

THE MISSISSIPPI FREEDOM MARCH  
AND ISSUES RAISED FOR THE MOVEMENT

by  
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My participation in the Mississippi Freedom March which began almost spontaneously after the assault on James Meredith when he began his walk from Memphis to Jackson, was an effort on my part to get close to the civil rights organizations, their leaders and troops, for the sake of bettering my understanding of their goals and purposes in both the march and the movement. This primary concern was coupled with my own desire to bear a witness out of the several roles which comprise the basic relationships of my life: a husband and a father who though he is white realizes that he and his family are not free until all men are free; a Southerner who has decided that the injustices of white supremacy must cease; an ordained Southern Baptist minister who is also a seminary student and who feels that clergy and laity of his denomination which controls the religious images of the majority of Southern churchgoers must show their brothers where they should be going other than to church; and, finally, as the national chairman of the Student Interracial Ministry program which has students working in the delta and all over the nation in efforts to educate them to the issues and engage them in the solution of the causes of this most serious social issue of Western culture.

For eight days, from Belzoni to Jackson with a side trip to Philadelphia, I marched with old and young, Negro and white, male and female; slept in the tents, ate the good meals and the skimpy ones, endured the dirt and hard ground, the short nights and the long days--but also shared in the victories with those who stood up for the first time and said no to Mr. Charlie, who came from the crowds that watched to join that small in comparison band which marched on behalf of all, who registered to vote--and here I want to point to the significance of the man who stepped forward to register in the heat of the battle, knowing full well the possible consequences after the marchers were gone. It seems to me that this is somewhat different from slipping down to the courthouse when no one is around.

I sang the songs and chanted the chants and learned them well in order to hear with my third ear what was being said behind the words about a new tomorrow when a march like this would not be necessary, about decent places to live, decent wages, not handouts but fair compensation for what was earned; it is hot as hell in those cotton fields but if it were fifteen dollars a day instead of three, men, women and children would not mind getting out there so much; if Mr. Charlie's houses for his tenants had plumbing, bathrooms, electricity, walls, paint, insulation, and a good roof, it would be easier to rest at night; but most importantly, if men were treated like men in mere personal day-to-day relationships and were free to determine their own destinies with dignity, it wouldn't be so bad just to be alive. This stands higher than the obtaining of the white middle-class virtues measured in goods and wages.



It is with great facility and genius that the white power structure through its press, television and radio news media, submerges the basic in the secondary or tertiary issues so as to relieve us from constantly facing the primary problems and concerns of the oppressed and deprived. The primary issues of the march finally came to reside in a conflict of ideologies among the three major civil rights organizations, so far as the press was concerned and they produced the images for the nation. You would have thought there was open conflict with overt battles raging twenty-four hours a day while the reality was that though there was conflict, most of it was a healthy dialogue seeking clarity on all sides. When clarity was finally gotten, there were splits between the persons involved, but then the civil rights organizations have never been together any more than the Southern Baptists, Catholics, and Jews have been, nor for a much greater length of time when brief encounters have occurred.

I believe I can forgive the persistent dwelling on the secondary but what further disturbs me is that there was no clarity there, even disregarding the almost unimaginable slanting of both reporting and commentary of the Mississippi papers, especially those in Jackson which have some sort of sickness that even I as a life-long Southerner cannot identify.

That I will leave to the psychologists and sociologists. What I will deal with is what the press dealt with--the secondary issues. These issues only exist because of the primary issues. They arise in the course of seeking ways to meet the primary issues. They are problems which exist in every revolution and should be dealt with seriously but not exclusively.

Sometime before I became conscious of it, a division arose between those who saw the goals of this march and those of the movement as exclusive on the one hand and inclusive on the other. There were those who saw the march as carrying out the intentions of Meredith of releasing himself and other Negroes of fear and this as an exclusive category. This was extended, however, to include fear of the white man in general, and of his violence in particular, and of responding to that violence as a sign that it would no longer be tolerated without reprisal. This gave rise to the dialogue concerning violence and non-violence which is obviously a continuing issue.

The violence and non-violence advocates found themselves in another conflict and yet this was not exclusively cut along those lines. The second conflict arose over the use of the platform by the various organizations; were they to use it only in terms of establishing the essential concerns of the march which had come to include voter registration, or did it become a platform for them to voice and debate their various ideologies? In choosing the latter alternative, a confused and distorted image of the march and the movement resulted for the ideologies of the freedomites and the black powerites seemed to be unalterably opposed and apparently was calling for a split in the communities which their bearers passed through.

It was primarily but not exclusively the leadership and membership of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference which insisted on the use of the term "freedom" to describe what the goals were. They also were the chief



proponents of non-violence for which Martin Luther King, Jr., is internationally known. SCLC originally presented non-violence as a tactic in achieving freedom. It was supposed to prick the consciences of the oppressors and indeed it was successful, but after many years, it has become suspect by those who feel, and rightly so, that more should have been accomplished by now.

Every revolution sees those who carry it out go through three stages with relationship to the ideology under which they operate. The first stage is believing in the ideology. The second stage is believing in believing. The third stage is to cease believing. They may go directly from the first stage to the third if there are not enough obvious victories to make the ideology appear valid. It has to have more than internal consistency and logic--it has to succeed. Some who do not doubt the internal consistency and logic of non-violence, but they do not see enough success for pursuing it as the primary tactic in the ideology of the movement.

Many of these same persons do not see freedom as an adequate symbol either. They are not opposed to freedom but they are weary of the compromises and token compensations thrown their way as they seek it. Some of the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee staff spokesmen began to popularize the term "black power" as a substitute for freedom. Their speeches--especially those of Willie Ricks, indicated that this term was to be used to make clear what they meant by the term freedom. The general impression was conveyed that this meant organization of the Negro community in such a way as to threaten and intimidate the white community and stop it from pursuing its policies of violence and oppressions for fear of violent reprisal. Of course the internal consistency of this argument was easily and quickly refuted. It was never so well articulated as at Canton where 2500 people were completely immobilized by instruments of modern technology.

Further confusion arose as to whether there was any place for whites in the black power system. If a black electorate elects a black slate in an exclusive manner, regardless of who else may be running on what platform, would this not be the epitome of a black racism or black nationalism which would soon see the oppression of the white minority.

Leaders for both SNCC and SCLC and Floyd McKissick of the Congress on Racial Equality all attempted to present interpretations of black power and establish a stance with regard to violence which would alleviate the tensions. The Black Powerites including Stokely Carmichael, were accused of being irresponsible in using this term which would give rise to the anti-white and black nationalist tendencies on the part of many of the hearers. They were further attacked for comments which would encourage violence, especially on this march which had a manifesto calling for non-violence. Gradually some clarity began to emerge and decisions were made about how to handle the presentation of the issues.

The decision was that chanting of either black power or freedom would be discontinued while each group would be given equal platform time to sell its philosophy during the rallies. The former agreement was never adhered to because of the lack of discipline among the troops; it was a



decision made at the top which never got to the bottom.

In the presentations of the ideologies of the various organizations, clarity was gotten that black power did not mean black nationalism and was not anti-white, and that it was not to be identified with advocating violence. Stokely Carmichael, who does not like to be misquoted and detests being interpreted, gave the most clarity as to what SNCC meant by black power and why they had adopted this slogan. In case there is some question about it, the following is my interpretation of what was meant by black power as Stokely presented the idea to me in both group discussions and in personal conversation.

Black power is primarily political power achieved through the thorough organization of black communities, particularly where they have a majority vote eligibility, but also where they have a minority. It has several purposes. One is to enable the electorate to elect who they want elected and especially to get some black people into office. Another is to have the kind of power and pressure necessary to force those in political office to make decisions and enforce them, for the welfare of the Negro community.

In the course of developing black power an education task must be carried on which copes with the psychic problem of blackness in the minds of those who have come to conclude that this denotes inferiority, evil, etc. This is needed in both the black and white community but that message will come across when the Negro community comes to a point of control.

What is needed is power from a political base because this is the only kind of power which will move the structures. It was once thought that a moral base could be established but the deep and pervasive immorality of our society has obviously proven that to be an illusion. Those who fear black power need not fear that they will be subjected to the same racist oppression that the Negro has for the Negro has learned what a vicious thing this is and does not intend to be guilty of the same view of relationships, many of the black power advocates suggest.

The primary reason so many are offended by the idea of black power resides in their own racist mind set. Whenever men in the past talked about political power, though it was never said, it was understood that this meant white power--there was no other power to be considered. Now that an alternative appears, they are understandably threatened.

Included in the strategy for establishing black power is the decision on the part of SNCC to have only blacks working in the black community. No more Northern whites are needed. There are now enough qualified Negro organizers to carry out the task. Whites are rather needed to organize the white community, especially the poor white who stands to gain from any legislation that the poor Negro gains from and whose voice and power can help get that vote even though he does not think in terms of gaining anything



for the Negro and may only be thinking of himself.

In the hoped-for humanizing process of our culture wherein racial prejudice and discrimination may be broken down on the inter-personal level, some provision must be made for interracial exposure. Such provision in terms of the frainess who will be organizing the white and black communities will be made through SNCC if that experiment begun by SCCC is successful. But on a broader base, SNCC is not concerned with producing racial harmony along the old white liberal lines which have been pursued for decades without bringing about the revolutionary changes in the political, economic, and cultural structures which Negroes are now demanding. The old white liberal line rarely brings more than minor breakthroughs when compared with the massiveness of the problem.

The issue of blackness/whiteness must assuredly be dealt with but the more revolutionary strategy for dealing with it at the moment is through confrontation rather than conferences—black power confronting white power from a political power base rather than a moral one. Dealing with the issue of blackness in the Negro community will be done through organizing their power, registering them to vote, educating them to participate in the democratic process and thus developing the sense of dignity and integrity which comes with experiencing oneself as a responsible participant in determining his future. This should help eliminate the identity crisis along with other psychological techniques, which the Negro experiences in a white world of authority.

When his political standing and his economic security is threatened, no doubt the white man will tend to respect his opponent more; when he has to deal with him as an equal in power, he may learn something of the meaning of humanness—or so it is hoped.

At the moment it appears to SNCC that it is worth the risk of some Negroes becoming anti-white in order that masses of Negroes may overcome the problem of being anti-black.

As I write this article in the West side of Chicago where Negro gangs are roaming the streets, nightly raiding white merchants, looting, threatening and intimidating whites and police and shouting "black-power", a second issue raised on the march with regard to violence is highlighted to me. Some of the more militant speeches during the march in which ideas concerning fighting back, self-protection, and getting a little white blood were included, raised the charge that black power would only lead to violence and that indeed this was its only purpose—to stir the people to violent protest. The Deacons for Defense observe their role as a protective one in the place of adequate local and state police protection in Southern states such as Louisiana where they began, and in Mississippi where marchers were attacked in Philadelphia by hecklers and police moved slowly and reluctantly to prevent physical harassment.



There are a few recorded instances of the Deacons' carrying out their philosophy and many more unrecorded. But their effectiveness is doubtful in the face of forces like those at Canton. The issue of violence and non-violence goes beyond self-defense however and is more concerned with aggression, particularly in large metropolitan centers. The question of success in hand-to-hand combat is already answered. It is impossible to envision victory. The white power structure has all the weapons and all the troops--the local police, the state troopers, the state militia and finally the federal troops--to quell any kind of violent protest of an overt nature.

Another kind of violence may be quite effective, however, if violence is to be pursued. In a discussion between Rev. James Lawson of Memphis, Tennessee, and some of the militants during a meeting the second night in Canton, some suggestions were raised concerning a constructive kind of violence adopting the gorilla warfare tactics, but not for the sake of killing.

The following are my ideas which are both adopted from that discussion and added to from other conversations:

An example of guerilla violence might be to select a Mississippi town and plan a thorough and fast raid on all the store owners about 2:00 a.m. This would produce a massive economic burden on the town if practically all merchandise was destroyed some Sunday morning. The follow-up could be in the form of demands which should be met in many cities to prevent the recurrence of such an episode in other towns. One town would serve as a model. If that did not work, other models might be set up.

As an alternative to such methods of violence, it has been offered that non-violence has not plumbed the depths of possibilities yet. The issue is that non-violence as a method of pricking the consciences of the oppressors has failed to prick their consciences, almost as if they had a super-ego which had no concept of respect for life and property of the oppressed. If one cannot get the conscience, then get the pocket-book and get at the reason and logic of the oppressors who operate only out of self-interest. It seems that the alternatives will lie between new forms of non-violence or economically destructive violence.

Along the non-violence line, what if massive traffic tie-ups were carried out in every major city in the United States, drive-ins on airports, effective blocking of public transportation systems, massive factory walkouts in an entire city not just for pay-hikes but for better job positions.

To accomplish such feats would necessitate massive organization and discipline whereas small commando units could accomplish the violent tactics. In terms of the press of time, sheer logic leans in favor of economic violence as overagainst the long-term process necessary for non-violence. Such is the goal of many riots but riots are seldom well planned although many believe that this trend is changing.



If economic violence is to be carried out in major cities it must be carried out on the main streets, Madison and Michigan Avenues, not in the slums. It should not be carried out in the form of looting, but in such a way as to leave the worthless, useless goods on the hands of the owners. Economic violence may include sabotage of power sources which would cripple entire cities, sabotage of public transportation systems, and other such tactics which would cause great economic inconvenience to the white power structure.

It should be clear that such activities be carried out in conjunction with overall plans for particular demands to be met and how those demands are to be met. Such activities carried out in a reactionary fashion, in hatred and bitterness will probably accomplish little.

A final issue which I would particularly be concerned with is the issue of discipline. No revolution has ever been successful without discipline. Some of the civil rights organizations are beginning to realize this but are doing little about it. SCLC staff are beginning to talk about discipline but they must come a long way to perfect it.

SNCC and SCLC both seem to have captured the awareness of the need for common cause and for planning for their troops. Without a disciplined task force to carry these plans out; however, success is doubtful. Besides this, the plans are usually incomplete and too much developed from the top down instead of doing the very thing in the revolution that it is supposed to accomplish--involve the people in the decision making process. However, once the decision is reached, discipline is necessary in both training for and carrying out the tactics.