

# THE ROOTS OF "BLACK POWER"

## INTRODUCTION

When the Civil Rights March through Mississippi began last June, it had tremendous sympathy in the Northern Press, and among most Northern liberal whites.

The New York Times editorialized:

The nation cannot and will not any longer tolerate any place within this Union where whites hold Negroes in economic servitude and political impotence and physical terror. This climate of fear has to be lifted. Mississippi Negroes must be able to use the full range of their talents in freedom and dignity. The Negro hero as victim is a tragedy too often played out.\*

Then, one evening, when the March had reached the Delta country of Mississippi, people throughout the Nation turned on Huntley-Brinkley and saw Stokely Carmichael, new chairman of the Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) speaking to a small crowd of sharecroppers and supporters.

"What do we want?," he yelled.

"Black Power!," the crowd answered.

As the March continued, the participants increased to 15,000. In front of the State Capitol Building in Jackson, Carmichael addressed them again:

"What do we want?"

"Black Power!"

In the months that have followed, more and more Negroes, from all economic classes, are apparently echoing that crowd. In Lowndes County, Alabama, sharecroppers and tenant farmers have formed an independent political party, adopted a black panther as their emblem, and "black power" as their motto.\* During the last NAACP national convention, one of the delegates, an M.D., was asked about the concept. He said: "I'm black, so I'd be a fool to be against black power." Finally, the traditionally integrationist Congress of Racial Equality has adopted "black power" as their goal.

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\*"Journey Against Fear," editorial, The New York Times

\*\*The Deep South Patriot, Vol. I, No. I, "Lowndes Primary," pg. 8

It is obvious that the term has many different definitions, but all include the concept of black exclusiveness for the Civil Rights Movement. Also, all definitions include the assumption that Negroes are a separate and distinct group in our society.

In this paper, I will try to deal with some general attitudes that have always existed in the Negro Community and which have led to the formulation of the "black power" concept. This is not supposed to be a comprehensive analysis, nor a complete description of the Negro community. It is based solely on my own experiences as a Civil Rights organizer in Negro ghettos of Mississippi, Georgia, and Washington, D.C..

The first part deals with general attitudes and feelings among Negroes with whom I have worked. In the second, I describe the Negro organization I know best--The Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). This was the first major Civil Rights group to call for "black power". The specific factors that led to this policy are, therefore, very important.

#### ROOTS OF THE BLACK POWER CONCEPT

##### Senator Leroy Johnson's Speech

On March 6, 1963, in Albany, Georgia, I attended the annual dinner of the N.A.A.C.P.. State Senator Leroy Johnson spoke. He was the first Negro to be elected to the Georgia Senate since Reconstruction. He said, in part:

What you are doing here, in Albany, Georgia, in the shadow of fear and in the shadow of tremendous odds by persons of non-color,\*represents what must be done by Negroes throughout the South if we are ever to obtain first-class citizenship. The Negro must receive a greater appreciation for his own accomplishments in order to move forward.

Today the Negro finds himself torn between two divergent philosophies. He is taught that the fruits of this great American democracy belong to all the citizens, and yet the Negro finds himself realistically faced with a segregated society.

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\* The emphasis is mine



Today throughout the Southland you will find a new kind of attitude characterizing the Negro, a kind of attitude which says to the world, "I will not be satisfied with second-class citizenship." For the black boys and girls are moving throughout this Southland, standing up and kneeling in, and pricking the conscience of America and saying "I want to be free, and I want to be free now."

No one needs to be altruistic with us. No one needs to give us anything. Our demands are the demands of a people who belong to this country. America is my land, and it's my country. We need not be apologetic to anybody, and the Negro must stop feeling sorry for himself. He must stop feeling sorry for being black.

A wind of change is blowing throughout the Southland. You will find a kind of attitude that is exemplified in the little boy who was stopped by a white man on the streets of Georgia. The white man represented the highest and best in segregation and prejudice. He stopped the little boy and said, 'This is my town and my streets--who are you?' The little black boy, standing on the tip of his toes, looked the white squarely in the face and squarely in the eye, and said to him, 'I am somebody.'

There will be those who will say, 'Take it easy--you've come a long way in 100 years. You've got plenty of time, and time will cure it all.' They will say to you that the time isn't right. And I will say to you that the answer to them is simple and very clear. The answer is not how far we have come in the last 100 years, but where we stand today in relation to the other group in society. I say to you that there has never been a single period in history where the majority group has given to the minority group of its own volition and of its own accord, basic human rights. Always there has been a necessity for minority groups to fight and sacrifice for rights obtained.

We must always realize that no matter how high one Negro may go, that he can never enjoy to the fullest capacity the fruits of American democracy until the lowest Negro in the lowest spot and the lowest place can enjoy these fruits of American democracy.

Our challenge is to remove every vestige of segregation and discrimination from this great land. And I submit to you that it may very well be that black men will have to teach America what democracy really means. It may very well be that our task here on earth is to make democracy work. It may very well be that the job of the black man is to bring democracy to the Southland and to this great country."

## Racial Pride

In analyzing these excerpts, it is important to remember that Senator Johnson delivered the speech in 1963, years before the phrase "black power" was coined. Yet, in 1963, Senator Johnson was speaking about race pride, the necessity for Negroes to take what is rightfully theirs, and the hypocrisy inherent in the American system. He even spoke of whites as the enemy of blacks. Because the speech was delivered years ago, I think it is valid to examine it in the process of trying to find the roots of the black power concept.

Senator Johnson was not a militant. Far from it. He is a middle class Negro from the wealthiest Negro section of Atlanta. At the time of his speech, he was being denounced as an "Uncle Tom," and today he is still so denounced. Also, he delivered the talk at a \$10 a plate dinner, far above what the average Negro in Albany could afford.

Yet, Johnson did call for racial pride. He stated clearly his opinion, that the Negro must receive an appreciation "for his own accomplishments....He must stop feeling sorry for being black." Senator Johnson, as a Negro, was simply aware of the fact that after 300 years of being brainwashed, many Negroes themselves believe that Negroes are inferior.

Many people believe that each person should think of himself "as an individual," not as a Negro or a white. However, Senator Johnson knew that, because of the years of racism, Negroes will be able to gain a sense of personal, individual dignity, only after they overcome the feeling of group inferiority. Their personal pride can only develop after group pride is established.

The feeling that there is a need for racial pride is not the figment of the imagination of a group of young radicals. To demonstrate this, I would like to present two poems written by a little girl from Albany, Georgia.



WHAT THE BLACK MAN NEEDS\*

As a race we all should learn  
We should learn to take heed  
If we desire to reach the goal  
Co-operation is what we need

To be a successful race,  
Some must follow, some must lead  
But regardless of what you do,  
Co-operation is what we need.

Since we all can't be leaders,  
Here's the thing for us to do  
Co-operate with the one who's leading  
And we are bound to go through.

There's nothing impossible for a black man  
Upon the face of this earth  
One of the wisest men that ever lived,  
A black mother gave him birth.

Black is really honorable  
To be black is nothing bad  
The Bible says Solomon was black  
He was the wisest man we've had.

I thought to mention these things  
Praying that you will take heed  
Come and co-operate in  
What the black man needs.

WAKE UP, NEGRO, WAKE UP!

I have wondered about the Negro  
I have wondered for a long long time  
Is the Negro really asleep, or has  
He lost his real good mind?  
No doubt he is asleep and  
His dreams are full of glee  
But it's time for him to wake up  
There's plenty for him to see.  
See your condition of unemployment  
You'll declare it's a real disgrace  
Just walk into some of the homes  
And see what you will meet  
Barefoot children and hungry wives  
And nothing there to eat.  
Other races are really happy  
They can drink and sup.

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\*Both poems are by Marion Gaines, who was thirteen years old when she composed them.

### Attitude Towards Whites

Senator Johnson implies that the enemy of the Negroes of Albany are "persons of non-color." He does not say the the enemy is a metaphysical concept like "prejudice" or "lack of understanding between people."

Senator Johnson was speaking in the Deep South. The only whites that his audience had come in contact with were their bosses or town rowdies--in other words, people who have oppressed them. I think that it would be unrealistic to feel that Negroes should not be antagonistic towards whites. Just as Negroes share in being discriminated against because they have black skin, whites share in the quilt simply because they are white. A Negro can't say, "Well, I'm not dirty. Just because some other black people are dirty, I shquldn't be discriminated against." And likewise individual whites cannot expect exceptions to be made for them because they, personally, are not bigots. It is natural that Negroes should distrust all whites.

### Radical Changes

The SNCC position seems to be identified not only with race pride, but also with the demand for radical changes in society. What are the "roots" for this concept within the Negro community?

Senator Johnson made the point that majority groups have never, of their own volition, given minority groups "basic human rights".

All their lives, Negroes hear about America, They hear that America is a land of opportunity and that it is a land of freedom. But they see realistically that America is not that, at least for them. Many Negro leaders now feel that "We don't want to be integrated into a burning house." They see a lot of inequities that exist in America, aside from the race problem.

Basically, the Negro wants his rights. He wants to be able to vote; he wants job opportunities. If he can somehow get these things within the present



system, fine, but if the present system is not flexible enough, he will still demand his rights. The Federal government, up until now, has only been interested in keeping the peace, not in forwarding Negro rights. For instance, in the Birmingham riots of 1964 the Federal troops were sent in only after the Negroes started to riot, not while the white policemen were beating up the Negroes. Negroes resented this very much.

#### The Muslims In Washington, D.C.

The Black Muslims were the first Negro group since Marcus Garvey to express the feelings of the average urban working-class Negro: antagonism towards whites and wanting to combat self-hatred. The Black Muslims are very effective. However, their political goal, buying or receiving free several states in the United States to set up a separate nation, is obviously untenable.

SNCC's "nationalism" has always been political and pragmatic. They base their beliefs and methods on what they consider to be a realistic analysis of American society.

The Muslims, on the other hand, have made a religion out of their nationalism. They do not speak in pragmatic terms, but in highly moral and religious terms.

Brad Freeman, an Antioch student, and myself, met with the head of Muhammad's Mosque of Islam of Washington, D.C., Minister Lonnie 3X. What follows is my impression of the interview.

Lonnie wouldn't meet us at the Muslim Mosque, of course, because whites are not allowed there. And he wouldn't come to the settlement house in which I worked, because it was white-run. So we met him on "neutral" territory, in a Negro luncheonette in the N.W. slums.

When we entered, I had the same feeling of total alienation that I had in the South--and I could see all the customers in the half-filled place staring at us. We asked the owner if Lonnie was there. He said, "no", with a bored tone, as if he wanted us to know that he knew we were just another couple of white curiosity seekers. We sat at the counter and ordered cokes. The manager started

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reading "Muhamad Speaks," and I bought a copy from the stand.

Minister Lonnie finally arrived. He saw us, came over, and sat down at our table. He wouldn't shake our hands. He wasn't hostile; he simply did not acknowledge our offer to shake.

We knew right away he would be in complete control of the situation. Lonnie asked Brad to put his cigarette out.(Muslims are forbidden to smoke.) Throughout the interview, he waved to people coming in the door. He raised his hand, palm straight up, saying "A Salaam A Leichem(Peace be with you), the Muslim salute.

I remembered that Lonnie had a Ph.D. in physics and mathematics. The fact that he had developed a comradeship with so many lower-class people impressed me.

We quoted a written statement which said, in affect, that the Muslim movement, was a reaction against oppression by whites. Lonnie emphatically denied this. He said that Islam was based on the teachings of Elijah Muhammad, the prophet of Allah. Lonnie said that his race pride was not an "over-compensation" to counter racism. He was proud of his race because it had created everything that was worthwhile in the world. The whites were devils, created by a mad Negro scientist centuries ago in order to attempt to conquer the world. But Allah is here on earth, and will destroy the devils in the <sup>year</sup> 1972.

However, Lonnie stressed another point which leads me to believe that Islam serves the same function the "race pride" serves for Negroes in the south. He said that Christianity was the white man's religion. He foisted it on the Negro to help keep him down. Christianity teaches "Be a good nigger here on earth, and obey the white masters. The Lord is watching and will give you pie in the sky when you die."

On the other hand, Lonnie said, Islam doesn't believe in "ghosts or spooks." It doesn't believe in a world hereafter. "You make it on earth or not at all." When Negroes accept Elijah Muhammed, Lonnie says, they learn that they should make themselves better people here and now.



The New Officers

Last May, SNCC members held a week long meeting near Nashville, Tennessee. They tried to define their position on some basic questions, and elected new officers. John Lewis, who had served as SNCC chairman since 1963, was replaced by Stokely Carmichael, a young man reared in the slums of the West Indies and New York City, educated at Howard University, and now identified with the new all-Negro political organizations he had sparked in the Black Belt of Alabama.\*

Jim Forman, who has been executive secretary of SNCC since 1961, did not run for re-election but remains a key figure in the organization. He simply decided that instead of spending most of his time fund-raising in the North he wanted to concentrate on developing new leadership among Southern Negroes.\*\*

He was replaced as executive secretary by Mr. Ruby Doris Robinson, former Spelman College student in Atlanta, one of the earliest sit-in leaders and an original founder of SNCC who has been a leader in the organization ever since. Cleveland Sellers, who was named program secretary in 1965, was re-elected to that post; he too is a long-time SNCC worker and was a key organizer in Mississippi.

These three--Carmichael, Sellers, and Mrs. Robinson--make up the present governing "secretariat" of SNCC. The fact that all three have been active in SNCC since its formation is significant. It is obvious that, as individuals, they have been reacting to the trends that have been gradually developing in SNCC.

Basic Trends

The current call for "black power" is only one of these trends, and it cannot really be understood except in the context of at least three others:

1. The first is the movement of SNCC toward an increasingly close identification with the disinherited Negroes of the South and of the entire country. This began when SNCC moved away from campus toward community organizing in 1961. It was decided that campaigns to integrate lunch counters were not very important.

2. The second basic trend in SNCC is the movement away from dependence

\*Anne Braden, "The SNCC Trends, Challenge to White America," The Southern Patriot, Vol.24, No.5, May, 1966, pg.1,2,3,

\*\*Unless otherwise noted, all comments I make about SNCC personalities are based on my own dealings with them.

on the Federal Government--either for protection, or for actions that could change poor people's lives.

This started when civil rights workers' calls for help brought much talk but little action, when FBI agents kept taking voluminous notes but people kept getting shot and beaten and killed, when new laws were passed but scantily enforced and nothing really changed in the South.\*

3. The third basic trend has been SNCC's slow but steady move toward independent political organization--independent, that is, of the old political parties.

This has always been the organization's goal--to help previously powerless people organize their own political vehicles.

The Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party (MFDP) was actually a move toward independent politics. It was people organizing for themselves--even though at that point they hoped to work within the framework of the national Democratic Party.

Most of them concluded they couldn't do it. The rejection of MFDP at the Democratic National Convention in Atlantic City in 1964 and the failure of the Congressional Challenge in 1965 had a profound influence on SNCC workers. Many decided then and there that there was no way for Negroes to build political strength within the American two-party system.

The next logical step was to try building their own parties where they had the numbers and conditions to do it--and that is what has developed with the Black Panther parties in Alabama.

#### Coalitions

The fact that SNCC wants to build independent political parties does not mean that SNCC is rejecting the idea of coalitions for all time to come. It is rather obvious that in a country where Negroes represent only 10 per cent of the population and even in the South do not have a majority in any state, there must someday be coalitions with someone.

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\*See Appendix



The question SNCC asks itself now is: coalition where, when and with whom. It is saying that in order for a meaningful coalition to take place, at least two conditions must exist: (1) The people who have been powerless must create a power of their own, else there will be no coalition but only a situation in which they will be absorbed and controlled by those who have all the power; and (2) there must be groups with kindred interests with whom to make a coalition.

Since the SNCC orientation is to a politics of power for poor people, this makes meaningful coalition with whites impossible at this moment, since organized groups of white people who are poor simply do not exist.

What about the traditional coalition between poor blacks and "liberal" whites?

Some SNCC people deny that "white liberals" exist in the Deep South. This probably depends on how the term is defined. But one essential fact is that the people usually described as "liberal"--the white people and the Negroes who form coalitions with them--are generally people who never knew or have forgotten what it is to be poor.

SNCC simply does not believe that these people, even if they were strong enough to win elections in Alabama or elsewhere, are going to make the social and economic changes necessary to improve the life conditions of poor people. They think poor people must do it themselves.

#### The "Freedom-High" Element

From the beginning, SNCC has been loosely organized. This has been its genius, since it gave free rein to individual creativity, but it had also been its weakness. Creativity sometimes became over-weighted by wasted effort when people came into SNCC seeking the "new world" and were more interested in finding their own freedom there than in doing what might be needed at the moment to build that new world. This became known as the "freedom-high" movement in SNCC.

Now SNCC is rejecting the "freedom-high" idea and is saying that if people are serious about making a social revolution there are certain organizational disciplines that are necessities of the struggle.

#### The Non-Violent Philosophy in SNCC

Another development is that most people in SNCC have rejected the idea of nonviolence as a philosophy and in most situations even as a tactic.

Like the other trends, this one has been developing over the last five years, but has just now been brought into public focus.

It is important to add quickly, however, that this in no way means that SNCC has turned to advocating violence.

As a matter of fact, those who jump to this conclusion should stop to realize that SNCC's emphasis on serious political organization is the direct opposite of advocacy of violence. Effective independent political organization may be the last, best, and only hope of avoiding widespread violence as a means of attacking the racial situation in America.

But most people who work with SNCC in the Deep South--and for that matter with other civil rights groups--simply reject the idea of turning the other cheek. They believe in people's right to defend themselves against the continuing and unrelenting violence of white racists.

The idea of nonviolence as an aggressive weapon of social change--the concept of nonviolent revolution--has, at least for the time being, disappeared as a significant factor in the South.

#### The Integration Philosophy in SNCC

Stokely Carmichael has said many times that:

"Integration is irrelevant when initiated by black people in the present society. It does nothing to solve their basic problems."\*

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\*Braden, op.cit., pg.3



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Most people in SNCC agree with him. What white people must realize is that integration has been presented as a matter of Negroes being "integrated" (or absorbed) into white society. On the face of it, this plainly says that what is white is better. This has been a raw insult to Negroes; many have long felt it, and now they are saying that they feel it.

Asked recently how he defined integration, Jim Forman said:

Moving Negroes into the mainstream of American life and its accepted value system -- which I reject.\*

This is not what everyone in the Movement has meant by integration. To some it has meant the literal meaning of the word "integrate" -- to make whole. That is, to make whole the human race. It meant integration of peoples not into the existing society, but into a new society, where different groups of people could enrich each other's lives, where all men could be free, and where it was possible for men to live as brothers.

#### Is SNCC Racist?

SNCC is now saying that, although many white people have helped the Civil Rights Movement in the past, it is now time for them to move over. It is now time for Negroes to "go it alone."

..... psychologically the Negro has been in a box that he could not get out of, and ..... what he wants to do now is to do what everybody else in the world has done. He wants to build something of his own, something that he builds with his own hands.\*\*

Is this "racism in reverse", as has been charged? It is very common today to read editorials and see cartoons that equate SNCC and other "black power" groups with such racist groups as the Ku Klux Klan. The question is complex, and not easy to answer.

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\*Ibid, pg. 3.

\*\*Stokely Carmichael, SNCC Charts A Course, interview with Wm. A. Price, National Guardian, New York, 1966, pg. 7.

Carmichael himself gave an answer which is not complete, but is very succinct:

....that is not anti-white. When you build your own house, it doesn't mean you tear down the house across the street.\*

SNCC believes "integration" can never exist until there is equality in strength between different groups of people. It believes that the human race can never be "made whole" until those who have been oppressed can create for themselves their own strength. The concept of white supremacy, which we must realize has been the cornerstone of our society, makes this impossible today.

\*Ibid, pg. 11/



## APPENDIX