

ABSTRACT

Dig Yourself! The Ascent of Stokely Carmichael, Black Power,
and the Death of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee

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In his role as chairman, Stokely Carmichael helped usher in a dramatic change for the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, a five-year old civil rights organization that had organized voting drives and schools for Black people throughout the south. While SNCC morphed into a more militant group to face the last half of the decade, Carmichael rode his popularity and the wave of Black Power around the world through conferences and speeches. In the end, SNCC had difficulty surviving due to internal conflicts and a lack of funding. Using a critical race lens, this study examines Carmichael's leadership skills and the issues he and veteran SNCC members faced before eventually being expelled from the group. While SNCC would never recover, its efforts had a lasting impact on the south, Black people and the civil rights movement.

Dig Yourself! The Ascent of Stokely Carmichael, Black Power,
and the Death of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee

by

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A Thesis

Approved by the Department of Journalism, Public Relations, and New Media

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Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of
Baylor University in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree
of
Masters of Arts

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Accepted by the Graduate School
May 2020

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

After making the decision to return to Baylor for a master's degree at the age of forty, I was not completely sure what I was getting myself into, however, it has been one of the most rewarding chapters of my life. I would like to thank Dr. Mia Moody-Ramirez for taking a chance on me in the American Studies Graduate Program. I appreciate Dr. Bradley Owens for the encouragement to write what I felt and reminding me there is plenty of room for all opinions, as well as all people in this country. Although his classes were the most challenging, Dr. James SoRelle, made a tremendous impact on my academic journey and my interest in the American Civil Rights Movement. Most especially, I would like to thank Dr. Jules Sweet, who was the first professor in my first class in August 2018. I have taken a class taught by her every semester since. She is a gifted teacher, a helpful mentor, and a trusted friend.

DEDICATION

To my wife, Alicia, who has continually given me courage, my father, Rodney, for understanding my need to pursue a dream, and my mother, Ann, who through her strength has shown me that if there is one good thing to come from cancer, it is our long talks and the relationship we have built through them.

CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

In his role as chairman, Stokely Carmichael helped usher in a dramatic change for the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, the civil rights organization that had organized voting drives and schools throughout the south into a more militant group to face the last half of the decade. In 1966, the year Carmichael took over as its leader, the organization was five-years old. That June, in Greenwood, Mississippi, Carmichael rallied supporters with a defiant clinched fist, chanting “Black Power.” Carmichael and SNCC faced opposition to the Black Power movement from traditional civil rights leaders like Roy Wilkins, Bayard Rustin, and A. Philip Randolph. The mainstream news, the FBI, and President Lyndon Johnson also criticized the group. While Carmichael rode his popularity and the wave of the Black Power movement around the world through conferences and speeches, SNCC had difficulty maintaining its identity due to internal conflicts and a lack of funding.

Fast forward to April 4, 1968, the day Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., was assassinated in Memphis, Tennessee.¹ Carmichael was devastated and remembered the anguish on King’s face the last time they were together, when with concern he said, “Stokely, promise me you will be more careful.”² Carmichael remembered another conversation with King as the news reported rioting in cities from across the country due

¹ *New York Times*, 5 April 1968.

² Stokely Carmichael and Michael Ekwueme Thelwell, *Ready for Revolution*, 659.

to the great man's murder. During the Meredith march two years earlier when King chastised him for his temper, Carmichael told him, "Dr. King you can tell all the good white folk out there that, if they want nonviolence to stay alive, they had better not touch you. Better not lay a hand on you. Because, Dr. King, the moment they touch you is the moment nonviolence is finished, done."³

After King's death the fist of Black Power came down in anger from sea to shining sea. A group mainly of SNCC members rode down together to King's funeral in Atlanta from Washington, DC. Carmichael remembered seeing plumes of black smoke in the distance and thinking to himself, "when you killed Dr. King, you killed nonviolence."⁴

The theme of nonviolence did indeed change during the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s, but it was not a change which occurred overnight. The students involved in SNCC were young and idealistic when they began their organization, but after suffering beatings, deaths, and humiliation over several years they emerged more and more defiant until the proverbial valve broke and the notion of Black Power exploded on the national scene.

Chapter One begins at the end, with the death of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., someone who had devoted his life to nonviolence. Chapters Two through Four show the birth of an organization and how idealism changed into the brutal realism for those working in SNCC. Chapter Five shows the very quick end to the discussion regarding

³ Carmichael and Thelwell, *Ready for Revolution*, 503-504.

⁴ Carmichael and Thelwell, *Ready for Revolution*, 657-658.

tactics that had been simmering for a long time. Chapter Six tries to explain Black Power and the consequences that arose from it. Chapter Seven could have been easily titled “The Rake’s Progress,” after the famous eighteenth century William Hogarth series, and deals in this case with the reality of fame in the form of Stokely Carmichael’s meteoric ascent as chair of SNCC and the unravelling of the organization around him. Chapters Eight and Nine, involve last ditch efforts to save the organization, regardless of how outlandish and dangerous they might look in retrospect. Chapter Ten, is the conclusion, or epilogue to the story, and a look at the lives of some of the main characters who were involved in SNCC.

It is hoped that this analysis provides context and synthesizes what has been previously published about Carmichael, veteran SNCC members and the Civil Rights movement, in general. Depending on what text one reads, Stokely Carmichael is always a polarizing character. He is both angel and devil, but taken together in reality, he was an outspoken young man who tried to address decades of racism and abuse in a dynamic new way. Whether he was to be loved or hated, he was a freedom fighter and passionate about equality of all mankind. The study is timely as the early 2000s have been characterized as new civil rights movement with the Black Lives Matter movement leading the way.

CHAPTER TWO

“The Birth of a Leader”

Stokely Standiford Churchill Carmichael was born on June 29, 1941, in Port of Spain, Trinidad.¹ Carmichael and his siblings moved from Trinidad to New York to join his parents when he was ten. His father, a skilled carpenter, worked several jobs, including one as a taxi driver, to help support the family, and his mother worked as a housekeeper. Carmichael was often left alone with his siblings in their apartment where he became an avid reader. Incredibly intelligent, Carmichael was offered a place at the revered Bronx High School of Science.² It was here that he first made white friends. The discrepancy between their lives and his life, however, was apparent after visiting their affluent homes.³ He would later remark, “I learned at Science that white people, liberal white people, could be intellectually committed but emotionally racist. They couldn’t see *through*. I was everybody’s best friend. They would say to me, ‘Oh, you are so different.’” What they meant was I didn’t meet their image of black people.”⁴ After graduation, Carmichael attended Howard University and joined the Non-violent Action Group (NAG), along with a young man from Denmark, South Carolina, Cleveland Sellers. Later they both joined the SNCC group recently organized on campus.⁵ On June 8, 1961,

¹ Carmichael and Thelwell, *Ready for Revolution*, 12.

² *Ibid*, 83.

³ Gordon Parks, “Whip of Black Power,” *Life*, 19 May 1967, 80.

⁴ Quoted in Bernard Weinraub, “The Brilliancy of Black,” *Esquire Magazine*. 1 January 1967.

⁵ Carmichael and Thelwell, *Ready for Revolution*, 115.

Carmichael was arrested after traveling by train from New Orleans to Jackson, along with other students from Howard. To conquer his fear on the train ride, Carmichael thought to himself, “somebody will die, but it won’t be me, it will be the guy next to me.”⁶ Upon his arrival in Jackson, he was promptly taken to Hinds County Jail. As he was processed, he sarcastically tried in vain to discuss Henry David Thoreau’s writings on civil disobedience with the jailers.⁷ On June 15, Carmichael and forty-four others were bussed to Parchman. For most of the students, including Stokely Carmichael, it was their first experiences with being arrested.

Although Parchman was known for its brutality, Carmichael seemed unfazed, which impressed his comrades and incensed the guards. After guards tried to take his mattress away, Carmichael sang at the top of his lungs from the gospel song, “I’m Gonna Walk and Talk with Jesus,” the line, “I’m going to tell God how you treat me one of these days!”⁸ The rest of the jailed group joined in, further angering the guards. He ended up staying in Parchman for eight days longer than any of the other riders. When he was released, he enjoyed his first taste of celebrity at dinners and functions held in honor of the riders. James Forman later wrote, “I had first met Stokely in Nashville in 1961 at the Southern Student Leadership Conference. . . Stokely had just been released from Parchman Penitentiary in Mississippi for participation in a Freedom Ride. . . . Stokely and I began to develop a warm friendship that grew in the years that followed.”⁹ After the

⁶ Quoted in Peniel E. Joseph, *Stokely, A Life*, (New York, Basic Civitas Books, 2014) 31.

⁷ Zinn, *SNCC*, 57.

⁸ Clara Ward, “I’m Gonna Walk and Talk with Jesus”, Recorded 1962, *Meetin’ Tonight*, Released by Vanguard Records 1994, Apple Music.

summer of 1961, Carmichael continued his studies at Howard and his work in the civil rights movement.¹⁰

One Man, Two Images

“Stokely Carmichael, tall, slim, brown-skinned, gives the impression he would stride cool and smiling through Hell, philosophizing all the way,” wrote Howard Zinn in 1964.¹¹

Carmichael left some people with that cool vision, but to many others, he was divisive, militant, and driven only by ego.¹² Seeming to take the torch of fiery black nationalist rhetoric from the recently assassinated Malcolm X, Carmichael helped lead the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) in the middle 1960s from its grassroots, boots on the ground, all-inclusive beginnings, to an exclusive all-black group preaching “Black Power.”

While crowds were drawn to his charisma and bombastic oratory, Carmichael made many enemies along the way.¹³ From colleagues within SNCC, traditional civil rights leaders, all the way to the FBI and the White House, people worried about where Carmichael was leading the civil rights movement. In 1967, Carmichael was ushered out as SNCC chairman, replaced by H. Rap Brown. By the end of the decade, the organization would be breathing its last breath, even attempting an ill-advised merger

⁹ James Forman, *The Making of Black Revolutionaries* (Washington, DC. Open Hand Publishing, Inc, 1985), 518-19.

¹⁰ Joseph, *Stokely*, 38.

¹¹ Howard Zinn, *SNCC: The New Abolitionists* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2017), 40.

¹² James Forman, *The Making of Black Revolutionaries* (Washington, DC. Open Hand Publishing, Inc, 1985) 518-22.

¹³ *Ibid.*

with Oakland, California's Black Panther Party for Self Defense. Carmichael's cries of "Black Power" ushered in a new chapter and a new dynamic of American history, but in doing so, he brought internal conflict from SNCC to a boil that had simmered for too long. Regardless of how hard the organization tried to be all-inclusive, leadership did emerge and SNCC was unable to survive.

The Birth of SNCC

In February 1960, the modern civil rights movement began at a Woolworth's lunch counter in Greensboro, North Carolina, when four college students, Joseph McNeil Izell Blair, Franklin McCain, and David Richmond, from North Carolina Agricultural and Technical College, sat down at the "whites only" counter and attempted to order coffee. After being refused service several times the students realized that they were not being threatened or arrested, they were simply being ignored¹⁴. They left when the store closed, and that same evening spoke to other students at the college. The next morning, thirty of their college classmates were at Woolworth's lunch counter to join in on the second day of the "sit-in." Their activity caught the interest of local news reporters who described them as "well-dressed Negro college students."¹⁵ These students did not intend to start a nation-wide movement, it was not well planned, and there were no great aspirations when they began. They simply wanted to sit down and have a cup of coffee.¹⁶

¹⁴ Claiborne Carson, *In Struggle: SNCC and the Black Awakening of the 1960s*, (Cambridge, Massachusetts, Harvard University Press, 1981), 9.

¹⁵ *Ibid*, 10.

¹⁶ *Ibid*, 9-10

In Nashville, Tennessee, however, brave black students like John Lewis, Diane Nash, and C. T. Vivian, had been planning something similar for some time when they first heard of the activity in Greensboro. These students risked verbal and physical abuse as they attempted to force popular department stores to change their antiquated segregation laws that would allow blacks to eat at store lunch counters.¹⁷ The movement grew throughout the South, eventually reaching into northern cities, as blacks protested in the streets against policies of racial discrimination in stores. As stores began to see that boycotts from both blacks and whites were damaging profits, they began to rethink their policies of segregation. The students finally achieved victory, but the sit-ins were only the beginning of what was to come.¹⁸

In April 1960, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), led by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., donated \$800 to host a retreat on the campus of Shaw University, in Raleigh, North Carolina, to bring the students of the national sit-ins together.¹⁹ Along with those students, other student groups were represented, including Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) and Congress for Racial Equality (CORE). Over 125 students attended the retreat and although Dr. King hoped a student component of SCLC would emerge, something very different was forged.

The SCLC was organized in a hierarchical fashion, which led to a top-down leadership style with many serving in leadership positions and few “boots on the ground” workers. It also tended to lend itself to misogynistic ideals and relegated women into

¹⁷ Zinn, *SNCC*, 33-35.

¹⁸ Zinn, *SNCC*, 39.

¹⁹ *Ibid*, 33-35.

mainly supporting roles. SCLC Executive Secretary Ella Baker, who had previously worked for the National Association of the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), had observed SCLC weaknesses for several years and guided the students at the conference in an entirely different direction.²⁰ She urged the students to form an organization that would rely on grassroots community involvement to achieve their goals for civil rights. There was also debate regarding the practice of nonviolent direct action (NVDA), but the students from Nashville, led by Diane Nash, John Lewis and Marion Barry persisted in their arguments that nonviolence was the only way to achieve victory.²¹ James Lawson, who had been expelled from Nashville's Vanderbilt School of Theology for his arrest during the sit-ins, spent three years as a missionary in India. He studied *satyagraha*, or "soul-force," Mahatma Gandhi's use of non-violence to achieve political change and offered to teach classes on non-violent direct action to SNCC members. He soon became greatly admired by the students who attended the conference.²² It was also made clear by Baker and the students attending, that SNCC's success would be as an integrated organization with all races included in its demographics. Without the help of the "New Left," and members of the mainly white, middle class SDS, SNCC would have had a hard time getting off the ground.²³ By the end of the retreat, SNCC was born.

²⁰ John Lewis and Michael D'Orso, *Walking with the Wind: A Memoir of the Movement* (New York, Simon and Schuster, 2017) 108.

²¹ Zinn. *SNCC*, 34.

²² Carson, *In Struggle*, 22.

²³ Wesley C. Hogan, *Many Minds, One Heart: SNCC's Dream for A New America*, (Chapel Hill, NC. The University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 37.

The newly formed SNCC organization took part in a CORE-sponsored event, the Freedom Rides that began in May 1961. Beginning in Washington, DC, the bus rides were to continue through the South to New Orleans, Louisiana, to challenge the non-enforcement of federal interstate commerce laws. Two Supreme Court cases, *Morgan v. Virginia* (1946), and *Boynton v. Virginia* (1960), proved that segregated bussing across state lines was unconstitutional.²⁴ Thirteen riders, seven black and six white, left Washington, DC on May 4.²⁵ The first few days went smoothly, however, the riders encountered trouble as they ventured into the deeply segregated South.

President John F. Kennedy was reluctant to get involved in the Freedom Rides because in doing so he might lose political support from already wary southern conservatives. He eventually involved his brother, Attorney General Robert Kennedy, to help ensure safe passage for the participants. Robert Kennedy tried to speak with Alabama Governor John Patterson, who refused to speak to him over the phone, fearing their conversation was being recorded. Patterson later announced publicly on the safety of freedom riders, that he could not “guarantee the safety of fools.”²⁶ The riders left for Montgomery, Alabama, and were savagely beaten upon their arrival. On May 21, mob violence broke out outside Reverend Ralph Abernathy’s First Baptist Church during a rally for the riders.²⁷ President Kennedy threatened to send in federal troops if order could not be restored. Speakers for the evening included CORE director and ride

²⁴ Ibid, 47-50.

²⁵ Zinn, *SNCC*, 42.

²⁶ Carson, *In Struggle*, 35.

²⁷ Hogan, *Many Minds, One Heart*, 47-50.

coordinator James Farmer, the Reverend Fred Shuttlesworth, and Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. The attendees in the church were soon surrounded by the mob outside and unable to leave. As tear gas and smoke seeped into the building, Dr. King led everyone in prayer and calmed the audience as much as he could. It was only when Governor Patterson reluctantly sent in Alabama National Guard troops (due to Kennedy's threats of intervention) that order was restored and those in the church were able to leave by 2:00 a.m.²⁸

Attorney General Kennedy made a bit of a devil's bargain with Mississippi officials for the riders' safe passage into Mississippi when they left Alabama.²⁹ More riders from SNCC and CORE had arrived in Montgomery to replace those who had been wounded in the assaults. The riders were not met by angry mobs when they arrived in Jackson, Mississippi on May 24. Instead, Jackson police led riders through the bus station to awaiting paddy wagons to take them to jail.³⁰ Over the next few days, as freedom riders and their supporters poured into Jackson, they also went to jail. Many were sent to the dreaded Mississippi State Penitentiary, better known as Parchman Farm. One of the riders sent there was a young man from the Bronx, Stokely Carmichael.³¹

²⁸ Carmichael and Thelwell, *Ready for Revolution*, 182-185.

²⁹ Hogan, *Many Minds, One Heart*, 47-50.

³⁰ *Ibid*, 49.

³¹ Zinn, *SNCC*, 57.

CHAPTER THREE

Hope and Heartbreak

Having achieved a victory with the Freedom Rides, SNCC set up an office in a corner of the Atlanta SCLC headquarters and began to send organizers out to both urban and rural areas across the South to register locals to vote and to help in desegregation movements. Leaders began to emerge within the group, including John Lewis, Robert Moses, and James Forman, but they all worked well together as a collective unit. SNCC along with other civil rights organizations met with Robert Kennedy on June 16, 1961. He suggested to the group that their activities might be more beneficial in organizing voter drives for blacks across the south. Kennedy assured the group there would be private funding available should they decide to work in breaking down the long-time disenfranchisement of minority voters. SNCC members were divided in their opinions regarding the voting issue. While all realized blacks had been blocked from voting for decades by white registrars using poll taxes and literacy tests to keep them away from the polls, there were also some who worried they could be influenced through white liberal funding sources. It was finally decided that SNCC would become community organizers and continue their NVDA work in desegregation. James Forman was elected as executive secretary of the organization and Charles Sherrod was hired as SNCC's first field secretary in Mississippi.¹

¹ Carson, *In Struggle*, 39-41.

There were failures and successes in cities and counties across the south, but SNCC was becoming well-known and more importantly, trusted in rural black communities.¹ Sherrod and other organizers originally felt isolated at first from most of the black population who were afraid to be around the outsiders, often fearing for their own livelihood and personal safety. Sherrod realized that to be a part of the community, one needed to act a part of the community. He later said, “you don’t achieve anything with the preachers, teachers and businessmen until you work with the common people first.”² Many SNCC student workers came on during the summer for individual projects, as Stokely Carmichael did prior to his graduation from Howard. SNCC members in rural areas gave up their suits and dresses for overalls and jeans which allowed them to fit in better in rural communities. Blacks and whites together worked in the most adverse conditions, often fearing for their safety while trying to address the plight of poor black southerners. They received no fanfare and little press attention.

This lack of press coverage led to a growing tension between SNCC and the leaders of SCLC.³ Organizers in SNCC were at times annoyed by the perceived condescension from the older SCLC leaders. When Dr. King showed up for a day or two at a time in SNCC organized communities, he was usually trailed by members of the press which immediately garnered interest on the national stage. When Dr. King left an area after a day or two, due to his hectic schedule, the press followed him out leaving SNCC members feeling abandoned. SNCC began to mockingly refer to Dr. King as ‘De

¹ Zinn, *SNCC*, 60-65.

² Quoted in Carson, *My Struggle*, 57-58.

³ James Forman, *The Making of Black Revolutionaries* (Washington, DC. Open Hand Publishing, Inc, 1985) 158-63.

Lawd,' and joked with each other about when he would next come around to perform his miracles.⁴ The fissures between the two groups continued to grow steadily over the next few years.⁵

There was beginning to be tension inside SNCC as well. There were those who truly believed that non-violent direct action was a way of life, and those who saw it only as a strategy. John Lewis, who became chairman of SNCC in 1963, was one of the former and an ardent admirer and protégé of Dr. King.⁶ When Stokely Carmichael questioned Dr. King on nonviolent direct action, King responded, "The beauty of non-violence is that you never let any outside force, nothing outside of yourself control what you do."⁷ Carmichael did not understand how one could have a "passive movement" and called it "a contradiction in terms."⁸ Carmichael and other organizers were turning away from SNCC leaders like Bob Moses and John Lewis and their pursuit of non-violence. Interestingly, a lot of the issues between factions in SNCC were divided between those who had grown up in the rural south, like Lewis, and those who were from the urban north, like Carmichael. Those from the north were leaning more toward militancy and were growing tired of constantly having to turn the other cheek in the face of brutality.

⁴ Carson, *In Struggle*, 63.

⁵ Hogan, *Many Minds, One Heart*, 70.

⁶Lewis and D'Orso, *Walking with the Wind*, 190.

⁷ Quoted in Hogan, *Many Minds, One Heart*, 249.

⁸ Carmichael and Thelwell, *Ready for Revolution*, 166.

Freedom Summer

Carmichael turned down a scholarship to Harvard to join SNCC full time in 1964.⁹ He worked as a SNCC organizer in Mississippi during the summers between his college years and it was where he returned after graduation. Although he had not been with the organization on a full-time basis, he quickly emerged as a leader during the Freedom Summer of 1964.¹⁰ The Mississippi Summer Project remains one of SNCC's most well-known projects.

The Mississippi Summer Project began as a way for SNCC to force a confrontation between state and federal authorities. The scope of the project was so large, other civil rights groups were asked to participate and through it an umbrella organization, Council of Federated Organizations (COFO) was formed to funnel resources and funds into the various parts of the state. SNCC recruited black and white students from across the country to participate in rural areas, establishing freedom schools for children and adults alike. There would also be a huge emphasis on voting rights and voting registration. SNCC veteran Robert Moses was responsible for the overall idea for the project.¹¹ He said that SNCC's job was to, "bring about a confrontation. . . to change the power structure."¹² The SNCC Executive Committee passed a resolution following a motion made by Marion Barry that charged SNCC with

⁹ Joseph, *Stokely*, 67.

¹⁰ Carmichael and Thelwell, *Ready for Revolution*, 357.

¹¹ Carson, *In Struggle*, 98.

¹² "Three Hundred Attend SNCC Conference," *Student Voice*, 9 December 1963, 2.

the task “to obtain the right for all Mississippians to vote, using as many people as necessary to obtain that end.”¹³

Hopes of a peaceful summer were dashed by the disappearance of activists Michael Schwerner, Andrew Goodman and James Chaney after their release from jail in Neshoba County on June 21. Most feared the worst and search parties were organized to look for the students. Stokely Carmichael, who headed the Second Congressional District area during the Freedom Summer, and others searched for three days and nights in the forests and swamps across the region. When the bodies were eventually found, forty-four days later, Carmichael spoke bluntly to a group by saying, “Sheriff (Lawrence) Rainey of Neshoba County got elected on his record as a nigger-killer.”¹⁴ Many SNCC members armed themselves with guns for their own protection during the summer and Carmichael spoke of non-violence as a “perverted way of life.”¹⁵

Perhaps the most memorable part of the Mississippi Project, aside from the three murders was the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party. Eight hundred delegates attended a state delegation in Jackson, in August, and elected sixty-eight of their number to attend the Democratic National Convention in Atlantic City, New Jersey. SNCC members who helped organize the MFDP were emotionally wiped out from the summer, but they were encouraged by the attitudes within the party. Stokely Carmichael wrote, “Many more of us than we knew were totally burned out. Emotionally scarred, spiritually drained from the constant tension, the moments of anger, grief, or fear in a pervading

¹³ Carson, *In Struggle*, 100.

¹⁴ Quoted in Joseph, *Stokely*, 69.

¹⁵ Quoted in Hogan, *Many Minds, One Heart*, 162.

atmosphere of hostility and impending violence. . . . But we were running on hope and maybe faith.”¹⁶ Their hope was to force the National Democratic Party to take a stand against the racist and segregated Democratic machine in Mississippi and seat them in their place at the convention. There was much hope in SNCC and in Mississippi that the views of the Democratic Party as a whole regarding race would help them in achieving victory. The group took a bus to the convention in late August, similar to those three years before, riding for freedom.¹⁷

On August 22, the MFDP presented its case to the Democratic Credentials Committee and several members of the delegation spoke. Robert Moses and Rita Schwerner, the widow of Andrew Schwerner spoke on behalf of the MFDP. The most poignant testimony followed, when Mrs. Fannie Lou Hamer, the middle-aged wife of a Mississippi sharecropper spoke on behalf of the party. She was one of the oldest SNCC organizers, but she had been extremely active in the Delta and was well respected by those in SNCC and citizens alike. On national television, she spoke of the degradations she had experienced while fighting for civil rights. She spoke of being fired from her job, driven out of her home, and being beaten by black inmates in jail on the orders of Mississippi state troopers, as they sadistically watched:

I began to scream, and one white man got up and began to beat me on my head and tell me to “hush”. . . .One white man- my dress had worked up high- he walked over and pulled my dress down and he pulled my dress back up, back up. . . All of this is on account we want to register, to become first-class citizens, and if the Freedom Democratic Party is not seated now, I question America.¹⁸

¹⁶ Carmichael and Thelwell, *Ready for Revolution*, 398.

¹⁷ Carson, *In Struggle*, 123-24.

¹⁸ *Ibid*, 125.

Unfortunately, Mrs. Hamer's speech was not heard by the nation in its entirety. President Johnson, not wanting anything to spoil his projected nomination for election, nor show any sign of quarrel within the Democratic Party, cut into the convention broadcast for an impromptu press conference. Johnson threatened Senator Hubert Humphrey of Wisconsin, with withdrawing his promise of the Vice-Presidential nomination if Humphrey could not straighten the situation in Atlantic City out.

Humphrey desperately wanted to be Vice-President, but he was also one of the most liberal Democrats in Washington and had been one of the earliest advocates for civil rights, going back decades. Over several days, negotiations went on with the MFDP, the Mississippi "regulars," Dr. King, Bayard Rustin, and others, all the while President Johnson was giving the "Johnson treatment" to those who had previously agreed to support the MFDP. Verna Carson, a black delegate from California, was told her husband would not be suggested for a federal judgeship should she continue to support the MFDP. SNCC held a vigil outside the convention while talks continued.¹⁹

The MFDP was finally offered a compromise of two "at large" seats at the convention and a promise from the Democratic National Committee that it would work to end racism in the delegate structure by the next election. Although Dr. King and Rustin urged the MFDP to take the seats, they refused. The Mississippi regulars, along with several other southern delegates also left the convention. The MFDP attempted to sit in the vacated Mississippi seats and were escorted out. Mrs. Hamer had the opportunity to approach Humphrey during the negotiations. She said to him:

¹⁹ Chana Kai Lee, *For Freedom's Sake-The Life of Fannie Lou Hamer*, (Chicago, Illinois, University of Illinois, 1999) 86-101.

Senator Humphrey, I been praying about you; and I been thinking about you, and you're a good man, and you know what's right. The trouble is you're afraid to do what you know is right. You just want this job, and I know a lot of people have lost their jobs, and God will take care of you even if you lose this job. But Humphrey, if you take this job, you won't be worth anything. Mr. Humphrey, I'm going to pray for you again.²⁰

When she finished speaking with Hubert Humphrey, they both burst into tears.

Humphrey went on to be nominated as Johnson's running mate.

For SNCC, the culmination of Freedom Summer at the Democratic National Convention left many veteran workers disenchanted with the political process and the players involved. Their hope had been to find enough good people who believed in their cause to support the MFDP, and they thought they had, until threats and forgotten promises made it impossible for them to continue. One of the gentlemen in the MFDP delegation, Mr. Turnbow turned to Stokely Carmichael at the convention, and asked, "Stokely, so this is what y'all's calls democracy?" Carmichael responded, "No, Mr. Turnbow, it's politics. . . as usual."²¹ Carmichael also recalled saying goodbye to Mrs. Hamer at the end of the Freedom Summer. She told him, "Stokely, so long as I got me a roof over my head in this heah Mississippi, you know you got a place to stay. An' if it ain't but two chicken wings in the pot, you know you got one."²²

Politicians and the national media blamed the "*apolitical SNCC radicals*" who "cynically manipulated the simple, 'politically naïve people,' of the Mississippi Delta."²³

²⁰ Chana Kai Lee, *For Freedom's Sake*, 93.

²¹ Quoted from Carmichael and Thelwell, *Ready for Revolution*, 408.

²² Quoted from Carmichael and Thelwell, *Ready for Revolution*, 439.

²³ *Ibid*, 410.

After the convention, the MFDP was asked by the Johnson campaign to campaign for him in black Mississippi in the 1964 election.²⁴ Politics as usual.

²⁴ Quoted from Carmichael and Thelwell, *Ready for Revolution*, 412.

CHAPTER FOUR

Burning Bridges- From Pettus to the Panther

SNCC viewed Dr. King's announcement of a major voting rights campaign in Selma, Alabama in early 1965 with some ambivalence. SNCC already had organizers in Alabama working on registration and again, while Dr. King's presence would bring attention to the nation's second lowest state of black registered voters (Mississippi was the first), they still had to contend with the leadership style of the SCLC. There was a fear that King would undermine SNCC's desire of nurturing black leadership inside the existing community. SNCC agreed to not hinder the SCLC plan, however, and offered resources to help in the campaign. Stokely Carmichael's first impression of Selma was "antebellum Dixie."¹ He also wrote that the black community in Selma was, "as together-psychologically and culturally a proud community- than many I'd seen. . ."²

During a peaceful night protest march, on February 26, 1965, protestors were confronted by angry whites and police. Jimmy Lee Jackson, a young black protestor was shot and killed by a state trooper as he attempted to protect his mother from being clubbed. SCLC leaders announced a march honoring Jackson from Selma to Alabama's Capitol in Montgomery would be held on March 7. SNCC disagreed with the tactics of the symbolic march but agreed to allow SNCC members to march independently.³

¹ Carmichael and Thelwell, *Ready for Revolution*, 443.

² Ibid, 442.

³ Carson, *In Struggle*, 157-58.

Bloody Sunday and its Aftermath

SNCC workers were surprised when they discovered Dr. King would not lead the 2,000 protestors who had gathered for the march because he was back in Atlanta delivering a sermon at the Ebenezer Baptist Church. John Lewis, SNCC chairman and also on the governing board of SCLC became one of the de facto heads of the march in King's place. After crossing the Edmund Pettus Bridge leaving Selma, the group was confronted by a combined force of local police, sheriff's deputies and state troopers, some mounted on horseback to challenge the marchers. When they refused to turn back, many were brutally beaten, including Lewis, who suffered a fractured skull. When the group attempted to regroup and kneel in prayer, the mounted police rode into the group as other lawmen fired tear gas cannisters into the throng. The group ran, stumbling back into town where they gathered in the relative safety of Brown Chapel AME church.

Cleveland Sellers was attending an MFDP meeting in Jackson, Mississippi, when he received an emergency phone call from SNCC's Selma office. "Get as many people as you can over here immediately, John Lewis and Hosea Williams of SCLC were leading a march and the people attacked them. John is in the hospital and we think he has a fractured skull," the voice on the line told Sellers.⁴ SNCC sprang into action, sending five carloads of workers to Selma who were previously headed to Mississippi. The group was angry, but behind the anger was an opportunity to express more militant action on behalf of SNCC. They hoped to prove the days of non-violent protests were over. Sellers wrote of the chaos they encountered when they entered Montgomery. On entering Brown Chapel, the scene was one of total confusion. "The police officers had completely

⁴ Sellers, *The River of No Return*, 126.

disoriented the people. The little church was filled with hysterical women, weeping children and thoroughly frustrated men. Many of the people still smelled of tear gas. Several wore makeshift bandages soaked through in spots with blood. SCLC officials were trying unsuccessfully to keep order.” Sellers left the church and immediately headed to Selma’s SNCC office to learn as much as he could about what led up to the assault. He said of the SNCC organizers there, even though most were veterans and seen assaults before, “They were angry, however, I could tell by the intensity of their voices, the feel of the warm air, that the spirit was building. A major confrontation was in progress.”⁵

The event on the Edmund Pettus Bridge was viewed at in horror through television screens across the country. The event had a similar feel to the atrocities in Birmingham, Alabama, in 1963, when Bull Connor, Commissioner of Public Safety, ordered his police officers to repel and drive back black children with high powered fire hoses and German shepherds. Sympathizers began arriving from across the country for another proposed march on March 10, led by Dr. King. Many of those who arrived were white clergy members. Federal Judge Frank Johnson requested a postponement of the march as a condition of hearing SCLC’s demand for an injunction against state officials. While Dr. King often defied state laws, he had never defied a federal one. On the day of the march, without informing anyone of his plans, Dr. King led the marchers to the barricades after crossing the Pettus Bridge, asked everyone to pray with him, then asked the group to turn back. Many people were bewildered, angry and felt betrayed by Dr. King, but he relied on federal support and therefore could not challenge federal courts.⁶

⁵ Sellers, *The River of No Return*, 126.

⁶ Carson, *In Struggle*, 159-60.

What's Good for One...

Three white ministers were attacked on the evening of the attempted march and one, Reverend James Reeb, later died from his injuries. The killing of Reeb further magnified the trouble in Selma and the news of his death angered many in the country and brought a huge national response. President Johnson sent a government plane on March 15, to deliver Reeb's widow to Selma from Boston. Upsetting to many blacks in Selma, especially those in SNCC was that the government response was virtually nonexistent following Jimmy Lee Jackson's death just two weeks earlier. Stokely Carmichael commented at Brown Chapel, "Now, I'm not saying we shouldn't pay tribute to Reverend Reeb. . . What I'm saying is that if we're going to pay tribute to one, we should also pay tribute to the other. And I think we have to analyze why (Johnson) sent flowers to Mrs. Reeb and not Mrs. Jackson."⁷

Federal authorities finally conceded to SCLC, and over 25,000 people took part in the march toward Montgomery. Dr. King spoke on the steps of the Alabama capitol and the march served as a major change in public opinion regarding the civil rights. President Johnson was able to pass a voting rights bill through congress, which many saw as a huge victory. SNCC was disenchanted by the experience and many hearts continued to harden. Many felt their doubts concerning non-violent direct action were well founded and militancy grew within in the ranks.⁸ Even John Lewis was shaken by the experience in Alabama. He said, "We're only flesh. I could understand people not wanting to be beaten

⁷ Quoted in Carson, *In Struggle*, 161.

⁸ *Ibid*, 161-62

anymore. . . Black capacity to believe (that a white person) would really open his heart, open his life to nonviolent appeal was running out.”⁹

During the Selma campaign in early 1965, Dr. King spoke of the growing tension with SNCC and said it was an “agony of spirit.”¹⁰ SCLC leaders also were concerned about the outbursts of SNCC Executive Secretary James Forman and questioned at times his mental stability. After a confrontation with police in Montgomery, Forman spoke to a church audience in anger, “If we can’t sit at the table to democracy, then we’ll knock the fucking legs off.”¹¹ While most SNCC members were ambivalent or opposed the march, Carmichael looked at the march from Selma to Montgomery as an opportunity. Years later he would say, “the march helped me in my organizing.”¹² During the march, Stokely and other SNCC members recorded information from the citizens of Lowndes County as they marched through the state. SNCC would be back.

Almost foreshadowing how the Civil Rights Movement would evolve after the march, Malcolm X visited Selma, at the request of SNCC members in February 1965. Dr. King had been jailed by Selma police on a trumped-up charge for trespassing outside a government building and was unable to meet with Malcolm, although his wife, Coretta, met with him. Malcolm X, who had recently broken ties with the Nation of Islam, spoke to a large group of the black community in the Brown Chapel. To the crowd and more importantly to the members of the press in attendance, he lauded Dr. King’s work and

⁹ Paul Good, “Odyssey of a Man- and a Movement,” *New York Times Magazine*, 25, June 1967, 46.

¹⁰ Joseph, *Stokely*, 84.

¹¹ *Nashville Banner*, 24 March 1965.

¹² Quoted in Joseph, *Stokely*, 85.

encouraged everyone in the community to embrace King's non-violent beliefs. Malcolm X encouraged non-violence in this instance, because, if the civil rights movement did not progress by the use of non-violence, there was only one other alternative. Just two weeks after he visited Selma and spoke to SNCC members, Malcolm X was assassinated in New York City, on February 21.¹³ Many SNCC members attended his funeral.

The Panther, Defiant

Lowndes County became more important to Stokely Carmichael than he ever could have dreamed. The population of the county was eighty-two percent black, although only a handful were registered voters.¹⁴ The black citizens of Lowndes County, mainly farmers, had no problem defending themselves when attacked and many owned weapons. Many of them were angry after decades of abuse and had to be restrained from attacking whites when slighted. SNCC began helping residents of the county register to vote, but by August 1965, only 250 were registered. On August 10, a federal voting registrar arrived after the passage of the Voting Rights Act of 1965, and the numbers of registered black voters began to grow.

White Democratic leaders in Lowndes County were beginning to feel threatened as blacks registered in greater numbers and there was concern within SNCC that there would be retaliations against black families. This led Carmichael to have conversations with SNCC research director Jack Minnis, concerning the feasibility of forming a separate political party. Minnis found a provision in Alabama law that allowed for a party

¹³ Peniel E. Joseph, *Waiting 'Til The Midnight Hour: A Narrative History of Black Power in America*, (New York, Henry Holt and Company, LLC, 2007), 181.

¹⁴ Carson, *Many Minds, One Heart*, 220.

to be formed at the county level. County residents could nominate candidates by holding a county convention and if the candidates received twenty percent of the votes in an election, the party would gain official recognition. Carmichael believed black political power resided in the will of the people themselves and after more discussion within the community, the Lowndes County Freedom Organization (LCFO) was formed. The party chose the drawing of a snarling, defiant black panther as its symbol.¹⁵

Cleveland Sellers wrote of Stokely Carmichael's appeal to the people of Lowndes County. "The people loved and respected him. He was, as far as they were concerned, one of them. He wasn't their leader. He wasn't some outsider from the North, trying to tell them what to do and how to do it. He was a *member* of the community."¹⁶ Carmichael was uniting the people of Lowndes County and showing each one of them they mattered. On the night before the election, each of the slated candidates had the opportunity to speak. Carmichael ended the evening by addressing the large group-

We have done what they said we could not do. Colored people have come together tonight! Tonight says that we CAN come together and we can rock this country from California to New York City! When we pull that lever we pull it for all the blood of Negroes that the whites have spilled. We will pull that lever to stop the beating of Negroes by whites. We will pull that lever for all the black people who have been killed. We are going to resurrect them tomorrow.¹⁷

The LCFO was incredibly important for the transition of SNCC into the more militant group it was becoming. Although there were no race restrictions for the LCFO, there were no whites who joined. While LCFO slated candidates were defeated in county

¹⁵Carson, *In Struggle*, 164-65.

¹⁶ Sellers, *The River of No Return*, 161.

¹⁷ Quoted in Sellers, *The River of No Return*, 161.

elections, due to election tampering and block voting from threatened plantation workers, SNCC and LCFO viewed the project as a success. More important than winning was that the black residents of Lowndes County, Mississippi knew they could be a part of the American political process. It represented Carmichael's long-held dream of organizing unrepresented people.¹⁸ This was a highpoint for SNCC, but although impossible to believe at the time, the LFCO was SNCC's last grassroots organizing project.¹⁹

In a January 7, 1966 editorial in the *New Republic*, Carmichael wrote from Lowndes County about white Americans ability for "self-delusion."²⁰ He explained that the Democratic Party was "a crew of racists and bullies." In Lowndes County, "they wanted to redefine politics, make up new rules and play the game with some personal integrity."²¹ The last line channeled Carmichael's thoughts on the civil rights movement as a whole. "Out of a negative force, fear grew the positive drive to think new." The *New York Times* referred to SNCC's efforts in Lowndes County as "political sabotage."²² Carmichael was condemned for his efforts in Lowndes County by SCLC and the NAACP as well.²³

¹⁸ Joseph, *Stokely*, 92.

¹⁹ Hogan, *Many Minds, One Heart*, 220.

²⁰ Stokely Carmichael. "Who Is Qualified?", *New Republic*, 20.

²¹ *Ibid*, 20-22.

²² *The New York Times*, 10 December 1965.

²³ Joseph, *Stokely*, 98.

CHAPTER FIVE

Sea Change

A SNCC retreat held in Kingston Springs, Tennessee, on May 8-10, 1966 was to serve as a regrouping for the organization at a critical time.¹ The outcome of decisions made at the retreat would completely alter SNCC involvement in the civil rights movement. The dueling dynamics of the organization, those of John Lewis, Diane Nash and Bob Moses, who shared non-violence as a personal philosophy conflicted too heavily with those of Stokely Carmichael and Cleveland Sellers who perceived non-violence as a strategy gone stale. There was also a question of the continued role of whites in the group.

In a confusing, often mythologized vote, John Lewis was reelected as chairman and James Forman executive secretary, only to be told that correct procedures of voting were not used. Forman resigned his position immediately in favor of another vote, but Lewis refused. Cleveland Sellers wrote that Lewis was “shaking with fury. . .He claimed he was chairman, that he had been legitimately elected and that he was not going to allow a group of troublemaking Northerners take the job from him. These comments generated much more resentment toward John than already existed.”²

¹ Lewis and D’Orso, *Walking with the Wind*, 383.

² Sellers, *The River of No Return*, 168.

Arguments continued through the night. Carmichael said of Lewis, “but what does it say if the chairman is that far out of touch with his organization?”³ Carmichael had SNCC members coming up to him, saying, “Yeah, John’s a nice guy, but he shouldn’t be chairman. He just isn’t representing us.”⁴ Lewis wrote that before the conference, “I learned Stokely had been mounting a campaign for the chairmanship. This was not something we ever did. No one in SNCC had ever campaigned for a position before.”⁵ He was heartbroken by the attacks from SNCC members. By morning, Stokely Carmichael had been elected chairman. Although Forman denied any involvement, Lewis blamed him for causing a “coup” in the organization he helped found.⁶ Forman wrote of his support of Carmichael, “his statements to me about his willingness to work inside the organization- a quality lacking in John Lewis were very appealing. I thought he would make a good chairman- he had field experience, many good ideas, and the ability to express them well- so I voted for him.”⁷

March for Freedom

Following the election, Carmichael, now head of SNCC, travelled to Mississippi to march with other civil rights leaders to complete James Meredith’s symbolic march across the state. Meredith, the first black student to be enrolled at the University of Mississippi in 1962, had begun a “March Against Fear” from Memphis to Jackson.

³ Carmichael and Thelwell, *Ready for Revolution*, 479.

⁴ Quoted in Carmichael and Thelwell, *Ready for Revolution*, 480.

⁵ Lewis and D’Orso, *Walking With The Wind*, 380.

⁶ Forman, *The Making of Black Revolutionaries*, 449-55.

⁷ *Ibid*, 519.

Shortly into his march, a sniper shot and wounded Meredith.⁸ SNCC, SCLC and CORE members made their way to continue the march at the place where Meredith was shot. Cleveland Sellers, said of SNCC's decision to march was because, "it was in the heart of SNCC territory. As a matter of fact, SNCC possessed more influence in that section of Mississippi than anywhere else in the nation."⁹ The NAACP and the National Urban League refused to take part in the march. Not only was there tension during the march due to the group's questionable security and safety, but as always there was the revisited tension between the leaders of SCLC and SNCC.

The older established guard of the Civil Rights Movement was now face to face with the "Black Panther" element of SNCC, a group very familiar with rural Mississippi after years of organizing in the state's black communities. King worried that SNCC would cause a "disenchantment with the whole structure of our society."¹⁰ SNCC devised a subversive plan for the Meredith march. SNCC members walked ahead of the larger group talking with as many local blacks as they could find. SNCC members were well known and respected, often living among the residents during their various projects through the first half of the 1960s. The locals were all asked to respond in a certain way when prompted by SNCC.

The press picked up on the changing dynamics of the civil rights movement and were now using it to fill the daily news. Dr. King and Carmichael were cordial to one another but their differing interviews and comments to the press showed the changing of

⁸ Joseph, *Waiting 'Til The Midnight Hour*, 132.

⁹ Sellers, *The River of No Return*, 170.

¹⁰ *The New York Times*, 28 May 1966.

SNCC beliefs and tactics. Privately, the two shared a very close bond. King chastised Carmichael, however, after he reacted when a white police officer pushed King off the Mississippi road where the group had been standing, and Carmichael lunged at the officer to protect King. Dr. King grabbed Carmichael before he could get close enough to strike the officer.¹¹ “You know Stokely, as we have discussed, you have greater responsibility now. You have to be very, very careful now that you represent SNCC.”¹² Carmichael responded, “I am sorry, Dr. King. This is the first time I have broken discipline on a non-violent demonstration. . . . And the only reason I did was because that cracker charged into you.”¹³

“Twenty-Seven Times”

On June 16, 1966, Carmichael was arrested at a campsite in Greenwood, MS., after his refusal to a police officer’s order to quit assembling his tent for the night, on what had originally been an agreed upon campsite for the group. He had spent the summer of 1964 in Greenwood as an organizer and was familiar with the area. His release on a \$100 bond proved to be the perfect time to put the SNCC plan in motion.¹⁴ Sellers wrote, “Stokely. . . was well known. Many people attending the evening rallies wanted to see and hear him. . . . Like the rest of us, they were angry about Stokely’s unnecessary arrest.”¹⁵

¹¹ Joseph, *Waiting ‘Til The Midnight Hour*, 132.

¹² Quoted in Carmichael and Thelwell, *Ready for Revolution*, 503.

¹³ *Ibid*, 503.

¹⁴ Joseph, *Waiting ‘Til The Midnight Hour*, 141-42.

¹⁵ Sellers, *The River of No Return*, 174-75.

Carmichael stood on the top of a truck in the middle of a field and addressed a group of over six hundred people. “This is the twenty-seventh time that I’ve been arrested, I ain’t going to jail no more.”¹⁶ He continued, “All we’ve been doing is begging the federal government. The only thing we can do is take over.” With that he held up a clinched fist and yelled, “What do we want?” The crowd responded with “Black Power!” He yelled the question five times and each time it was met with the reply from the crowd, “Black Power!” The civil rights movement instantly pivoted in a dynamic, new direction.¹⁷

The shockwave that struck Greenwood sent ripples throughout the rest of the country after the first calls for “Black Power.” During the remainder of the Meredith march, white members of SNCC and CORE, who had been involved in the organizations for years, realized their roles within the groups were changing and were beginning to feel alienated. As they continued on the march, black marchers began referring to white hecklers that gathered as “whiteys” and “honkies,” and many of the whites participating wondered if that was how the blacks in SNCC felt about them as well. John Lewis knew the organization he helped found no longer had a place for him.¹⁸ He overheard a phone conversation in SNCC’s Atlanta headquarters between Carmichael and Cleveland Sellers about how they were going to “take over the march” and “set up” the SCLC. Lewis

¹⁶ Quoted in Joseph, *Stokely*, 114.

¹⁷ Joseph, *Stokely*, 115.

¹⁸ Lewis and D’Orso, *Walking with the Wind*, 177.

wrote, “I could never be a party to anything that involved deviousness and deceit. That afternoon, I submitted my resignation. . . .”¹⁹

King still had to make it through the march and referred to the call for Black Power as “an unfortunate choice of words.”²⁰ Other Civil Rights and national leaders shared their own opinions. Roy Wilkins of the NAACP referred to it as “the raging of race against race. . . . We will have none of it.”²¹ The esteemed Bayard Rustin worried about the direction of the movement and the “confusion” Black Power caused.²² Vice President Hubert Humphrey, the longtime proponent for civil rights called Black Power “reverse racism.”²³ The Meredith march ended on June 26, 1966 with a rally held in Jackson.²⁴

¹⁹ Ibid, 388.

²⁰ *The New York Times*, 21 June 1966.

²¹ Quoted in Carmichael and Thelwell, *Ready for Revolution*, 525.

²² William L. Van Deburg, *New Day in Babylon* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1993) 12.

²³ Quoted in Carmichael and Thelwell, *Ready for Revolution*, 526.

²⁴ Joseph, *Waiting 'Til The Midnight Hour*, 145.

CHAPTER SIX

Say it Loud!

While the more traditional civil rights leaders spoke against Carmichael, or at least had reservations about him, Carmichael was widely embraced by the Nation of Islam (NOI).¹ Many compared Carmichael to Malcolm X, and saw him as the appropriate person to take over the mantle of black nationalism. The group's founder, Elijah Muhammed held lavish dinners for him with other NOI members, including Louis Farrakhan and Muhammed Ali. While Carmichael certainly enjoyed being fawned over, he was never really comfortable around Elijah Muhammed, who Carmichael described as "almost frail." "The Messenger (Muhammed) was a slightly built, almost petite, light-skinned black man with a distinctly Asiatic cast to his features."² Cleveland Sellers accompanied Carmichael to meet with Muhammed and later wrote, "my recollection is that there was a lot of talk about divine intervention, a lot. And much fulfillment of prophecy and some stuff about a mothership. Very un-SNCC stuff."³ With Farrakhan, Carmichael enjoyed discussions regarding their similar political beliefs, while with Ali, he enjoyed his playfulness and celebrity status. Ali would soon refuse his military draft status and become a more outspoken anti-war crusader that would result in the forfeiture

¹ Joseph, *Stokely*, 133-135.

² Carmichael and Thelwell, *Ready for Revolution*, 522.

³ *Ibid*, 522.

of his heavyweight boxing title. Carmichael saw the boxer as the epitome of a true revolutionary.

Stokely Carmichael became immersed in the promotion of the Black Power movement and the new identity of SNCC. He emerged as the fiery spokesman and instantly identifiable leader of an organization founded as a counter to the top down leadership structure of the SCLC. While natural leaders had emerged over the years, there was never intended to be a figurehead at the top of the group.

On August 5, 1966, the *New York Times* ran a lengthy article on Carmichael entitled “Black Power Prophet: Stokely Carmichael.” The article stated that “one of his first targets when he became chairman of the student committee in May was white liberals. . . . During the last few months, he has become more militant in these public utterances. While preaching black power, he has become increasingly cool toward whites.”⁴ Lerone Bennett, Jr., a fan of Carmichael and the Black Power movement, wrote of him in *Ebony Magazine*, “Carmichael has been hailed as a ‘hip Malcolm X,’ and condemned as a ‘juvenile pied piper’ leading black people to ‘black death.’”⁵ Cleveland Sellers remembered this early period of Black Power, “in black ghettos across the nation, we were hailed as young heroes- Young Turks taking it to ‘The Man.’”⁶

President Lyndon B. Johnson was certainly not a fan of Carmichael. Carmichael was openly critical of John Lewis, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and other civil rights

⁴ *New York Times*, 5 August 1966.

⁵ Lerone Bennett, Jr., “Stokely Carmichael: Architect of Black Power,” *Ebony Magazine*, September 1966, 26.

⁶ Sellers, *The River of No Return*, 193.

leaders for working so closely with Johnson.⁷ Johnson described Carmichael as a “young man who didn’t know his rear end from his elbow.” He blamed Carmichael’s Black Power movement and the growing civil unrest in black metropolitan areas for scaring Congress into voting against a new civil rights bill in 1966.⁸ Johnson had further reason to be disgusted with Carmichael after it was announced there would be a SNCC-led protest outside the White House during the wedding of Johnson’s daughter, Luci. While prominent members of the civil rights movement condemned the march, Carmichael shot back with “you have displayed more backbone in defending Luci than you have shown for the millions of black people being brutalized every day in the United States. You have displayed more backbone in defending Luci than you have shown for the colored people of Vietnam being napalmed by Luci’s father.”⁹

Carmichael penned an essay, “What We Want,” in *The New York Review of Books*, in September 1966. It was well received among intellectuals and took many aback who did not realize Carmichael’s brilliance and who had cast him aside as a loud-mouthed firebrand. He wrote, “An organization needs to speak for the needs of a community, as does the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee, must speak in the tone of the community, not as somebody else’s buffer zone.”¹⁰ He spoke of the recent

⁷ John Lewis, “Tensions within SNCC and transition of leadership from Lewis to Carmichael.” Interview A-0073, *Southern Oral History Collection*, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, November 20, 1973.

⁸ Joseph. *Stokely*, 144-147.

⁹ *The New York Times*, 5 August 1966.

¹⁰ Stokely Carmichael, “What We Want,” *The New York Review of Books*, 22 September 1966. 5-6,8.

riots in Watts and other parts of the country to try to explain the rationale for the violence:

Each time the people in the cities saw Martin Luther King get slapped, they became angry; when they saw those four little black girls bombed to death, they were angrier; and when nothing happened, they were steaming. We had nothing to offer that they could see, except to go out and get beaten again. We helped to build their frustration. . . .¹¹

On September 27, Carmichael spoke to Mike Wallace in a CBS News special report, “Black Power, White Backlash” from SNCC’s Atlanta headquarters. Wallace, after interviewing the dashiki-clad Carmichael for several minutes, offered him the opportunity to speak directly to the white American public:

I would say, “Understand yourself, white man.” That the white man’s burden should not have been preached in Africa, but it should have been preached among you. That you need now to civilize yourself. You have moved to destroy and disrupt. You have taken people away, you have broken down their systems, and you have called this civilization, and we, who have suffered at this are now saying to you, you are the killers of dreams, you are the savages. . . Civilize yourself.¹²

As John Lewis once said of Stokely Carmichael, “he loved nothing more than to scare the hell out of white people.”¹³ Now he was given the opportunity to do so on national television.

Black Power on Tour

Carmichael drew huge crowds at SNCC fundraising speaking engagements across the country. On October 29, 1966, he addressed a large crowd of students and supporters

¹¹ Stokely Carmichael, “What We Want,” *The New York Review of Books*, 22 September 1966. 5-6,8.

¹² “CBS Reports: Black Power, White Backlash.” 10.

¹³ Lewis and D’Orso, *Walking with the Wind*, 177.

at a rally held at the University of California, Berkeley. He strode across the stage and thanked the crowd for being invited to speak at “the intellectual ghetto of the West.” He continued by addressing the media present, “Oh, for my members and friends of the press, my self-appointed white critics: I was reading Mr. Bernard Shaw two days ago, and I came across a very important quote, which I think is most apropos for you. He says, ‘All criticism is autobiography.’ Dig Yourself.”¹⁴ Carmichael used his intellect and ego to excite, challenge, and provoke audiences with the notion of Black Power. “We are oppressed as a group because we are black. Not because we are lazy. Not because we are apathetic. Not because we are stupid. Not because we smell. Not because we eat watermelon and have good rhythm. We are oppressed because we are black.”¹⁵ The mainly white, middle class, liberal crowd ate up the rhetoric, although it was that very group Carmichael was often vilifying, provided he was not directly in front of them at the time. California Governor Pat Brown and his Republican challenger, Ronald Reagan both denounced the speech.¹⁶

Stokely Carmichael continued his crusade against the Johnson administration and U.S. involvement in Vietnam. As he became more vocal, the Justice Department, aided by the FBI, continued adding to a growing file on Carmichael. Mississippi Congressman John Bell Williams sent a public letter to Defense Secretary Robert McNamara, inquiring on Carmichael’s draft status. Williams wrote in the letter, “He is obviously a prime

¹⁴ Stokely Carmichael, *Stokely Speaks: Black Power Back to Pan-Africanism* (Chicago, Chicago Review Press, 2007) 46.

¹⁵ Carmichael, *Stokely Speaks*, 49.

¹⁶ *Ibid*, 160-161.

candidate for your salvage and rehabilitation program.”¹⁷ Carmichael had been evaluated for military service and given a 1-Y exemption, which meant he was available for service in case of emergency but exempt for health or other reasons. His status was eventually changed to 4-F. Confidential information obtained by the FBI, which was dated January 21, 1965, stated that doctors originally felt he was mentally unfit for duty.¹⁸

Stokely Carmichael was proving to be both a blessing and a curse for SNCC. While his speaking fees across the country were desperately needed to fund the organization, his new celebrity status in concert with his growing ego were not universally loved by everyone in the organization. SNCC executive secretary Ruby Doris Smith Robinson, mockingly referred to him as “Stokely Starmichael,” and worried that he was bypassing the organization’s system of checks and balances in the personal statements he made publicly.¹⁹ James Forman countered her originally, later writing, “during Stokely’s year as chairman, SNCC had no ideology to provide him with guidelines in the many public statements he made. We were still struggling for direction. Stokely was left free to say whatever he liked.”²⁰ While Carmichael’s status was growing across the nation, the organizational structure that had long been the success of SNCC projects was floundering. “We were surrounded by contradictions. While establishment leaders denounced our spiraling influence, we were doing everything possible to keep the organization from collapsing,” wrote Cleveland Sellers.²¹

¹⁷ *The New York Times*, 7 September 1966.

¹⁸ Joseph, *Stokely*, 157.

¹⁹ Joseph, *Stokely*, 138.

²⁰ Forman, *The Making of Black Revolutionaries*, 519.

²¹ Sellers, *The River of No Return*, 193.

SNCC also faced the reality that many of their successes had been in helping organize communities and projects in the rural south. SNCC realized there were few “students” left in the organization that thrived in its genesis with peaceful students from black college campuses of the south. Many new members of the organization were drawn to Carmichael’s idea of “Black Power” and were decidedly more urban. By 1966, only a third of SNCC staff members were in the Atlanta office or spread across the south. The rest had moved to urban areas in Washington, New York and Los Angeles.²² New members also refused the same training many veteran organizers had gone through, like the lessons taught by Bob Moses, involving non-violent direct-action techniques. The veterans, many who were still in their twenties, were tired and emotionally worn down from the constant stress they had been under since the first half of the 1960s.

The Path Forward

As with John Lewis, SNCC lost many early members due to the changes in the organization, the exclusion of white veteran members, medical conditions and better opportunities. Charles Sherrod, SNCC’s first field secretary, left the organization after the SNCC Central Committee rejected Sherrod’s plan to bring northern white students in to help work in southwest Georgia.²³ Julian Bond felt the need to distance himself from the organization as he tried to take a seat in the Georgia legislature. He later commented that SNCC no longer seemed to “have a program to match its rhetoric.” Bob Moses, one of the founders of SNCC, changed his name to Robert Parris, paranoid he was constantly

²² Carson, *In Struggle*, 231.

²³ Ibid, 232.

under surveillance. He never recovered from the stress of the Freedom Summer. He left the group around the same time.²⁴

The passage of the 1964 Civil Rights Bill and the 1965 Voting Rights Bill also caused traditional civil rights organizations to wonder “what do we do now?” The passage of these bills, while monumental, caused SCLC, SNCC and others to lose their grip in areas in the south because it appeared to many that they had gotten what they had long fought for. Carmichael wrote, “in the South, SNCC had accomplished everything it was set up to do. Jim Crow, as our parents had known it, was dead. All that was left was the organizing the funeral.”²⁵ At that point he could have been referring to either Jim Crow, or SNCC. The Federal Government passed the laws that were needed, but as with other past legislation, it came down to the willingness to enforce the laws. Cleveland Sellers claimed that after the laws were passed all “initiative was lost in these areas.”²⁶ The problem was that even if the laws were in place, they did not change the lives of most blacks living in the south. The laws did nothing to help educate them, as the *Brown v. Topeka Board of Education of Topeka* (1954, 1955) Supreme Court decision had attempted to do by ending school segregation. The laws were not enforced and did not address the oppressive racial caste system in the deep south. Sellers continued by writing there was only the “illusion of progress.”

SNCC’s declining effectiveness was also apparent due to the loss of northern philanthropy, upon which the group had historically relied. While some pulled back after

²⁴ Sellers, *The River of No Return*, 153.

²⁵ Carmichael and Thelwell, *Ready for Revolution*, 660.

²⁶ Sellers, *The River of No Return*, 140.

the first cries of “Black Power,” others began to withhold funds due to the lack of projects from the group. SNCC began relying on professional fundraisers and many staff members had to skip paychecks which added additional strain on members and their families. Stokely Carmichael was a money maker with his speeches across the country, but SNCC was growing tired of his status as a celebrity. SNCC members were often referred to as Carmichael’s “aides” in the press, which many resented. Some in the organization also worried that Carmichael was more interested in getting his personal message out, instead of speaking on behalf of SNCC.²⁷ As Cleveland Sellers wrote of Carmichael, “Stokely’s magnetic appeal to the mass media presented SNCC with several problems. Unlike the previous chairman, Stokely was outgoing, a charismatic figure who attracted attention wherever he went.”²⁸ Ruby Doris Smith Robinson conceded that “at his best, he has said what (the masses of black people) wanted to hear,” but “cliché after cliché has filled his orations.”²⁹

During the weekend of October 22-23, 1966, a central committee meeting was held to deal with the internal structure of SNCC. Carmichael addressed the group of SNCC members in attendance by admitting that some of his rhetoric had made it difficult for the organization to continue to grow and evolve in long-standing projects. He was defensive, however, regarding his role as chairman of the organization.³⁰ Carmichael would later write, “people start to get all this media attention and they begin to think they

²⁷ Carson, *In Struggle*, 230.

²⁸ Sellers, *The River of No Return*, 194.

²⁹ Ruby Doris Robinson, Organization Report to SNCC Central Committee, 21 October 1966.

³⁰ Joseph, *Stokely*, 154.

are important. People recognize you anywhere you go. Autograph seekers be approaching you. . . . If you are so inclined, and if you are not careful, you begin to feel sho nuff like *you* the celebrity.”³¹ After being harangued by Robinson, Faye Bellamy and others, the committee suggested the establishment of guidelines regarding the content of Carmichael’s speeches.³² He reluctantly agreed to take a break from speaking after December 10 to focus on SNCC organizational needs. It was also decided that Carmichael would begrudgingly be accompanied to any speech or interview by another member of SNCC, to make sure he did not veer off his approved rhetorical course. What had begun just a few months before over ideology was quickly becoming an internal battle over personalities and petty jealousies.

During the summer and fall of 1966, SNCC was also confronted with the ongoing discussion regarding the role of whites within the group. Many of the older members who were still part of the changing group looked to many white organizers as dear friends who had suffered beatings and arrests along with them in the name of equality since the first days of the Freedom Rides. For newer members of the group, sometimes referred to as “separatists” viewed SNCC as a black organization that would only be successful if run by blacks. Julius Lester, who joined the group during Carmichael’s chairmanship tried to explain the changing mood of the organization in an essay, “The Angry Children of Malcolm X.” Lester wrote of the naïve and idealistic SNCC founders “who honestly believed that once white people knew what segregation did, it would be abolished.”³³

³¹ Carmichael and Thelwell, *Ready for Revolution*, 545.

³² Joseph, *Stokely*, 154.

³³ Julius Lester, “The Angry Children of Malcolm X,” *Sing Out*, 16 October-November 1966.

Lester went on to predict a race war would be coming in the near future in his popular tract, *Look Out Whitey! Black Power's Gon' Get Your Mama!*³⁴ If blacks were going to represent Black Power, they could not do so with the help of whites. Ironically, as SNCC became more homogenous, the ties that bound the group together would never be as strong again.³⁵ James Forman looked at early white members as “blood brothers,” and wrote that “one might get the impression that the reason for SNCC’s difficulties at this stage was the presence of so many whites. But that would be to negate the importance of the class factor- a factor which we did not give enough importance to at the time. Much of the liberalism was being articulated by Northern middle-class blacks.”³⁶

Rock Bottom

SNCC held a retreat for over one hundred members in Kerhonkson, New York on December 1, 1966. It was similar to the October meeting, with Carmichael addressing the group by speaking to some of SNCC’s difficulties. James Forman watched the meeting and described it as hitting “rock bottom,” and wrote an essay afterwards with that as the title.³⁷ Fannie Lou Hamer, the courageous stand-out of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party at the Democratic National Convention in 1964 was insulted by new college educated members who said she “was no longer relevant,” and not “at our rate of development.”³⁸ Long-time veterans of the organization continued to leave, including

³⁴ Julius Lester, *Look Out, Whitey! Black Power's Gon' Get Your Mama!*, (New York, Dial Press, 1968) 137-138.

³⁵ Carson, *In Struggle*, 236-37.

³⁶ Forman, *The Making of Black Revolutionaries*, 421-22.

³⁷ *Ibid*, 477.

³⁸ Quoted in Forman, *The Making of Black Revolutionaries*,

founder Marion Barry. Forman noted that the marijuana smoking and pill popping of the organization had gotten out of hand. Although the organization passed rules regarding drug use, the rules were usually overlooked by the leaders.³⁹

The question over white members was discussed over several days, which was incredibly uncomfortable for some black members and the few white members in the room. When a vote was taken on the issue, nineteen voted for expulsion of whites, eighteen against, and twenty-four abstained. Bob Zellner was one of those whites who was expelled. He was offered the opportunity to stay in the group and be excluded from meetings. To this offer, he said, “my decision is that I am either a SNCC staff member or I am not.”⁴⁰ He had been with SNCC since 1961, and the first white field secretary.⁴¹ Later, Forman would refer to Zellner as “his best friend.”⁴²

The retreat also brought matters concerning Stokely Carmichael to a head. Carmichael agreed to step down as chairman of the organization to allow H. Rap Brown to succeed him. Brown was the younger brother of long time SNCC member Ed Brown and he was seen by many as controllable, at least more controllable than Carmichael. He later wrote. Although he would not take over until the following May, Brown’s tenure would be short as he received the brunt of the government tracking of the organization.⁴³ Carmichael later wrote, “SNCC had become too much of a target and any chairman was

³⁹ Quoted in Forman, *The Making of Black Revolutionaries*, 476-77.

⁴⁰ Quoted from Sellers, *The River of No Return*, 207.

⁴¹ Carson, *In Struggle*, 240-241.

⁴² Quoted in Sellers, *The River of No Return*, 207.

⁴³ Joseph, *Waiting 'Til The Midnight Hour*, 181.

likely to continue to be one as well.”⁴⁴ During the contentious meeting, Forman went so far as to make a motion, which was voted down by the group, that SNCC disband and that all remaining funds of the organization be sent to revolutionists in Guinea.⁴⁵

⁴⁴ Carmichael and Thelwell, *Ready for Revolution*, 564.

⁴⁵ Forman, *The Making of Black Revolutionaries*, 475.

CHAPTER SEVEN

“Starmichael”

After the dramatic retreat, Carmichael returned home to New York City to give his sister, Lynette, away at her wedding. He was followed by *Life* magazine photojournalist, Gordon Parks, who was working on a profile of Carmichael.¹ The magazine came out in the May 19, 1967 issue and split the photo coverage between Carmichael in his role as a Black Power revolutionary and being waited on by his loving mother at his sister’s wedding.² Carmichael talked to Parks about how the civil rights movement had changed over the years and how the kids in the future would be much more radical than he. “People think *I’m* militant! Wait until those kids grow up! There are young cats around here that make me look like a dove of peace!”³ Parks also captured Carmichael speaking to a group regarding his opposition to the Vietnam war. “Ain’t no Vietcong ever called me nigger. . . and if I’m going to do any fighting, I’m going to do it right here at home! We will not fight in Vietnam and run in Georgia!”⁴

Parks’ profile also told of how not all civil rights leaders flocked to Carmichael’s Black Power banner and how he might have hurt the cause more than helped it. NAACP head Roy Wilkins, no fan of Carmichael, was quoted, “No matter how endlessly they try

¹ Joseph, *Stokely*, 169.

² Parks, “Whip of Black Power,” 76-82.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ *Ibid.*

to explain Black Power, the term means anti-white. . . . It has to mean going it alone. It has to mean separatism. This offers a disadvantaged minority little except the chance to shrivel and die.”⁵ “Martin Luther King,” Parks wrote, “has called Black Power a confusing phrase, but has never actually denounced it.”⁶ With that line, Parks showed that the mutual respect between King and Carmichael was still stronger than any reservations regarding personal ideology.

Over the years, King and Carmichael had grown close through the activities they participated in and both of them living in Atlanta while not on the road. Dr. King was a mentor to Carmichael and there was a shared love and respect between the two men. Carmichael said of King, “of all the ‘adult’ leaders, Dr. King had always best understood and supported SNCC’s work and approach.”⁷ In late April, King called Carmichael and invited him to hear him preach the next day at Ebenezer Baptist Church, as he publicly condemned the Vietnam War, something Carmichael had long urged him to do. Carmichael sat on the front row of the church and led a standing ovation after King delivered his sermon.⁸

The year 1967 led Carmichael to some of his most controversial decisions and actions. His book, *Black Power: The Politics of Liberation in America*, co-written with Charles V. Hamilton, was published and served as the movement’s manifesto.⁹ The book

⁵ Quoted in Parks, “Whip of Black Power,” 80.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Carmichael and Ekwueme Thelwell, *Ready for Revolution*, 511.

⁸ Ibid, 515-16.

⁹ Stokely Carmichael and Charles V. Hamilton, *Black Power: The Politics of Liberation in America* (New York, Random House, 1967).

gave specific examples of black oppression and spoke to racism as few had heard it spoken before.

The whole question of race is one that America would rather not face honestly and squarely. To some, it is embarrassing; to others, it is inconvenient; to others, it is confusing. But for black Americans, to know it and tell it like it is and then to act on that knowledge should be neither embarrassing nor inconvenient nor confusing. . . . We blacks must respond in our own way, on our own terms, in a manner which fits our temperaments. The definitions of ourselves, the roles we pursue, the goals we seek are *our* responsibility.¹⁰

Throughout the book, Carmichael told blacks to get hold of their lives and to speak truthfully of their situations. The book was not racist as some whites would claim, or anti-white; it simply told blacks to be in control of their own lives and that blacks probably knew better than white people how to fix things in black communities. For many young blacks the book served as a guide for moving forward.

Global Revolutionary

Carmichael had been invited to speak in London, at a conference called the “Dialectics of Liberation.” While he intended to stay only a couple of weeks, he later decided to add stops to Cuba, North Vietnam and several countries in Africa. He was gone nearly three months. In London, Carmichael found the conference he was invited to attend a sham, it was actually put together by four psychologists concerned with “radical innovation.”¹¹ He ended up speaking to various groups on civil rights, Black Power and Vietnam. Carmichael had what he felt was a wonderful interview by BBC reporter Andrew Salkey. He later commented, “it is always a great relief to work with conscious

¹⁰ Carmichael and Hamilton, *Black Power*, xvi-xvii.

¹¹ Carmichael and Thelwell, *Ready for Revolution*, 573.

black journalists. Such a difference, a pleasure.”¹² He thoroughly enjoyed being among the Caribbean Londoners around the city in their enclaves of Notting Hill and Brixton. While many of the British public treated him like a rock star and followed him everywhere, those were not his only followers. Much as in the United States, he was heavily monitored by the British secret service, or “special branch.”¹³ The *London Tribune* reported that although Carmichael was an intellectual, his speeches were “laced with sarcasm.”¹⁴

One of his speeches dealt with the very sensitive topic of British colonialism:

I’m always amazed when I pick up a newspaper and read that “England today decided to give the West Indies their independence.” That’s totally absurd, you cannot *give* independence to anyone. You cannot *grant* anyone their independence. If it’s independence, they just take it; and that is what white America is going to learn. No white liberal can give me anything. The only thing a white liberal can do for me is help civilize the other whites, because the need to be civilized.¹⁵

Carmichael cut his trip to London short because the British government had issued an “expulsion order” for him to leave the country due to his incendiary comments.¹⁶

Prior to leaving London, Carmichael was asked by a Cuban high commissioner if he would like to attend a conference in Havana as the guest of Cuban leader Fidel Castro. Carmichael indicated he would be honored to, but the Cuban commissioner warned him how that would look for him politically. Carmichael arrived in Havana, Cuba on July 25,

¹² Carmichael and Thelwell, *Ready for Revolution*, 573.

¹³ Joseph, *Stokely*, 199.

¹⁴ *London Tribune*, 28 July 1967.

¹⁵ Carmichael and Thelwell, *Ready for Revolution*, 578.

¹⁶ *Ibid*, 582.

via Denmark to attend a conference for the Organization of Latin American Solidarity (OLAS).¹⁷ Carmichael was travelling by himself, not as a representative of SNCC, whose members were also attending the conference in an official capacity. The Cuban government welcomed him with open arms, and he spent a great deal of time with Fidel Castro. Castro took Carmichael into the Sierra Maestra mountains and proudly showed him where many of the guerilla-style battles of the Cuban revolution had taken place.¹⁸ In front of an audience of one million people, Castro introduced his American guest as one of the “most distinguished” civil rights leaders and proclaimed that “the U.S. colored population, victim of discrimination and exploitation, is rising up more and more with astonishing valor and heroism to demand its rights and resist force with force.”¹⁹ Carmichael said of his conversations with Castro that they were the “most educational, most interesting, and most enlightening of my entire public life.”²⁰

SNCC was not pleased because Carmichael’s presence overshadowed the attendance of other SNCC members and again made it appear as if he spoke for the organization. James Forman wrote of the trouble with Carmichael in Cuba in regard to SNCC. “Carmichael made arrangements to go to the OLAS all on his own, while away on an approved trip to London. He did so despite the fact that the overseas trip committee had appointed two others to represent SNCC at the OLAS and we had prepared a position

¹⁷ Carmichael and Thelwell, *Ready for Revolution*, 583.

¹⁸ *Ibid*, 587.

¹⁹ Quoted in Joseph, *Stokely*, 204.

²⁰ Carmichael and Thelwell, *Ready for Revolution*, 586.

paper for the meeting. . . . That series of actions by Stokely was a serious violation of organizational discipline.”²¹

Regardless of SNCC’s position, the OLAS conference gave Carmichael the opportunity to address the group gathered. He compared the plight of African Americans with the plight of citizens in all Latin countries due to the treatment of them by the United States.²²

We share with you a common struggle, it becomes increasingly clear; we have a common enemy. Our enemy is white Western imperialist society. Our struggle is to overthrow this system that feeds itself and expands itself through the economic and cultural exploitation of non-white, non-Western peoples of the Third World.²³

Carmichael later wrote of his time at the conference, “It was an incredible moment, more than just exciting. It was eye-opening, inspiring, and mind- blowing. . . . So many different groups and faces, all in some way struggling against injustice and inequality, and to improve humanity.”²⁴

New York Times bureau chief James Reston was amazed and horrified by Carmichael’s display at the conference. He wrote in a dispatch that “Stokely Carmichael is playing a miserable game down here. He is not only condemning his own country abroad, but he is misleading Fidel Castro and the other revolutionary Communists from Latin America about the condition and power of the Negroes in America.”²⁵

²¹ Forman, *The Making of Black Revolutionaries*, 521.

²² Carmichael, *Stokely Speaks*, 101-110.

²³ Carmichael, *Stokely Speaks*, 101-110.

²⁴ Carmichael and Thelwell, *Ready for Revolution*, 583.

²⁵ *New York Times*, 1 August 1967.

While Carmichael was in Cuba, the Cuban Government informed him that the United States planned to seize his passport as soon as he stepped back into the country. To this he later wrote, “So they going to take my passport for coming to Cuba, huh? Hey, let’s really give them something to take it for. . . . If these *gringos* going to take my passport for coming *here*, let them take it for *all* of em”²⁶ With the help of the Cuban government, Carmichael arranged a trip to visit North Vietnam, via China. Entering China, he was greeted by Shirley Graham Du Bois, the widow of the iconic black civil rights leader of the first half of the twentieth century, W. E. B. Du Bois. The two had dinner together and fostered a friendship that would continue to grow as Carmichael traveled through Africa, at her invitation.²⁷

Upon his arrival in Hanoi, Carmichael was quickly ushered into a bomb shelter due to an American bombing attack.²⁸ As an honored guest, he attended several receptions held in his honor and enjoyed private meals with Ho Chi Minh. President Ho was impressed by Carmichael’s knowledge of his writings and he shared stories of his time in the United States and listening to speeches from Marcus Garvey on the sidewalks of Harlem.²⁹ Carmichael wrote of Chairman Ho, “Ho Chi Minh was a great man. He clarified many things for me. He had a real appreciation of our struggle in America. We discussed, of course, the role of African American troops in Vietnam.”³⁰ Chairman Ho

²⁶ Carmichael and Thelwell, *Ready for Revolution*, 590-91.

²⁷ Carmichael and Thelwell, *Ready for Revolution*, 594-595

²⁸ Carmichael and Thelwell, *Ready for Revolution*, 599.

²⁹ *Ibid*, 601.

³⁰ *Ibid*.

told Carmichael that his troops were taught not to kill African soldiers, if possible, because it was not their fault they were fighting. Before the end of their last meal together, Ho Chi Minh gave Carmichael a silk scarf to take home to his mother.³¹ Carmichael was moved by the North Vietnamese people and his resolve to continue his protest of the American war was hardened after the visit.

Trouble at Home

While Carmichael was travelling through the third world, establishing his international revolutionary credentials, SNCC continued to make headlines back in the United States. In July 1967, Chairman H. Rap Brown was shot in Cambridge, Maryland after urging a crowd of 400 black protestors to “burn this town down if this town don’t turn around.”³² Brown was in Maryland to meet with the Cambridge Action Federation, made up of former SNCC members and other black youths upset by recent activities of the Ku Klux Klan and the white States Rights Party. In many ways, Brown was more militant and rhetorically bombastic than Stokely Carmichael ever was, and often carried a loaded pistol with him. He encouraged the crowd to burn down white businesses because money was the only thing whites respected. After a forty-minute speech, Brown led rioters to Cambridge’s business district where store and businesses were burned and looted. A black elementary school deemed “inferior” to white schools was also burned to the ground. A white police officer fired a shotgun and Brown was hit by one pellet in the forehead. He was treated and released by a local doctor. Brown claimed not to have taken

³¹ Carmichael and Thelwell, *Ready for Revolution*, 601.

³² *New York Times*, 25 July 1967.

part in the riot and had simply been walking a woman home. He fled the city the next morning.³³

Maryland Governor Spiro Agnew toured Cambridge after the riot and blamed Brown for the destruction. He was charged with arson and the case was turned over to the FBI, since Brown was no longer in Maryland. Brown was in Washington at the time and feared he was in the middle of a nationwide manhunt. Through his attorney, Brown agreed to turn himself in to New York authorities. The FBI denied making a deal with Brown for his surrender and he was arrested at the Washington airport on his way to New York. He was directly taken to the courthouse in Alexandria, Virginia, federal charges were dropped so he could be rearrested and extradited to Maryland to face arson charges. Never one to miss an opportunity, when Brown was released on bond, he released a statement that said America was “one the eve of a black revolution,” and referred to President Lyndon Johnson as a “white honky cracker, an outlaw from Texas.”³⁴

Brown attempted to visit family in New Orleans, by flying from New York after his release on bond. He lawfully registered a rifle in his name with the airline and checked it in as luggage as he attempted to board a plane. At roughly the same time, a Dayton, Ohio court charged him with “advocating criminal syndicalism,” while a grand jury in Maryland charged him with arson and New York officials arrested him by touting a little-known state law which made it illegal for persons under indictment to transport

³³ Carson, *In Struggle*, 255-56.

³⁴ *Ibid.*.

weapons over state lines. He was held on a \$25,000 bond and sent to New Orleans under jurisdiction from the federal court. He was unable to post bail.³⁵

While Brown's issues continued to play out across the nation's newspapers, SNCC worker, Fred Meely, without consulting other staff members, wrote an article in *African American News for You*, regarding his support for the Palestinians in the Arab-Israeli conflict. A following article in the SNCC newsletter written by Ethel Minor, listed thirty-two "documented facts" regarding "The Palestinian Problem." She also wrote Israelis were committing atrocities against Arabs and charged there was bias in Israel over dark-skinned Jews, which led to an overwhelming backlash from Jewish and civil rights leaders.³⁶ James Forman, who had just returned from Africa, later wrote, "The material had been hastily edited and the questions were not framed to make the kind of educational presentation desirable- especially for the black movement."³⁷

The *New York Times*, reported "spokesmen for leading Jewish and Zionist organizations pointed to the sacrifices made by Jews in working for civil rights causes." Especially hurtful were the memories of the deaths of New Yorkers Michael Schwerner and Andrew Goodman, both Jewish, who were murdered during the 1964 Freedom Summer. Whitney M. Young, Jr., executive director of the National Urban League was quoted as saying, "Negro citizens are well aware of the contributions made to the drive of civil rights by Jewish citizens. Negroes have been the victims of racism for too long to indulge in group stereotypes and racial hate themselves." Longtime civil rights leaders,

³⁵ *The New York Times*, 21 August 1967.

³⁶ Carson, *In Struggle*, 267-68.

³⁷ Forman, *The Making of Black Revolutionaries*, 496.

A. Philip Randolph and Bayard Rustin released a joint statement stating, they were “appalled and distressed by the anti-Semitic article.” The Jewish Labor Committee highlighted that under the leadership of Stokely Carmichael and H. Rap Brown, SNCC has “now irrevocably joined the anti-Semitic American Nazi party and the Ku Klux Klan as an apostle of racism in the United States.”³⁸

SNCC leaders responded by further fanning the flames of the controversy. A statement was released stating that Jews were “imitating their Nazi oppressors.” Ralph Featherstone, SNCC program director said, “Israel is and always has been the tool and foothold for American and British exploitation in the Middle East and Africa.” SNCC as an organization perhaps did not realize that by making such outlandish claims, they were effectively cutting off the funding sources of northern Jewish people and organizations who had been supportive of the group since the beginning. Cleveland Sellers remarked later, “the little money we were still receiving from white sources just stopped coming in.”³⁹

Mother Country

Carmichael continued his non-SNCC sanctioned trip around the globe, visiting more places unfriendly to the United States. In Africa, he first visited Algeria and Guinea. Two important things happened to him. He discovered a new sense in himself and he fell in love. While he loved Algeria, he was ready to leave because he wanted to experience “Black Africa.”⁴⁰ He was blown away by Guinea and the revolutionary spirit

³⁸ *New York Times*, 16 August 1967.

³⁹ Sellers, *The River of No Return*, 215.

⁴⁰ Carmichael and Thelwell, *Ready for Revolution*, 6

exhibited in the new country, recently freed from its yoke of French colonial rule.⁴¹

Madame Du Bois arranged for Carmichael to meet with President Kwame Nkrumah soon after his arrival. Similar to his meetings with Castro and Ho Chi Minh, Carmichael was overwhelmed by Nkrumah's eloquence and resolve.

Madame Du Bois also surprised Carmichael with something else in Guinea. She took him to a party with a private concert performed by South African singer Miriam Makeba.⁴² He first met Makeba at a concert as a nineteen-year old student at Howard. It was now time for Carmichael to be star struck. When they met again, Carmichael held out his hand to her, but she surprised him when she embraced him. "I've been reading about you brother. I've seen you on TV."⁴³ This added a dimension to his trip he had not quite expected, but he welcomed it. He stayed in Guinea until December 1967 and fell in love with the country and Makeba. They would soon marry back in New York. Carmichael decided to return to the states and face the music after several attempts by U.S. State Department officials to seize his passport after six months of revolutionary travel.⁴⁴ Carmichael realized Africa held a special place in his heart and he planned to return as soon as he was able.

⁴¹ Carmichael and Thelwell, *Ready for Revolution*, 608-612.

⁴² *Ibid*, 617.

⁴³ *Ibid*, 618.

⁴⁴ *Ibid*, *Ready for Revolution*, 621.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Flirtation

Before flying back to New York, Carmichael read that his young friend, Huey P. Newton, had been wounded in a shootout with police in Oakland, California and was in police custody while in the hospital. While Carmichael had been in the Bay Area in 1966, on a SNCC speaking tour, he first met Huey P. Newton and Bobby Seale, two budding black radicals who had recently founded the Black Panther Party for Self Defense in Oakland. Both were looking to Carmichael to provide assistance and guidance as they tried to rise above competing Black Power groups.¹ During this time together, Carmichael enjoyed his conversations with Newton and appreciated the young men and their zeal as budding revolutionaries. He had kept in intermittent contact with both before leaving for his London trip.

The Black Panther Party for Self Defense was unlike anything white America had ever seen. Although they had taken their name from the Lowndes County Freedom Party mascot, there was no other similarity between the groups. The Panthers sought to invoke fear in the very soul of the white establishment and took the concept of Black Power to the next, darker level. Dressed in pale blue turtlenecks, leather jackets, berets and sunglasses, Newton, Seale and other Panthers patrolled the streets of Oakland armed with guns and books of law. When police were seen arresting young black men, Panther members would stand the legally safe distance away from the scene and announce what

¹ Joseph, *Stokely*, 165.

their rights were to those being arrested. If the police questioned the Panthers, the Panthers quoted from California law stating what gave them the right to be there, or what the officer was doing wrong in the proceeding.² The Panthers were within their legal rights to be armed due to California being an “open carry” state, which meant anyone was able to openly carry firearms.³

When Californians were given the right to legally carry firearms, there was little doubt that anyone ever thought that right would someday be used by a militant black group opposed to police oppression, or for that matter, black people at all. Soon after the Panther activities began to be frequently reported, the California legislature decided that it might be a good idea to repeal the law that gave citizens the right to openly carry weapons. In May 1967, Bobby Seale, armed with a holstered .45 Automatic pistol on his hip, led two dozen shotgun and rifle wielding Panthers into the California capitol in Sacramento, marching straight past Governor Ronald Reagan into the legislative chamber. Seale spoke from the floor, issuing Mandate Number Two:

The Black Panther party for self-defense calls upon the American people in general and the black people in particular to take careful note of the racist California Legislature which is considering legislation aimed at keeping the black people disarmed and powerless at the very same time that racist police agencies throughout the country are intensifying the terror, brutality, murder and repression of black people.⁴

The men were escorted out of the capitol by state troopers but were not arrested. They were stopped by the police at a gas station on their way back to Oakland and there several

² Joseph, *Waiting 'Til The Midnight Hour*, 209.

³ Ibid, 210.

⁴ *Sacramento Bee*, 2 May 1967

members were arrested. This event helped position them as the emerging leaders of the Black Power movement and it received nation-wide news coverage.⁵

In the early morning of October 28, 1967, Newton was stopped by police and within minutes had been shot in the stomach while a police officer was mortally wounded next to him. Although no one is sure what transpired, Newton was believed to be the suspect. When he arrived at the hospital he was handcuffed to the gurney.⁶ The photographic image of the shirtless Newton, wincing in pain, arms outstretched, handcuffed on both sides, his bloody wound visible, evoked an allegorical Christ-like figure, this time persecuted not by the Romans, but by the Man.⁷ The reaction around the country was mixed, but both white and black liberals feared it was a set-up by the police or FBI.

“Free Huey” rallies were held across the country, filling living rooms as well as arenas, the proceeds going to his defense fund. Celebrities took part in fundraising and even wealthy white urbanites were drawn to the story of the boys in the ghetto. In Tom Wolfe’s *Radical Chic*, he satirically wrote of the Panthers visit to the home of Leonard Bernstein for a later legal fundraiser. The Panthers looked as foreboding as possible for the star-struck New York aesthetes, who felt they were slumming it with revolutionaries over canapes to fund their revolution.⁸ Bobby Seale and Eldridge Cleaver, a new Panther leader, were eager to have the support and notoriety of Stokely Carmichael. The two

⁵ Joseph, *Waiting 'Til The Midnight Hour*, 210.

⁶ *Ibid*, 211.

⁷ Donna Jean Murch, *Living for the City*, (Chapel Hill, NC, The University of North Carolina Press, 2010) 148-49.

⁸ Tom Wolfe, “Radical Chic,” *New York Magazine*, June 1970.

visited Carmichael when he returned from his world travels.⁹ As they talked, it was clear they not only wanted Carmichael's and SNCC's help in the fight to free Huey Newton, but also wondered about a possible merger of organizations.¹⁰

“In retrospect, the Panther/SNCC “alliance”- *flirtation* might be a better word- was a comedy of errors,” Carmichael later wrote.¹¹ While that was the case “in retrospect,” there was a time when the merger was a real possibility. For the Panthers, they looked to SNCC as “elder statesmen,” people who had six years of experience on the front lines of civil rights and could give legitimacy to their organization.¹² The Panthers also needed the star power of Carmichael who could attract media attention and add legitimacy to the group. SNCC desperately needed to do something to stay relevant and some members of SNCC, like Stokely Carmichael, realized that SNCC needed a new focus or it would die.¹³ SNCC also looked at the Panthers as a vehicle to carry the concept of Black Power into urban areas they had always struggled with in their organizing. Carmichael, selfishly, also needed a new gig.

Personality Disorders

The alliance between SNCC and the Panthers was doomed from the beginning. The Panthers, under Cleaver's leadership, courted the support of white militants of the newly formed Peace and Freedom Party (PFP), eager to be part of the Panther cause.

⁹ Carmichael and Thelwell, *Ready for Revolution*, 641.

¹⁰ *Ibid*, 659.

¹¹ *Ibid*.

¹² *Ibid*, 660-661.

¹³ *Ibid*.

Berkeley students, in the Bay Area were eager to be part of the Black Power movement at the same time SNCC was moving away from interracial organizing. The Panthers also needed funding from white sources for their programs and Newton's legal defense, in the same way SNCC had once relied on the money for their projects. Carmichael and Cleaver continued to disagree regarding this issue. Carmichael was adamant that their struggle needed to be a solely black struggle, while Cleaver realized and relied on the psychology of some whites wanting approval and acceptance of black revolutionaries.¹⁴

Both the Panther and SNCC camps continued to try to make the merger work, although it was proverbially trying to "fit a square peg in a round hole." Carmichael later wrote, "a lot of people- in SNCC and our supporters- were questioning this sudden Panther connection. A lot of questions and legitimate confusion. What *is* this anyway? What does it mean? How can it work?"¹⁵

The Panthers named Carmichael their honorary "Prime Minister of Afro-America," James Forman as the Panther "Minister of Foreign Affairs," and H. Rap Brown as "Minister of Justice."¹⁶ Carmichael and Forman, who had once been the closest of friends, were now distancing themselves from one another and that led to the establishment of two rival factions within SNCC. The rift began with Carmichael's travels and statements unauthorized by SNCC. Carmichael was also leaning more toward Pan-Africanism, which supported the political union of all indigenous inhabitants of the African continent, which Forman and others in the group did not fully support.¹⁷ Forman

¹⁴ Peniel E. Joseph, *Waiting 'Til The Midnight Hour*, 221.

¹⁵ Carmichael and Thelwell, *Ready for Revolution*, 659.

¹⁶ Sellers, *The River of No Return*, 224.

¹⁷ Sellers, *The River of No Return*, 223.

wrote, “much of what Stokely said while abroad was good, but his general attitude represented the zenith of an individualism that has hurt the black struggle in many quarters.”¹⁸ Cleveland Sellers recalled, “The Panthers were aware of these tensions, but didn’t believe that they would have any significant effect on the ‘alliance.’”¹⁹ This made it awkward in dealing with the Panthers whose members were not always on the same page concerning their own organization either. The Panther’s quasi-military structure put too many people in leadership positions, contrary to the original SNCC organizational model. Also, Panther “orders” and “mandates” were issued while very little time was spent getting opinions from other members to form a consensus.²⁰ The Panthers experienced tremendous early negative media bias which focused on their dress, weapons, and constant arrests.²¹

The Panthers viewed themselves very much as neo-Marxists, but although Carmichael had shown interest in socialism and communism while visiting Cuba and North Vietnam, his trip to Africa changed his opinion on both socialism and communism. At a “Free Huey” rally, Carmichael, dressed in an African dashiki, proclaimed, “communism is not an ideology suited for black people, period. Period. Socialism is not an ideology fitted for black people, period. Period.”²² Of this, Forman wrote, “people

¹⁸ Forman, *The Making of Black Revolutionaries*, 521.

¹⁹ Sellers, *The River of No Return*, 262.

²⁰ Carmichael and Thelwell, *Ready for Revolution*, 670.

²¹ *Ibid*, 670-671.

²² Quoted from Peniel E. Joseph, *Waiting ‘Til The Midnight Hour*, 225

began to notice that Stokely's line while speaking abroad was not the same inside the United States. . . . He was creating more confusion and distrust in the movement."²³

Internally, Panthers began having reservations regarding Carmichael. Although his name brought attention to the organization, his intellectualism and know-it-all attitude was not always appreciated by the rank and file members. Bobby Seale and Huey Newton were highly intelligent, and Eldridge Cleaver was a gifted writer, but many of the Panther soldiers were militant street thugs and hustlers who were not as interested in Carmichael's philosophizing. Carmichael also pushed back at members who demanded he wear the black leather "uniform" of the organization. Eldridge Cleaver, along with many Panthers had served time in jail, not for civil rights activities like those members in SNCC, but for burglary, assault and other crimes. Cleaver was a self-admitted rapist and, in his book *Soul on Ice*, had written extensively on black male machismo and the desire of white women to be taken by "brothers."²⁴ With Carmichael, some Panthers even discussed physically harming him.²⁵

The final straw between the organizations came from a mixture of unstable paranoia from both Eldridge Cleaver and James Forman. Forman publicly announced the support of the Black Panthers to become a national organization, while Cleaver thought his comments were insincere and felt SNCC was planning a takeover of the Panthers. From jail, Huey Newton made hostile remarks about SNCC, completely disregarding the organization's important history of civil right victories. He said the group had long been

²³ Forman, *The Making of Black Revolutionaries*, 521.

²⁴ Joseph, *Waiting 'Til The Midnight Hour*, 213.

²⁵ Carson, *In Struggle*, 283.

held captive by white liberals and were “hippies” who were radicalized by the Panthers.²⁶ For those SNCC members already uneasy with the merger, Newton’s comments merely magnified the misguidance of it. During Newton’s murder trial, Panthers, on an apparent order from Eldridge Cleaver held James Forman at gunpoint in the SNCC New York office. Panthers allegedly forced the pistol in his mouth and pulled the trigger three times in a row, clicking an empty barrel each time.²⁷ James Forman vehemently denied this story, but the unconsummated love affair between the Black Panther Party and SNCC was over

²⁶ Joseph, *Stokely*, 268.

²⁷ *New York Times*, 7 October 1968.

CHAPTER NINE

Expulsion

Carmichael and Makeba experienced a backlash in SNCC and with her professionally after they were married. The FBI used criminal contracts to spread around rumors that Carmichael was a covert CIA agent. Her singing career in the United States had suffered with concerts and planned albums being cancelled due to her relationship with Carmichael.¹ Carmichael later wrote, “my wife’s troubles continued. She’s had a contract for three albums a year with a recording company, all of which had done very well indeed. Now the company- without the courtesy of a letter or even a phone call- simply allowed the for the next recording session to go by. But, by then, nothing surprised us.”²

Makeba wrote in her autobiography, *My Story*, “The FBI which has been following Stokely for some time, now begins to follow me, too. . . . I tell Stokely I feel as if I am in prison. We even have the impression that someone is listening when we are making love. He says, ‘Never talk to them. Don’t look at them.’”³ The IRS began to look into her previous tax returns The two moved to Washington, D.C. and rented a small house, but the FBI spread rumors to SNCC and Panther members that the couple were looking to buy a \$70,000 house, and the Carmichael had “sold out” and turned

¹ Carmichael and Thelwell, *Ready for Revolution*, 653.

² Ibid, 672.

³ Ibid, 672-673.

“bourgeois.” They had not bought a house, the FBI simply hoped to continue the fissures between Carmichael and SNCC.⁴

Stokely Carmichael was in attendance at Newton’s trial when he received the news his involvement and membership in SNCC had been terminated. Phil Hutchings, who replaced H. Rap Brown as chairman stated in a press release, “it has been apparent for some time that SNCC and Stokely Carmichael were moving in different directions.”⁵ Hutchings went on to praise “Brother Carmichael” for his work in the civil rights movement, but the years of petty jealousies and ideological differences had spilled out into the public. The faction of SNCC led by James Forman accused Carmichael of a power grab with the help of the Panthers, which is exactly what the Panthers accused SNCC of attempting.⁶ Carmichael stated publicly, “I still regard SNCC highly and have never attacked it.” He went on to say his time with the group was “enjoyable, pleasant, healthy and educational.”⁷ Privately, he was crushed:

For some time our political emphases had been growing apart, which happens in politics. That is understandable. But, I certainly did not appreciate hearing about this from some reporter calling for my reaction and reading to me from a press release out of Atlanta. Some days later the letter came. That wasn’t cool.⁸

SNCC held a staff meeting in December 1968, that further highlighted the dysfunction in the group. Long-time veterans of the organization, Cleveland Sellers and Willie Ricks, were expelled like Carmichael. “Fired from SNCC!” Sellers wrote. “Fired

⁴ Carmichael and Thelwell, *Ready for Revolution*, 672-673.

⁵ *New York Times*, 23 August 1968

⁶ Joseph, *Stokely*, 270.

⁷ *Ibid*, 270

⁸ Carmichael and Thelwell, *Ready for Revolution*, 676.

by a group of posturing idiots! I looked at Ricks and saw what must have been reflected in my eyes: surprise and embarrassment. We didn't argue or protest. There was no need. The situation was too ridiculous for words."⁹ Sellers added that he did not recognize many of the faces in SNCC, because they had joined after Carmichael left. James Forman, who tried to keep the organization going for so long, found that many in SNCC were aligning against him. He retreated from the group following suffering a near complete mental breakdown after the Panther fiasco to regroup in the Caribbean. Other staff members, simply drifted away from the organization, realizing there was no point for them to stay on a sinking ship.¹⁰

H. Rap Brown engaged in what might best be called a hostile takeover of SNCC in the summer of 1969. He blamed the group's struggles on the current leadership and along with his supporters, wanted SNCC transformed into a paramilitary group called the Black Revolutionary Action Party. No one in who was left in SNCC cared enough to try to challenge the takeover and on July 22, Brown held a press conference announcing he was once again leader of the organization. It was decided to keep the acronym "SNCC" because it was so well known but change the name to the Student National Coordinating Committee.¹¹ SNCC lingered for a few more years, dwindling to practically nothing. The New York FBI office reported on December 11, 1973, "In view of the fact that SNCC has no national office, no national officers, had engaged in no significant activities for several years, and that future prospects for such are exceedingly faint, NY is closing this case."¹²

⁹ Sellers, *The River of No Return*, 266.

¹⁰ Carson, *In Struggle*, 293.

¹¹ Carson, *In Struggle*, 295-96

¹² SAC, New York to Director, FBI, "SNCC," 11 December 1973,

CHAPTER TEN

Epilogue

The SNCC memberships rosters over the years have a familiarity about them because so many names continued to be well known after the organization fell apart. Like reacquainting during a class reunion, some members some had successful careers, while some achieved somewhat less than their original expectations.

John Lewis was elected to the U.S. House of Representatives in 1986, where he still serves in 2020.¹ He has remained one of the most recognizable Civil Rights leaders in the country and in March 2015, led a march across the Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma, Alabama, with President Barack Obama, the nation's first black president.² In December 2019, Lewis announced he was battling pancreatic cancer, but promised to fight it.

Robert Moses became a high school math teacher after he discovered his daughter was not being taught algebra in her local school in the 1970s. He was given a McArthur Grant in 1982, for the Algebra Project, to teach minority children mathematics. He has since been a visiting professor at Cornell and Princeton universities. James Forman studied African and African American Studies in the 1970s and went on to teach and write several books, including *The Making of a Black Revolutionary*, in 1972. He passed away in 2005 after a battle with colon cancer. Marion Barry was elected as the Mayor of

¹ Lewis and D'Orso, *Walking with the Wind*, 478.

² *New York Times*, 7 March 2015.

the District of Columbia in 1979. He struggled with substance abuse and was filmed in an FBI sting operation in 1990, smoking crack cocaine. He left office in 1991, served six months in federal prison, but was reelected as Mayor in 1994, serving until 1999. He passed away in 2014, after a life of serving the disenfranchised and was still affectionately known by many citizens of Washington as “Mayor for Life.”³

H. Rap Brown went into hiding in 1970, while facing a long prison sentence for his previous arrests in Maryland, Louisiana, and New York. He spent five years in Attica Prison after a botched robbery in New York City, in 1971. He was released in 1976, after converting to Islam and changing his name to Jamil Abdullah al-Amin. In 2000, al-Amin was arrested in Lowndes County, Alabama, after a shoot-out with police, resulting in the death of Deputy Ricky Kinchen. Al-Amin was arrested wearing body armor and carrying an assault rifle.⁴ He was convicted and sentenced to life in prison in 2002. He is currently incarcerated in the United States Penitentiary, Tucson, Arizona.

Cleveland Sellers earned a master’s degree from Harvard University, in 1970, and his Ed.D. from the University of North Carolina, Greensboro, in 1987. He served as the director of African American Studies at the University of South Carolina and later as the President of Voorhes College, in his hometown of Denmark, South Carolina.

Stokely Carmichael and Miriam Makeba moved to Ghana in 1968, before settling in Conakry, Guinea in 1969. He would later change his name to Kwame Toure and remained an activist and revolutionary for the rest of his life. After a battle with prostate cancer, he died in 1998. NAACP Chair Julian Bond, Carmichael’s old friend from SNCC

³ *Washington Post*, 23 November 2014.

⁴ *New York Times*, 21 March 2000.

said, he “ought to be remembered for having spent almost every moment of his adult life trying to advance the cause of black liberation.”⁵

Black Power grew from the frustration of centuries of slavery and decades of segregation in the United States. Black Power cultivated from young black men being shot by white police officers and black women being taken advantage of by their white “superiors,” just as their mothers and grandmothers had been for generations. Black Power arose from the anger brewing after the four little girls were bombed in Birmingham and the photograph of Emmett Till lying in his casket, unrecognizable, bloated and decayed after being lynched and thrown in to the Tallahatchie river. Black Power spread from thousands of perceived slights from whites, the head bowing, and never being able to look someone in the eye. Black power surged from all those “Boys,” and “Yes’srs,” and “No’srs,” over so many generations.

When Stokely Carmichael threw up his fist in Greenwood, Mississippi and asked, “what do we want?” The crowd responded not only because they were prompted, but because those poor, subjugated people, standing, listening to him speak, in the sweltering June heat, needed to speak out. For once in their lives, they needed to lash out. One can still see the traces of the Black Power movement in the form of Black Lives Matter. In March 2015, when President Obama spoke on the fiftieth anniversary of “Bloody Sunday” in Selma, he announced to the thousands gathered, “we know the march is not yet over.”⁶

⁵ *New York Daily News*, 16 November 1998

⁶ *New York Times*, 7 March 2015

In SNCC, Black Power created an almost rising black populism for the grassroots organization. It showed how petty differences can get in the way of idealism and envy can overwhelm righteousness. The celebrated status and idolatry of Stokely Carmichael by members of the black community did not kill the organization, but it brought internal issues to the forefront while their projects suffered. Black Power did not kill SNCC but remade it in the wake of legal civil rights victories. After realizing that civil rights and voting laws would not be enforced through non-violence, the gloves came off of many who had continued to turn the other cheek at abuses, hoping the federal government would eventually step in. As Malcolm X told SNCC members gathered in Selma, if non-violence did not work, they would have to try it another way. SNCC was killed by the Civil Rights Movement itself, in the form of the emotional and mental toll it took on so many brave young men and women, who were fighting when others had chosen to look the other way. The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee no longer exists as an organization but lives on in the memories and hopes of those who first had the courage to take a seat at the lunch counter.

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