



SNCC

Charts a Course

An interview with

Stokely Carmichael, Chairman,

Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee

by

National Guardian reporter

William A. Price

In May of 1966 at a meeting near Nashville, Tenn., the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee outlined its directions and goals and elected as its new chairman, 24-year-old Stokely Carmichael who has worked in Mississippi, as well as in Lowndes County, Ala. where he and other SNCC workers organized the Lowndes County Freedom Organization, the "Black Panther" Party. Carmichael was born in Trinidad, moved to Harlem when he was 11, is a graduate of Howard University. The interview with Price was taped in New York.

PRICE: Mr. Carmichael, your recent election has been variously described as a "coup," as an insurgent move by SNCC to go it alone in the South and as an extra militant move which may separate it from other civil rights organizations. Could you describe what you feel happened at Nashville at the time of your election?

CARMICHAEL: I just think it means an intensification of our programs in terms of the political arena. For the six years we've been in business we've always had mock power, we've had mock elections, mock votes, mock freedom. This is the first year that we've had real power. And that's reflected in the Lowndes County Freedom Organization. What the [SNCC] staff was doing was [asking] how do you deal with this real power?

For example in Mississippi we had several mock elections, mock votes which were just pressure tactics to demonstrate to the country that black people weren't really apathetic, that black people really wanted the right to vote. We finally got real power in 1966 in Alabama in terms of being able to vote and to form political parties.

Q. By mock power, do you mean the freedom elections of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party?

A. Right, we had mock elections which we never could have won. But the idea was to get Negroes to start thinking politically.

Q. Are there lessons you have learned from the MFDP?

A. We certainly have. We learned number one, that the national Democratic Party

doesn't care about justice or equality, they just care about power. We went to them, the Freedom Democratic Party, and said: "Now here we are. We've organized in the state. We haven't shot anybody. We haven't lynched anybody who's tried to vote. We support your platform. We're willing to sign the loyalty oath. And we support your candidates, Johnson and Humphrey." The white Democratic Party [of Mississippi] came to them and said: "We don't support your candidates; if Negroes try to vote, we're going to shoot and kill them, we don't support your platform and we ain't going to sign your loyalty oath." And we said: "Now, which one will you seat?" And they said: "We have to seat those white guys, but we'll let two of you go with them so you can become like them." And we said we didn't want any part of that. No one in the country understood that.

Comment on SNCC Election

Q. I'd like to read two comments about your election and about SNCC since your election. [Columnists] Evans and Novak in the Washington Post May 25 described you as the voice of "the extreme black racists." And the New York Courier, which is the New York edition of the Pittsburgh Courier, a Negro newspaper, describes the SNCC program as a "juvenile, crackpot, 'go-it-alone' strategy."

A. That's absolutely absurd. If people wanted to be serious, they would look at the Alabama primary on May 3. They would realize that there are no white moderates in Alabama. That state voted wholeheartedly for Wallace.

If there are to be any white moderates, and if there's to be any coalition, then people have to go into the white community and develop that base.

What we are saying to the white workers in SNCC is that you have to get into that community and organize that base. So that when we talk about coalitions, we will have somebody we can have coalitions with. Not the George Wallaces and not the "Dixies" in the South.

Q. You talk about the white workers within SNCC—this has also been described as a "purge" [by SNCC] of white workers, and a "de-emphasis" of the role of white workers within SNCC.

A. That's not true. We want the white workers to go into the white communities and start developing those moderate bases that people talk about that do not now exist. If they don't do that, when the same thing that happened in Alabama on May 3 will happen again and again and again.

Q. How many counties in the black belt of Alabama are there where Negroes have voting supremacy over whites?

A. About 11.

Q. What about on a state-wide level where the percentage of Negroes is about 25% and where you couldn't possibly use that bloc voting to gain an election?

A. What I said Negroes had to do this year was concentrate on building their own political parties on a county basis and then move up to a state-wide basis. So that if they ever decided to go into one of those parties, they would have strength; that they wouldn't just go in unorganized and be absorbed as they did on May 3.

Q. You're saying that Negroes, by voting for Flowers [for governor] got absorbed?

A. Absolutely. But worse than that, Flowers put them in a trick. Because Flowers knew there was no such animal as a white moderate in Alabama. If he really felt there was such a person, Flowers should have moved into the white community to develop those white moderates. He did not do that. So it was clear that Negroes were going to throw their vote to him and their vote would be just not counted — would be excluded. It would be as if it was non-existent.

Q. You don't think there is such a thing as a white moderate in Alabama?

A. I have yet to find one.

Q. You don't think Flowers is one?

A. No, I do not.

Q. What do you think of his prosecution of the murderers of Mrs. Viola Liuzzo [killed in Lowndes County March 25, 1965]? And Jonathan Daniels [killed in Lowndes County, Aug. 20, 1965]?

A. He didn't do anything with the prosecution of the murderers of Mrs. Liuzzo. Let me explain what his position was when Jonathan Daniels was shot by Tom Coleman. Jonathan Daniels was white. And he [Flowers] talked about "justice" being brought to Tom Coleman. That had nothing to do with black and white. Three months later, a black man by the name of Willie Brewster was shot in Anniston. And Richmond Flowers never

said a word. On March 7, [1965], when Al Lingo [head of the Alabama state troopers] and [Gov.] Wallace made state troopers march and whip Negroes into the ground [at Selma], Richmond Flowers did not say a word. The white people



Pierotti in the Post, New York City
The "trial" of Tom Coleman

across the country want to believe that there are moderates and things are good and rosy and apple pie and would have you believe that Flowers is a liberal.

Polarization in the South

Q. What is the general tone of Negro sentiment in the South today? [Carmichael was asked to comment on a recent report of the Southern Regional Council (see p. 5) which likened conditions in the South today with those in France before the French revolution, and a statement by the Southern Conference Educational Fund that despite some loosening of Negro-white tensions, there was a polarization between the two peoples.]

A. I think there is a polarization but I would never make the analogy with the French revolution because it too simply overlooks the whole problem of racism in the country. The feeling the Negroes have now is that they psychologically want something of their own, something

to identify with. That's why you have groups like "Afro-Americans," because they cannot identify with white society. Negroes certainly see that this is the richest country in the world, and they want to share in the wealth. And the feeling—whether or not the white press likes this, whether or not white liberals like it—is that if [Negroes] cannot enjoy part of that dream, they're going to burn the country down.

Q. Do you think this is relevant to what happened in Watts?

A. I certainly think it is.

Q. Would you consider what happened in Watts a political development?

A. What it would point out to me is that after the riot last year, black people yelled and screamed about getting rid of [Los Angeles Chief of Police] Parker and he's still there. It's very clear to me that those people have no power to move that man out. And that the people who are supposed to be responsive do not intend to listen to them. The exact same thing is clear in Chicago, where for a year people demonstrated, blocked sidewalks, went to jail, to remove [Superintendent of Schools] Ben Willis. And he was not removed. He decided to resign. The same thing in Boston. Wherever you look across this country, the political control of the Negro ghetto is outside of the ghetto. What we're saying in SNCC, is that it must be inside the ghetto, the people must control it.

That's what this country has to come to grips with. No matter what the country says, no matter what "racists" they call SNCC, no matter how "black nationalist" they call SNCC, those problems still exist, they will exist tomorrow, and they will exist the day after. And [people] better check out Watts. Last year, they sent the white community into the Negro community to make reports on why those riots occurred. What they should have done was to make reports on the white community that controls that Negro community and they would have known why those riots occurred.

'Reverse racism' denied

Q. SNCC's new direction has been called "reverse racism." Would you comment on that?

A. I do not see it as "reverse racism." There is nothing wrong with anything all black. There is nothing wrong with anything all white. What is wrong with either of those things is when force is used to keep somebody else out based on color. That's what is happening in this country. Things have been all white in this country because [whites] have used physical force in the South or they've used legal force in the North to keep blacks out.

Q. Have you read the press comments about your election?

A. I think [the press reports] are vast distortions of what is happening in SNCC. I know for a fact that those people who throw the word "black nationalism" around do not care to analyze SNCC. They are the same people who red-baited us not too long ago. For example, you started off by reading Evans and Novak. Evans and Novak two years ago said we have "communists" in SNCC. And when that trick didn't work, they're now beginning to "black-bait" us. But what Evans and Novak and the rest of the people in this country better understand is that we speak in the context of the people with whom we work. And whether or not they like it, we're going to continue to speak in that tone.

Q. Have you been able to see any of the same kind of sentiment within the urban ghettos of the North?

A. I certainly think so. I think that a feeling of hostility is certainly polarized in the North today—whether or not people want to admit it. There is concern that riots—whether or not people want to talk about it—are imminent. What we have to do in this country is for once and all to stop hiding and stop sugar-coating everything and look at the reality of life. This country should be concerned not to punish some Negroes who tear down an American flag in Cordele, Ga., but to find out why they will tear down that flag they are supposed to love.

A prospect of violence

Q. What do you think are the real prospects in Lowndes County for the election of your slate of candidates?

A. If you want to talk realistically, it means that a lot of those Negro can-

didates might be shot between now and Nov. 8.

Q. You have seven candidates?

A. That's right. And the probability of their being shot is very high.

Q. In that sense, nothing has changed in Lowndes County?

A. Nothing has changed and no one will kid themselves to believe it has.

Q. Is Tom Coleman still active in the Democratic Party?

A. He still is holding up the pillar posts outside the court house.

Q. Do you see any kind of diminution or relaxation of pressure, terror or violence?

A. No, I think it's going to be polarized.

Q. More of it?

A. Yes.

Q. What will be your reaction to this?

A. Well, I think that the people in Lowndes County have come to realize, that since the FBI can do nothing but take notes, the Justice Department can do nothing but initiate suits, that they will have to move, just as this country says it's moving in Vietnam to insure free elections in their own county.

Q. Does that mean the establishment of something like the Deacons for Defense and Justice?

A. It will mean whatever means they see necessary.

Q. How is it at Tent City now [where people, evicted because of registering to vote, live in tents]?

A. They're still there. The government came in with a program of helping people to build houses and lifted their hopes. Then they said they couldn't do it. They rejected the proposal.

Q. A request for OEO [Office of Economic Opportunity] funds?

A. Yes, an OEO self-help housing project.

Q. Who put the bid in for the grant?

A. They sent somebody down from Washington to tell us about it after the tents appeared on Highway 80 [the route of the 1965 Selma-Montgomery "Walk for Freedom"].

Q. And then a request was made?

A. By the Lowndes County Christian Movement for Human Rights. It was denied.

Q. I first heard of you when I was in Selma last year at the time of the Selma-Montgomery march, and was told

that the safest way for me to travel was to ride with Stokely Carmichael because he was known to have the quickest foot on the gas pedal. I've heard since then that you earned the nickname when you were in Mississippi of the "Delta Devil," and that you're quite a driver.

A. The irony is that we had to make fun of that. After being shot at several times and being chased, we had to develop skills as good drivers to stay alive. Several times we were chased at breakneck speeds—almost killed ourselves. You develop special skills if you want to stay alive and work for SNCC.

Q. In an interview that you had with Robert Penn Warren published in *Commentary* last year, you tell of going to Bronx High School of Science, where you began to know, deal with and became friends with a number of white students, that you participated in social functions with them at Park Avenue apartments,



Hirst in the *Tribune*, London
"Who the hell is stirring these people up?"

etc. And at the same time you were confronted with the conditions of Harlem and the East Bronx where you lived. Can you say anything about what you learned during that time that is relevant to the way you think now?

A. What I learned then was how deep racism really is in this country. I don't think anybody escapes it. I think that no matter how intellectually committed

people are to principles of freedom, that emotionally their thinking—I'm talking about white people—is that Negroes are inferior and that their responses are governed by that. They will make certain exceptions. See, I became an exception to the rule. I was the accepted Negro. Accepted. But other Negroes were not like me. They were bums, inhuman beings, they were lazy and unambitious, and that attitude was always extended whenever people spoke to me. I think that attitude is relevant to what is considered to be the left in America and why in the ghetto there is just a complete reaction against it. People there don't want to talk about that "leftist, Marxist or socialistic thing." The whites who were involved [in the ghetto] were economically secure. They had "principles" that they adhered to, and those principles were also embedded around a racism they were not aware of.

Q. One comment about the change in SNCC since your election was that you had left the civil rights movement and joined the New Left.

A. I don't know what the New Left is, and I wish someone would tell me. When I find out, we can decide.

On policy and objectives

Q. Can you, in capsule form, define what you think is now the current policy of SNCC and its objectives?

A. SNCC is going to move into the area of independent politics, regardless of race.

Q. Why do you say "regardless of race?"

A. Because we are going to try to organize whites independently too—in independent parties.

Q. Where?

A. Wherever we can.

Q. Will there be a concentration? Would it be in Northern ghettos?

A. We'll try in areas where we think white people want to come together and try to control the resources in their areas and want to make the decisions about the things that affect their lives.

Q. What about the financing of SNCC?

A. I think we are going to lose a lot of money.

Q. From whom?

A. From a number of whites who will be concerned that we are no longer acting the way they define that we should act, that we're now "acting out." When we took our Vietnam stand [against the war and in sympathy with draft resisters] we realized that it would mean a sharp cut in funds. We've never let funds decide for us what we will say.

Q. I understand John Lewis, whom you replaced as chairman is now head of an international education program of SNCC and plans to travel abroad and make contacts with movements abroad.

A. SNCC's view is that we have to start hooking up with people in the third world, and that we have to hook up with student groups across the world. We see not an isolated problem, but oppression of certain people by other people. We feel we must now hook up with those other groups.

Q. How many Negroes are now registered in Lowndes County?

A. It [the number] has far surpassed the whites. [But] the whites in Lowndes County are not going to sit by and give up their power, and let it be taken over democratically. They will not do that. The only thing left for them to do is to resort to violence and they've always done that in the past. Just like an old dog, you can tell the tricks he's going to pull.

Q. Is there any message you would want to give to white Americans who have supported SNCC in the past?

A. Yes. I think they have to understand that psychologically the Negro has been in a box that he could not get out of and that what he wants to do now is to do what everybody else in the world has done. He wants to build something of his own, something that he builds with his own hands. And that is not anti-white. When you build your own house, it doesn't mean you tear down the house across the street. It just means that you're building your own house.

Whites in this country have to understand that black people don't want to have to look to Tom and Dick and Harry to help them build [so that when] they don't do like Tom, Dick and Harry say, whites withdraw their support. Negroes want something that they can own and control. That's what everybody in this world wants and if white people are sincere in this country about freedom, they have to realize that.

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