There was a time, only a few years back, when the civil rights movement in the South was largely a Christian crusade and Martin Luther King its prophet. Non-violent protest was seen as a device for producing a "moral confrontation" between the races. Such a confrontation, the early leadership believed, would lead to a "crisis of conscience" in the white South, which could only end in the white supremacists' accepting their black brothers as equals (or even as moral teachers).

This "conversion strategy" failed—although not everyone perceived its failure immediately and some clerics in the movement (occasionally including King) still talk as if it could eventually work. But by the time the civil rights movement entered Mississippi in 1961, the "conversion strategy" was becoming a minority faith. The movement was going secular, and the assault on Mississippi was led by Robert Moses, a former Harvard graduate student, and the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee, not by Dr. King or the Southern Christian Leadership Conference. The movement had begun to evolve what might be called a strategy of limited coercion. The new strategy still relied heavily on non-violence and direct action, and it was supported by many who still talked about religion and morality. But the hope was no longer to win over the white supremacists to brotherly love; it was to make life so unpleasant for them that they would find compromise easier than massive resistance. Boycotts would hurt white business, demonstrations would cut into tourism. Perhaps more important, Negro protest of all kinds would provoke the white community into violent retaliation, and this would make it easier to pass federal civil rights legislation and harder for the offending community to attract Northern investors.

The "limited coercion" strategy worked fairly well in some parts of the "new" South, where the business community has become influential and a middle-class distaste for disorder and violence is pervasive. When the demonstrators forced such communities to choose between brutal repression and modest reforms, some chose reform. But Mississippi proved to be still part of the "old," unreconstructed South. Most Mississippians care more for preserving white supremacy than for profits, lawfulness or other symbols of "progress." In such a setting demonstrations were useful only to build interest among local Negroes and to show the North that the right to vote was still not honored in Mississippi. Soon after entering the state, SNCC leaders began to realize that ending white supremacy in Mississippi would ultimately require the use of force.

This was not an easy thing for people committed to non-violence to believe, nor is it easy for white Northerners to believe today. Over and over we have been told that eventually the Southern white "moderates" would speak out and take control from the "extremists," that the "younger generation" of whites would have different views from the older, that industrialization and prosperity would eventually change Mississippi's outlook, or that some other "evolutionary" force would save the day. An outsider cannot judge such matters confidently, but I can report that very few of those with whom I talked last month in Mississippi, black or white, had much faith in any of these accommodating influences. Listening to them it seemed to me that if Mississippi were left to its own devices, racial conflict would steadily increase.

The present balance between violent whites, moderate whites, and non-violent blacks did not seem to me likely to change radically this year or next. So long as young Mississippi Negroes imagine that they can better their lot in the North, there will be a safety valve of sorts, and Negro violence will probably focus on the Northern ghettos where unemployed Negro adolescents and young adults are concentrated. But in the long run this very violence may persuade many black Mississippians that there is no point in moving North. If the young Negroes despair and stay in Mississippi, and if they cannot find jobs, regular meals, or even safety from the police in Mississippi's "niggertowns," they will presumably respond eventually as Harlem has long responded. The results could then be much worse than in the North. In most Northern cities public officials depend on Negro votes for office, and have some sympathy with the "legitimate" aspirations of the "decent, law-abiding Negroes." In Mississippi, Negro voters don't count and a "decent, law-abiding Negro" is not expected to have any aspirations. Once violence begins, there is not even a common set of ideals on the basis of which a compromise can be sought.

But while white violence against Negroes will probably continue, and may evoke more sporadic counter-violence than in the past, an organized upheaval seems unlikely. Negroes in New York, like Malcolm X and Jesse Gray, talk about giving bloodshed a purpose by resorting to guerrilla tactics in Mississippi. Most Negroes on the scene know that such a venture, while appealing to some frustrated young adolescents in Mississippi's few miniature Harlems, could only end in disaster. Mississippi is not South Africa. Its black inhabitants are less numerous than its white ones, and they live on a largely white continent where outside sympathy or help would be unlikely once they started shooting. If black Mississippians were to attempt a violent attack on white supremacy, it is hard to be sure what would happen. Much would depend on the form violence took. Terrorism aimed at specific, objectionable sheriffs or businesses would be one thing; guerrilla warfare aimed at seizing power would be quite another. In the latter case the Negroes would probably end up decimated and "pacified" on "reservations," like the Indians before them. (The fate of the American Indian seldom gets the attention it deserves from black nationalists; it does not suggest that all-out violence or separatism holds much promise of success in America.)

Yet if Mississippi Negroes cannot hope to employ force successfully themselves, they can hope to play their cards cleverly enough so that the federal govern-
ment will do their job for them. The present strategy of the civil rights movement in Mississippi rests on this hope. I do not mean that civil rights leaders in Mississippi are sitting on their hands waiting for the Justice Department to take over. If anything, the reverse is the case. But it is true that the civil rights workers spend as much time, energy, and blood trying to push the Administration harder and faster as trying to push white Mississippi.

What's the Problem?

Northern whites often find this kind of pressure on Washington irritating or puzzling. They feel the Negroes got as much as they had any right to hope for in the new Civil Rights Act, and they feel that "the problem is now one for the courts." This feeling is understandable, for it is based on the notion, widely disseminated by civil rights organizations in the past, that "the problem" is primarily one of segregation and discrimination. This may be true in some places. It is not true in Mississippi, and SNCC spokesmen have been saying as much since President Kennedy (for whom they had little love) sent his proposals to Congress more than a year ago.

The fact is that the new civil rights law, even if rigorously enforced, would do little for the overwhelming majority of Mississippi Negroes. The Act is relevant largely to the Negro middle classes, a mere handful of whom are allowed to exist in Mississippi. The middle classes are the ones who can afford to eat in hitherto white restaurants and stay in hitherto white hotels. They are the ones whose children will be emotionally and intellectually prepared to profit from white middle-class teachers, and who will not have to drop out of school to work in the fields. They are the ones who will qualify for better jobs if and when discriminatory hiring is abandoned. It will mostly be they who will pass the voter registration tests if and when these are fairly administered.

The lives of most Mississippi Negroes, however, will remain unchanged, and they mostly know it. The Act does not speak either to their poverty or to their fear. Two-thirds of Mississippi's Negro families now have total income from all sources of less than $2,000. The Act will have very little effect on that statistic. Almost all Mississippi Negro families have at least one breadwinner who could be fired tomorrow for displeasing a white employer. The Act will not change that either. Almost all rural Negro families subsist on credit from local storekeepers, who can cut it off at the whim of the white community. The Act will not change that. All Negroes, urban and rural, old and young, exist on the sufferance of local law enforcement officers, from whose kindness or brutality the Act offers no real appeal. Finally, and most fundamentally, if a Mississippi Negro is to appeal, the greatest sinner would be the greatest triumph. The lives of most Mississippi Negroes, however, will remain unchanged, and they mostly know it. The Act does not speak either to their poverty or to their fear. Two-thirds of Mississippi's Negro families now have total income from all sources of less than $2,000. The Act will have very little effect on that statistic. Almost all Mississippi Negro families have at least one breadwinner who could be fired tomorrow for displeasing a white employer. The Act will not change that either. Almost all rural Negro families subsist on credit from local storekeepers, who can cut it off at the whim of the white community. The Act will not change that. All Negroes, urban and rural, old and young, exist on the sufferance of local law enforcement officers, from whose kindness or brutality the Act offers no real appeal. Finally, and most fundamentally, if a Mississippi Negro is to appeal, the greatest sinner would be the greatest triumph.

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What these young radicals are looking for is not a chance to "make it" in white America, but a chance to remake America along more egalitarian and proletarian lines. They have chosen to begin in Mississippi for many reasons. Mississippi is "the worst," which appeals to the evangelical element in SNCC - to convert the greatest sinner would be the greatest triumph. Then too, all that SNCC's workers dislike in America is written bold in Mississippi, with ambiguities and shadings eliminated. Mississippi dramatizes the problems of the American Negro better than any other place, North or South. And drama is important not only in moving white liberal opinion but in activating Negroes. At the same time, the more ideological SNCC workers are fascinated by Mississippi because to their minds it comes closer to being a "pre-revolutionary situation" than any other in America. The poor, and especially the black poor, are a larger proportion of the population than in any other state. Furthermore, the black poor are largely free from what SNCC inevitably regards as the malign influence of the black bourgeoisie. The NAACP, traditional organ of the black middle class, has provided the state with a martyr (Medgar Evers) and with the current president of the Council of Federated Organizations (COFO), a federation of all civil rights organizations in the state. Yet in day-to-day practice COFO is a mere umbrella under which SNCC veterans, and particularly Robert Moses, run the Mississippi Summer Project, the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party and other ventures.

A word is perhaps in order here about charges of Communist infiltration in SNCC and the Summer Project. There is no doubt that at the rhetorical and ideological level, SNCC has been receptive to all the left-wing clichés of the 1930's. Why not? Until very recently the "mainstream" of the American intellectual tradition has hardly even recognized the possibility that a state like Mississippi could exist in modern America. Even so, SNCC's thinking is very "American," especially in its faith that the Constitution drafted by the Founding Fathers (and revised by the Radical Republicans) means what it says and will be their salvation. To plan a revolution on the assumption that it can be carried out by the federal government, to believe that the "power structure" can be won over to your side is hardly Marxist. These young men seem to me to owe more to C. Wright Mills and the Populists and to Marx than to Lenin.
and among the volunteers working in Mississippi this
than to Marx or Lenin.

When one turns from ideology to personnel, Com-
munist influence wanes to the vanishing point. There
are a number of white people on the fringes of SNCC,
and among the volunteers working in Mississippi this
summer, who have a history of association with left-
wing causes. That any of these hangers-on or volun-
teers is actually a Communist party member I doubt.
Some are certainly verbal supporters of Castro, but few
have a good word to say for Khрушchev. Some
would undoubtedly like to use SNCC as a focus for a
radical revival in America, concerned not just with civil
rights but with other domestic and foreign issues. On
the basis of my observation, however, it seems to me
that there is fairly little danger of SNCC being “used”
by anyone white. SNCC will not conduct an anti-Com-
munist purge for public relations purposes, but nor
will it submit to outside influence. Among the Negroes
who make policy in SNCC the whole issue of “Com-
munism” is simply irrelevant. They may be radical;
they may even be dangerous; but this is because of
their own experience and dreams as Negroes in Amer-
ica, not because of anything Moscow or Havana might
have said or paid for.

What SNCC wants in Mississippi is nothing less
than a second effort at Reconstruction, backed by what-
ever federal force and funds are necessary to make the
venture successful. Desegregation would be an inevi-
table by-product. Every activity of the Summer Project
— voter registration, the freedom schools, the com-
munity centers, the study of federal programs in the state,
the effort to proselytize among poor whites — all relate
to the overriding hope of redistributing political power.

SNCC’s basic aim is now a political realignment in
the state. First, SNCC hopes the Democratic Adminis-
tration will repeal the Mississippi Democratic Party,
deprive its Congressional delegation of party privileges
(notably the party seniority which makes them commit-
tee chairmen), and refuse to distribute pork and
patronage through the present party machinery. A new
Northern-style Democratic Party would then be or-
ganized in the state, with Negroes, labor unions and
poor whites as the major shareholders. Conservative
plantation owners and industrial managers, as well as
small businessmen and die-hard segregationists, would
presumably turn to the Republican Party. The new
“liberal” Democratic Party could use its control of
federal offices and federal spending (SNCC thinking
does not seem to include the possibility that the Re-
publicans might capture Washington) to make major
social and economic changes in the state. The magni-
itude of potential federal influence is indicated by the
fact that two years ago Mississippi families each were
contributing, directly or indirectly, an average of $435
to the federal Treasury, while getting back (mostly in-
directly) more than $5,050 per family. Only a small
fraction of this $5,050 is available for social renov-
ation, but even a small fraction would make a big differ-
ence in a state where almost half the Negro families now
earn less than $2,050 a year from all sources. Through
control of federal patronage and broad appeal to the
poorer residents of the state, the new-style Democrats
might even capture state and local power — especially
if there were enough federal intervention to enable
large numbers of Negroes to vote. And if this were to
happen not only in Mississippi but elsewhere in the
South, the balance of power in Congress would shift
left, and much more generous federal help in dealing
with poverty would be forthcoming.

Their Chosen Hell

At first glance this all adds up to a very improbable
scheme. But then any scheme which holds out real hope
for Mississippi’s 900,000 black inhabitants is inherently
improbable. Probability is all on the side of despair,
and the only “rational” plan SNCC could formulate
would probably be massive emigration. But where can
Mississippi Negroes go? Most of SNCC’s top leaders
come from the cities, North and South, to which Mis-
sissippi Negroes might flee. It was their disillusion
with these places that set SNCC’s veterans on the semi-
revolutionary path which led to Mississippi. And it is
the hope that Mississippi can ultimately be raised not
just to the level of North Carolina or Maryland or New
York, but something better than any existing model,
that keeps not only the old-timers who set the tone in
SNCC but the dozens of new recruits from within
Mississippi in their chosen hell.

SNCC’s political ambitions are increasingly focussed
on the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party — an or-
ganization which usually follows American rather than
African tradition by calling itself the “Freedom Party,”
not the “MFDP.” In theory, the Freedom Party is to
become the nucleus of a new Democratic Party in Mis-
sissippi. It has already put up candidates in the Dem-
ocratic primary for the US Senate and House. These
candidates, unlike their incumbent opponents, support-
ed the national Democratic platform and the Johnson
Administration’s program. They lost. Now the Freedom
Party is sending a delegation to the Democratic Na-
tional Convention, challenging the credentials and
loyalty of the “official” Democratic delegation, and
asking to be seated instead. The challenge is based
partly on the fact that the traditional Mississippi Demo-
crats refused to give Negro voters a voice in the selec-
tion of the delegation, partly on the fact that most of
the traditional Democratic Party in Mississippi is overt-
ly or covertly backing Barry Goldwater for President.

President Johnson’s attitude toward this challenge
was uncertain at the time this was written. He is said
to have no hope of carrying the state in November.
He is mainly concerned with the effect of the Mississip-
pi fight on the November balloting in other states. He
could lose a lot of Southern support if he questioned
the legitimacy of Mississippi’s white Democrats. He
could lose Northern Negro votes by spurning Mis-
sissippi’s black Democrats. He could lose Northern
white votes if he seated the white Mississipians and
if the thousands of Negro demonstrators expected in
Atlantic City rioted.

Whatever happens in Atlantic City, the Freedom
Party’s long-term prospects depend on creating a black-
white coalition within Mississippi which can win state
and local elections. The difficulty is that so long as
Negroes remain a tiny minority among registered
voters, no white group has any incentive to negotiate
with the Freedom Party. Today its support would be
a liability, not an asset.

The only way to make a coalition viable would be
to increase substantially the number of Negroes regis-
tered to vote. In 1960 Negroes made up 42 percent of
Mississippi’s inhabitants; if they also constituted 42
percent of the electorate, enough of Mississippi’s white
voters could probably be lured to some compromise
candidate for him to win statewide office. This would
certainly be true if the candidate had been promised a
voice in distributing federal largesse within the state.
In many counties Negroes are an absolute majority,
and no such coalition would be needed.

In order to make Negroes anything like 42 percent
of the electorate, however, major changes would have
to be made in Mississippi’s present voting laws. The
present laws require, for example, that would-be voters
answer, to the satisfaction of white supremacists, ques-
accepted the invitation eagerly. The Justice

crimination by local registrars. Most registrars have

obtained it. Even if such an injunction were issued (and

tions about the meaning of the stale constitution and

tively

literate Negroes would still be reluctant to apply. Black

there is a good chance that it eventually

voters would probably not exceed

that state's white voters in order to capture

statewide office. At present it is hard to imagine a

candidate who could both win support from Negro

Negroes, and if the Justice Department were

more eager to prosecute, perhaps Negro registration

This is true because, although there are more Negroes

combined effect of rural mechanization and employment

of sixth grade establishes a

Courage it where possible. As a result, Negroes

But less than half Mississippi's adult Negroes meet this

standard, for they began working in the fields when

Harlem has, should they at long last strike back at

waivers to a fifth of the electorate. If Washington made

the proportion can be expected to drop to

More important, even a "color-blind" literacy test

sharply reduces the proportion of Negroes in the

electorate. The new Civil Rights Act says that completion

of sixth grade establishes a "presumption" of literacy.

But less than half Mississippi's adult Negroes meet this

standard, for they began working in the fields when

they were ten or eleven. If Mississippi confined voting

to those who had completed the sixth grade or passed

some equivalent test Negroes would constitute only 20

percent of the eligible voters. There is not a single

county in which a majority of the elementary school

graduates is black. Since today's young Negroes are

getting a better education than their parents, one

might expect their potential weight in the educated

electorate to rise over the years. But it probably won't,

because Mississippi's brighter and better educated Ne-

gro youngsters keep moving to Memphis or points

North. Negroes today constitute almost exactly the

same percentage of the elementary school graduates

living in the state as their parents did in 1940. The only

way to raise the proportion of black voters much above

20 percent in the foreseeable future would be for Con-

gress to establish a huge adult literacy program. And

for such a program to reach the mass of Mississippi

Negroes, it would have to be administered directly from

Washington, rather than working through state or local

authorities. Yet direct federal control goes very much

against the Congressional temper and is hardly likely.

(It is of course also conceivable, though hardly prob-

able, that a Constitutional Amendment might bar

literacy tests for voting or that the Supreme Court

might ban them on the ground that they violate the

"equal protection" clause.)

Task for a Coalition

The probability is, however, that Negroes will not

soon constitute more than a fifth of Mississippi's voters.

Politically, this means that a liberal Democratic

coalition would have to win the allegiance of about 40

percent of the state's white voters in order to capture

statewide office. At present it is hard to imagine a

candidate who could both win support from Negro

voters and from 40 percent of the whites. J. P. Cole-

man, for example, got about 40 percent of the white

vote in last year's gubernatorial primary, but he would

probably have lost some of this support if he had had

"official" Negro support and had made compromises

on white supremacy to rally the Negro vote. Still, times

change and politicians seldom remain permanently hos-

tile to a fifth of the electorate. If Washington made

a more energetic effort to get literate Negroes registered

and if the White House were to make it clear that fed-

eral "goodies" would only be distributed through a

local party that included Negroes, perhaps Mississippi's

politics would gradually become like Tennessee's. But

President Johnson has shown little sign yet of moving

in this direction.

Today most Mississippi Negroes still seem to believe

in the American dream, if not for themselves then for

their children. (At bottom, this goes for most SNCC

workers too.) Should they stop believing, as much of

Harlem has, should they at long last strike back at

white Mississippi, Northern support for their cause

would be reduced to a whisper. If the military were to

be used at that point it would be for repressors, not

reconstruction. The only obvious way to avoid such a

talent disaster is to give Mississippi Negroes a

major voice in their own destinies before they despair,

making them part of the Mississippi "power struc-

ture." Only the federal government has the power to

do this; certainly white Mississippians will not do it

voluntarily.

What would make the federal government move de-

cisively in time? Only killings, I fear. The Neshoba

County tragedy was a beginning, but its effects lasted

only a few weeks. It will probably take repeated and

dramatic white violence against Negroes to elicit the

necessary federal action. Such violence can hardly be

welcomed, but it could at least have therapeutic con-

sequences. If the present situation is simply allowed to

deteriorate, and if large-scale black violence against

whites eventually begins, it is hard to see how the

circle of fear, violence and repression will ever be

broken.

SUPPORT SNCC NOW

THE WORK IN MISSISSIPPI MUST CONTINUE.

Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee

6 Raymond Street, N.W.

Atlanta, Georgia 30314

Enclosed is my contribution of $...

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