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# A Conference on the Sit-Ins

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Ted Dienstfrey / June 1, 1960

It is with a desire to do *something* that many Northern white college students look at the sit-in movement of their Southern Negro counterparts. (Some of us, seeing newspaper pictures of rioting Mexican and Japanese students, have envied them and their activity.) That the Northern response has been almost unanimously favorable is no surprise: of all the current social and political issues—the cold war, disarmament, the draft, planned obsolescence, the double standard—integration is the only one which does not have to be discussed. We all agree that segregation must end; we only disagree on when it will end, on what will end it, and who is responsible for ending it.

I am a Northerner, and I attend the University of Chicago—where equality is preached in the classroom, though the University itself practices segregation in administering its real estate—and I live in an almost completely Negro neighborhood which is relatively unsafe at night if one is alone. Those of us at the University who feel that ending segregation is in part our responsibility probably use methods very similar to the methods of comparable groups in other Northern schools.

We have had our student government pass resolutions decrying the present situation, and we have sent many telegrams stating our position. Several times we have tried unsuccessfully to pressure the University into enforcing desegregation on its off-campus real estate holdings. We have circulated and signed petitions addressed to city, state, and national legislatures and executives asking them to pass and *enforce* various anti-segregation ordinances and laws. We even attempted to elect an anti-Dawson slate to the city NAACP.<sup>1</sup> And we have repeatedly tried to get the National Student Association to endorse strong and enforceable legislative measures, but, as in the United States Senate, Northern indifference joined with Southern passion to out-manuever us. (Now that the present NSA officers have given support to the sit-ins, we expect the Southern white students to protest strongly at this summer's convention.)

Most of our activity accomplishes little. We achieve none of the small victories which might encourage us to believe that we are not wasting our time. Some of us become disillusioned; others just look for something else to try. Through all such shifts, though, we seldom discuss the causes of segregation. We also have a much clearer idea of what we mean when we say we are anti-segregationists than what we mean when we say we are pro-integrationists—even though we use the words interchangeably. Nor do we discuss why we are against segregation.

In April 1959, we participated enthusiastically along with 25,000 other students in the Youth March for Integration. (Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr., in the May *Progressive*, claims that there were 40,000 in the march; 25,000 was the figure the police reported.) With the backing of the NAACP, labor unions, Reverend King, and various other notables, the students of the country were to demonstrate in Washington—to Congress, to the people, and to ourselves—that the youth wanted segregation to end *now*. But when we went to Washington, we found ourselves walking down four back streets to the rear of the Washington Monument, and listening there to an endless number of self-righteous speeches by labor leaders and Congressmen who told us what we already knew—that integration was better than segregation. The newspapers gave us only

minimal coverage, and many of us—the white Northerners, I mean—felt very little enthusiasm over attending another such event, and giving our energy and support to what seemed a kind of betrayal.

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Yet in February 1960 we began hearing about the Southern sit-in demonstrations, and by March we had set up sympathetic picket lines in front of Chicago's Woolworth stores. Our reasons for picketing were, as usual, mixed. We were picketing to demonstrate sympathetic support, to arouse Northern interest, to pressure Woolworth, to be part of the movement. Few of us thought we would go to jail. (One of my friends brought his schoolbooks to the picket line just in case.) But mixed as they were, our feelings must have been duplicated throughout the North. The spread of similar picket lines to other cities was in no way coordinated, and they seem to have been as spontaneous as the sit-ins themselves.

In the South, meanwhile, students *were* going to jail and others were being expelled from school. A few of these students began traveling to Northern colleges to ask for moral support and, if possible, financial support as well. (I do not know who underwrites these trips.) Two such emissaries came to Chicago, and they told us of a conference that was to be held on the 16th of April in Raleigh, North Carolina, for the purpose of trying to coordinate the goals and the tactics of the Southern sit-ins. One of the Southern Negro students suggested that we send observers, and so the day before the conference began, four of us decided to drive the thousand miles from Chicago to Raleigh to see for ourselves the students who had started something which had moved us all.

The conference—which was organized, so far as I know, by the Southern Christian Leadership Conference<sup>2</sup>—was held at Shaw University, a small Negro Baptist school in Raleigh. When we reached Shaw on Saturday afternoon—the conference had started the night before—we found that a hundred students had already arrived from the eleven Southern states in delegations ranging from Mississippi's single Negro representative to the inter-racial coed group of twenty from Tennessee (this was the only inter-racial group from the South). There were, in addition, about sixty students from Northern schools and the majority of them were white. When the housing director saw us, she said in a tired voice that she just hadn't expected so many people.

Yet no one, least of all ourselves, thought it strange that we had not given advance notice of our coming. We had brought sleeping bags with us and were prepared to use them. But, though most of the delegates were housed in the University's dormitories, for the four of us, the housing director found rooms in three private Negro homes.

The keynote of the conference had been given the night before by Reverend James Lawson, who, because he had led the sit-ins in Nashville, had been expelled from the Vanderbilt School of Theology. His speech was referred to several times during the day and a half we stayed in Raleigh. Apparently he had attacked middle-class complacency, concerned lest the students' middle-class attitudes would prevent them from going to jail or getting expelled from school or doing anything else that was necessary. He had also urged the students to develop their own philosophy and ideology.

In the meetings that I attended, Lawson kept insisting that the form and structure of the movement should follow the beliefs of the members. Though students chaired these meetings, Lawson sat on the stage and was consulted whenever a problem arose. I assumed that he was responsible for the main orientation of the

conference: an attempt to decide whether non-violence was basic to the movement as a principle or as a tactic. Lawson himself indicated that he wanted the group to endorse non-violence as a *principle* and to work out the implications of such an endorsement. But as far as I could tell, the majority of the Southern students had merely absorbed the rhetoric of non-violence and had considered only its strategic importance. Few, for example, seem to have considered becoming conscientious objectors. For most, non-violence was the most effective tool to end segregation.

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At the first session of the conference that afternoon, we broke up into small groups for discussion. Committee One, “Non-violence Speaks as a Movement,” was to be attended by the heads of the various delegations. The other delegates were assigned more or less at random to seven remaining groups: “Non-violence and the College Administration,” “Techniques of Non-violence,” “Inter-racial Trust,” “Nonviolence and Financial Problems,” “Preparations for Non-violence,” “Jail vs. Bail,” and “Strategy of Non-violence.” Lawson, who did the assigning and probably chose the topics, explained that the areas overlapped and that therefore we should go to the committee to which we were assigned.

Each group met with a student leader and an adult advisor. Lawson was advisor to the first committee, the one I attended. Its chairman announced that we must decide on the “goals, philosophy, future, and structure of the movement.” Lawson suggested—and justified—a reversal of the first two terms of the list: “*philosophy, goals, future, and structure.*” That is, we were told once more to discuss first the “philosophy” of non-violence and then the “goal” of integration.

After preliminary attempts to define “non-violence,” one student claimed that since non-violence was based on our common Christian beliefs, we all understood what it meant. I pointed out that most of the advocates of non-violence I knew in Chicago were agnostics or atheists.

Gandhi and Thoreau were invoked, and the discussion continued. But the group still could not come up with an acceptable definition. The chairman, who wanted to “get something done,” kept trying to force an agreement. Several times she asked “Jim” to give us his ideas. He replied that we had to solve the problem ourselves. In desperation, the chairman finally appointed a subcommittee which, with Reverend Lawson, was to work out a definition.

The discussion then turned to “goals.” To the surprise of most of the students, definition here was just as difficult. It is, after all, hard to explain the relation between a hot dog at Woolworth’s and human dignity. Perhaps such an explanation is unimportant, but a major point of the entire conference, and the point of our particular committee, was to try and arrive at one.

But more than one student said that the talk was “getting us nowhere.” Deeds were what they wanted, not words. And in fact, some of the students were so unconcerned with the talk of the conference that they left the meetings to picket.

When, sometime later, I asked a Shaw student how the sit-in movement started, he could name dates and individuals but could give no reason as to why this year and not last. I asked him how he had spent all his time last year—the time, I explained, he now spends in the movement. Again he had no answer; my questions, in fact, seemed strange to him. I asked him what he thought about non-violence. He was for it. For

South African Negroes too? I asked. He had thought about that, he said, but could not come to any decisions, for it didn't seem natural not to fight back when people were shooting at you.

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In the late afternoon all the delegates held a general meeting with Reverend King. He said that he had nothing special to say to us now, but as practice for his appearance on *Meet the Press* the next day, he would prefer to answer questions. The students asked for and received reassurance that their movement was a good one. At another point, King praised the movement's spontaneity, but he went on to say that by now it had become so large that it needed to define itself, it needed an organization.

King spoke at a mass meeting later in the evening. It was held in an auditorium large enough for 3,000 people, and was approximately two-thirds full. The only white members of the audience were the Northern student delegates and about a half-dozen reporters. On the stage sat the potentates of the Southern Negro community: ministers, morticians, teachers, and businessmen. There were no union men.

The program was long and interwoven with badly sung spirituals. Someone made a short impassioned speech about getting out to register and vote. A Negro teacher who had filed for Congress said a few words: for him there was only one issue, racial representation in Congress. We were asked for an "offering," and in an attempt to imitate South Africans coming forward to burn their pass books, we were asked to walk forward to give our contributions instead of dropping them into a plate. Needless to say, there was great confusion.

The long-awaited King speech finally came. As I listened, I kept comparing the King of today, attempting to retain leadership of spontaneous youth demonstrations, with the King I had heard in Chicago in the spring of 1958—the King who was the acknowledged leader of the Montgomery bus boycott. He had been more impressive in Chicago. Perhaps he was tired now, perhaps the audience did not respond adequately. In Chicago the audience had been half Negro, half white; and as King's speech moved swiftly from quoting the Greek classics to a chanting Baptist crescendo, the Negroes in the audience rhythmically interjected "amens," while the whites sedately interjected applause. At Raleigh the almost all-Negro audience mainly applauded.

King did not deliver a factual speech—either about the sit-ins or about the Alabama state government's current suit against him. In some sense, he gave an apologetic talk which defended Negro rights and encouraged the attempts to secure them. "We no longer want to eat pigs' ears and pigs' feet," he said. The audience responded to this simple statement in a manner which clearly indicated that not so long ago pigs' ears and pigs' feet had been a major part of their normal diet.<sup>3</sup> But most of the audience was now dressed in a way that pointed to the affluence of at least sometime beef eaters.

King kept using the same phrases he had used two years before in Chicago: "We have no hate for the white man," "We must love our enemy," "We are doing this for all America." If I had heard them twice, how many times must King have heard himself repeat them? And without the emotion of the Chicago speech, their meaning seemed to me unclear.

King had trouble with his hands throughout the speech. He buttoned his three-button suit, put his hands in his front pockets, moved them to his jacket pockets, unbuttoned the jacket, put his hands behind his back, almost raised them to make a point dramatic, but half-way up he let them fall. When he finished there seemed to be neither extreme approval nor disapproval. Everyone left the auditorium satisfied.

I got the impression that King needed rest, but simply did not have the time for it. Perhaps his remark to the students in the afternoon—about the need for organization—was his way of commenting on the enormous amount of work he had done and was continuing to do. This interpretation seemed to me more reasonable than assuming that King had in the back of his mind definite and clear objectives that were to be gained through such an organization.

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The only heated discussion of the entire meeting came on Sunday: were Northerners to be represented on the temporary planning committee of the not yet established organization? Lawson and the other leaders felt that whatever ideology and/or momentum the group now had would be dissipated by Northern intervention. But to the Northerners and to many Southern participants, such “second class membership” was unacceptable. A compromise set up a de facto all-Southern planning committee which Northerners could *earn* the right to join by participating in non-violent demonstrations against segregation in the North. Sympathetic Woolworth picketing did not count as such a demonstration. The compromise seemed satisfactory to almost everyone; a few Boston students thought they might have been gypped, but they were not sure.

The various delegations began leaving after lunch; those which remained met once again to close the conference formally. One Negro from Virginia said that he felt the conference had not accomplished anything, and that he was extremely disappointed. But a majority of the group disagreed; they felt that a spirit had been created. An elderly Quaker woman told us that we had done more than most of the very many conferences she had attended. One of the original sit-in students from North Carolina said that he was satisfied.

Before we left Raleigh, the families with which we had stayed provided us with an embarrassingly large amount of food for our drive back to Chicago. Their hospitality was much beyond our expectation, and only after a while could we think of a possible explanation. Southern Negroes probably give their friends such large amounts of food for traveling because most of them would not be served at Southern restaurants.

What did the weekend mean? That with or without the help of Northern students, the South is changing. Soon Negroes will be able to eat at most restaurants, and their friends will not have to pack big lunches for traveling. And schools will be integrated, and the Negro will vote. All this will change, but—and this is what no one at the Southern conference wanted to discuss—very much in American society will not change.

As for non-violence, what can it accomplish? Gandhi is often called the spiritual leader of this movement, so it is well to look at Gandhi’s accomplishments. India is no longer under British rule, and it achieved its freedom through non-violence. But Gandhi was incapable of stopping the Hindu-Moslem massacres. Nor was he able to have much effect on India’s variety of the race problem, the untouchables.

The young Southern Negro today is understandably having one of the best times of his life in the process of fighting for his rights. For once he is participating in a meaningful action. King had told us how glad he was to be alive at this moment in history. He also told us that he doesn’t need Khrushchev to inform him that he has an iron heel on his neck. He knows this by himself, as do all the Southern Negroes who have created and sustained their movement of non-violent direct action. But I am not so sure they know that as the movement progresses and achieves its goal, they are trading the localized and identifiable pressure of that heel on the neck for all those more general and more amorphous conflicts we all face.

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<sup>1</sup> Congressman William Dawson is the leading Negro politician in Chicago. If Reverend Adam Clayton Powell is at one end of a continuum of "verbal militancy," William Dawson is at the other.

<sup>2</sup> The SCLU, whose president is Martin Luther King, Jr., was founded to work toward extending the franchise among Negro voters.

<sup>3</sup> The only joke I heard in Raleigh was told to me by a Negro following King's speech. A Negro goes into a restaurant and asks for "pigs' feet." "Don't serve them," the counterman answers. "Chitterlings then." "Don't serve them." "Pigs' necks?" "Don't serve them." "Pigs' ears?" "Don't serve them." "White man," the Negro says, "you just ain't ready for integration."