



BLACK POWER

by SY LANDY and CHARLES CAPPER

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in defense of black power

BLACK POWER

IN THE MIDST of the debate over the call for "Black Power" in White America, radical Negro leaders have declared that they cannot give a detailed definition of the term. This position is only consistent with the concept of Black Power — in fact, it reveals the very essence of the concept: that the Negro people will themselves determine the direction of their own movement in the course of struggle.

BLACK POWER MARKS the beginning of a new stage in the struggle of a people toward social liberation, a stage as important today as was the Civil War and Reconstruction a century ago. For the Negro in America, the American heritage has meant centuries of slavery, transformed at last into corporate 'free enterprise' slavery, poverty, and physical terror. But beyond even the lynchings and poverty, the blood and hunger, has been the systematic attempt not only to crush the Negro but to make him accept his degradation as his just due. History and tradition weaved a blanket of social lies that smothered the Negro in his own supposed inhumanity, his fitness only for manual labor, his awareness of social and even physical dependence on the power and wealth of White America, his incapability of running his own life.

MUCH MORE IMPORTANT than explicit theories of Negro inferiority has been the conscious and unconscious racism that permeates the lives of whites living in a society built on the stooped backs of black people. Even more tragic, a great many Negroes have themselves accepted the racist concept of their own inferiority. Deliberately deprived of their African heritage, virtually denied the history of their own past rebellions, forced into patterns of deference by the need to survive, forced into the most menial jobs, forced into filthy slums and dirt road shacks, many American Negroes found it easy to accept the myth of their inferiority. It is a tribute to the human race in general and the Negro people in particular that such a system was not completely effective, that they could not be beaten down totally even by the vast powers aligned against them.

Though the white radical can empathize to a degree with the self-liberating effect of Black consciousness on the Negro people, only he who has been burdened with the myth of his own inferiority can know what that liberation really means. The experience of the Negro belongs to the Negro; only he knows how he feels, and only he can, in the course of struggle against the forces that oppress him, determine what he wants and how he intends to get it. In part, that is Black Power.

BEFORE ONE CAN even begin to discuss the political importance of Black Power, it is absolutely essential to understand the importance of this sense of Black consciousness in the building of a mass Negro movement.

A FEW YEARS AGO a sensational discussion raged in the American press on "Black Nationalism." The greatest problem with this discussion was that a good deal of it was irrelevant. The crucial question for whites should have been, "Why?" Why were the Muslims, and before them the Garveyites, able to get such sizable and deep-rooted support and participation in the ghetto? Why were so many Negroes who did not join these groups so ambivalent and defensive, yet also so respectful toward them? Why did the spirit of "Nationalism" pervade so much of the internal life of even the most integrated civil rights organization?

A BASIC REASON for this phenomenon was the need for self-identification and self-respect. American black society had for too long accepted the idea that Negroes were incapable of uniting and leading their own groups. Traditional civil rights organizations might "do good things," but the black man at the bottom could not identify himself with them. What appears to the white community to be 'integrated' organization often appears to the grassroots of the black community to be white-dominated. Central, then, to the appeal of Nationalism, even for those who rejected it, has been the hunger for Black pride. Back To Africa, a separate state, Muslimism—all these ideas themselves hardly account for the popularity of nationalism. They were surface symbols of militancy, of a refusal to kneel to the white man.

BLACK POWER has a longer history in the Negro community. In the North we are familiar with it as an impulse, often unclear, sometimes conservative, sometimes radical, but always present. The Negro Church, even with its frequent ties to whites, even with its frequent implied message that "White is Good, Black is Bad," gained support as an instrument of Negroes. The growth of Negro political machines inside the old parties represented (and depended on) the aspiration for group identity, even if most of the benefits were at best vicarious. Even Uncle Toms were preferred to direct white control. The Negro press and fraternal groups are also wavering but perceptible indications that the Negro wanted his own institutions and his own power groups.

This trend is even more marked in the South. The central feature of Segregation was not separation of the races, it was the domination by whites of powerless Negroes.

Black institutions were controlled by the white power structure. Established black community leaders depended for their power on the support they had in the white community. A "friend" of the whites could command some influence on a day-to-day level. A white could work his pleasure on the black community; the reverse was impossible. Segregation was not simply two separate communities; it was more closely akin to a ranch, on which the black cattle were penned off and fed as long as they suited the needs of their white owners; if they did not, they were slaughtered.

WHITE AMERICA HAS shown the Negro that he needs both identity and power. From this lesson springs the need and the motive for a Negro movement, led by and responsible to Negroes.

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REPLIES THE LIBERAL, we have always urged support for civil rights organizations that are dedicated to bettering the lot of Negroes. Somehow SNCC and other Black Power militants seem to want a different kind of movement, they don't seem to want to integrate into American society. As we will try to show, this movement is of necessity different from other civil rights organizations in its relations to middle-class white America. And this difference, not the phony charge of "racism in reverse," is at the heart of much of the white reaction to Black Power — a reaction that not only reveals SNCC's alienation from middle-class white America, but also the white liberal's commitment to it. But let's first take up this question of assimilation into American society from an historical perspective. Let us ask whether Black Power radically deviates from the American experience?

THE ANSWER, we think, is that it does and it doesn't.

ON THE ONE HAND, it should not seem strange, for almost all minority groups in the United States have gone through analogous processes. Very few groups have simply "translated," "assimilated," or "integrated" into the dominant society. In fact, behind the gauze coverlet of the great "melting pot," "all-Americans-unhyphenated-together-in-brotherhood," and "every-man-considered-as-an-individual" has always been the reality of defined ethnic groupings that make up our own society. Every politician making up a slate pays due heed to group self-identification patterns. The Irish consolidated themselves as a group, took over the church and gave it new content as an Irish institu-

tion, and formed and controlled many political institutions; the Jews built their manifold and powerful organizations; the Italians radical institutions; the Jews built their manifold and powerful organizations; the Italians cohered their consciousness as Italians rather than as fellow villagers when they reached these shores — and so on. For separate groupings American society did not provide the option of simply blending in. Such a choice is only possible when a group becomes strong enough internally to utilize its force and command respect inwardly and outwardly.

IN THIS WAY is the Negro's course similar to that of other groups. However, there are significant differences. The most obvious is that the color line make the gulf between white and Black sharper, moreover, the other minorities came with intact cultures to be eroded over time, while the African's language and culture was decimated if not completely destroyed. And finally, the Negro was treated to the process of proclaimed inferiority, for more than others. Fourth, the other groups could begin to translate in by increasingly adapting to middle-class standards and by rising on the socio-economic ladder on a large scale. For the vast numbers of Negroes largely kept unskilled or semi-skilled and living in an increasingly fixed and stratified economy, this course is basically not open to them.

THESE FACTORS MEAN that the fight of the Negro is harder, sharper, and of necessity, more radical. For, if the goal is the self-raising of 20 million Black Americans, it can only be accomplished by a drastic and thorough change of the whole society—its politics, its economy, its culture.

ONE LAST POINT should be made in relation to the European ethnic minorities which is crucial to an understanding of the similarities and differences vis-a-vis the Negro. The European minority groups had outside allies even while they crystallized their power. The ethnic groups were frequently hostile to each other, nevertheless, over the long period of time, they tended to buttress each other and fight for common needs. Then, too, despite periods of intense hostility, a loose alliance with the labor movement aided the process. Given the difficulty of the Negro's revolution and, at the same time, his minority position in American society, the problem of alliances is more difficult, but crucially important.

BEFORE ONE CAN even talk about alliances, however, it is important to understand the absolute necessity for building an internally unified, strong, and self-respecting Negro movement. Only then, when Negroes have something strong enough that other groups can ally with it and not simply dominate it, can one consider the problems of alliances. The central problem with the Negro movement has been that there has not really been one capable of digging roots into Black communities and responding to the socio-psychological and political needs of the

Negro masses. Black power, as we have seen in the preceding sections, is a radical response to that radical need.

BUT GIVEN THE NECESSARY development of such a movement, we still then pass to the problems of alliances. For sometime certain leaders within and without the Civil Rights movement have declared that the Southern Negro is in coalition with labor, the church groups, liberals, etc., within the political compass of the Democratic Party. They call for the intensification of this alliance and condemn the idea of Black Power as a method of isolating the Negro and destroying profitable alliances. They say it means that the Negro wants to go it alone and that this would be disastrous. Let us see.

LET US LOOK FIRST at the sort of alliances that the idea of Black Power, even at this early stage, implies; second, at the nature of the coalitionist alliances upon which the traditional civil rights groups have been based; and third, a more detailed and speculative analysis of the potential alliance growing out of the new Negro movement based on the idea of Black Power.

AT ONE LEVEL, the idea of Black Power clearly addresses itself to the question of white student allies.

A RECENTLY PUBLISHED SNCC position paper puts it: "This is not to say that the whites have not had an important role in the movement. In the case of Mississippi, their role was very key in that they helped give Blacks the right to organize, but that role is now over, and it should be." White students and others have participated in a variety of situations in the South and have been crucial in quite a number. Now the concept of Black Power has been advanced and it means simply that a stage of struggle has been reached in which Negroes want control over their own fight, its policies, and its destiny. This decision is both strategic and democratic. Strategic in that it is based on the best way to build a strong Negro movement; democratic in that it states that Negroes should control their own organizations. Any white who feels that he has an "inherent right" to be part of the leadership of the movement is only expressing his own feelings about the inability and/or illegitimacy of Negroes to build and lead their own organizations.

AS WE HAVE SEEN, it became increasingly clear that the fight has to be waged by digging deeper and more permanent roots among the Negro people themselves in the South. Consequently, the position of whites in leadership roles became increasingly ambiguous. Their very presence, no matter how well-intentioned, was at some variance with the need for involvement of black people. The Negro, more than anyone, has had to go through the process of recognition that blacks are able to lead, have ideas, and can organize themselves. Articulate, advantaged, middle-class white students impeded this process of recognition. Given this need

and the conservatism of the Negro's allies — labor, liberals, and so forth — the development of mass black movements has become of crucial importance.

BITTER EXPERIENCE with "laws" and "gains" wrested from federal and state governments has shown that they have little content unless there is a powerful mass movement on the scene to force compliance. The need to involve masses of Negroes means a black movement, but it does not mean the end of alliances with white radicals or social movements of whites. Quite the opposite. The SNCC statements have explicitly advised white activists to organize in their own communities. In fact, the hope for this sort of black-white alliance depends in a real sense on the activity of white radicals in such predominately white movements as the labor movement. Black Power is not a policy of self-isolation, but a strategy for building a strong, unified Negro movement and a call for more meaningful alliances.

BUT BEFORE we discuss more fully the nature of these (potential) new alliances, we should examine the nature of the coalitionist alliances of the old-line civil rights groups.

BLACK POWER COMES at a concrete time, in response to concrete conditions and concrete alliances. The trouble with the recent alliances is that they reduce the black ally to a subordinate status. It has become obvious that the price demanded by these allies is the abandonment of militancy and militant demands. The real worth of the labor bureaucrats and liberals as allies was demonstrated conclusively at the 1964 Democratic Party convention, when the Mississippi Freedom Democrats demanded to be seated as the only loyal delegation from that state. The Negroes' "friends" put pressure on them to capitulate. Such a capitulation would have meant selling out and destroying the mass movement of Negroes in Mississippi, but that was secondary to the need of the labor bureaucrats and liberals to play ball with Johnson.

IN THE PRESIDENTIAL campaign that followed, the attempts by the lib-labs to high-pressure the Negro movement into a moratorium on demonstrations and militant activity underlined the nature of the "alliance." Fearful that such activity would create a white backlash in favor of Goldwater, they tried to present a picture of happy Negroes contented with their gains and making no further demands on White America. As we have seen, the moratorium did not prevent a white backlash; it merely persuaded it to vote for Johnson. A real alliance would have fought for the Negro, not for Johnson. At least it could have forced Johnson to make some concessions to the Negro instead of moving to the right to incorporate the white backlash.

THE FACT THAT the AFL-CIO has still not cleaned its house of internal discrimination and its failure to fight for the low-seniority and unemployed workers (a large percentage of the Negro community is in these two categories) renders it an even more dubious ally at this time.

BUT EVEN THIS is not the worst aspect of the present "alliance" when we turn our gaze on the South.

CONTRARY TO the hopes of radicals, the struggle in the South did not come about as the result of a poor Negro-poor white alliance. The South has gone through a rapid transformation since World War II. It is now more urban than rural, if only by a few percentage points; whole areas are now highly industrialized. But while economic power has shifted to the cities, political power has lagged behind and tended to stay in the hands of small-town businessmen and lawyers and plantation owners in the black belt. The Democratic Party and the state legislatures were almost exclusively pork barrel trading posts. When the threat of a CIO organizing drive receded, the urban upper and middle classes tried to change their political status from that of junior partner to rural and small town interests to senior partner. This was the reason for the reapportionment fights in the border and more industrial states. The spearhead of this fight was an alliance of financial, industrial, and mercantile interests plus the new, more sophisticated, middle classes.

THE NEGRO STRUGGLE of the '50s was concentrated in urban areas. Slowly an alliance emerged between the Negro leadership and the urban upper classes. For example, the "pro-civil rights" Mayor of Atlanta (the banking center of the South) is the former head of the Chamber of Commerce, and the Vice-Mayor formerly led the realty interests of the city. The pattern is duplicated through much of the developed South. Sometimes the coalition is easy; sometimes the business community is a most grudging "ally." The labor movement in the South plays virtually no role.

THIS COALITION has resulted in precious little for the Negro. The political complexion of his allies ranges from conservative Republican to Johnson Democrat. As a result, after agonizing struggles, the Negro's gains have been only token in most areas.

THE GOAL OF THE Southern white moderates is racial peace. But the impoverished Negro community needs a social, economic, and racial revolution. The urban white upper classes will go only so far and no farther. They tend to moderate their already-modest goals in order to keep their allies in the rural areas. The rural upper classes want to modernize and industrialize, so they are beginning to move toward tokenism to achieve social peace. As a result, the opposition

to Negro demands is shifting from the town business-oriented White Citizens Councils to lower levels of the white population in the form of the Klan.

THE CHAMBER OF COMMERCE will hardly advocate a program that can make a difference in the daily life of the average poor Negro. In Atlanta, for example, where Negroes can vote more or less freely, until recently only a few saw voting as a meaningful way to change their lives. The cost of the alliance to the Negro was that the black community could not be organized. Any program of Black Power or of radical economic demands would be inconsistent with what could be cajoled from the business and middle-class groups that dominate the alliance.

WHERE THE NEGRO PEOPLE have been solidly organized on independent lines, as in the Mississippi Freedom Democrats and the Lowndes County Freedom Organization, their former white "allies" quickly disappeared from view. Phony alliances cannot continue when the real aspirations of the Negro are put forward.

IF THE PRESENT alliance pattern continues, it means the end of any possibility of developing deeply-rooted Negro organizations in the South. Instead, a coalition will come into being between white business and the upper levels of the Negro community. The great mass of Negroes will still be out in the cold.

THE REAL QUESTION for the Negro movement vs not, whether or not to have alliances. The question is, what kind of alliances, with whom, and toward what ends?

BLACK POWER MEANS, if carried through, the rupture of present alliances and changes in Negro leadership. Alliances between large social groupings are not broken sharply or in one day. Sections of departing allies hang on and serve as brakes on the movement. Moderate leaders hang on as long as they can. The publicity given them in the mass media give them the appearance of strength. They can even gain small successes by pressuring their white cohorts to give a little and avert a more militant leadership. Revolutions are processes that develop over time. They wane and wax. But if the present alliances disappear, whether slowly or rapidly, what new ones seem likely? Or will the Negro movement isolate itself? Where is the South, in America, can new social alliances be forged?

BLACK POWER DOES NOT preclude future alliances. The idea that it does arises from confusion. If the Negro community organizes itself, future allies will have to respect its power. They will not be able to subordinate it to their own needs. But this only means that any such alliance will be genuine.

IT IS ONLY in liberal mythology that meaningful alliances occur on the basis of brotherly love. The best cement for an alliance is common interest.

THE MOST FAR-REACHING and integrated alliance that has ever involved the Negro in the South was the Populist Party. S. Vann Woodward and other historians have pointed to this fact, although the plebian Negro-white relationship was temporary and sporadic. The joint effort that occurred at that time was the result of a recognition of common interests by two separate organizations. A white farmers' organization and a black farmers' organization came together in the Populist Party out of common necessity and forced mutual respect. The Southern poor white and the Negro loved each other no more then than now. Integration, to the extent that it occurred, was a side result; the mutual goal was economic, social, and political advancement.

SAMUEL LUBELL has documented the patterns of Negro and white voting in the South. He shows that, while Negroes and the upper strata of the white community vote similarly on racial issues, on economic issues the poor whites and Negroes tend to vote alike. We know that historically there are great class divisions in the white community, divisions that have often led to violence. We know that strains still exist—unemployment, underemployment, and low wage levels oppress the poor white as well as the Negro. Moreover, there is growing resentment among poor whites toward the racial policies of the white upper class whose policy of tokenism affects only them and not the big shots.

CAN THE DIFFERENCES between the classes in the white community be crystallized so that a new alliance can occur between self-organized poor blacks and poor whites? Obviously, given the existing racial enmity, no one can give assurances of this. But there are possibilities that offer a way forward. The white worker and the white poor will not be organized on the basis of fighting for the rights of Negroes, but they can be organized to fight for their own needs.

WHEN SNCC CALLS FOR white students, especially white southern students, to organize the white poor, it points to a necessity. This in itself will be vastly difficult, but unfortunately even more is necessary. In the 1880s and '90s, white plebeians lent a hand in helping to organize black groups; the reverse is now needed. Obviously, this does not mean sending Negro organizers into white communities, but it does mean that Negro groups will have to adopt a particular stance toward the white under group. This stance will be built upon the truth, the way the Negro and white really feel:

I) "The Negroes you despise have organized to fight for their needs and are winning something. Will the poor white do the same or is he a permanent patsy?"

Mario

2) "We aren't anxious to 'integrate' into the white community. We want the right to go where we please or sit where we like, but we don't intend to smash our own community to do it, because we have our pride. We will consider the idea of 'assimilation' when white movements worthy of respect are ready to help us in transforming society."

THE NEGRO, IN PRESSING his demands, will widen them and show that these demands have meaning for the poor white as well. For example, the South needs massive public works - dams, power plants, hospitals, schools, libraries. These would give jobs to thousands of unskilled and semi-skilled workers, the bulk of the Southern labor force, both black and white. Not that the Federal or state governments, controlled by the Two-Party Establishment, are likely to heed these demands; they will come through with the needed billions only for the purpose of mass murder. But in the Negro community - and perhaps in the white - the idea will spread that people have a right to a job and a decent income. If the present government won't give it to them, they should establish one that will, one that they themselves control.

ALREADY A CHANGE is taking place in the nature of Negro demands. The economic program associated with Black Power is still sketchy, but it is becoming more radical. SNCC is calling for black credit unions and cooperatives as well as independent political parties, and it is evident to SNCC and everyone else that this is *but* the beginning.

MOVEMENTS EVOLVE in the course of struggle. Generally, even working-class movements start with middle-class goals. Those who want to rise naturally try to follow in other's paths. They want the same things others have. When and if they learn that they cannot become small businessmen or have two cars and the like, they either fall away or build a new group consciousness and more radical ways to raise themselves. The Negro movement from the beginning raised general demands for jobs and housing, but it never concentrated on a radical economic program. For those leading the fight at the time, this was not the most important thing. But the scene shifts radically as the need is felt to seek deeper roots and attract greater forces.

THE SIGNIFICANCE of this for future alliances is that the demands of the black movement will strike more chords among white workers and farmers and widen their awareness of their own needs.

THERE IS STILL another factor: in aiming at political power, the Negro will increasingly need to orient toward the city, where political power is concentrated. SNCC is having its biggest successes in the rural black belt, but the urban fight still looms. In the

black belt, there is less need for allies. There are fewer to be found, even potentially, and in any case the Negro is not in a minority. But as the fight expands, as it must, and as more radical Negro forces enter the Southern cities, they meet a more complex situation. There organized black power will be not only in separate black institutions but asserting itself within white institutions. While there will be (and should be) black unions like the Maryland Freedom Union where the white unions refuse even to organize masses of Negroes, these are important unions with large blocs of Negroes already involved. Here the organization of black caucuses may cause companion white ones to spring up. If inflation continues, the pressure now building up for more money among black and white workers could produce all sorts of struggles and all sorts of alliances inside unions.

AN ALTERNATE COURSE of events - more racial bloodshed and the dashing of hopes for these new alliances - is possible. But if it occurs, the blame will rest as much with the failure of white radicals to break from the old coalitionist alliances and help build a movement of white workers fighting for their needs, as it will with an anti-white perversion of the concept of Black Power.

ANTI-WHITE FEELING in the black community is hardly created by the slogan of Black Power. It is already there and boiling over. Black Power attempts to channel the rage and energies of the Negro community in the direction of political, economic, and social goals; its opposite is coups and programless riots. It seeks to transform riots into rebellions, aimed not at indiscriminate hostility but directed at the vitals of the rotten American power structure. To a great extent, the responsibility for simple anti-whitism lies with the conservative civil rights leaders who raise hopes but fail to deliver the goods because of their subordination of the movement to the political needs of the Democratic Party and the lib-lab coalition, thus adding to the enormous pent-up frustration of an oppressed people.

THE BLACK POWER movement is still in embryo; many programs are advanced in its name, ranging from a new and genuine black radicalism to the conservative notion of an artificially "united" black community. What is exciting about Black Power is that it provides the basis for building a mass Negro movement, militant and independent of the Old Politics. If it is to succeed, this new movement will not only have to break from the white power structure, but from those sections of the black community which serve as brokers for the white establishment in the ghetto. The Black Power movement has to begin now to build an alternative to the old-line Negro politicians like Adam Clayton Powell and William Dawson.

IT IS POSSIBLE that the sort of semi-nationalism now being advanced can be twisted into reactionary forms. The movement, especially in the North, could go down to defeat, obliterated by the armed power of the White Establishment; it could travel the dead-end street of anti-Semitism; it could break into small and warring fragments. History makes no guarantees of social progress. Because Black Power can be perverted if no white anti-Establishment insurrections develop to aid the Negro movement, precisely for this reason it is essential for radicals to orient toward it. It is even more essential for white radicals to commit themselves to the building of a working-class movement willing to fight for its rights, its interests, its humanity, against its exploiters, in a society that is increasingly dehumanizing and barbarically oppressive. Opposition to Black Power - which expresses such legitimate needs for a mass Negro movement - can only lead to a self-fulfilling prophecy for the whites, a reactionary race war that will drown Negroes in blood. Such a warfare will end the hope of a catalytic force to aid in the creation of a non-exploitative, truly human society for white as well black. It is to that end that we welcome the slogan of Black Power because it paves the way for potential new alliances to replace those that have hampered the Negro movement. It is to that end that we welcome white radical activity in helping to build a movement of whites that fights its exploitation as militantly as the Negro militant fights his. It is on the basis and from the experience of such struggles that a movement for a new, transformed America can be built.

An SDS Convention
Position Paper

by

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