

SNCC

THE 1964 ANNUAL SPRING SNCC CONFERENCE

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A white field secretary for the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) was beaten in jail by a white cell mate in front of several police officers.

Dr. Howard Zinn, former history department chairman at Spelman College of Atlanta, related that experience to the Annual Spring Conference of SNCC held March 27-29 in Atlanta.

The beaten SNCC worker, Zinn continued, called the local FBI office the following morning after being bonded out of jail. He told them he was coming to their office to register protest of the beating and demand appropriate FBI and federal action. He was accompanied by two well-dressed New York City lawyers and a college history professor.

The SNCC worker's face was badly swollen, his face and shirt still covered with blood when the four of them reached the FBI office. The local FBI agent looked them over and said, "Who was it got beaten?"

Zinn, a member of SNCC's Executive Committee, stressed the importance of focusing on the President for the protection of Constitutionally guaranteed rights. "We need to know," he said, "what we need and who we want to do things."

Zinn, who is the college professor in the story, told the audience of 350, "I'm not saying that the FBI is incompetent, has bad eyesight or is malevolent. Just cold and distant as if the 14th amendment wasn't their responsibility. It's their job and the President has the power to tell them to do their job and so does the Attorney General."

Pinpointing responsibilities within the federal structure is important, Zinn said. "The term 'Federal power' allows the passing of the buck" among

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the President, the Congress and the Courts. It is important to focus on the President, he said, because the President has had the power to protect civil rights since the Civil War. Legislation has had no effect in the Deep South "because the President of the United States has not used his power to make it mean anything."

<sup>states</sup>  
The Constitution/~~xxxx~~ it is the job of the President to enforce the laws and the Constitution is the highest law of the land, Zinn said. Therefore, civil rights legislation isn't needed for the purpose of enforcing the 14th amendment, he said.

Zinn noted the historical underpinnings to the President's unwillingness to protect citizens' rights in the Deep South. The Civil War established the principle that a state does not have absolute control over its citizens, Zinn said. ~~Until~~ Until the passage of the 14th amendment in 1868 the state did have absolute power legally. ~~The~~ The 14th amendment set limitations on the states which the Bill of Rights had set on the Federal Government. But today, ~~xxx~~ Zinn said, the states still operate as if the 14th amendment does not exist.

The "Compromise of 1877," in which the President told the South, "You can treat the Negroes as you like and we won't interfere," is in operation in 1964, he said. "That's what Burke Marshall means when he says the Federal Government won't intervene. Congress did its job one hundred years ago. The Courts have extended themselves. Now it's the President's job to take a stand and do his job. We have never had a President who said the 14th amendment will operate in the Deep South."

Zinn proposed to the audience that it undertake to "embarrass the President and hold him up to his responsibilities before the nation."

The President should "station a substantial number of federal marshals in the areas where Constitutional rights are likely to be violated. Not for the purpose of taking notes and filing suits in order to see the results years later. But to get in the way and arrest those persons and police officers interfering with Constitutional rights.

"Sheriff Jim Clark (of Dallas County, Alabama) should spend a few nights in jail," he said. "He should have been arrested by the FBI in Selma. The FBI was there taking pictures of Negroes being arrested on the steps of a Federal Building, but did nothing."

Dr. Steven Smith, sociology professor at Tuskegee University spoke voting as about/a different way to effect some changes in the Deep South. He said voter registration and voting ~~XXXX~~ provided a power play to force the existing power structure to yield concessions.

Smith described the situation in Macon County, Alabama, where Negroes now comprise a majority of the registered voters. He said there is a local Negro group which is sponsoring a slate of candidates to run for the numerous local posts to be contested in 1964. Smith said, "the group is most interested in accelerating social change and therefore supports those who are best qualified to do it."

~~However~~, The Negro 'power structure' in Macon County is supporting the white contestants for Mayor and Sheriff, the Tuskegee professor said. The sheriff, who is running for Mayor now, promised the group that several Negroes would be appointed to positions in the Sheriff's department if he is elected. Smith said the group regarded this as an important promise to have been exacted from the former sheriff. He said that kind of patronage

exemplified the way change can be brought about.

Smith suggested that the threat of a large <sup>vote</sup> and actual voting will intimidate the white power structure into granting "social change and democracy."

Several persons spoke from the floor to challenge Dr. Smith's analysis and the position of the Negro 'power group' in Macon County.

One person asked why the group in Macon County is not sponsoring a Negro candidate for sheriff and mayor. Smith said the group felt that the candidates running were the best qualified, but that anyone who wanted to file to run for the office was welcome to do so. As far as the group ~~thinks~~ is concerned, no qualified Negro person is available.

The questioner asked if Dr. Smith felt that a person who had been sheriff in Macon County these last few years could be qualified to speak for the best interests of the Negroes and whites in Macon County. And further, if the Negroes of Macon County would attempt to make full use of the power available to them because of the majority of voting strength they enjoy.

Dr. Smith replied, "Would you want an all-black slate?" But the person who asked the question said that skin color was not the issue. Rather, would the candidates fight for a platform which took into account the interests of most of the persons in the county.

In discussing the goals of present civil rights activities, two speakers showed the relevance of post-Civil War activities to present problems.

Dr. St. Clair Drake, of Roosevelt University in Illinois, called for a return to the spirit of cooperation between blacks and whites which prevailed during the Reconstruction period.

The issue of race, Drake said, is still manipulated in the way it was used after Reconstruction to prevent any loosening of the stranglehold which the ruling class has on the economic and political institutions. Drake noted that in the 1963 Gubernatorial race in Mississippi the Democrats ran against the first serious Republican opposition since Reconstruction. The Democratic platform was based on "Preserve White Supremacy with the One Party System" and "Bury the Scalawags." Drake explained that the term "scalawags" refers to Southern whites who cooperated with Southern Negroes during Reconstruction to tackle their common needs.

Drake emphasized the importance of dispelling the myths about the ability of Negroes to handle governmental responsibilities. Contrary to the white history books, Drake said, Reconstruction legislatures did not bankrupt the legislature and plunder the helpless people of the Deep South states. He noted that the problem of corruption in state legislatures was not a function of illiteracy, but of greed. Often those with the education pilfered state funds, while those without it pushed forward some of the most progressive legislation in the Deep South's history.

In several ~~xxx~~ cases, the large debts of the state legislature were incurred prior to the War, with the Reconstruction legislatures fighting hard to correct the financial imbalances. [The South Carolina legislature, he said, the only one of the Deep South legislative bodies with a Negro majority, established the first public school system with compulsory attendance.] The public school system in the South today, Drake said, has its roots in the Reconstruction legislatures. [Drake also noted that when the South Carolina legislature was getting ready to buy some available land for the purpose of distributing it to poor Negroes and whites, the legislature was "broken."]

SNCC Executive Secretary James Forman, in his talk, said the post-Reconstruction era in Mississippi may be characterized as a period of violent overthrow of the republican form of government. "The counter-revolution of 1875," Forman said, was maintained by force, coercion, economic reprisals and election frauds.

"Grant refused to send troops to Mississippi to save the republican government," Forman continued. "The Civil War had been a revolution of the right to vote." Between 1875 and 1890 a campaign was waged in Mississippi to prevent Negroes from voting, resulting in a drastic reduction of voters all over the state. "This approach, known as the 'Mississippi Plan,' was copied by other Deep South states," Forman said,

This history has relevance to the kind of police buildup and election reform laws now under consideration by the Mississippi legislature, he said. The state Republicans have denounced the election laws as an undisguised attempt to emasculate the budding Republican effort in that one-party state.

Forman analyzed the background of some of the state legislators to illustrate the kind of power bloc/controlling the fate of Negroes and whites in Mississippi. His analysis showed that the Citizens' Councils, Chambers of Commerce, American Legion, the conservative Farm Bureau, and the legal profession predominate among the interests of the state legislators. (He was able to show, for example, the degree to which business interests dominated legislative committees and the clients of law firms of some of the leading legislators.)

Research into the power structure undermines the widely accepted myths about the roots of racism. It becomes clear that the institutions which perpetuate segregation and state-led violence against Negroes are not controlled by a few fanatical backwoods, suspender-pulling, tobacco-chawing

rednecks. The research reveals that the Citizens' Councils, state legislators, Chambers of Commerce, banks and industries, planters, courts and police are holding hands to keep control of what for them is highly profitable financially.

The purpose of SNCC conferences is education. At this one the effort was to focus on who is responsible for the problems Negroes and whites face, what needs to be done about it, and who should be made to do it. The speakers pointed the finger at the white business and political leaders as responsible for society's problems. Then, suggested the need for direct Presidential intervention with federal marshals to protect the right to vote and other Constitutionally-guaranteed rights. And finally, <sup>outlined</sup> the importance of organizing politically to place the proper persons in elective office.

*If these ideas have already been incorporated into SNCC's program.*

<sup>The</sup> ~~mississippi~~ summer program includes the support of Negro Congressional candidates in Mississippi (where there are three), Alabama and Georgia, and a Senatorial candidate in Mississippi. The program also includes a freedom school program in Mississippi, part of which will be to inform Mississippi youth about history and politics. And with at least one thousand students expected to come into the state this summer, SNCC is already calling on the President to ensure their protection against violence <sup>the state of</sup> by Mississippi.

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