

What Lies Ahead for the Southern Negro and
How Can We Help?

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Observations based on work with SCOPE, July, 1965

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My general impression is very favorable--much has been done and is being done by the SCLC, and a good start made by SCOPE. When we consider the century during which the lot of the southern Negro became worse rather than better, it is surprising that the last decade and a half has not brought complete chaos. Most of us northerners find it hard to realize that Negroes were not only denied good jobs, the use of Christian churches, public transportation, public libraries, parks and restaurants, but that their schools usually received only the textbooks discarded by the white schools and were taught by the products of such schools. That this present Negro revolution could be conducted with so little violence on the part of the Negroes is remarkable and does great credit to Dr. Martin Luther King's influence and his insistence on non violence. That thousands of Negroes are nonetheless induced to register and to try to prepare for their startlingly new responsibilities as voters, shows good work by many.

The crowded SCOPE office in Atlanta hummed with ever changing files of who is doing what and where. The tiny SCOPE office in Marion seemed to be functioning surprisingly well in spite of having no telephone, except the use of one in a funeral parlor on the other side of a small cafe. The courageous dedication of SCOPE workers is overwhelming.

Such a degree of success is even more impressive because of the nature of SCOPE workers and the irregularity of their terms of service. The majority of SCOPE workers seem to be of the explosive age of eighteen to twenty-five; older people may be less idealistic, less courageous or more deeply involved in family care and career building. However this brave, quick-acting age has liabilities--overconfidence, inexperience, carelessness, and, at times, poor judgment. They drive any one's car they can get hold of, apparently without realizing that there is such a thing as driver education, banging SCOPE cars into eight inch curbs, ("I guess we are all just so much for the cause that we consider any one's car, for all,") driving far above legal limits, ("Good practice for civil rights workers--may need it for a get away some time,") and even inability to shift out of second gear. These malpractices must cost SCOPE much. They often revolt against the authority not only of white government officials, but even of black or white SCOPE officials. Three girls simply would not get up and go to work on time. One serious, studious Negro youth when told by the assistant director to do the dishes said "I ain't goin' to do no dishes." As a matter of fact I volunteered to do those dishes--and about half of all the dishes done during the four days I was in Atlanta; it did me no harm and I believe helped a little to remove from the Negro's mind the stereotype of a bossy white person who does no dirty work. A similar and more arduous labor was that of a young white male teacher who dug a hole in the hard red clay of the backyard in which to burn and bury the garbage which otherwise would get pretty odorous between the once-a-week collections. In this case a Negro youth did help to throw loose dirt back over it, after the art teacher had left on a photographic

tour for SCOPE. I thought perhaps it was to break this Negro stereotype of inactive whites, that another white woman and I were asked to sort and arrange a big blanket cupboard which obviously hadn't been put in order for many weeks. Some of the SCOPE workers, however, both black and white, were very industrious, keeping steadily at their typing, clipping, filing and accounting without frequently repeated orders. Bad judgment was exhibited sometimes by young people who made a point of black-white embraces on the front porch of Freedom House to "give those crackers who rubber when they drive past, something worth rubbering at." This is as understandable as the antics of many of our soldiers when they nervously face the possibility of danger, but it does your cause no good to antagonize its opponents unnecessarily. Inexperience may be responsible for the irregularity of meals, but might this not be improved by careful advance planning, perhaps by the vice director, of meals, including the purchase of food as well as its preparation.

More important than what SCOPE is doing now, is what it will do for the tremendous needs the southern Negro will soon face.

A large group of people not only totally lacking in political experience but many of their abysmally ignorant, will be herded to the polls! One member of my class, hearing that I had once gone to Africa, asked, "Did you drive?" "Naturalization" was an unknown word. Perhaps they'll not need to know much fundamental world geography or anything pertaining to immigrants, but they had to be told that they are American citizens. This, too, is understandable, humiliatingly so, and they do need to be able to sign their own names and to fill in the date before and after the "19" on a date line. "I can't see very good," alibied several. "I was the oldest

of seventeen and I couldn't go to school," said another with, I'm sure, complete veracity. Their prevailing ignorance does not, however, prove stupidity; many of them showed the same sort of shrewdness and good judgment which were characteristic of a northern white farmer I once knew who had somehow escaped the clutches of all schools. Their questions in class showed good thinking.

"Why don't they want us to vote?"

"What's politics?"

"Why don't we have Negro history?"

"Why do we have to have politics?"

Two members of the class had their own checking accounts and one of these told me he was about to sell a little timber. And their appreciation of our efforts to help them was touching. Several met me in their church and, after service, patted my arm and said, "It's good of you to come 'way down here to help us.'"

"I worked at the hospital from ten last night until eight this morning," said one, "but I knew I'd better come here to class before I go to bed."

One woman brought me a couple dozen nice tomatoes she had raised. Another woman said, "I know it not good to be late to class, but my daughter and I late today to finish this for you," and handed me a handle-less cup glued firmly to an overturned saucer, the whole trimmed with bits of black, red, and green cotton brick brack braid glued on. "See," she said, "you put dirt in here and a little plant and it can grow over."

A large inexperienced electorate is an easy field for a dictator, as the recent history of several new countries shows, but this will not necessarily happen in our deep south. However we remember that one of the world's most tyrannical dictatorships was formed in one

of its best educated countries. Also there is very strong religious feeling among the southern Negroes and two of the ministers I met seemed to be exerting very fine influence for freedom, without retaliation. One of them used his own incarceration after the Selma march, as an illustration for a Sunday School lesson on "Christian Strength Through Conflict." "I'm more of a man now, than I was before," he told his congregation in earnest reassurance. One day each week he drives a truck to Birmingham to get the supplies ordered by the little cooperative store which the Negroes of Marion have formed since they started to boycott the stores which do not employ Negroes.

Good leaders they must have to replace the Wallaces, Loftuses and others who have not treated Negroes in the black belt fairly. In this change will it be possible to avoid a repetition of the experience of 1865? Or will mealy mouthed outsiders, or home grown renegades make foolish promises as to what the government is going to give Negroes, without any thought of what they will do to help build up their country? Will the new leaders be magnanimous and fair enough to treat all alike, and intelligent enough to keep careful track of just how public money is spent? Will they fall into the easy pattern of raising themselves by climbing on others? How can the tremendous drive by which the franchise is being achieved, be continued through less exciting days of study and practice in politics?

Not only must wise and good leaders be chosen but two media should be used--mass singing and T.V. Who can write a song which colored people will like to sing as well as they do We Shall Overcome? It should keep up their emotional high pressure for the hard years ahead. I could not see that T.V. is deliberately used to

mold Negro opinion or help in their political education, but the opportunity is there. Almost every Negro home I entered had a television whether it had chairs or not. Can a Foundation be persuaded to provide the money for a continuing bipartisan program planned by a team of nationally known teachers of government, local advisers and television professionals?

Special efforts must be made for several years by young Negro students. Otherwise the contrast between what whites and blacks of the same age know, will be humiliating to the latter and will give the former support for their racial superiority theory. Southern whites apparently do not know that the latter is not accepted by scientists and will not attribute low achievement of blacks to inferior schooling due to white domination. If Operation Headstart could be adapted on a seven grade scale, it would be extremely helpful right now.

Continued and extended use of federal power will be needed to protect poor, frightened people who have too long been cowed into accepting the poor part of the town, the least frequent garbage collection, and the least desirable jobs. Help and advice by SCOPE and other impartial workers will be needed at least as long.

I was terrified when I went to Alabama to help educate Negroes who are going to vote. Maybe my four days at Freedom House in Atlanta started fear in me--every SCOPE worker present, seemed to have spent some time in jail for the cause and constantly made joking references to hair breadth escapes from pursuing southern officials intent upon helping the dominant whites stay on top. One of the workers had been called in to Atlanta by Hosea Williams, Director of SCOPE, to go with me to Marion, Alabama. "He's white," the Director had said, "so he can get you through--there won't be any trouble." I hadn't even thought of trouble getting to Marion where I was to teach, but this put the idea into my mind.

Atlanta seemed eerie, anyway, at 4 A.M. At first I drove, asking James to direct me. After he had missed twice he said, "If I were driving I could just cross that median and get us headed where we want to go." I snorted the sort of reply that any law abiding adult would make and continued to drive. James hinted, as teen-age boys do, that he wanted to drive until I finally let him and then I really was frightened--he put the car up over 80 and I asked him to slow down. He did momentarily, then put it up to 85; I asked him not to drive my car so fast, and he said he hadn't realized he was, and slowed a bit, then stepped harder and harder on the accelerator as he told me bits of his troubled life; the speedometer read 102. This time I spoke in my sharpest, school teacher voice, James slowed some, but said, "We usually go the limit." When I told him he was doing almost twice the limit he said, "of the car, I mean. A freedom worker never knows when he'll need to drive this fast, and practice is good." After that, I motioned him down each time he got up to 85.

Finally I suggested that we stop for gas and said I would go to the Ladies Room. "Oh, we can't," said James; "It's in these little towns where they jump you--we won't be safe until we get to a big city," My nervousness increased. Was I being hurtled along by a paranoid boy who was still thinking in terms of cops and robbers, or was there really danger? I knew that he had been arrested for Freedom work with trial the following month. We stopped in two cities--Birmingham and Selma.

At last we got to Marion, found the tiny SCOPE office and were guided by a kindly Negro boy whom I never could recognize again because at 10 A.M. my eyes were almost shut and my mind dazed. We went to a Negro home where we were kindly received, James went to sleep at once in a back room--he had had no sleep he said, for 20 hours, but I knew that he could have slept five in Atlanta had he wished. I was feeling the humid heat as much as the gripping fear, so I did not sleep, but did feel better with a big fan in front of me and a glass of ice water inside me.

Fear sort of slipped away as we were fed a good dinner and then I was guided to the home of a generous, courageous Negro widow who always takes in Freedom workers although her house is small and she has five children. I asked if she might have trouble because of my being there and she answered, smiling composedly, "Yes, but I ain't afraid of dem; when de Lawd wants me, he'll take me. I been in jail and all my children." Obviously she was not afraid for herself but the next morning when I said I'd like to walk around and see what the town was like, as I usually do in a new place, she said seriously that I'd better not--I'd better just drive and she called my attention to white people across the street, staring at me. "Dey is all right--won't do any harm but others might." The

street on which she lived marked the line between Negro and Caucasian residences. So I drove daily to the SCOPE office, although I craved exercise. Often as I sat on the porch of the SCOPE office, waiting for the hour at which my class of illiterate, eager-to-learn, appreciative Negroes, would begin, cars of sneering whites drove slowly by, with such venomous hate on their faces as I had never seen.

At the office, other SCOPE workers asked to use my car and they returned it with a 180 mile increase on the speedometer reading although the town they were supposed to have gone to, was only some 20 miles away. They said, gleefully, "Now your car will be known all over Perry County as an integrationist car!" I was suddenly aware of their youth--twenty years olds constitutionally drive with gay abandon and, sometimes, lack of adequate planning. I didn't let any one else drive my car after that, largely because several people asked to borrow it who couldn't drive but thought they could.

But I drove it for them many times, bringing prospective voters to the Courthouse to register, or taking other SCOPE workers up and down country roads and helped them try to persuade frightened Negroes to register. The leader of the Marion SCOPE told us to be back by 4 o'clock always. My hostess said that that was right because most of the trouble started after dark; she told me it was better not to go out after dark except to the biweekly mass meetings of the movement in a church to which I took her and several of her children. I still didn't know whether I really needed to limit my restive feet to my hostess' lot and the village square, but I obediently did as I had been told.

Not only was my body restricted, but my mind too, for I saw no newspapers except a Negro paper of Civil Rights news. When I heard radio or TV news, there was usually mention of a Negro youth

being jailed, or shot--often in Mississippi. Suddenly this came nearer. A Civil Rights worker said to me casually, after discussing a second hand car she wanted to buy, "We're going to Greensboro tomorrow to march from one of the churches they burned, to the other. Do you want to go?"

"No," I said, then I looked inside for the reason I had said it. First, I was a little afraid of being beaten and cattle-prodded; second, I was ^{un}convinced of the usefulness of repeated demonstration (especially in comparison with the tremendous need for the teaching I was doing) and, thirdly, I was frankly afraid I couldn't stand the heat, a five mile hike would not ordinarily bother me, but with the temperature over 90 and the humidity ghastly, I was afraid I would not only be useless, but a care. I refused, also, to let the others take my car because it was my means of escape when the month for which I had volunteered would be up--I depended on it for some 1500 miles of travel home. Anyhow, I had seen quite a few Negro-owned cars on farms and some in town which I thought could be used. News came that evening of 200 jailed Freedom Workers in a prison camp, and of the use of tear gas. More of the Freedom Workers from Marion went to Greensboro to march again the next day and were jailed as I was teaching my last class.

"Will they let me telephone if I am stopped tomorrow on my way home," I asked my hostess' daughter.

She didn't know--her family had all been in jail together, as she laughingly recounted. Then she added, "But we could look after you." So I gave her the names and addresses of three people who should be informed if I were jailed. She must have told her mother because she said to me reassuringly, as I left early the next morning, "Dey won't stop you--might stop us Negroes, but not you--"

you'll be all right."

I had asked a Negro car owner which route would be best for me and he showed me on the map and said, "Your car won't be known or attacked beyond Centerville." And I wasn't stopped, nor did I stop for many miles--I had filled my gas tank the night before. I still don't know whether I was living in the middle of a nightmare, or whether heightened fears fed by cautions and narrations of others' past experiences, made it seem so. Is this America?