

MISSISSIPPI

From Conversion to Coercion

by Christopher Jencks

There was a time, only a few years back, when the civil rights movement in the South was largely a Christian crusade and Martin Luther King its prophet. Non-violent protest was seen as a device for producing a "moral confrontation" between the races. Such a confrontation, the early leadership believed, would lead to a "crisis of conscience" in the white South, which could only end in the white supremacists' accepting their black brothers as equals (or even as moral teachers).

This "conversion strategy" failed — although not everyone perceived its failure immediately and some clerics in the movement (occasionally including King) still talk as if it could eventually work. But by the time the civil rights movement entered Mississippi in 1961, the "conversion strategy" was becoming a minority faith. The movement was going secular, and the assault on Mississippi was led by Robert Moses, a former Harvard graduate student, and the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee, not by Dr. King or the Southern Christian Leadership Conference. The movement had begun to evolve what might be called a strategy of limited coercion. The new strategy still relied heavily on non-violence and direct action, and it was supported by many who still talked about religion and morality. But the hope was no longer to win over the white supremacists to brotherly love; it was to make life so unpleasant for them that they would find compromise easier than massive resistance. Boycotts would hurt white business, demonstrations would cut into tourism. Perhaps more important, Negro protest of all kinds would provoke the white community into violent retaliation, and this would make it easier to pass federal civil rights legislation and harder for the offending community to attract Northern investors.

The "limited coercion" strategy worked fairly well in some parts of the "new" South, where the business community has become influential and a middle-class distaste for disorder and violence is pervasive. When the demonstrators forced such communities to choose between brutal repression and modest reforms, some chose reform. But Mississippi proved to be still part of the "old," unreconstructed South. Most Mississippians care more for preserving white supremacy than for profits, lawfulness or other symbols of "progress." In such a setting demonstrations were useful only to build interest among local Negroes and to show the North that the right to vote was still not honored in Mississippi. Soon after entering the state, SNCC leaders began to realize that ending white supremacy in Mississippi would ultimately require the use of force.

This was not an easy thing for people committed to non-violence to believe, nor is it easy for white Northerners to believe today. Over and over we have been told that eventually the Southern white "moderates" would speak out and take control from the "extremists," that the "younger generation" of whites would have different views from the older, that industrialization and prosperity would eventually change Mississippi's outlook, or that some other "evolutionary"

force would save the day. An outsider cannot judge such matters confidently, but I can report that very few of those with whom I talked last month in Mississippi, black or white, had much faith in any of these accommodating influences. Listening to them it seemed to me that if Mississippi were left to its own devices, racial conflict would steadily increase.

The present balance between violent whites, moderate whites, and non-violent blacks did not seem to me likely to change radically this year or next. So long as young Mississippi Negroes imagine that they can better their lot in the North, there will be a safety valve of sorts, and Negro violence will probably focus on the Northern ghettos where unemployed Negro adolescents and young adults are concentrated. But in the long run this very violence may persuade many black Mississippians that there is no point in moving North. If the young Negroes despair and stay in Mississippi, and if they cannot find jobs, regular meals, or even safety from the police in Mississippi's "niggertowns," they will presumably respond eventually as Harlem has long responded. The results could then be much worse than in the North. In most Northern cities public officials depend on Negro votes for office, and have some sympathy with the "legitimate" aspirations of the "decent, law-abiding Negroes." In Mississippi, Negro votes don't count and a "decent, law-abiding Negro" is not expected to have any aspirations. Once violence begins, there is not even a common set of ideals on the basis of which a compromise can be sought.

But while white violence against Negroes will probably continue, and may evoke more sporadic counter-violence than in the past, an organized upheaval seems unlikely. Negroes in New York, like Malcolm X and Jesse Gray, talk about giving bloodshed a purpose by resorting to guerrilla tactics in Mississippi. Most Negroes on the scene know that such a venture, while appealing to some frustrated young adolescents in Mississippi's few miniature Harlems, could only end in disaster. Mississippi is not South Africa. Its black inhabitants are less numerous than its white ones, and they live on a largely white continent where outside sympathy or help would be unlikely once they started shooting. If black Mississippians were to attempt a violent attack on white supremacy, it is hard to be sure what would happen. Much would depend on the form violence took. Terrorism aimed at specific, objectionable sheriffs or businesses would be one thing; guerrilla warfare aimed at seizing power would be quite another. In the latter case the Negroes would probably end up decimated and "pacified" on "reservations," like the Indians before them. (The fate of the American Indian seldom gets the attention it deserves from black nationalists; it does not suggest that all-out violence or separatism holds much promise of success in America.)

Yet if Mississippi Negroes cannot hope to employ force successfully themselves, they can hope to play their cards cleverly enough so that the federal govern-

ment will do their job for them. The present strategy of the civil rights movement in Mississippi rests on this hope. I do not mean that civil rights leaders in Mississippi are sitting on their hands waiting for the Justice Department to take over. If anything, the reverse is the case. But it is true that the civil rights workers spend as much time, energy, and blood trying to push the Administration harder and faster as trying to push white Mississippi.

What's the Problem?

Northern whites often find this kind of pressure on Washington irritating or puzzling. They feel the Negroes got as much as they had any right to hope for in the new Civil Rights Act, and they feel that "the problem is now one for the courts." This feeling is understandable, for it is based on the notion, widely disseminated by civil rights organizations in the past, that "the problem" is primarily one of segregation and discrimination. This may be true in some places. It is not true in Mississippi, and SNCC spokesmen have been saying as much since President Kennedy (for whom they had little love) sent his proposals to Congress more than a year ago.

The fact is that the new civil rights law, even if rigorously enforced, would do little for the overwhelming majority of Mississippi Negroes. The Act is relevant largely to the Negro middle classes, a mere handful of whom are allowed to exist in Mississippi. The middle classes are the ones who can afford to eat in hitherto white restaurants and stay in hitherto white hotels. They are the ones whose children will be emotionally and intellectually prepared to profit from white middle-class teachers, and who will not have to drop out of school to work in the fields. They are the ones who will qualify for better jobs if and when discriminatory hiring is abandoned. It will mostly be they who will pass the voter registration tests if and when these are fairly administered.

The lives of most Mississippi Negroes, however, will remain unchanged, and they mostly know it. The Act does not speak either to their poverty or to their fear. Two-thirds of Mississippi's Negro families now have total income from all sources of less than \$2,000. The Act will have very little effect on that statistic. Almost all Mississippi Negro families have at least one breadwinner who could be fired tomorrow for displeasing a white employer. The Act will not change that either. Almost all rural Negro families subsist on credit from local storekeepers, who can cut it off at the whim of the white community. The Act will not change that. All Negroes, urban and rural, old and young, exist on the sufferance of local law enforcement officers, from whose kindness or brutality the Act offers no real appeal. Finally and most fundamentally, if a Mississippi Negro is to redress his grievances, the US Constitution requires him to go before a jury. This jury may not be all white, but it will inevitably include enough white supremacists to prevent a Negro's obtaining the unanimous vote in his favor which he would need to get his due from a white man. White supremacy is founded on social and economic relationships such as these, far more than on mere segregation or legally-provable discrimination.

The SNCC leadership in Mississippi seems to understand all this, perhaps too clearly. The Mississippi Summer Project has not sought to desegregate anything (except SNCC itself, which had been almost entirely black in Mississippi until this summer). There have been no sit-ins, and no boycotts of lily-white employ-

ers. Even the testing of the new public accommodations law has been left to visiting firemen like King and the NAACP delegation. SNCC represents a new generation of Negroes, unlike the Kings and Farmers and Wilkines - or the Malcolms - and they have far less interest than their elders in such symbols of white supremacy as lunch counter segregation. They are rebellious and radical, and for the moment they have rejected their parents' hope that they would earn a place in white middle-class society and be satisfied with it. Over and over they tell a visitor (echoing James Baldwin), "We don't want to be integrated into *your* society," or say of the whites who endlessly harass them, "We want more than equality with *them*." In part, such talk reflects the anti-white feeling of many young Negroes. But even more important in SNCC is bitter hostility to the middle classes, black or white. Why be integrated into white schools when white schools are so square - and lousy? Why fight to go to a fancy restaurant with white table cloths? Why struggle for the right to type some industrial baron's mail?

To Remake America

What these young radicals are looking for is not a chance to "make it" in white America, but a chance to remake America along more egalitarian and proletarian lines. They have chosen to begin in Mississippi for many reasons. Mississippi is "the worst," which appeals to the evangelical element in SNCC - to convert the greatest sinner would be the greatest triumph. Then too, all that SNCC's workers dislike in America is written bold in Mississippi, with ambiguities and shadings eliminated. Mississippi dramatizes the problems of the American Negro better than any other place, North or South. And drama is important not only in moving white liberal opinion but in activating Negroes. At the same time, the more ideological SNCC workers are fascinated by Mississippi because to their minds it comes closer to being a "pre-revolutionary situation" than any other in America. The poor, and especially the black poor, are a larger proportion of the population than in any other state. Furthermore, the black poor are largely free from what SNCC inevitably regards as the malign influence of the black bourgeoisie. The NAACP, traditional organ of the black middle class, has provided the state with a martyr (Medgar Evers) and with the current president of the Council of Federated Organizations (COFO), a federation of all civil rights organizations in the state. Yet in day-to-day practice COFO is a mere umbrella under which SNCC veterans, and particularly Robert Moses, run the Mississippi Summer Project, the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party and other ventures.

A word is perhaps in order here about charges of Communist infiltration in SNCC and the Summer Project. There is no doubt that at the rhetorical and ideological level, SNCC has been receptive to all the left-wing clichés of the 1930's. Why not? Until very recently the "mainstream" of the American intellectual tradition has hardly even recognized the possibility that a state like Mississippi could exist in modern America. Even so, SNCC's thinking is very "American," especially in its faith that the Constitution drafted by the Founding Fathers (and revised by the Radical Republicans) means what it says and will be their salvation. To plan a revolution on the assumption that it can be carried out by the federal government, to believe that the "power structure" can be won over to your side is hardly Marxist. These young men seem to me to owe more to C. Wright Mills and the Populists

than to Marx or Lenin.

When one turns from ideology to personnel, Communist influence wanes to the vanishing point. There are a number of white people on the fringes of SNCC, and among the volunteers working in Mississippi this summer, who have a history of association with left-wing causes. That any of these hangers-on or volunteers is actually a Communist Party member I doubt. Some are certainly verbal supporters of Castro, but few have a good word to say for Khrushchev. Some would undoubtedly like to use SNCC as a focus for a radical revival in America, concerned not just with civil rights but with other domestic and foreign issues. On the basis of my observation, however, it seems to me that there is fairly little danger of SNCC being "used" by anyone white. SNCC will not conduct an anti-Communist purge for public relations purposes, but nor will it submit to outside influence. Among the Negroes who make policy in SNCC the whole issue of "Communism" is simply irrelevant. They may be radical; they may even be dangerous; but this is because of their own experience and dreams as Negroes in America, not because of anything Moscow or Havana might have said or paid for.

What SNCC wants in Mississippi is nothing less than a second effort at Reconstruction, backed by whatever federal force and funds are necessary to make the venture successful. Desegregation would be an inevitable by-product. Every activity of the Summer Project - voter registration, the freedom schools, the community centers, the study of federal programs in the state, the effort to proselytize among poor whites - all relate to the overriding hope of redistributing political power.

SNCC's basic aim is now a political realignment in the state. First, SNCC hopes the Democratic Administration will repudiate the Mississippi Democratic Party, deprive its Congressional delegation of party privileges (notably the party seniority which makes them committee chairmen), and refuse to distribute pork and patronage through the present party machinery. A new Northern-style Democratic Party would then be organized in the state, with Negroes, labor unions and poor whites as the major shareholders. Conservative plantation owners and industrial managers, as well as small businessmen and die-hard segregationists, would presumably turn to the Republican Party. The new "liberal" Democratic Party could use its control of federal offices and federal spending (SNCC thinking does not seem to include the possibility that the Republicans might capture Washington) to make major social and economic changes in the state. The magnitude of potential federal influence is indicated by the fact that two years ago Mississippi families each were contributing, directly or indirectly, an average of \$455 to the federal Treasury, while getting back (mostly indirectly) more than \$1,050 per family. Only a small fraction of this \$1,050 is available for social renovation, but even a small fraction would make a big difference in a state where almost half the Negro families now earn less than \$1,050 a year from all sources. Through control of federal patronage and broad appeal to the poorer residents of the state, the new-style Democrats might even capture state and local power - especially if there were enough federal intervention to enable large numbers of Negroes to vote. And if this were to happen not only in Mississippi but elsewhere in the South, the balance of power in Congress would shift left, and much more generous federal help in dealing with poverty would be forthcoming.

Their Chosen Hell

At first glance this all adds up to a very improbable

scheme. But then any scheme which holds out real hope for Mississippi's 900,000 black inhabitants is inherently improbable. Probability is all on the side of despair, and the only "rational" plan SNCC could formulate would probably be massive emigration. But where can Mississippi Negroes go? Most of SNCC's top leaders come from the cities, North and South, to which Mississippi Negroes might flee. It was their disillusion with these places that set SNCC's veterans on the semi-revolutionary path which led to Mississippi. And it is the hope that Mississippi can ultimately be raised not just to the level of North Carolina or Maryland or New York, but something better than any existing model, that keeps not only the old-timers who set the tone in SNCC but the dozens of new recruits from within Mississippi in their chosen hell.

SNCC's political ambitions are increasingly focussed on the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party - an organization which usually follows American rather than African tradition by calling itself the "Freedom Party," not the "MFDP." In theory, the Freedom Party is to become the nucleus of a new Democratic Party in Mississippi. It has already put up candidates in the Democratic primary for the US Senate and House. These candidates, unlike their incumbent opponents, supported the national Democratic platform and the Johnson Administration's program. They lost. Now the Freedom Party is sending a delegation to the Democratic National Convention, challenging the credentials and loyalty of the "official" Democratic delegation, and asking to be seated instead. The challenge is based partly on the fact that the traditional Mississippi Democrats refused to give Negro voters a voice in the selection of the delegation, partly on the fact that most of the traditional Democratic Party in Mississippi is overtly or covertly backing Barry Goldwater for President.

President Johnson's attitude toward this challenge was uncertain at the time this was written. He is said to have no hope of carrying the state in November. He is mainly concerned with the effect of the Mississippi fight on the November balloting in other states. He could lose a lot of Southern support if he questioned the legitimacy of Mississippi's white Democrats. He could lose Northern Negro votes by spurning Mississippi's black Democrats. He could lose Northern white votes if he seated the white Mississippians and if the thousands of Negro demonstrators expected in Atlantic City rioted.

Whatever happens in Atlantic City, the Freedom Party's long-term prospects depend on creating a black-white coalition within Mississippi which can win state and local elections. The difficulty is that so long as Negroes remain a tiny minority among registered voters, no white group has any incentive to negotiate with the Freedom Party. Today its support would be a liability, not an asset.

The only way to make a coalition viable would be to increase substantially the number of Negroes registered to vote. In 1960 Negroes made up 42 percent of Mississippi's inhabitants; if they also constituted 42 percent of the electorate, enough of Mississippi's white voters could probably be lured to some compromise candidate for him to win statewide office. This would certainly be true if the candidate had been promised a voice in distributing federal largesse within the state. In many counties Negroes are an absolute majority, and no such coalition would be needed.

In order to make Negroes anything like 42 percent of the electorate, however, major changes would have to be made in Mississippi's present voting laws. The present laws require, for example, that would-be voters answer, to the satisfaction of white supremacists, ques-

tions about the meaning of the state constitution and the duties of a citizen. These questions have no objectively "right" or "wrong" answers, and they invite discrimination by local registrars. Most registrars have accepted the invitation eagerly. The Justice Department has sought an injunction preventing the use of such questions throughout the state, but so far has not obtained it. Even if such an injunction were issued (and there is a good chance that it eventually will be), many literate Negroes would still be reluctant to apply. Black voters would probably not exceed 10 percent of the total. If the law requiring the publication of would-be voters' names were invalidated, if local registrars were replaced by federal ones, if the FBI were more energetic in investigating charges of harassment, intimidation and reprisals, and if the Justice Department were more eager to prosecute, perhaps Negro registration might rise to 15 or 20 percent of the total.

Beyond that, a major revolution would be required. This is true because, although there are more Negroes than whites born each year in Mississippi, the combined effect of rural mechanization and employment discrimination forces a substantial fraction of young Negroes to leave the state soon after leaving school. White supremacists welcome the emigration and encourage it where possible. As a result, Negroes constitute only about 34 percent of all Mississippi adults, and by 1970 the proportion can be expected to drop to 30 percent.

More important, even a "color-blind" literacy test sharply reduces the proportion of Negroes in the electorate. The new Civil Rights Act says that completion of sixth grade establishes a "presumption" of literacy. But less than half Mississippi's adult Negroes meet this standard, for they began working in the fields when they were ten or eleven. If Mississippi confined voting to those who had completed the sixth grade or passed some equivalent test Negroes would constitute only 21 percent of the eligible voters. There is not a single county in which a majority of the elementary school graduates is black. Since today's young Negroes are getting a better education than their parents, one might expect their potential weight in the educated electorate to rise over the years. But it probably won't, because Mississippi's brighter and better educated Negro youngsters keep moving to Memphis or points North. Negroes today constitute almost exactly the same percentage of the elementary school graduates living in the state as their parents did in 1940. The only way to raise the proportion of black voters much above 20 percent in the foreseeable future would be for Congress to establish a huge adult literacy program. And for such a program to reach the mass of Mississippi Negroes, it would have to be administered directly from Washington, rather than working through state or local authorities. Yet direct federal control goes very much against the Congressional temper and is hardly likely.

(It is of course also conceivable, though hardly probable, that a Constitutional Amendment might bar literacy tests for voting or that the Supreme Court might ban them on the ground that they violate the "equal protection" clause.)

Task for a Coalition

The probability is, however, that Negroes will not soon constitute more than a fifth of Mississippi's voters. Politically, this means that a liberal Democratic coalition would have to win the allegiance of about 40 percent of the state's white voters in order to capture statewide office. At present it is hard to imagine a candidate who could both win support from Negro voters and from 40 percent of the whites. J. P. Coleman, for example, got about 40 percent of the white vote in last year's gubernatorial primary, but he would probably have lost some of this support if he had had "official" Negro support and had made compromises on white supremacy to rally the Negro vote. Still, times change and politicians seldom remain permanently hostile to a fifth of the electorate. If Washington made a more energetic effort to get literate Negroes registered and if the White House were to make it clear that federal "goodies" would only be distributed through a local party that included Negroes, perhaps Mississippi's politics would gradually become like Tennessee's. But President Johnson has shown little sign yet of moving in this direction.

Today most Mississippi Negroes still seem to believe in the American dream, if not for themselves then for their children. (At bottom, this goes for most SNCC workers too.) Should they stop believing, as much of Harlem has, should they at long last strike back at white Mississippi, Northern support for their cause would be reduced to a whisper. If the military were to be used at that point it would be for repression, not reconstruction. The only obvious way to avoid such a potential disaster is to give Mississippi Negroes a major voice in their own destinies before they despair, making them part of the Mississippi "power structure." Only the federal government has the power to do this; certainly white Mississippians will not do it voluntarily.

What would make the federal government move decisively in time? Only killings, I fear. The Neshoba County tragedy was a beginning, but its effects lasted only a few weeks. It will probably take repeated and dramatic white violence against Negroes to elicit the necessary federal action. Such violence can hardly be welcomed, but it could at least have therapeutic consequences. If the present situation is simply allowed to deteriorate, and if large-scale black violence against whites eventually begins, it is hard to see how the circle of fear, violence and repression will ever be broken.

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