicable future projects. Carmichael opened the meeting with the oft-repeated suggestion that whites would do best to organize white communities. Very soon, though, the separatist minority, led by Bill Ware and the Atlanta Project, took hold of the proceedings and managed to extend the debate about the use

70 Federal Bureau of Investigation. “Summary of Current Activities of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee.” January 30, 1967. Accessed through Declassified Documents Reference System. http://galenet.galegroup.com. The Atlanta Project and other SNCC offices were also under surveillance by the FBI at this time. One memorandum from a confidential informant describes the “internal dissension” within SNCC regarding interracial organizing. Feelings of distrust and paranoia must have also had an effect on the harried activists.
71 Carson, *In Struggle*, 239.
of white activists over the entire three-day retreat.\footnote{Carmichael, \textit{Ready for Revolution}, 570.} The arguments grew so contentious that James Forman motioned to disband SNCC entirely, remarking that “a viable organization did not expel people from its ranks based on their skin color.”\footnote{Forman, \textit{Black Revolutionaries}, xv.} He was particularly disgusted when Atlanta Group members insulted the dedicated SNCC veteran Fannie Lou Hamer for her defense of white partnership, saying she was “no longer relevant.”\footnote{Carson, \textit{In Struggle}, 240.} Eventually a late-night vote was called, in which a little more than half the attendees participated. The decision to “expel” white staff members from the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee passed by just one vote.\footnote{Carmichael, \textit{Ready for Revolution}, 570.} SNCC was no longer an interracial organization.

Ware’s volatile and disruptive behavior eventually pushed Stokely Carmichael to discharge him and fire or suspend the remaining members of the Atlanta Project. Yet the decision to remove the few permanent white staff members who had remained in SNCC through the last two years of growing racial animus was never overturned. The leaders in SNCC who had previously supported integration were unwilling to overturn the decision. It appears the Atlanta Project actually had “considerable support” within SNCC’s ranks.\footnote{Carson, \textit{In Struggle}, 241.} Additionally, several of the most principled integrationists had resigned during the turbulent summer of 1966, including John Lewis and Bob Moses. That the late night vote at the “Peg Leg” Bates meeting even occurred demonstrates how much the group was beleaguered by several years of hard struggle, burdened by exhaustion and an intellectual ferment that had been boiling since 1964’s intense Freedom Summer. Many SNCC members had since looked inward and found a hitherto untapped and powerful racial identity which could not be welded to the pragmatic politics of their earliest efforts. African American activists had earlier criticized white activists for their
paternalistic attitudes but accepted them as valuable resources to various projects that helped end segregation and register voters throughout the United States. But after years of violence, the rise of Black Power ideology, and the weariness caused by several years of arduous searching for organizational direction, the persistent racial issue within SNCC was finally resolved by a separatist group whose members had not even been a part of SNCC’s most monumental battles. Few of them had known Ella Baker, nor had they worked alongside white activist Bob Zellner during the bloody Freedom Rides and Freedom Summer. Regardless, the Atlanta Group’s pressing of the issue finally made the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee into an all-black organization. According to Cleveland Sellers, the “perpetual crisis” of the preceding years had left the organization “so harried… that most of us hardly had time to do more than shake our heads and wish that things had turned out differently…”

Conclusion

The vote that took place in the early hours of a December morning in 1966 was by no means the result of a single factor or faction within SNCC. The reasons behind the expulsion of white staff members were as diverse as the reflections in a mirror shattered by a Black Power salute. The racial relationship between blacks and whites in the civil rights movement had been complex and fraught with tension since the organization’s inception six and a half years before. Since then, the young activists had matured politically and achieved substantial gains for African Americans. Yet they had also been rocked by several bitter defeats. These experiences developed a racial consciousness and pride among black activists which had not been present before the sit-ins and Freedom Rides. This pride was later referred to as Black Power. It was sometimes, but not always, fueled by anger and distrust toward whites. Defining their new identity, as well as the direction the movement would take after the initial battles against

---

77 Sellers, River of No Return, 197.
segregation and disenfranchisement were in denouement, became the foremost obstacle that eventually destroyed the organization. Powerful ideas of black-controlled institutions and self-determination echoed SNCC’s initial philosophy, but the events of 1960-1966 had breathed an impatient and pessimistic poison into the organization that pushed against interracialism and cooperation, which had been among the key ingredients to their earlier successes. With each victory came an acknowledgement that even broader problems remained unsolved, and the liberal establishment became less willing to work with civil rights groups as it had before. Yet even as activists became more militant and radical, many SNCC members had countered racial animosity by defending whites and the group’s founding vision of a utopian organization free of prejudice.

SNCC’s idealism was fractured by Freedom Summer and the defeat of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party. The summer of 1964 had been a distinct fulcrum on which the beam of interracial solidarity had tipped against working together. Bob Moses had made a devil’s bargain when he invited middle class whites into Mississippi to register impoverished African Americans. The Mississippi Summer Project had been conceived as a way to force the federal government’s hand and grab the attention of the American people, but it came with the painful acknowledgement that white lives mattered more to the public than black lives. Though the move seemed necessary for the effectiveness of Freedom Summer, the project itself was not very successful. Years of hard work and sacrifice—not to mention murder and intimidation—appeared to have been in vain. The MFDP defeat was like a final nail in the coffin for the veteran workers’ patience, optimism, and idealism. After this, the splintering among black SNCC members over their willingness to work with whites became so divisive that the expulsion

79 Carson, *In Struggle*, 144-145.
vote in late 1966 was met with virtually no fanfare. The Atlanta Project, driven by an ideological fury that lacked a solid foundation of feasible programs, pushed for separatism in SNCC when the organization was weakened by the explosive events of the preceding years. The young veterans were simply too exhausted, too dramatically altered—both spiritually and physically—that they could do nothing more but look forward and pursue their mission of racial empowerment and equality in the tumultuous years ahead.
Works Cited and Consulted

Primary Sources


**Secondary Sources**


