

THE POLITICAL SIGNIFICANCE OF
THE FREEDOM RIDES

by

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Distributed by
Students for a Democratic Society
for
the Liberal Study Group
at
the National Student Congress,
August 19-30, 1962,
Columbus, Ohio

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gress or of The Ohio State University.

11-28, 1968

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This paper is the transcript of an address given by Tom Kahn to the SDS Conference on "Race and Politics" held at Chapel Hill, North Carolina, in May, 1962.

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I am supposed to talk about the Freedom Rides and the response to them, North and South. That's too broad a topic to be handled in depth in the short time I have. Since a good deal has already been said about the response of the enemy, I want to talk about the response of the liberal community.

The problem is : we are achieving the declared goals of liberalism but we are not doing it in the liberal way. There's the rub. Even more than the sit-ins, the Freedom Rides were disruptive of the conventional liberal mentality. On the emotional level, the explosive violence in Anniston and Birmingham, much more than the cumulative violence absorbed by sit-inners, deeply disquieted the world of liberal unviolence. I use the term unviolence, awkward as it sounds, to designate a prevalent opposition to uninstitutionalized domestic unviolence and an uneasy attitude toward even nonviolent actions which may "provoke" it. In a period when the struggle of the labor movement is really characterized by violent clashes on the picket line-- indeed, a picket captain in a recent New York strike declared that his men would "pull the nonviolence resistance bit" to prevent scabs from crossing the picket line--in such a period there has evolved a bland and blind faith that social change, at least in this country, can always find a path free from violent consequences. This faith, which, it must be stressed, applies only to uninstitutionalized domestic violence-- not to the militaristic ethic, the arms race, "legal" police violence, etc.--this faith rests on the conviction that "the system contains all the machinery necessary to adjust the conflicting interests of all groups. When the machinery gets clogged up--as it has since the Reconstruction-- then the problem is declared to be terribly complex and those who will not temporize the injustice are called "precipitous."

Yet it was difficult to apply such terms to the Freedom Rides. The machinery had been used before the Riders set out. Fifteen years had passed since the highest court in the land had declared segregation in interstate transportation unconstitutional. If moderates could delude themselves that the rate of school desegregation--one per cent per year-- represented "all deliberate speed," a richly inventive imagination, or malicious intent, would be required to discern any progress in fifteen years of flagrant noncompliance with the "law of the land" as handed down in the Morgan case. Not only was there a Supreme Court decision, but there was the enforcement machinery, in the form of the Interstate Commerce Commission. No legislative action was necessary. All that was needed was a "stroke of the pen". Of machinery there was enough. But machinery was not enough.

The issues posed by the Freedom Riders were not complex. They were absolutely clear. The question of "property rights"--that devilish phrase that lodges itself, like a thorn, in the side of the American dream and induces paralysis of the will--the question of "property rights," which trailed the sit-inners, was not the issue here. Federal regulation of interstate commerce has long been established. Finally the cliché about "outsiders" was patently ridiculous. After all, who else would use interstate transportation if not the people from out of state?

I say all this not to list the arguments in favor of the Freedom Rides but to establish the Freedom Rides as a kind of symbol, because they raise certain questions which lie at the bottom of our entire movement. For this reason the national reaction to this symbol is an index of just where we are and where we should be going. Thus, I want to say a few more things about the response of the liberal community to the Freedom Rides; then, in the light of this response, I want to attempt a critical analysis of the Rides themselves, and to examine the posture of the Kennedy Administration. Finally, I want to talk about the problems that confront us as a result of that posture.

On the strategic level, the Freedom Rides have provided the most clear-cut demonstration of the sterility of legalism that our generation has witnessed. By legalism I mean the view that social revolutions can be carried out in the courtrooms. Working through the courts is, of course, a proper and necessary part of the struggle against injustice. The gains we win must be recorded, and precedents must be set. Like all effects, court victories can in turn become causes, helping to set the stage for new advances. Thus, the 1946 decision afforded a legal and a moral basis for the Freedom Rides. It is also true that the 1954 school desegregation decision helped create an atmosphere and a certain confidence conducive to Freedom Riding. But it cannot be said that the 1947 decision actually integrated the bus terminals, any more than it can be said that the 1954 decision is really integrating the schools. Or any more than it can be said that it was the courts and not the Montgomery Bus Protest that integrated the busses. That's a little like saying it was the Emancipation Proclamation that freed the slaves without mentioning Abolitionist agitation and the exigencies of the Civil War.

But perhaps I am beating a dead horse. Even the most disdainful opponents of direct mass action before 1960 now publicly concede that the fight against Jim Crow has more than one dimension. That's a positive gain. What was well on the way to becoming perhaps one of the most specialized and "technicalized" freedom movements in history has been opened up to laymen. The credit for this goes primarily to the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee.

But back to the Freedom Rides themselves. I think we have to recognize that they were a fluke -- a bomb whose fuse we never lit. When it exploded, the noise was louder than anyone had expected. We owe their impact not to their intrinsic importance so much as to the irrationality of the segregationist officials. Had they not been so insane as to permit and encourage mob violence and bus-burning, it is likely that the Freedom Rides would have been just another direct action project.

This, it seems to me, is the most obvious weakness of the Rides. Of course, I don't mean that they should never have taken place. I mean only that a project whose significance and impact are attributable to circumstances controlled by an irrational enemy should be recognized for the peripheral undertaking it is and not be made the center of our grand strategy.

A second weakness is more important. We should not be fooled by our own propaganda. For purposes of argumentation we may choose not to recognize differences between "insider" and "outsiders." In this we are quite correct. On moral grounds we may argue, in the best tradition, that wherever there is injustice our own rights are not secure. On patriotic grounds we may argue that the barbaric racist system of the South imperils our national security and diminished our national prestige, thus handicapping us in the face of expanding totalitarianism abroad. As taxpayers, we may insist that the quaint racial customs of Dixie are costing us money. We may use any combination of these and other arguments, and they are all quite sound and all quite helpful in combatting, on an idealistic level,

artificial notions of states' rights and in advancing the conception of the essential unity of the human family.

But this ideal will never be achieved through such argumentation, but only through a vital mass movement that systematically and relentlessly destroys the social institutions that stand in the way of the ideal. The building of such a mass movement, of which we now have but an embryo, depends in large measure upon our having a strategy that does recognize the distinction between "insiders" and "outsiders", not so that "outsiders" can be eliminated, but so that we keep ever before us the yardstick by which we can measure the value of their role: what did the "outsiders" leave behind them when they went home? Did they spark an indigenous popular movement with solid local leadership prepared to move aggressively into the vacuum created by their disruption and departure? Or did they derail the local movement and leave it demoralized, incapable of defense against retaliation and indisposed to future action?

Perhaps I belabor the point. I certainly don't mean to suggest that the Freedom Rides had this second, negative effect. On the other hand, I don't think that the Rides, in their very conception, were calculated to stimulate grass-roots movement on the local level. Unless I am mistaken, the masses of Southern Negroes are but slightly affected by segregation on interstate busses. Every victory over Jim Crow is to be hailed, but how the victory is achieved is also important. Recent reports indicate that throughout the Deep South Negroes rarely use the newly integrated terminal facilities. This is perfectly understandable and in no way supports the segregationists' contention that the Negro really doesn't mind his subordinate status. We really can't expect that courageous specialists in nonviolent direct action will integrate interstate transportation facilities--especially such relatively peripheral facilities--and that immediately the black man in the street will feel free nonchalantly to walk in and demand service. Granted, this will take time. But how long it takes will be determined by whether the existing civil rights organizations can reach down to the black man in the street and, by dealing with his day-to-day problems, build for themselves a conscious mass base that will not permit a vacuum to develop.

Easier said than done. But until it is done, liberal America won't find it too hard, however conscience-stricken, to get off the hook. The Freedom Rides sent a sudden shock wave through the country. But material support was shamefully inadequate. At the height of the Freedom Rides financial contributions from trade unions had not exceeded \$20,000! Protestant, Catholic and Jewish organizations together had not contributed more than \$10,000! In terms of human bodies, we have to admit, now that the drama is over, that four hundred is not a very large figure, really. And even of this figure, how few represented the mainstream of American liberalism!

Some of the reasons for the feebleness of the liberal responses have been scattered throughout my remarks. For one thing, as I have suggested, there is a kind of ideological factor, if you will. We are not exactly doing things the liberal way. More important, there is, to the Northern liberal, something unreal about the Freedom Rides, something unreal and shallow about Southern segregation generally. And the reason for this, I think, is that the Negro revolt has not yet hit the North--except perhaps as expressed in black nationalism, which is not a challenge but a withdrawal. The response of Northern liberals has been relatively feeble because in a sense there is no Northern liberal movement in the area of civil rights. It is not we Northerners who have agitated Southern Negroes, as the racists would have it. The Southern Negroes have been agitating us. But no movement can be built upon fund-raising and upon expressions of support for some other

movement. How many Freedom Riders from the North had ever been arrested at home as a result of direct action against segregation and discrimination in housing or employment?

Let there be no mistake. The struggle today is in the South, and the more of us who are willing to enter the furnace, the better. But the liberal community will not be worth much to the South until it is revived in the course of struggle in its own backyard. And, the fact is, however we chafe under it, that the American Negro can advance no farther than the liberal-labor movement is prepared to go. This hard fact, and not mere sentiment, dictates the nature of our relationship with that movement.

The American labor movement, compared with its counterparts elsewhere in the world, is conservative. Not only has it dragged its feet inexcusably so far as the Negro is concerned, but its white membership is declining as a result of its overall policies. I think we have to look, shrewdly, to the labor movement as an ally, not because we like George Meany--I don't-- or because we like white Southern workers, but because I know of no other major American institution of which it can be said with certitude that, if it does not move radically on civil rights, it will unquestionably be destroyed in our lifetime. In personal relations we may choose our friends according to what they say or think about us. But in politics we must choose our friends according to whether they cannot get along without us, despite themselves. I'm not talking about sentimental idealism; I'm talking about economics. Despite all talk of progress, the plight of the mass of Negro workers, most of them unskilled or semi-skilled, is getting worse as the result of automation and discrimination in job apprenticeship and retraining progress. A large mass of unemployed Negroes willing to work at sub-union wages depresses the labor economy and eats away at the foundations of labor organization. If the labor movement does not deal with this problem by wiping out racism within its own ranks, by organizing the South, and by taking the lead in the fight for total racial equality, it will go down in history as the largest labor movement in the world ever to have committed suicide. This may happen. I don't think it will. In any case, I refuse even to contemplate the consequences of such a catastrophe as it would affect all democratic impulses in this country.

To say that we must look to the liberal-labor movement as an ally does not mean that we have to adopt their position or to compromise with it. I disagree with the gentleman who called upon us yesterday to learn more about the peculiar divisions and intricacies of labor's manifold responsibilities, and who then professed ignorance about our movement. There is no excuse for any representative of the labor movement, whatever his particular niche in the bureaucracy, not being profoundly concerned with what we are doing. When the official labor movement really concerns itself with the problem of boss control alluded to yesterday, then it will begin to fight vigorously against one of the greatest citadels of boss control--that exercised over an entire race, most of the members of which happen to be workers.

It is not by embroiling ourselves in the intricacies of the labor movement or by "learning the rules of the legislative game", as someone else suggested, that we will succeed in creating the kind of militant alliances that our struggle requires. We shall succeed through force--through the exertion of such pressure as will force our reluctant allies to accommodate to us, in their own interest. It is not because we don't know enough that we have not achieved our goals. We have more than enough legal experts, political scientists, and professional lobbyists. What we lack is political power.

This brings me to my final point: the Kennedy Administration and our attitude toward it. The first thing to be said about the new administration is that

it is different from its predecessor. It is more dangerous. And it is potentially more helpful. This paradox arises out of the monumental dilemma with which the Kennedys have confronted us. If we are not careful, we may end up, I am convinced, the victims of one of the cleverest political strategems in American history.

The dilemma consists in this: the Administration has advised us that our most important objective must be winning the ballot. To this all other direct action efforts are secondary. This position is disarmingly correct on the surface. In fact, it is more or less what many of us have been saying for some time.

But what motivates this new interest in Negro suffrage? Certainly, foreign policies factors figure. The Cold War Integrationists are growing in influence. But, more than anything else, the Kennedy policy represents an attempt to capture the civil rights movement for the Democratic Party. In itself, there is nothing wrong with this. If our movement could become integrated into a national political party that genuinely had our interests at heart, then we could rejoice that we had found a political vehicle that would make our movement more powerful. But the Administration seeks to absorb us into the Democratic Party without fundamentally changing the bastard character of that party. The Administration wants to register a certain number of Southern Negroes--possibly as abulwark against Goldwater Republicanism --but to do so in such a way as to create as little friction as possible with the Dixiecrats.

Bob Moses mentioned yesterday the fact that Justice Department voting suits have been aimed at areas where Negroes were in a minority and avoided areas where Negroes were in a majority. This should serve as a reminder that a numerical increase in Negro votes does not necessarily mean an increase in Negro political power. A mere increase in Negro votes does not fundamentally threaten the position of the Dixiecrats. Nor does a literacy test bill which does not take the administration of such tests out of the hands of the master class. Behind the scenes money is being offered to civil rights groups which will emphasize "education"--whatever that means as opposed to direct action. And while the Administration proclaims its unswerving devotion to the right to vote, it continues the appointment of Eastland cronies, like Cox, to Federal judgeships in strategic areas.

Against this background, the Administration's efforts to veer the movement away from direct action and toward "political action" are suspect. They are the most sophisticated means yet devised for obtaining a "cooling-off" period. Because the motivations of the Administration are suspect does not mean, however, that we should cut our own throats by refusing to recognize that the crux of the problem is political and that our aim must be to achieve political power.

What is the role of the student movement in all of this. First, of all, we must recognize our own limitations. We cannot ourselves achieve political power. I know of no student movement that ever did. Even the most politically conscious, not to say revolutionary, student movements of our generation-- in Korea, Cuba, Hungary, Turkey, Poland, and Spain--played two roles: they sparked activity by mass adult groups, and, especially in the earlier stages, they molded the ideology of the movement. When the students have failed in their objectives, it has usually been because the adult movements were unprepared to follow up or were helpless against the power of the opposition.

Returning to the United States, we find that while the students have sparked the voter registration drive and remain in the forefront of it, they cannot themselves carry out the ballot revolution. For one thing, except in Georgia,

we are mostly too young to vote ourselves. In addition, the student movement is, by definition, cyclical and unstable. The sophomores who pioneered in the 1960 sit-ins are graduating. We lack the organizational base, the financial resources, and the stability of leadership required for the kind of massive assault that alone can demolish the political structure upon which the Southern oligarchy is perched. If only we had the resources! If only others had our will!

Given these limitations, what can we do? First, I would say, we should actively conceive of ourselves as the radical wing of the civil rights movement. This is the traditional role of students in all broad struggles. Relatively free of vested interests, of family obligations, and decisive economic ties, we can experiment with new techniques (always in the hope that they will later be adopted by those stronger than ourselves). We are in a better position to speak out against unprincipled or fruitless compromises. We are less susceptible to temptation than many of our elder colleagues. In short, we are more strongly committed to disruption of the status quo.

Secondly, we must give the movement its ideology, to the extent that we can make ourselves heard. This, it seems to me, means the concept of political realignment. This concept is all the more important in view of the present crisis of direction confronting civil rights forces. It is the only alternative to our being captured by the Democratic Party and eventually smothered under a blanket of political deals overlaid with tokenism and false rhetoric.

The term "political realignment" has been tossed around a good deal at this conference, as it has been at countless others. I am not sure that it is really understood. It does not mean supporting the Democratic Party. It means nothing less than a full-scale political revolution in this country, its vortex in the South. We tend to use the word "revolution" loosely. I am trying hard to be precise. The strategy of political realignment aims at the overthrow of a political class that presently rules the South and that, through its coalition with conservative Republicans, has maintained effective control over the reins of national power for decades. I think that's fairly precise.

The Southerners derive their power from two sources: on the local level, from disfranchisement of Negroes (and, to a lesser extent, poor whites); and, on the national level, from membership in the Democratic Party, generally acknowledged to be the majority party. As senior members of the majority party, they are assured of control of the most important Congressional committees. At the same time, they vote with conservative Republicans forty percent of the time. Now, a lot of profound political scientists tell us that it's "healthy" to have a "margin of disagreement" within our parties. In fact, Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., tells us that one of the reasons America is great is that we are so "flexible" and "pragmatic". But I think you will agree that forty percent is kind of high as "margins" go, especially when you consider the questions in which there is disagreement, and especially when you consider that the figure would be even higher, were it not for the various forms of cloakroom chicanery and log-rolling--involving, say, defense contracts and jobs in the bureaucracy--that go by the name of "liberal pressures" these days.

On the whole, the liberal and labor movements are also in the Democratic Party, although a few are scattered in the Republican ranks. It is for this reason that we have to focus special attention on the Democratic Party. The conflicts that exist in the Republican Party are not so thorough-going and are much more personality-centered than in the Democratic Party.

To focus special attention on does not mean to support. I personally did not support Kennedy in 1960, or the Democratic slate as a whole. On the other hand, there are some Reform candidates in New York, like Mark Lane, the Freedom Rider, whom I would support, even if it meant registering as a Democrat, because he favors kicking the Dixiecrats out of the Democratic Party. Registering as a Democrat to vote for a given candidate does not mean support of that party. I am willing to smile at that technicality while I proceed to help split the Democratic Party.

And that, at least superficially, is what realignment means: kicking the Dixiecrats out of the Democratic Party, so that they lose their majority-party privileges and have to shift for themselves or make their common law marriage with Goldwater official. That would leave the Democratic Party pretty much in the hands of the liberal and labor forces.

Now, I don't think this brings the millenium. We have had too much experience with the official liberal and labor community to be exactly delirious in our enthusiasm for our reluctant allies. I personally see the necessity for economic and social changes in this country which are more fundamental than what these allies are on record for. But that is not the immediate question. The point is that a new Democratic Party--if it keeps that name--would give us for the first time since 1877 a national political vehicle that had no vested interest in the political, economic, and social subjugation of the Negro. Such a party would have to do more than make platform declarations about voter registration. It would actually have to conduct Negro voting campaigns in order to build a counter-base to the Dixiecrats. The present Democratic Party already has the South sewn up, and the Republicans enjoy too much Dixiecrat support to bother with seriously building an independent Southern constituency.

I think that it is within this context that we can see the meaning of what Rev. Smith is doing in Mississippi. With the help of SNCC, he and the other Negro candidates who have sprung up throughout the South have initiated the political revolution I have been talking about. For the first time since Reconstruction a real challenge has gone out to the Dixiecrats. It does not now seem likely that Rev. Smith will win, but this trend is unmistakable. And the Dixiecrats know it.

It is the job of the student movement to keep that trend going and to push it in a radical direction. It is no mystery that Kennedy has refrained from endorsing these Negro candidates, while he simultaneously calls for an increase in Negro voting. We must insist that the registration of a limited number of Negro voters diffused throughout white-dominated Southern counties is no substitute for rightful political power. There are still over 100 Black Belt counties in the South. We must demand the right of Negroes to represent themselves. We must demand that Kennedy and his followers endorse Rev. Smith and the others, and let the Dixiecrats do as they please.

If the Southern student movement is to be effective, it will have to build a base for itself, on the campus and in the community, as Ella Baker has already emphasized. But it will also need a vision, an enthusiasm, a direction. There is a great deal of talk about the Negro as the "soul of America". I confess I don't always know what this means. In the mouths of some it sounds mystical and otherworldly. In the mouths of others it is a hypostrophe to the twist. Maybe there's something in both notions. But my own feeling is that if there is any real merit in the phrase, it has to do with a vision of freedom. And freedom is not an abstraction. It cannot be separated from the concrete day-to-day conditions that determine the quality of our lives. That quality, or our generation, has already ^{been} perceptibly elevated by what began