Difficult to Organize the Poorest and the Wealthiest Among Negroes

By John Perdew

In case you should wish to introduce this article you should know that I am 21, a student on leave from Harvard College, a field worker with SNCC. I've spent five months in southwest Georgia, partly in Albany and partly in Americus. I spent 20 days (June 19-July 9) in jail in Albany on charges of disorderly conduct, defacing public property, resisting arrest, and with intent to murder. I was released on $1900 bond (cash). I spent 85 days (August 8-Nov. 1) in Sumter County jail on charges of inciting to insurrection, interfering with a lawful arrest, rioting, unlawful assembly, and assault with intent to murder (state charges) and resisting arrest and disorderly conduct (city charges). I was released by order of a three-judge panel of federal judges on $2100 bond, which declared the insurrection and unlawful assembly statutes unconstitutional and all eight peace warrants lodged against me invalid. The court is in recess and will convene again after Dec. 1 to decide whether to issue an injunction restraining local officials from depriving people of their civil rights under color of law.

Participants in the civil rights movement today are not given to utopianism, but a theme which lies behind picket lines, mass demonstrations, and arrests is the attempt of American blacks to feel the pain of oppression which they have so long suppressed and find the strength to overcome it.

This became painfully apparent to me during my three month stay in the Sumter County Jail in Americus, Georgia, on charges of inciting to insurrection. One of the black prisoners there, a man in his forties, could not stop calling me "sir", even after I tried for several weeks to break his habit. For him the pain of communicating with me, a white, was so great that he avoided me as much as possible even though he knew I was in jail because of civil rights work. The way to relationships of mutual respect between white and black is blocked by deep counter currents in the personalities of, I would say, the majority of Southern blacks.

Still Jim Crow Despite ICC

Surface events in the racial struggle mean little until one can understand why, in Albany, Georgia, in spite of an ICC ruling which ended segregation in the bus terminal there, few blacks use the formerly "white" waiting rooms. After two years of mass demonstrations, boycotts, and voter registration, Albany blacks have little to show for their suffering in official desegregation, and the balance weighs heavily against even casual integration. The scale of success, however, is the people's state of mind, and there are at least several hundred blacks in the city who can now face a white man without the need to feel servile. These are the ones who have faced beatings, jail and the wrath of the white man with aggressive non-violence and have experienced at least temporary unity in the long-divided Negro community.

There is at least one basic institution through which Southern blacks (I use "black" rather than "colored", which is the euphemistic word attached to segregated facilities) attempt to release and rectify the frustrations which result from inferior status. Country churches in particular have evolved a "language" of music and preaching and patterns of intense emotional possession which are baffling and embarrassing to whites used to more formal and "rational" means of religious expression. The elaborate, shifting chords and embellishments of a "common meter" hymn; the rising cadence of the black in the pulpit singing the Word; the shouts of the old bent ladies in the Amen Corner; the pleading prayers of the grimacing deacon—all are media through which, I think, the most oppressed blacks may convince themselves that their afflictions represent the road to that "great gettin'-up mornin'".

The most talented and sensitive SNCC workers enter a country church and speak in the language of black religion but with the message that suffering, while a source of strength, is dehumanizing, that retreat only intensifies it. Black churches, for this reason and for convenience, become the site of mass meetings, the most regular feature of the Movement, and old hymns carry new words, themes such as "We shall not be moved", "We shall overcome", "This little light of mine, I'm gonna let it shine".

A totally different reaction to segregation consists entirely in an attempt to be "white". Students at Negro colleges in the South, many teachers at all levels, some ministers with relatively wealthy congregations, and aspiring politicians and professionals deny their "roots" in black culture. Straightened hair, a flashy car, esoteric cultural tastes and formal, restrained church services become symbols of the escape. The result, in terms of the Movement, is that many, though certainly not all, of the upper classes in the Negro community will not actively identify themselves with the Movement.

In canvassing for voter registration I have found the most response from people in the middle ranges on the Negro income scale. The very poor are frequently afraid of me as a white (sometimes they will not answer the door, other times they will agree to everything the canvasser says in order to get rid of him). Or they are realistically or irrationally afraid that they will suffer eviction, firing, or even "legal" or physical intimidation. Ignorance and apathy as well obscure the connections in their minds between their personal failure to register and the fact that from top to bottom the "government is a white man". At the upper end of the scale, businessmen are threatened with white boycott, revocation of licenses, litigation, and property damage if they take an uncompromising public stand for black interests. Teachers, ideally a powerful force, usually in my experience succumb to subtle pressures from principals and the school board, much as teachers all over the nation willingly or not steer away from "controversial issues". All of these pressures reinforce the tendency to disavow "black roots" in a drive for respectability.

Only the most confident and aggressive leader can counteract the forces which maintain the status quo, for on the level

(Continued on Page Six)
... Washington Evasive and FBI Often Unsympathetic to Brutality Charges

(Continued from Page Three)

of personal contacts all but the most militant need a lot of
pushing to rise out of short-term thinking and passivism. It
is clear that youth are the most active leaders and followers
in this Movement, but the most charismatic leaders are often
defeated by their heroic image when, for example, their awed
followers ask for autographs and lavish praise rather than
risking jail and violence. An everyday principle in SNCC
work is: balance between the hardest demands of a militant
movement and the compromise necessary to maintain enthusi-
as and communication.

Despite endless condemnation of the effects of white domi-
nation in propaganda, a basic submission to authority some-
times emerges in the strangest places. A southwest Georgia
police chief once entered a mass meeting wearing his gun
and was greeted not with a mass exit or cold silence but with
uncertain applause. A skillful law officer can blunt the edge
of the strongest leadership. Journalists, ministers, parents,
and teachers can apply similar pressures in creating an aura of
conventionalism — in phrases describing the "well-dressed,
middle-class" Movement—which obscure the originality and
depth of change. Paternalism as well undermines resentment
and determination by a superficially friendly atmosphere.

The Whites, Too, Are Fearful

I think it can be argued that segregation both feeds on and
spawns mutual fear between black and white and that this
fear interacts with clear economic pressures. If violence may
be said to indicate fear in the aggressor, then it becomes clear
why it is in the blackest counties and towns of the South that
lynchings and beatings are the commonest. One Georgia
sheriff revealed his fear of a black SNCC worker when he
forgot to lock him up after a conference with lawyers outside
the cell block. Another sheriff once caned a SNCC lawyer
who came to his jail to see about a white SNCC worker
whom the sheriff had ordered beaten by prisoners. The most
rabid segregationist propaganda reveals a fear of sexual and
cultural pollution.

But the unbelievable intimidation which official and private
whites wreak on "uppity niggers" would be impossible to
perpetuate without economic support and incentive. The
white employers and businessmen rely on the local monopo-
lies which protect them from retaliation. If they antagonize
the black population by kicking a customer or firing a black
worker, they still in most cases run the area's only grocery or
furnish the only source of employment. Only a well-orga-
nized and timely boycott can restrain the white who is driven
to such behavior. And only massive voter registration and
organization can restrain local politicians and law officers
from arbitrary intimidation.

Strategy then is complicated when it is unclear whether
depth prejudice and fear or expediency are driving a specific
aggressor. In any case "justice" in the Black Belt can be
accurately symbolized by the token prosecution of the Bir-
mingham bombers and the threat of execution levied against
me and three other civil rights workers in Americus, Georgia.

Will the Movement for racial equality turn to violent
tactics, and if it did would this tactic achieve the end of inte-
gration? I think the answer to both questions is "no". Or-

ganized violence will not come because the individuals cap-
able of violence in the black population are least ready for
sustained discipline. Gang leaders frequently work with
SNCC but our insistence on non-violence forces them to
choose between discipline within the Movement and violence
against each other. The end of one such leader's association
with SNCC could be placed at the time when he was
wounded in a battle with a rival black gang. If violence
were adopted as a tactic, I think, the effect of it would be to
confirm and strengthen white fears.

Where is the federal government in all of this? My con-
tact with the most active local representatives of the federal
government; agents of the FBI, has been less than enchanting.
While perhaps one third of the local agents I have met have
been fairly impartial Northerners, the others, natives of the
South, have taken statements from me with poorly disguised
skepticism and sometimes antagonism. I have also talked
with sympathetic Justice Department investigators, but their
province is generally strictly limited to the evidence related
to intimidation of prospective voters.

Official statements from Washington are usually evasive
concerning allegations of police brutality: "there is no evi-
cence", "investigations are underway (after three months!)", or "we have no authority to deal with this issue". But
SNCC has submitted hundreds of sworn affidavits specifying
cases of police brutality, and the FBI is in possession of
photographs showing bruises and welts which we suffered as a
result of official violence.

A symptom of the attitude of the federal government to-
ward civil rights is Kennedy's appointment of a judge to the
southwest Georgia district court who has consistently ren-
dered unfavorable decisions in cases involving racial issues.
His views on race relations were well-known before his ap-
pointment.

Where, then, does the Movement stand in southwest
Georgia, and where is it going? Voter registration is receiv-
ing the greatest emphasis in anticipation of the elections next
November. Albany, Georgia, saw a Black run for Mayor in
October this year. An inevitable problem is low turnout—
in this case roughly 60% of the registered Negroes, 10% of
whom apparently voted for one of the two white segrega-
tionist candidates. White reaction to the candidate was sur-
prisingly favorable, and he received a few votes in all-white
wards. Political pressure has a high potential in towns like
Americus, where almost 50% of the population is black, yet
only 10% of the eligible blacks are registered.

The history of Albany, I think, has shown that momentary
crises are not effective in bringing a change unless they are
backed by substantial and visible economic and political
power. Where once over 700 people went to jail during
demonstrations, now potentially active participation is limited
to a few tireless workers.

The Movement is reaching far greater economic sophistica-
tion in selective patronage, in a producer's co-operative for
farm owners and workers (aimed at combatting price dis-
tribution and seasonal unemployment), and possibly com-
bination with white workers in union activity. Meanwhile,
the currents of fear and pain and courage continue to clash
in the Black Belt.