

AT THE CENTER OF A STORM  
MY INVOLVEMENT IN THE CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT

John Paull Harper, PhD

B8 Sunday, November 12, 1961

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Associated Press

John Harper (bottom right) dragged from a sit-in at a segregated restaurant in Baltimore, Maryland.  
*Washington Post*, November 12, 1961

I enrolled in Howard University in September 1961. The civil rights movement had been much in the news and I wanted to do something about racial equality. Since I was a college student, I figured I would study for a year at a black college. Nobody encouraged me, but nobody came up with a better plan either. So, I left Macalester College after my freshman year and transferred to Howard University for my sophomore year.

When I returned to the dorm after my first day of classes at Howard, Stokely Carmichael was standing on the steps of Slowe Hall haranguing with other students about the civil rights movement. I sided with Stokely in the haranguing, and afterwards we went into the cafeteria for dinner. I walked into the center of a storm: the civil rights movement at Howard University.

#### **NAG**

I joined the Non-Violent Action Group (NAG). We were the Washington affiliate of the Student Non-Violent Coordination Committee (SNCC). Most of us were Howard students, and all of us were committed to the struggle for racial equality.

NAG activists met frequently to share news and plan activities. Discussing issues informally, we made decisions by consensus. Our decisions were significant for the civil rights movement in the nation's capital area and beyond.

#### **Route 40**

The big issue on NAG's agenda in the fall of 1961 was a planned freedom ride to desegregate restaurants along US Route 40. At that time Route 40 was the main highway between the nation's capital in Washington and the United Nations headquarters in New York City. When African diplomats were denied service at segregated restaurants in Maryland, Route 40 became an international issue.

The Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) called for a freedom ride along Route 40 on November 11. Among the organizations joining CORE were NAG and the Civic Interest Group (CIG), the Baltimore affiliate of SNCC.

NAG activists posted notices, handed-out leaflets, and networked with other students to recruit demonstrators for the freedom ride. We drove to Baltimore several times for planning meetings with other organizations involved in the protest.

### **Waiting for the Freedom Ride**

On October 1, a month before the planned freedom ride along Route 40, Stokely and I joined a CORE picket line protesting the all-white Washington Redskins football team, and the next weekend, we drove down to Danville to touch base with civil rights activists in southern Virginia.

Visiting Howard at the end of October, the civil rights organizer and theorist Bayard Rustin trained us in non-violent direct action for the upcoming freedom ride along Route 40. Bayard emphasized the possibility of being injured or killed, even in a supposedly-moderate border state like Maryland, and he told me I was especially vulnerable since white extremists would view me as a traitor to my race.

### **Change of Plans**

On November 3, CORE called off the freedom ride. In a secret deal, many restaurant owners agreed to de-segregate their facilities in exchange for CORE cancelling the demonstrations along Route 40.

CORE made a mistake. By agreeing to the compromise, CORE gave away the political leverage of an international issue without getting a statewide desegregation deal or even

desegregating all of the restaurants along Route 40, and by calling off the freedom ride, CORE opted out of leadership of the civil rights movement in the nation's capital area. NAG filled the vacuum.

NAG joined CIG for demonstrations in Baltimore instead of Route 40. Hundreds of northern demonstrators joined us to keep the desegregation issue alive in Maryland.

### **Baltimore Sit-Ins**

On November 11, NAG activists sang freedom songs on the bus all the way from Washington to Baltimore. Assembling at the Cornerstone Baptist Church, we listened to speeches and sang freedom songs. When all had arrived, we divided into smaller groups for picketing and sit-ins at segregated restaurants.

I led a sit-in group of a dozen students from Dunbar High School and Morgan State College. Almost nineteen, I was the elder statesman in my group.

Angry crowds of white people shouted vile insults at us while we picketed in front of segregated restaurants. Leaving the picket line, the sit-in group entered the restaurant and sat down at the counter. Policemen filled the room and read a "trespass" law three times. Facing arrest if we stayed in our seats after the third reading of the law, we left the establishment and proceeded to the next restaurant.

Later in the day I rushed into a restaurant with a group of volunteers who intended to be arrested. Fellow Howard students Sharon Wheeler, Bill Mahoney, and Jan Triggs also got inside before employees shut the door and stopped the flow of demonstrators into the restaurant. Policemen filled the room and read us the law three times. Refusing to leave, we were arrested.

Policemen pulled me from my chair and carried me out of the restaurant. I was thrown high in the air and thudded onto the floor of a police van. Somehow I avoided serious harm.

We were booked, fingerprinted, and locked-up at a local precinct house. Left alone by the guards, we were bailed out after midnight by the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP).

### **Storefront Churches**

On the morning after the arrests, NAG activists visited black churches to request support for return trips to Baltimore. Since the NAACP and CORE already had established ties with the big churches, CIG activists arranged for us to meet with smaller Protestant congregations.

At two storefront churches, Mary Lovelace, Bill Mahoney, Stokely, and I each spoke about the meaning of our arrests. Although the congregations were not affluent, the parishoners wanted to share a portion of what they had with us. It was sobering to witness how much we—as civil rights activists—meant to them.

### **New York**

Stokely invited Mary Lovelace and me to New York City for the Thanksgiving vacation. We spent time with Stokely's family at their house in the Bronx, went to a family party in Brooklyn, and walked around Greenwich Village. We also joined Courtland Cox, Tom Kahn, and other NAG activists for discussion with Bayard Rustin at his apartment on the Upper West Side. We laid out plans for future demonstrations in Maryland.

### **Second Arrest**

NAG returned to Baltimore in December. After picketing and sit-ins at a number of segregated restaurants, I again joined a group of volunteers who intended to be arrested.

A policeman choked me with my tie while I was being carried from my seat in the restaurant to a police van. But, luckily for me, not enough time elapsed for him to hurt me. Jailed without further incident, we were bailed out after midnight by the NAACP.

### **Christmas Vacation**

At Christmas vacation, Stokely and I went south. Martin Luther King had been swept into jail in mass arrests in Albany, Georgia, and the word went out for assistance. We got a ride down to Georgia with some students Stokely knew at American University.

By the time we got to Atlanta, all the demonstrators had been released from jail in Albany. Stokely got a ride home to New York City. I hitchhiked 600 miles up US Route 23 from Atlanta to my home in Delaware, Ohio.

### **Demonstrations**

NAG returned to Baltimore seven times during the winter and spring of 1962. We joined CIG in demonstrations in and around Baltimore, along Route 40, and over to the Eastern Shore of Maryland. Northern demonstrators joined us on several occasions.

Angry crowds of white people shouted vile insults at us everywhere we went. On a picket line in Glen Burnie, a man broke from the crowd and swung at me below the belt. His blow missed its mark and hit my leg as I twisted away from him.

Walking across a big parking lot after a demonstration in Aberdeen, Bill Mahoney suddenly yanked me to the side. As I stumbled in front of Bill, a car sped closely by us along the path where I had been walking. The car would have hit me had Bill not seen it and yanked me out of the way.

Protest was dangerous. We were brave kids.



### **Bobby Kennedy Sit-In**

Back in Washington, NAG appealed for the federal government to protect civil rights workers in the south.

Dion Diamond, a founding member of NAG and a SNCC field secretary, was charged with “criminal anarchy” and held on \$12,000 bail for organizing a protest at Southern University in Baton Rouge. When US Attorney General Robert F. (Bobby) Kennedy refused to intervene, NAG activists sat down in the reception area of his office and refused to leave until Dion was set free. We took shifts sitting-in.

While I was studying in my dorm room late at night, armed federal agents lifted the NAG demonstrators into wheel chairs, took them out a side door, and set them on the sidewalk. Our sit-in thus came to an end. If only Bobby had been as ingenious in helping us.

### **Project Awareness**

In addition to non-violent direct action, NAG members ran the student council committee Project Awareness which sponsored public forums at the university. Since Project Awareness was our operation, NAG activists volunteered as the project staff to address and stuff envelopes, circulate leaflets, and assist with the events.

The Project Awareness blockbuster of 1961 was a debate between Bayard Rustin and the Black Muslim Minister Malcolm X. The debate on “Separation or Integration” was the first opportunity for both speakers to address the black elite.

### **Malcolm X**

On October 30, fifteen hundred people packed Cramton Auditorium to hear the debate. Hundreds more were left outside after all the seats were filled. As the Project Awareness staff,

NAG activists greeted the speakers in the anteroom behind the stage and sat on the front row of the auditorium during the debate.

The debate was electric. In a withering attack on the “white devil” and “so-called Negro leaders,” Malcolm X delivered his message with an inimitable ferocity which embodied the simmering discontent of the black masses.

Bayard agreed with Malcolm about racial oppression, but contended that the black minority needed white allies to change society. Teasing Malcolm about recently expanding his base to include Puerto Ricans, Bayard facetiously wondered if liberal Jews might soon be admitted into the Black Muslim faith. Both speakers fully capitalized on their first opportunity to address the black elite.

### **Local 1199**

During the summer of 1962, I worked in New York City. Bayard Rustin arranged for Stokely, Courtland Cox, and me to get summer jobs through District 65 of the Store Workers Union. I got a position as a laborer at a fabrics mail-order shop in the garment district.

In 1962 the big civil rights issue in New York City was Local 1199 organizing hospital workers. In those days state government prohibited hospital workers from joining a union. Non-professional health care employees made less money than a person on welfare. Since most of the low-paid hospital workers were people of color, the union issue was a civil rights issue.

A Committee to Defend Hospital Workers Local 1199 was sponsored by the legendary civil rights pioneer and union leader A. Philip Randolph, President of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters (BSCP). Bayard Rustin set up and ran the committee.



After work and on weekends, I assisted Bayard at the BSCP offices on 125<sup>th</sup> Street in Central Harlem. I attended meetings, addressed and stuffed envelopes, made telephone calls, and ran errands. I also handed-out leaflets on street corners in Greenwich Village, and listened to Malcolm X and other orators at African Square in Harlem. The song that most often blared out of record shops along 125<sup>th</sup> Street that summer was "Twist and Shout" by the Isley Brothers.

### **Brooklyn Sit-In**

In June, Stokely and I joined a sit-in to support Local 1199. Sitting on the floor with locked arms, a dozen of us blocked the public entrance to Beth-El Hospital in Brooklyn. Policemen appeared and told us to leave. Refusing to budge, we were arrested for "disorderly conduct" and carried off one at a time.

Leaving me for last, a policeman told me that I could walk away without getting arrested. But I told him no thanks. I was with the other protestors.

Taken to the Toombs in lower Manhattan, we were put in the tank with other prisoners until well after midnight. The NAACP paid our bail as well as our fines the next month.

### **Stanford**

Before I completed my sophomore year at Howard, I had to make a decision about the next school year. Most NAG activists had become increasingly involved in the politics and leadership of SNCC. I didn't see that as a career path for a white kid like me. So, I stuck to my original plan to study at Howard for one year.

I figured I would go out to the West Coast as motivation to complete a bachelor's degree. I enrolled in Stanford University in September 1962.

### **Summer of 1963**

After completing my junior year of college at Stanford, I returned to Washington for the summer of 1963. Relatives found me a clerical job at an educational institution.

Working nine to five as a clerk/typist, I volunteered after work and on weekends at the DC office of the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom. We addressed and stuffed envelopes and made telephone calls to recruit demonstrators from the DC area. Bayard Rustin, the march's organizer, touched base when he was in town.

Most NAG activists went south with SNCC that summer. Among the newcomers in town, I got to know Ed Brown's younger brother Rap.

### **March on Washington**

I was a marshal at the March on Washington. As the demonstrators began to arrive at the National Mall, I was one of the staffers handling inquiries at the information tent beneath the Washington Monument, and later in the day, I was one of the couriers walking back and forth through the crowd from the information tent to the podium beneath the Lincoln Memorial.

Looking out for trouble all day, we did not know for certain that everything would go well until we had helped the last of the stragglers find their busses home. By then, of course, the March on Washington was history.

### **Farewell**

At a peace rally the day before I left Washington for my senior year at Stanford, I saw NAG activists singing freedom songs on a large portable stage in the National Mall. I weaved through the crowd to say hello. When I got to the front, Ralph Dismuke and others grabbed my

arms and pulled me up onto the stage. Singing songs of freedom with my friends in NAG, I bid farewell to the civil rights movement at Howard U.

### **Epilogue**

Living in the dorm at Howard and being involved in the civil rights movement, I got to know black people as people, and I witnessed racial oppression first-hand. Although I already knew that racism was wrong, it is quite another thing to be there when it happened. I came to identify more closely with the black struggle and reaffirmed my commitment to do something about promoting racial equality.

While I admit to having helped all kinds of people over the years, I paid special attention to racism as the transcendent moral issue in the United States. I helped to establish a predominately-black college campus at a city workers union, and I later taught at that campus as an adjunct professor one night a week for twenty years. As a teacher, I focused on the analytical thinking processes, persuasive writing skills, and intellectual sophistication which would help students advance in their careers, and I labored at the art of writing letters of recommendation to help my students get into graduate school.

My activities also included using my union connections to help Rap Brown get out of prison the first time; using my university credentials and radical connections to help a black local union official become the regional education director of a national union; using my influence as a white district leader to help three black judges win election to the New York State Supreme Court, and using my position and connections in city government to help black colleagues and protégés advance their careers. I try to do what I can.

## APPENDIX A

Washington Post, November 12, 1961

*Wk Post page B1*

## Pastor and 8 Howard Students Among 33 Held In Protest of Maryland Restaurant Segregation

By Tony Gieske  
Staff Reporter

BALTIMORE, Nov. 11—At least 33 persons were arrested today for restaurant picketing and sit-ins in Baltimore and Annapolis and a one-man sit-in in Glen Burnie.

The protests came after the Congress on Racial Equality (CORE) called off a scheduled Freedom Ride along Rte. 40 north of Baltimore.

Twenty-two persons, including at least eight identified as Howard University students, and a Baltimore clergyman, Dr. Logan Kears, 40, were arrested in Baltimore where scores of reserve police and the police K-9 Corps were called out.

### Ten Held in Annapolis

Police at Annapolis later disclosed the arrest of ten others, identified as coming from Ohio, Illinois and Pennsylvania, for attempting to enter a restaurant near the State Capitol, the Associated Press reported.

Anne Arundel County police reported the arrest of a lone demonstrator at a restaurant on Ritchie hwy., Glen Burnie, who was released on bond.

In Baltimore, a total of some 300 demonstrators picketed at 50 restaurants. Four, identified as Howard University students, were arrested for trespassing at one restaurant. They are Bernard Conn, 21; Mary F. Loveless, 19; Stokely Carmichael, 21, and George Hackley, 27.

Pickets arrested for dis-

orderly conduct outside the restaurant were Michael P. Shapiro, 18, listed at 2100 I st. nw., and six others.

### Seized as Trespassers

Arrested for trespassing at another restaurant were John Harper, 18; Sharon Wheeler, 18; William C. Mahoney, 20, and Jan J. Triggs, all identified as Howard students, and Paul Deitrick, 30, listed at 2928 Porter st. nw.

Witnesses said two white

Picture on Page B8

marchers entered Hooper's Restaurant, Fayette and Charles sts., about 3:40 p. m. Seven others, including several Negroes, followed on their heels, forcing their way through a revolving door and damaging it.

The group seated themselves at a table while a policeman read them the Maryland law against trespassing and warrants were sworn out against them by a local magistrate.

Scores of residents gathered in the streets of the city's "Little Italy" section to taunt pickets who marched in front of eating places there. One restaurant closed its doors rather than admit the biracial group of demonstrators.

But at least two restaurants—Marty's Park Plaza at Charles and Madison and the White Rice Inn, at 320 Park st.—admitted integrated parties and served them, accord-

ing to organizers of the demonstration.

Expensive restaurants in the Eager st. area turned away sit-in groups, saying it was against "policy" to admit them.

The managers of Harvey House and One West told reporters afterwards they were willing to desegregate upon passage of a state law requiring it.

The demonstrators carried signs saying "Don't Support Segregation," "There Will Be Other Routes" and "America is Watching." Passers-by responded bitterly in front of downtown Miller Brothers restaurant, calling the pickets "criminals" and "termites."

### Parts of Signs Masked

Many of the signs had sections hidden by masking tape, beneath which the letters "CORE" could be detected. Other signs had portions torn away.

Julius Hobson, Washington chairman of CORE, told the demonstrators who gathered about 10 a. m. at the Cornerstone Baptist Church to map strategy, that the Congress could not sponsor today's demonstrations because that would indicate bad faith in a bargain the organization made late last week with Maryland officials.

CORE promised not to conduct a Freedom Ride along Rte. 40 if a substantial number of the restaurant owners there agreed to desegregate. This was done. The State Department had objected that

African diplomats were being slighted in this area because they were Negroes.

The marchers came from Washington, Baltimore; Philadelphia, New Jersey and New York. Those from Washington included members of the Non-Violent Action Group (NAG) and those from Baltimore, the Civic Interest Group (CIG).

Most of the pickets were students. They came from Morgan State College, Johns Hopkins, Howard, American, George Washington and Catholic Universities, Goucher College and Coppin State Teachers College.

By mid-afternoon, operating in about 20 squads of 10 members each, the agitators had attempted to gain entrance to all 50 restaurants listed as segregated on a mimeographed brochure distributed at the church rally. Then they went back to try again.

Hobson told the group at the church that CORE would extend full financial and legal backing to the demonstrators.

Kears warned them not to take any retaliatory action whatsoever. The demonstrators drafted a telegram to Gov. J. Millard Tawes, saying that they appreciated "the promised integration of some of the public facilities on U.S. Rte. 40."

Police reported no demonstrations by desegregationists along Rte. 40, but about 20 persons met near the Baltimore Raceway to "defend the rights of restaurant owners to serve whomever they please."

## APPENDIX B

### *Curriculum Vitae*

#### Education

Columbia University, Graduate Faculties	PhD (1975); MA (1969)
Stanford University, School of Humanities and Sciences	BA 1964
Howard University, School of Arts and Sciences	1961-2
Macalester College	1960-1

#### Awards

Graduate Fellow in Interdisciplinary Studies, Columbia University	1966-70
Graduate Fellow in Quantitative Methods & Models, Cornell University	Summer 1967

#### Employment

Administrative Education Officer, Department of Education, City of New York	1991-2010
Associate Staff Analyst, Human Resources Administration, City of New York	1985-91
Visiting Professor, Labor Education Center, Rutgers University	1982-3
Director, Labor Studies Program in New York City, Cornell University/NYSSILR	1978-82
Associate Director, District Council 37 Campus, College of New Rochelle	1974-8
Lecturer (Full Time), Lehman College, City University of New York	1970-2
Lecturer (Full Time), Bronx Community College, City University of New York	1966-7
Street Club Worker, Youth Board, City of New York	1964-6

#### Activities

Adjunct Professor, DC 37 Campus College of New Rochelle	1986-2005
Executive Board, Organization of Staff Analysts/Municipal Labor Coalition	1986-2010
District Leader, Community Free Democrats, Westside of Manhattan	1987-93 & 1997-9

#### Publications

- "Unions and Universities," *American Journal of Education*, 1982
- "ACLU and the Wagner Act," *Labor Studies Journal*, 1981
- "Ideologies of Organized Labor," *New Labor Review*, 1980
- "Be Fruitful and Multiply: The Origins of Legal Restrictions on Planned Parenthood in 19th-Century America," in C.R. Berkin and M.B. Norton, eds, *Women of America* (Boston: Houghton-Mifflin, 1979)
- "Be Fruitful and Multiply: The Movement to Suppress Planned Parenthood in 19th-Century America," Doctoral Dissertation, Columbia University, 1975
- "Roosevelt's Intellectual Advisers and Organized Labor, 1932-1940," Master's Thesis, Columbia University, 1970

#### Current

Retired 3/6/2010	
Assistant to President (Volunteer), Organization of Staff Analysts/MLC	2010-present