

WHAT WOULD IT PROFIT A MAN TO HAVE THE VOTE
AND
NOT BE ABLE TO CONTROL IT?

For many years Negroes, in the black belt of Alabama, have been the victims of a vicious system of political, economic and social exclusion. Political exclusion is maintained in many ways - the denial of Negroes of the right to vote, service on juries, access to any political office of the white office holders, and naked brutality whether acting under color of law or just a plain white sheet. Economically, Negroes in the rural black belt have been the prime source of cheap hard labor. They worked the large cotton holdings in Alabama, hoeing, weeding, planting, picking for \$3 a day, if they were lucky. If they were tenants or sharecroppers they worked under verbal contracts which were designed to always leave the black man in the red. Socially, the Negro in the black belt of Alabama always had to leave some of himself outside when talking to whites, for he knew that to become "uppity" was to court death. The above history could be continued ad infinitum for Alabama only represents a minor reflection of the history of the blackman in the United States.

The history of the Negro in the United States, while being a chronicle of victimization, has also been a history of struggle. The latest struggle being the brutalization that Negroes, especially in the black belt of Alabama, received to pass the Voting Rights Bill, a right already guaranteed by the 15th Amendment of the United States Constitution.

Since 1961 Negroes in the South have been encouraged to register and vote. They were encouraged by good citizens, civil rights groups and the United States government. Negroes were told that they should risk life and limb so that when they get

the right to vote they would be able to throw off the shackles that previously held them bound. Many poor blacks in the rural and urban areas felt that if they would register to vote and exercise that right they could do something about poor education, unpaved roads, sheriff brutality, the economic and political intimidation, the everyday social injustices, and, the whites might even stop calling them "boy."

It even became fashionable in many areas to stand up for the right to vote for "qualified" Negroes who had been disenfranchised. After much pressure by the white community and many thousand gone in the black belt communities, the Congress of the United States passed the Voting Rights Act of 1965, as a result.

A few Federal registrars were sent to the South, and many Negroes across the black belt, turned out to register and vote (to become first-class citizens, to exercise their right to the franchise, and to participate in the American dream.) Many asked, "Now that the Negro has the right to vote, could he desire anything else?" Others asked, "What would it profit a man to have the vote and not be able to control it?"

What would it mean for a poor Negro in the black belt to say, "I have the vote and now I can vote Democrat or Republican"?

"How can my vote be used to get the things I risked life and limb to gain?"

If we look at the political situation of the Negro as it has developed as a result of protest many whites are willing to accept Negroes. But they are willing only to accept Negroes who are considered "qualified" by them. That is to say, Negroes who are of good education and middle-class economic background. What has developed and is developing in the South is what is known

is bi-racial politics. Whereas before only whites dominated the political scene, today bi-racial politics intends to gather moderate whites and middle-class Negroes to define the art of the possible -- politics. To many in this country, this integrated image is considered good development, however if we look at the reality, this is a cruel joke.

Let us look at two communities in the North where, as in the black belt, Negroes are in a high concentration, live in poverty, are excluded from the society, and have been promised participation in the American dream (in the South by voting and in the North by definition of its being north). In New York "Image Negroes" are put up to be borough president, to serve in many committees, judgeships and on many visible and high positions. After the appointment of Negroes to high places many sit back and admire the progress "they", the included, have accomplished. They say, "What could 'you people' possibly want?" In Watts is the S.O.S. (same old song). And the Negroes riot.

The fact of the matter is the Negroes, North and South, are not only black but more importantly, at this stage of the game, poor. They riot because in many instances this is the only political expression left open to them. The tragedy is that when Negroes riot they are politically seen but not heard. So the story of the plot often remains the same. And they are continually excluded.

The question that faces those who work and live in the South is can the pointed exclusion and fruitless striking out be avoided?

Are there any new forms that can be developed to give the poor black a chance to make decisions and control his own

political life?

It is now time for the protest movement to enter the realms of politics. And by protest movement, we don't mean the narrow definition that is given to CORE, SNCC, SCLC, and other such groups. The energy for this political thrust has to come from the victims of this country's political exclusion. It now becomes necessary to develop a political environment where the organization and organizational participation of people becomes more important than the politicians' platform. As it now stands, politics is defined as the art of the possible, inclusive of few, exclusive of many. The right of people to make decisions about their own lives is the most fundamental right that a member of a democratic society can have. And this is the perspective from which the concept of freedom organizations evolved. The Lowndes County Freedom Organization, alias the Black Panther Party, attempts to be such a group.

Lowndes County has a population, according to the 1960 Census, of 15,417 people. Of these 12,425 are Negro, or 81% of the total county population. Previous to March 1965 no Negroes in that county were able to register to vote. After the passage of the Civil Rights Bill 2,000 Negroes were registered to vote under the Federal registrar. However, the whites having only 1,900 eligible voters have 2,500 eligible voters in the books, or over 130% registration.

Most of the Negro families in Lowndes County make less than \$1000 a year. Most of them are engaged in sharecropping and tenant farming. The median school years completed by Negroes, again according to the 1960 Census, is 5.1 years.

Negroes in Lowndes County have all the elements of deprivation associated with being a poor black.

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In an attempt to satisfy their needs - involving education, decent law enforcement, paved roads, decent housing, good medical facilities, and all things that they hope for them and their posterity - they looked to the county court house. The question was how to get people into the political offices that control the court house who would be responsive to their needs.

The Republican Party is non-existent; the Democrats, although officially removing their motto of white supremacy from the rooster, made no other changes in their long standing policy of racism. In fact, the Chairman of the Lowndes County Democratic Executive Committee, Dickson, announced that the qualification fee for the Democratic primaries would be raised 900% from \$50 to \$500 for the offices of sheriff, tax assessor, tax collector and from \$10 to \$100 for the offices on the board of education. The Chairman of this Democratic Executive Committee is a defendant in a federal court suit seeking an injunction preventing Lowndes County landlords from evicting Negro tenants for registering to vote.

Although Negroes are the numerical majority in Lowndes County, the Democratic party only provides them with white candidates who will adhere to a policy of less racism. The Negroes of Lowndes County want a political grouping that is controlled by them. They want a political grouping that is responsive to the needs of the poor, not necessarily the black people, but those who are illiterate, those who have poor educations, those of low income, that is to say, those who are unqualified in this society. To do this they had to form a group on the county level, that represented their own interests.

It is going to attempt to go into areas where no one has bothered to go before, and to talk to people who up until now have not been considered worthwhile to deal with or represent.

And the idea wants to be made real and take shape in the form of control of the court house, so that they will be the distributors of any state and federal resources, and taxers of any industry in their county (for example Dan River Mills in Lowndes), the determiners of the quality of education and the money spent for county schools. If they can put this program into action, a program sympathetic to the needs of the poor, tremendous amounts of state or even Federal Money can be unleashed for use in construction of houses, roads, etc.

There has been some criticism of the concept of the freedom organization. First, that it will split the Negro vote. Yet, this vote will always be split if Negroes vote in their own economic and political interests. In the past poor Negroes have always formed the base of a pyramid on which those who are qualified were able to gain all the advantages of the Negro vote. Freedom organizations hope to destroy this practice.

The second criticism is that the freedom organization, because of the Black Panther as a symbol, and because the majority of the grouping is Negro, is said to be Black Nationalist. The only symbolic importance of the panther, is its determination to be powerful and aggressive. The major emphasis is to bring to the poor and excluded, political power on the county level, the color of skin is incidental. To the extent that blackness is seen as a problem is one of the manifestations of a segregated and racist society.

There are those who say that these people are illiterate, uneducated, barbaric, and ill-equipped to run a government. We say that those people know their needs and too long have they been ignored. If they cannot find political expression in what is considered a legitimate process, they will express themselves "illegitimately".