

Albany, Georgia

By Vincent Harding and Staughton Lynd

AT this writing, certain things seem clear about the situation in Albany, Ga. The federal government has miserably and disgracefully failed in its duty of protecting the elementary civil rights of the Negro citizens of Albany. After its dramatic attempt to secure total freedom all at once by mass marches on City Hall, the Albany Movement has reverted to more conventional tactics: legal suits for desegregation of schools and public facilities, and voter registration. Although the Movement has thus far failed to achieve any of its tangible goals, the spirit of the Negro community in Albany has been transformed and morale is high.

These big facts are made up many

VINCENT HARDING is directing community service activities for the Mennonite Church in Atlanta, Georgia, while completing his Ph. D. dissertation. He has spent at least one week a month in Albany since December 1961, including four days spent in the city jail.

STAUGHTON LYND teaches history at Spelman College in Atlanta. His article, "Freedom Riders to the Polls," appeared in *The Nation*, July 28, 1962.

of "little" facts: facts about bullets fired into homes which missed sleeping children by inches; about white men (including public officials) who assaulted Albany Negroes, tell F.B.I. agents and reporters "I'll do it again," but are permitted to remain at large; about students of the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee living, like the early Christians, on the free-will offerings of the families they are helping; facts about songs; facts about jails; facts about jobs.

What do the facts mean? As the Albany Movement moves into a quieter phase, many people lie awake at nights wondering, with anguish, what the last twelve months in Albany have meant. What have they meant to the Negro community, so many of whose families have lost jobs and savings in the course of the Movement? What have these months meant to the white community: how much are they disturbed by business losses, and by the destruction of Albany's image as a forward-looking town congenial to new industry? What has Albany meant to the individuals and organizations from other parts of the nation who have attempted to provide support and counsel for the local Movement?

What has the Movement meant to the Negro population of the counties surrounding the Albany trading center: "terrible" Terrell County, "bad" Baker County, and the rest?

It is probably too early to answer these questions with confidence. But it is not too soon to draw some pointed conclusions about the failure of the federal government, as our friend and colleague Dr. Howard Zinn has done in his report for the Southern Regional Council.² Perhaps, too, it is time to make some tentative evaluations of the different forms of protest that have been used at Albany. Life in the midst of the broad sweep of a revolution is most dangerous for the historian, especially if he senses within himself a calling beyond that of recording and interpreting events. Such a life is dangerous because it catches him up in the temptation to make generalizations at least as large and as broad as the movement itself. With this caveat and confession, we offer our view of the meaning of the Albany protest for the larger civil rights movement.

The word "protest" comes from the Latin root *protestari*, to declare publicly. The Albany Movement has expressed itself through ten forms of protest or public witness: freedom rides; marches; jail-ins; boycotts; picketing; prayer vigils; sit-ins; legal action; voter registration; and mass meetings. Obviously, the full inventory of protest techniques developed by the civil rights movement has been brought to bear in this one Deep South locality.

The *freedom ride* was not a major form of protest in Albany. Rather,

the arrest of freedom riders at the Albany railroad depot in December 1961 served as a spark to ignite the growing dissatisfaction within the Negro community over the stringent segregation in their city, and over the adamant refusal of the city commissioners to take action on apparently reasonable requests from Negro representatives. But in demonstrating that Albany's police force and city government were actually obstructing the right of Negroes to make use of the bus terminal, thereby disobeying the ruling of the Federal Interstate Commerce Commission, the freedom riders exposed the illegality and hypocrisy of the entire segregation policy of the Albany city fathers.

CRITICIZED ASPECT

The most criticized aspect of this form of protest is that freedom riders blaze into a town, upset its peace and tranquility, throw it into confusion, and then leave, sharing none of the long range burdens, experiencing none of the permanent scars. It was different in Albany. The first tests of the I.C.C. ruling, in November, were by students from local Albany State College, and two Albany State students were among the eleven riders arrested on December 10. The other riders were mainly S.N.V.C.C. workers, active in Albany voter registration before the rides and still at it today. In fact, the Negro community had been sensitized, and the freedom ride proved to be just what they needed to begin a major campaign for freedom. One of Albany's most vituperative attackers of "outside agitators" finally confided to an author of this article

that it was likely the city would not have made any move towards change if the so-called outsiders had not ridden into town. Here then was a case in which the local Negro leadership was able to make use of creative tension and to capitalize on the shattering of the old "peace and tranquility."

This unique situation does not, of course, destroy the force of the basic criticism that the freedom rides have an element of irresponsibility about them. Nor does it begin to answer what seems to us at least as important a question: How justified are men and women in leaving their own brand of segregation behind, untouched and unchallenged, and going to challenge their neighbors' variety? (This is not to suggest, of course, that such a charge can be brought against all the persons who participate in the freedom rides.) Finally, it appears that a key problem of freedom ride activity is that it is necessarily a vanguard movement, usually involving persons who do not ordinarily use the facilities in question. Therefore, it is often the case that when the right to full use has been established, sometimes at the cost of no little blood and pain, the larger Negro community is not at all prepared to make use of the dearly-won prize, largely because they themselves did not take part in the particular struggle.

By contrast, the *mass marches* drew a far larger group into a protest activity which demanded the giving of their whole selves. At the same time that the young people of Albany State College and S.N.V.C.C. were beginning to protest through freedom

rides, the adult Albany Movement was forming. It was a coalition of previously-existing groups, one of them a neighborhood association which had pressed for the paving of streets in Albany's "Harlem." The leaders were for the most part young, college-trained professionals. By the time the riders came to trial in mid-December, the appropriate action had been agreed upon. On the day of the trial, some thirty persons came to City Hall to kneel and pray on the steps of this building where the court room was located. They were arrested. The next day more than 150 persons marched around City Hall in further protest. They too were arrested. After another day of marching and arrests, there were close to 400 persons in jail.

PUBLIC DEMONSTRATIONS

Then Dr. William Anderson, Albany osteopath and president of the Movement, called upon Martin Luther King, his personal friend, to come down from Atlanta and bring his worldwide leadership and prestige to the cause. King decided to come, but before he arrived, another hundred or so persons had marched. Finally, Martin King and Ralph Abernathy led 200 persons, singing "We Shall Overcome" across Oglethorpe Ave. and into jail. By December 18, when an agreement was reached (or seemed to have been reached) with the white power structure, Chief of Police Laurie Pritchett had made more than 700 arrests to stop the marches.

Marching gave the Negro people of Albany an alternative to the self-defeating ways of fearful acquie-

scence and bitter, underhanded revenge. Now they were able to offer a public demonstration of those deeply-felt longings within them, those groans that could not earlier be uttered. The first (approximately) 300 marchers did not know they would be jailed. Those who came after did know it: more and more they believed themselves as they walked down the street toward the police singing "we are not afraid, we are not afraid today." The marchers included children as young as nine and adults as old as seventy. All observers agree that the outlook of the Albany Negro community can never be again as it was before December 1961, and the decision of hundreds of ordinary citizens to march and to endure jail is without question the fundamental reason for this new dignity and courage.

The marches in Albany also served the purpose of addressing an open letter to the white citizens of the town. The marches were an attempt to let the whites know that Negroes were not as satisfied as some of the maids and yardmen led them to believe, and that Albany's Negro citizens were seeking not for revenge but for that mutual respect which must precede all reconciliation.

Of course, it was not to the local white community alone that the marches were directed. Martin Luther King told a mass meeting one night before a march that they had seen justice denied in a local court, and now they must raise their case before the court of world opinion. Like the freedom rides, the marches dramatized the situation, and brought international publicity. The need for

this world-wide attention must not be denied, of course, for Albany is not an island and Georgia (despite campaign speeches to the contrary) is not a sovereign state. However, in Albany there were more than a few times when the presence of thirty or forty newsmen induced too great a concern for press deadlines, and too eager a practice of calling the press to inform them of each move. Inquisitive reporters left the Negro leaders inadequate time for the reflection and planning which the situation demanded. Moreover, the understandable concern for national and world-wide publicity tended to push aside one of the basic understandings of non-violence: that in the struggle against an evil system, one must always assume that the proponents and supporters of the system are in possession of conscience and so capable of change. Instead, Albany's leaders seemed at times to pay little attention to the local white community, with which, in the end, the Negro people of Albany would have to find a way to live.

PURPOSE OF JAIL-INS

The *jail-ins*, too, were both inner—and outer—directed. Going to jail served the obvious utilitarian purpose of concentrating public attention on the situation, especially since hundreds were willing to go and since Martin Luther King was one of their cellmates. In the case of Albany, "public attention" often meant the attention of Washington, D.C., or the attention of persons who could bring pressure to bear on Washington, which might in turn lead to pressure on Albany. One can-

not deny the efficiency of this aspect of the jail-in, particularly in view of the regular phone calls that passed between Washington and Albany while Dr. King was there, and especially while he was in jail.

However, this willingness on the part of Negroes to participate in protest activities which were certain to lead to jail, produced certain inner effects no less important. In a middle-class-minded society, which looks on jail as an evil to be avoided, the willingness to go to jail for cause tells an important story. There were times in Albany when the stanza "we shall go to jail today" was added to "We Shall Overcome". Here was an expression of the new spirit which the sit-ins had announced. Negroes were learning to go to jail, sometimes with gladness, for conscience's sake. Jailing was one of the ultimate threats which the Albany police could bring against Albany Negroes in the effort to maintain segregation, and now hundreds of Albany's Negroes were not cringing in the face of that terror. This was one of the most disquieting things to the police in the whole Albany situation. One of the writers will never forget the strange, thoughtfully troubled look that came to the face of a policeman as a group of young Negroes sat calmly behind bars one evening and sang with assurance, "no more segregation, no more segregation, no more segregation over me." The act of going to jail became not only a means of exhibiting the Negroes' determination, but also a method of building up that resolve within them. Moreover, the experience of jail itself — sometimes with sixteen or

more persons in a call made for four — helped many persons to experience the sense of a joyful, suffering *koinonia*⁸ that they had never known in any church.

The jail-in, like every other form of protest, presented characteristic problems. One was the tendency for jail-going to degenerate from a creative form of courageous protest to a means of spiteful defiance. Secondly, many — perhaps most — of the persons who went to jail in Albany were not prepared for the rigors of a prolonged stay, and in some cases their enthusiasm was actually lost as a result of having to undergo much more discomfort or even suffering than they had expected. Finally, one of the most subtle problems of the whole jail-going movement is the constant temptation to measure a man's courage and worth by the number of times he has gone to jail. This "martyr measurement" leads people to forget that not everyone is called to this particular way of witness, and can trap persons into what T. S. Eliot calls "the greatest treason: doing the right thing for the wrong reason."

FUNCTION OF BOYCOTTS

Although the marches and jail-ins attracted hundreds of Albany's Negroes, the most broadly-based part of their protest consisted of various *boycotts*. The boycott on the city buses was begun when the verbal agreement of December 18 between the city commissioners and those leaders of the Albany Movement still out of jail — the agreement which brought the marches and jail-ins to an end until the following July —

broke down. The bus boycott (like its famous Montgomery predecessor) grew out of the Negroes' dissatisfaction with segregated seating and with the bus company's failure to provide jobs for Negro drivers, in spite of the fact that at least 90 per cent of its passengers were Negroes. By the end of December the basic justification for the boycott ended when the bus company agreed to desegregate its seating and to hire at least one Negro driver. Then the Albany Movement tried to get a written agreement from the city that it would not interfere with bus desegregation. The city commissioners balked at this. The bus company's offer was then rejected and the boycott continued, becoming essentially a secondary boycott in its attempt to get the company to bring pressure on the commissioners. Finally the company stopped operation.

During December, a boycott was placed on downtown stores. This was a secondary boycott from the outset. Moreover, there was no sustained attempt to speak to the business people before the boycott was initiated, or while it was going on. Today, after twelve months, the boycott is estimated to be 50-75 per cent effective. But the Negro trade is not quite important enough to constitute real economic leverage, and the retail merchants are in any case not so influential in the city's power structure as the Movement at first supposed. On the whole, the boycott has failed in its actual purpose of influencing the city commissioners. The white community of Albany regards the boycott as an unexplained, unprovoked attempt to hurt the city's economy.

In Albany, *picketing* and *sit-ins* were used primarily to supply material for an omnibus suit against segregation of public facilities. Since one of the fundamental strategic mistakes of the Albany Movement was its delay in launching such a suit, picketing and sit-ins were not prominent until the summer. There were sporadic sit-ins during the six-month lull between December and July, a period which Albany students remember as a time when a white policeman killed a Negro and white hoodlums laughed at the funeral, and as a time when young Negroes wore blue jeans to Easter services as a token of solidarity with the boycott.

The *prayer vigil* has more often been used in the peace movement than in the civil rights movement. In Albany, the prayer vigil was one of the first forms of public protest, but was not used again until this summer, when three or four groups followed Dr. King's example in praying in front of city hall for an opening of negotiations. In all but one instance they were arrested. A dramatic variation of the prayer vigil occurred on the night of July 21, when in defiance of a federal injunction the Rev. Samuel Wells led over 150 persons toward city hall and, when commanded by Chief Pritchett to go back, dropped on his knees in prayer.

Here was a way in which the deep resources of non-violent declaration and the ritual of the Christian church could be brought together. Here was a means by which the worship of the sanctuary could be brought boldly into the midst of the world. Indeed on one occasion when such a

vigil was held in front of City Hall, one of the older sisters "got happy," as they say, and responded to the spirit just as if she were praying in the aisle of the Shiloh Baptist Church. For others it was difficult to pray genuinely with a policeman at one's elbow, and the prayer vigil was ever in danger of becoming simply a coercive technique or a publicity measure. At its best, though, the prayer vigil demonstrated a tremendous potential. The police found it most difficult to deal with such a form of protest, especially when the group knelt on the sidewalk with some persons refusing to rise even after arrest. They were praying and would not be moved.

LEGAL ACTION

To turn from the prayer vigil to *legal action* is seemingly to enter an entirely different sphere. The tension between church-centered and court-centered activity is the deepest tension within the civil rights movement. It is a real tension, not (as so often declared on public occasions) merely a clash of organizations, generations or personalities, or an artificial creation of the segregationists. For the coercion which underlies any legal system is essentially alien to a Christian philosophy of moral conversion and long-suffering love. We do not pretend to have an answer for this fundamental dilemma. Indeed, the observer of Albany is forced to the perplexing conclusion that the Movement's initial reliance on direct action alone (as exemplified by Dr. King's statement that "we will wear them down with our suffering") led to over-long

delay in resorting to the courts; but that, at the same time, a persistent weakness of the Albany Movement has been its failure to confront the whites of Albany directly and personally. (Dr. Anderson's appearance in July over a local television network was a happy exception to this generalization, but was not adequately followed up.)

From the outset, the white politicians of Albany have said that the Negroes should go through the courts rather than engaging in direct action. This may be a plea simply to take the city out of the limelight and off the spot: to give segregation more time to live. Albany's failure to act on the Supreme Court's school desegregation decision of 1954 and on the I.C.C.'s bus desegregation ruling of 1961 lend strong support to such an interpretation. On the other hand, Albany officials may be asking for the courts to force them to do what they know they must do eventually: one commissioner in Albany has come so far as to praise N.A.A.C.P. for believing in "due process as opposed to those direct action groups who want, he said, "to short-cut everything." Perhaps the critical factor in evaluating the role of legal action is the assumption one makes about what happens when individuals or groups are forced by outside power to do what they know to be right. Many studies of compulsory desegregation in the Army, in public housing projects, and in the National Maritime Union seem to show that when discrimination is forcibly halted, prejudice in time dies away. The argument on the other side is that the efficacy of law

in Albany depends on general acceptance from the community, and that both historical experiences like Reconstruction (as C. Vann Woodward, the most eminent historian of the South, argues) and the teaching of Jesus (as the philosophers of non-violence emphasize) go to show that such acceptance cannot be forced.

There is yet another problem involved in reliance on the courts. Such legal action as an omnibus suit involves relatively few persons in direct participation. Out of this lack of participation there can grow the phenomenon mentioned in connection with the freedom rides: a lack of broad, community-based response to the opportunities made available by the courts. The whole movement is thrown open to the charge, You see the Negroes really didn't want desegregation.

NEED FOR PROTEST

Perhaps these ambiguities surrounding legal action simply underline the need for protest to go on at every level, involving as many persons as possible, and using whatever openings are available. Dr. King has written that while in jail in Albany last July he became convinced of the need for such a "four-pronged approach" to the city's problems: the four prongs are legal action, direct action, economic boycott and voter registration.⁵

Of the four, as Dr. King stressed in a September 18 talk to the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, *voter registration* now seems the most important. S.C.L.C. asserts that the registered Negro vote in Al-

bany has doubled during 1962. It believes that the larger Negro vote had much to do with moderate Carl Sanders' victory in Dougherty County in the September 12 Georgia Democratic primary. Dr. King and S.C.L.C. believe further that the increased Negro vote in Albany has already produced some softening in the city's attitude, and that this trend will continue.

One of us has discussed elsewhere the double-edged sword which the new emphasis on voter registration and political action presents to the civil rights movement.⁶ It is beyond question that the mere existence of a sizeable block of registered Negro voters tends to restrain police brutality, as Myrdal long ago pointed out.⁷ There also appears to be a definite correlation between the size of the Negro vote and the degree to which desegregation can be carried out smoothly and peacefully.

Yet the lasting significance of Albany may be that there a Deep South Negro community glimpsed the possibility of a truly free America, of what *The Crisis* had recently called "Final victory";⁸ and from this standpoint, voter registration must be viewed as only the preliminary to a creative and comprehensive use of the vote. Using the ballot merely to hold the balance between two inadequate candidates, to settle for a perennial choice between the lesser of two evils, to go no farther than "rewarding one's friends and punishing one's enemies," is not enough. Even running independent Negro candidates is not enough. The civil rights movement must begin to envision the use of the vote to

produce the comprehensive social changes—including not only civil rights but also, for example, the creation of more jobs—which are required to produce real freedom for all citizens.

The witness of Albany is to the necessity of final victory and total freedom. When Albany leaders rejected the possibility of bus desegregation they may have made a tactical blunder, but in another viewpoint they were saying: Montgomery is no longer enough for us. "If you ever want freedom, now is the time," speakers told the crowds in the packed churches in early July. However much the movement at large may differ from the Albany Movement in tactics, it must keep faith with Albany by hewing steadfastly to the goal of total freedom, right now. (For in the words of the Talmud: If not now, when?)

This freedom, this community, this brotherhood unconscious of skin color, has already existed in Albany in that form of protesting which throbs at the very heart of the Albany Movement: the *mass meeting*. One young Negro minister has characterized the weekly mass meeting in Albany as the gathering of the true church. For here men and women from the various denominations (and some with no formal affiliation) come to deal with the really burning issues of life. A prayer meeting led by some of the older women and men often forms the preliminary, and petitions are offered for mayor and police chief, for leaders and opposition, for the coming Kingdom of God. By the time the meeting really gets going anywhere from 500 to 1,000 persons have

gathered, depending on the size of the church and the space available around the doors and windows outside. Then the singing begins in earnest. This is a form of protest in which all can participate: regardless of their fears, regardless of their economic vulnerability, they can sing. The singing must be experienced to be known.

Much is told in the words themselves as they rend the evening air. The main theme of freedom is set by the popular "Woke up this morning with my mind set on freedom." This firm resolve is reinforced when they almost shout out the words to a relatively new favorite, "Ain't gonna let nobody turn me around, keep on walking, keep on talking, marching to the freedom land." The new insights and new courage are seen in "This little light of mine," especially when they sing, "right in front of the City Hall I'm gonna let it shine," "all in the jail house I'm gonna let it shine."

Interspersed through the singing are several announcements, reports on the present status of the struggle, the collection for the movement, and always there is a main address, most often a sermon. Sometimes, if this is a special night or day, the mass meeting provides the occasion for the miracle of the Word become flesh. For there has been more than one mass meeting in which the preacher has exhorted the soldiers of freedom, calling them to march for the cause of justice and truth, and they have answered, "We are able." Then in that very moment, instead of a closing organ postlude and the polite shaking of hands, both preacher and a goodly part of the

flock have taken up the marching song and streamed out of the church doors into the midst of the world, marching to jail for their freedom, and for the liberation of all their brothers, black and white.

As one sees the band of dark pilgrims marching out of the church doors singing, "We shall overcome," it is almost impossible not to believe them.

REFERENCES

1. It is significant that in the Georgia Democratic primary on Sept. 12, Dougherty County (in which Albany is located) voted for "moderate" Carl Sanders over segregationist Marvin Griffin, although all the counties adjoining Dougherty went for Griffin. The Sanders vote in Dougherty was twice as large as the number of registered Negro voters in the county.
2. Dr. Zinn's reports may be obtained from the Southern Regional Council, 41 Exchange Place, Atlanta, Ga.
3. *Koinonia* is the word used in the Greek New Testament for "congregation" or "church." Near Americus, Georgia, an hour's drive north of Albany, is an interracial co-operative community which calls itself *Koinonia*. In the mid-1950's the

Koinonia Cooperative Community was subjected to bombing and shooting, just as the Albany Movement is today, and *Koinonia* has been virtually ruined financially by a white economic boycott which has lasted over six years.

4. For accounts of these studies, see, for example, Gordon W. Allport, *The Nature of Prejudice*, abridged ed. (New York, 1958), Chapter XVI; M. Collins and M. Deutsch, *Interracial housing: a psychological evaluation of a social experiment* (Minneapolis, 1951); S. W. Cook et al., *Human relations in interracial housing: a study of the contact hypothesis* (Minneapolis, 1955); George E. Simpson and J. Milton Yinger, *Racial and Cultural Minorities: An Analysis of Prejudice and Discrimination*, second edition (New York, 1952), pp. 752, 780; Edward Suchman et al., *Desegregation: Some Propositions and Research Suggestions* (New York, 1958), 90, 107.
5. Entry for July 30, "Reverend M. L. King's Diary in Jail," *Jet*, Aug. 23, 1962, p. 18.
6. Staughton Lynd, "Freedom Riders to the Polls," *The Nation*, July 28, 1962.
7. Gunnar Myrdal, *An American Dilemma* (New York, 1944), 498-499.
8. Gloster B. Current, "53d Annual Convention," *The Crisis*, August-September 1962, p. 378: "final victory . . . will mean the wiping out of every vestige of second-class citizenship, tokenism, quotas, and percentages; abolition of the ghetto and all of its damaging ramifications into education, public accommodations and travel; erasure of the color line in employment and the substitution of competence; the destruction of government by color."

"Desegregation and equality of opportunity protect the worth and sanctity of the individual and satisfy the imperatives of political morality. They permit any person who is otherwise qualified to participate and achieve his personal goals without racial, religious or ethnic disability. But this does not yet serve all the needs of society. The fuller development of a sense of community and of cohesion, the fuller utilization of human resources, are directly related to a substantially realized integration and level of achievement for the group."

Earl Raab, *American Race Relations Today* (1962)