

THE LIBERALS' BIG STICK: READY FOR SNICK?

IS IT REALLY THE END FOR THE MOVEMENT
WHICH LIBERATED COLLEGE STUDENTS
FROM APATHY, PANTY RAIDS, AND J. D. SALINGER?
AN ARTICLE BY JACK NEWFIELD

America's mighty Liberal Establishment is coiled and ready to strike at "Snick"—the Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee, those saints and irresponsibles of the civil rights movement.

The liberals—black and white—and SNCC have been circling each other all winter like two gangs on the brink of a school-yard rumble, with any sudden gesture capable of igniting a fratricidal struggle that could splinter the integration movement for years to come.

The Establishment liberals are a diverse group, each nursing his own grievance against the youthful visionaries of SNCC. Some genuinely hope SNCC reforms itself without a public bloodletting, while others are spoiling for a public show-down that would discredit the mystique of SNCC that flourishes on the campuses and in the minds of some of the fattest cats the Movement has.

The movers and shakers of the liberal coalition are: Charles Evers, Mississippi field secretary of the NAACP; Roy Wil-

kins, NAACP executive director; James Wechsler, editorial-page editor of the *New York Post*; Joseph Rauh, former chairman of ADA and former lawyer for the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party; Allard Lowenstein, author, professor, and chief recruiter for the 1964 Mississippi Summer Project; and Walter Reuther, president of the United Auto Workers union.

Some of the liberals seem to be lashing out in recoil to wounded vanities, while others seem to be motivated by the sincere conviction that SNCC's militant means inadvertently harm the common end of integration.

Evers, for example, refuses to even sit at the same table with SNCC's leadership after eighteen months of frenetic factionalism inside the frontline trenches of Mississippi. Evers has oriented his middle-class followers towards integrating the restaurants and motels of Jackson. But SNCC, under the humanistic grassroots influence of Bob Moses, has worked

with the pauperized mental and illiterate sharecroppers, who couldn't care less about the plush motels of the capital. These antithetical philosophies have led to tactical disagreements, mistrust, and now recriminations, with Evers claiming, "SNCC wants to run the whole show its own way." A neutral journalist says, "Evers has no business being a civil-rights leader. He's trying to fill his brother's shoes [the slain Medgar Evers] and they're just too big for him and he knows it and is panicking."

Wilkins, the wise and patient leader of the NAACP, has for years silently endured SNCC's taunts of "Uncle Tom" because of his reluctance to engage in both civil disobedience and mass street demonstrations. But Wilkins broke his bitter silence on January 6 in New York when he charged publicly that "Chinese Communist elements" had infiltrated SNCC.

Reuther's criticism of SNCC—as might be expected from the symbol of trade-union democracy—is that SNCC is ineffi-

"It all comes from what you see when you get up in the morning. We see sharecroppers and they see Central Park." The *they* is the Liberal Establishment—white and Negro. The *we* is "Snick," the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee, the storm center of the civil-rights movement. The Liberal Establishment is on the verge of initiating a fratricidal rumble with Snick, the real beneficiaries of which would be the backslashers of America. The only thing that might head it off is the lack of agreement among many of the Liberal gurus themselves, some of whom are seated on the park bench at left: Roy Wilkins, executive director of the NAACP; James Farmer, executive director of CORE; Vice-President Hubert Humphrey; Martin Luther King; and A. Philip Randolph, the revered octogenarian.

cient, disorganized, and bereft of democratic procedures.

Rauh, who is a braintruster of Vice-President Humphrey, is most disturbed by sncc's "irrationality and bitterness. They are so alienated from political reality," he says, "they tend to intentionally make impossible demands only to validate their own preconceptions of liberal bad faith."

Lowenstein, the symbol of protest to a whole generation of campus radicals and who has shared the Mississippi trenches and jails with sncc's leaders, believes it is "sncc's hostility to coalition with less militant civil rights groups" that is at the root of the liberals' winter of discontent.

The leaders of sncc, bruised by the daily contact with Southern violence, federal indifference, and liberal sympathy, are unmoved by the specter of an attack by the Liberal Establishment. Lawrence Guyot, the 25-year-old chairman of the sncc-organized Freedom Democratic Party, says:

"We will accept help from anyone, but we will accept guidance from no one. The only coalition I am responsible to is the Negroes of Mississippi . . . if we become isolated because of attacks from our so-called allies, that is okay. And if we crumble, we will do so without outside control."

Says Bob Moses, the now-legendary first sncc prophet to come to Mississippi, "The liberals getting upset at us was inevitable. We are raising fundamental questions about how the poor sharecropper can achieve the Good Life, questions that liberalism is incapable of answering."

Ed Hamlet, a white sncc staff member, says, "Sometimes I think the NAACP is a bigger menace to us than HUAC or the Klan. . . . They're another generation from another time and they can't possibly understand what we are about."

The comments of the sncc leaders illuminate some of the very real differences that divide the Liberal Establishment from the generation with a cause—a generation that should be its legatees. And these differences go much deeper than personality or even tactics, and cannot be ignored by incantations for "unity."

The liberals are practical, and sncc is utopian; the liberals are sophisticated, and sncc is primitive; the liberals want reform, and sncc wants what is tanta-

mount to a revolution; the liberals are bureaucratic, and sncc is spontaneous; the liberals are middle-aged and middle-class, and sncc is young and classless; the liberals are relativist, and sncc is absolutist; the liberals are adjusted, and sncc is alienated. sncc veteran Stokely Carmichael sums up the differences this way, "It all comes from what you see when you get up in the morning. We see sharecroppers and they see Central Park."

Al Lowenstein says, "I want to see Mississippi like North Carolina in ten years."

sncc's Casey Hayden says, "I want Mississippi to become like nothing that exists in the world today—and don't ask me how to do it because I don't know."

The seeds of the liberal revolt were sown in the cauldron of the Democratic Convention in Atlantic City last August, where the integrated rnr sought to be seated as the legitimate representatives of Mississippi in place of the regular all-white delegation. The rnr, like most of the Movement in Mississippi, derives its character from the primitive prophets of sncc, and by the convention's climax it was only sncc who held out against accepting the President's compromise offer of two token seats at large, plus the understanding that the liberal Hubert Humphrey would be the vice-presidential candidate.

Most of the guns of the Liberal Establishment, now so angry at sncc, stood before the rnr delegation of tenant farmers, janitors, and domestics on the second day of the convention and pleaded for acceptance of the compromise—Reuther, Wilkins, Rauh, then the rnr attorney, in addition to James Farmer (executive director of near-Congress of Racial Equality—which has not yet taken a stand on the Liberal-sncc feud) and Martin Luther King. But the 68 rnr delegates, most of whom had never heard of these men, unanimously voted down the compromise and marched, singing the integration anthem *We Shall Overcome*, to the convention floor and the sit-in under the Mississippi banner.

The rejection of the compromise confounded the liberals who thought they could influence the rnr. And the sit-in, with its potential for violence on nationwide television, terrified them. In the months that followed, sncc's version of the convention as a defeat and a betrayal—and their firing of Rauh—enraged the liberals even further.

The leadership of sncc was equally bitter because they felt that Wilkins, Rauh, Reuther, and the others displayed more compassion for Humphrey's ambitions than for the Negroes of Mississippi. sncc was further outraged by the series of attacks aimed at them in the press immediately following the convention. They suspected these assaults were inspired by the Liberal Establishment. Evans and Novack, columnists for the *New York Herald Tribune*, who are often privy to "leaks" from the White House, charged "communists and left-wingers had infiltrated the rnr" and that Bob Moses had "Black Muslim sympathies." The liberal James Wechsler, writing in the *New York Post*, bitterly assailed the irrationality of the rnr and Moses.

After the convention Moses explained his actions this way:

"The rnr delegates were the only people at that whole convention who were free in any meaningful use of the term. The President told everyone else—delegates and civil-rights leaders—what to do. . . . When we got back to the delta, an old man who was a delegate said to me, 'I used to think only Mississippi Negroes were afraid of losing their jobs. Now I know the President feels the same way.' All I cared about was the insides of those 68 delegates and the future of the rnr in Mississippi. It wasn't my responsibility to care about Humphrey or the backlash. We couldn't let others single out two people and appoint them our spokesmen. The whole point of the rnr is to teach the lowest sharecropper that he knows better than the biggest leader exactly what is required to make a decent life for himself."

In January, the rnr's challenge to the seating of the five congressmen from Mississippi reopened all the scars inflicted during the convention fight. sncc and the rnr demanded not only that the five congressmen be unseated, but that three Negro women, elected during a mock "freedom ballot," be seated in their place. The Liberal Establishment, including the ADA, NAACP, and UAW, balked at this demand. When James Wechsler wrote a column opposing that part of the challenge, Mrs. Fannie Lou Hammer, one of the three challengers, called him up to ask when he was joining the Klan. Once again epithets filled the air and poisoned relationships. It was two days after the challenge was (continued on page 88)

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lodged that Wilkins made his charge of communist penetration of SNCC.

All winter, while the Liberal Establishment worked quietly on the campuses to put together a 1965 Summer Project not controlled by SNCC, a handful of integration leaders struggled to stave off the confrontation. This peacemaker faction consisted of Bayard Rustin, organizer of the 1963 March on Washington; A. Philip Randolph, the revered 80-year-old president of the Sleeping Car Porters Union; Michael Harrington, author of *The Other America*; and the apostle of redemption and reconciliation, Martin Luther King. This group shared many of the liberal criticisms of SNCC, but was unwilling to join any move to detach SNCC from the mainstream of the movement.

On February 1, the fifth anniversary of the first sit-in, a stormy six-hour meeting, called by Rustin, was held in an effort to quell the liberal revolt. Among those present were Rustin, Harrington, Lowenstein, and James Forman and Ella Baker of SNCC. The confrontation produced no tangible results, other than to bring the Liberal Establishment's estrangement from SNCC into the open.

After the meeting, the liberals were

still determined: "There will not be a repeat of last summer, when SNCC made all the decisions, got all the glory, and indoctrinated 800 of the best college students in the country with their line."

The liberals are demanding a broad coalition, where they would have an effective voice in shaping policy and tactics. SNCC maintains it is they who first ventured into Mississippi, it is they who live there and face the specter of beatings and jail every day, and it is they who should make the decisions. At press time it seemed likely the liberals would set up their own Summer Project in Mississippi under the aegis of the NAACP, while SNCC organized a separate project for the whole "black belt" of Southwest Georgia, Alabama, Arkansas, and Mississippi.

The future remains fluid and uncertain. If the liberals attack, they will have the backing of the unions, the press, the funding foundations, and the Johnson Administration.

All SNCC will have is its legend. It is a legend that liberated a generation of college students from the shackles of apathy, panty raids, and J. D. Salinger. It is a legend that pushed the NAACP out of the court into the streets and jails.

If the Liberal Establishment chooses to separate such a legend from the movement, the only beneficiaries will be the Birchers and backslashers. □