THE STUDENT NONVIOLENT COORDINATING COMMITTEE: A BRIEF HISTORY OF A GRASS-ROOTS ORGANIZATION

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The Beginnings: The Sit-Ins

The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) was organized to advance and coordinate the “sit-in” movement, a protest technique that became prominent in 1960, when four young black men sat at a segregated “whites only” lunch counter in Greensboro, North Carolina, and refused to leave when ordered to do so.

On February 1, 1960, at 4:30 P.M., Ezell Blair, Franklin McCain, Joseph McNeil, and David Richmond, four black freshmen from North Carolina Agricultural and Technical (A & T) College, walked into the local Woolworth’s, purchased some supplies and then sat down at the lunch counter and asked for a cup of coffee. The waitress told them they did not serve Negroes. Pointing to the package he had just purchased, Blair responded, “You just finished serving me at the counter only two feet from here.” The waitress pointed to the take-out stand at the end of the counter where blacks could get food. “Negroes eat at the other end,” she said.

The four students remained seated until the store closed at 5:30 P.M. They returned the following day reinforced by about twenty more black students, including four black women from Bennett College. On the third day, white students from the Women’s College of the University of North Carolina campus in Greensboro and more black student supporters from A & T and Bennett joined them. The students filled the 66 seats at the lunch counter of Woolworth’s and launched a sit-in at the lunch counter in the S. H. Kress store down the street. Day after day the demonstrations grew larger and the sit-ins spread to other stores and other cities throughout the South.

Within a few months, the sit-in movement had spread to 54 cities in nine states. Students in Northern cities soon joined the protest against segregated public accommodations. White students at Columbia University in New York picketed Woolworth stores as a show of solidarity. Major demonstrations in Atlanta, Georgia and Nashville, Tennessee were met with violent resistance from white hecklers. In Nashville, the city policemen arrested 81 protesters and charged them with “disorderly conduct.” In Atlanta, students publicized their action
in a full-page advertisement entitled *An Appeal for Human Rights*. The ad, sponsored by students from Morris Brown, Clark, Morehouse, and Spelman, four black colleges, proclaimed in part:

Today’s youth will not sit by submissively, while being denied all the rights, privileges and joys of life. We want to state clearly and unequivocally that we cannot tolerate, in a nation professing democracy and among people professing Christianity, the discriminatory conditions under which the Negro is living today in Atlanta, Georgia . . . We do not intend to wait placidly for those rights which are already legally and morally ours to be meted out to us one at a time.

As a result of the ad, on March 15, at 11:00 A.M., prior to lunchtime, 200 Atlanta students jammed the lunch counters and restaurants in the city hall, the Georgia State Capitol, two other state office buildings, the Fulton County Courthouse, and the city’s bus and train stations. The demonstrations resulted in the arrest of 77 protesters. The moral stand taken by Ezell Blair, Franklin McCain, Joseph McNeil, and David Richmond in the small town of Greensboro, North Carolina was now developing into a nationwide movement against American apartheid.

The Raleigh Conference

In the Spring of 1960, it was becoming obvious that the older civil rights leaders, those who had been active in seeking change through the courts and Congress, might be losing their leadership role. Privately, many of the older black leaders became nervous about the nature of the “wildcat” sit-in movement. But publicly, two important senior leaders praised the students. Roy Wilkins, executive secretary of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), delivered a speech in Cleveland, Ohio in April and told the audience, “The message of this movement is plain and short. Negro youth is finished with racial segregation, not only as a philosophy but as a practice.” Martin Luther King, Jr., recognized the direction the student activists were taking: “This movement is the eternal refutation of the idea that the colored citizen is satisfied with segregation.”

Many young blacks sensed the shift in power and direction. Dissatisfaction among the young student activists with the older civil rights leadership erupted as a noticeable phenomenon. Nonetheless, the growing student movement impressed Ella Baker, a 55-year-old woman and civil rights veteran and executive director of King’s Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC). The student movement spread because “There was a great deal of dissatisfaction among the young with the older leadership,” she is quoted as saying.

Baker had the foresight to discern that the sit-ins lacked direction and overall coordination and she appealed to SCLC to sponsor a meeting with students who
were involved in the sit-ins. SCLC agreed in part because of its hope to gain control of the student movement. Held on Easter weekend, 1960, the meeting took place at Shaw University in Raleigh, North Carolina. Ella Baker had expected to draw at most a hundred student representatives and was amazed when over three hundred activists showed up. “The concept of a conference escalated beyond our expectations,” she said. Ella Baker warned the students against SCLC control of the conference or any other outside adult attempt to influence the outcome of the student conference. The students accepted her advice and rejected the older civil rights leadership.

The conference attracted a myriad mix of students and activists: among them were students from Southern black colleges, northern and southern activists from local sit-ins, and northern white college students. A few of those who attended should be mentioned to give an idea of the diversity of the group. The group included Tom Hayden, later to become founder of Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) and a California State Senator, Marion Barry from Nashville, the Reverend Jim Lawson who delivered the keynote address, and John Lewis and Diane Nash, also fresh from the successful Nashville sit-in movement. Nineteen northern colleges were represented at the conference, and the students from these schools raised a problem that would dog the history of SNCC and the movement. The southerners and activists were black and many had come straight from jail. They were sit-in veterans and recognized heroes and heroines of the sit-in movement. The northerners were mostly white and often more articulate politically than the southerners. In order to keep black-southern control of the movement, separate meetings of southern and northern students were held.

Ella Baker, Jim Lawson and Martin Luther King addressed the entire assembly, Baker, however, assumed the role of midwife to one of the most effective philosophical grass-roots organizations in American history. Her opening address concentrated on the need for the students to change the entire social structure of America, not just to integrate lunch counters. “The younger generation is challenging you and me, they are asking us to forget our laziness and doubt and fear, and follow our dedication to the truth to the bitter end,” she declared. King and Lawson echoed her remarks. Recognizing the importance of unity and dedicated commitment on the part of the new student movement, one student drew applause with the comment, “The greatest progress of the American Negro in the future will not be made in Congress or in the Supreme Court; it will come in the jails.”

At the Raleigh conference Guy Carawan sang a new version of “We Shall Overcome,” an adaptation of an old labor song. This song would become the national anthem of the civil rights movement. People joined hands and gently swayed in time singing “black and white together,” repeating over and over, “Deep in my heart, I do believe, we shall overcome some day.” This bonding act of camaraderie represented a coming together and reaching out to one another for strength and spiritual support.
The conference concluded with the forming of a new group led by black southern students. The fledgling group emerged as the “Continuations Committee.” The CC selected Marion Barry as chairman and decided that each state was to have one or two representatives. They agreed to meet again in the fall in Atlanta, and in June, Jayne Stembridge, a young white poet and native Virginian, volunteered to be secretary. The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), pronounced, “snick”), as it was soon to be renamed, now had one regular volunteer employee.

A Band of Brothers and Sisters in a Circle of Trust

By the Fall of 1960 SNCC begin shaping itself as a separate, independent organization run by students whose activities would be rooted in the needs of black communities, with the sole focus on promoting change in those communities, rather than striving for national change and goals. At a SNCC meeting at the Highlander School in Tennessee in August 1961 the group almost split in two. One faction wanted to focus on direct confrontation against segregation, the other faction wanted to promote voter registration. SNCC finally decided that individual members could follow their conscience and work in the areas of their choosing. All SNCC workers, however, would take a no-compromise stance on all issues pertaining to SNCC’s moral commitment to achieving justice for all. A SNCC credo was adopted.

The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee Statement of Purpose (1960)

We affirm the philosophical or religious ideal of nonviolence as the foundation of our purpose, the presupposition of our faith, and the manner of our action. Nonviolence as it grows from Judaic-Christian tradition seeks a social order of justice permeated by love. Integration of human endeavor represents the crucial first step toward such a society.

Through nonviolence, courage displaces fear; love transforms hate. Acceptance dissipates prejudice; hope ends despair. Peace dominates war; faith reconciles doubt. Mutual regard cancels enmity. Justice for all overthrows injustice. The redemptive community supersedes systems of gross social immorality.

Love is the central motif of nonviolence. Love is the force by which God binds man to Himself and man to man. Such love goes to the extreme; it remains loving and forgiving even in the midst of hostility. It matches the capacity of evil to inflict suffering with an
even more enduring capacity to absorb evil, all the while persisting in love.

By appealing to conscience and standing on the moral nature of human existence, nonviolence nurtures the atmosphere in which reconciliation and justice become actual possibilities.

James Forman, SNCC's executive secretary who served through most of the organization’s tumultuous history, contended that the division between the voter registration people and the direct action people “was a rift so deep that if it were not healed the organization was finished before it had well begun.” The direct action faction felt that voter registration was “an establishment red herring to stop the disruptive effects of sit-ins, freedom rides, and street demonstrations.” Members argued over the questions of who would preside over the Atlanta office and who would serve in the field and what methodologies field workers followed?

The compromise reached allowed both wings of the organization to be in the field as long as they function within the organizational guidelines to be administered by a single executive secretary that would serve at the behest of both wings. Both factions knew and trusted James Forman and asked him to assume the responsibility of objective coordination of resources. Forman has since written in a 1964 position paper that he was “neutral and wanted only to serve the movement and record its activities.” Forman quickly moved into the first SNCC office space located in the SCLC office at 197 Auburn Avenue. Later he moved the SNCC office from there to 135 Auburn Avenue and from there to 6 and 8 1/2 Raymond Street where the excellent research and photography departments were created.

**Mississippi and the Freedom Summer**

In 1960 Robert Parris Moses (fig. 1: Robert Parris Moses), a high school math teacher from Harlem who had studied mathematics and philosophy at Harvard University, went south to work in the SNCC office with Jane Stembridge. Before long, Bob became dissatisfied with the work in Atlanta and wanted to get out of the office and into the field. In 1961 he went to the state of Mississippi to begin the organizing work that would transform that state (fig. 2: The Two Faces of Mississippi).

After three years of hard and dangerous work, during which there were arrests, beatings, killings, threats, acts of intimidation, and homes and project offices were bombed and burned, Moses announced the Freedom Summer (fig. 3: Standing Tall with Courage in the Mouth of the Beast). The Freedom Summer was a highly publicized campaign in Mississippi to register blacks to vote during the summer of 1964. During the summer of 1964, thousands of civil rights
volunteers, many of them white college students from the North, descended on
Mississippi to try to end the long-time political disenfranchisement of blacks
in Mississippi (fig. 4: The Brothers — Karamazov and Jones). In spite of the
Fifteenth Amendment, blacks were unable to exercise their right to vote. Blacks
were systematically kept from voting by white local and state officials through
formal methods, such as poll taxes and literacy tests, and through cruder meth-
ods of fear and intimidation, which included beatings and lynching. Moses and
SNCC understood the crucial significance of voter registration. A black voting
bloc would be able to effect social and political change.

The call for the Freedom Summer marked the climax of three years of intensive
voter-registration activities in Mississippi (fig. 5: Voter Registration). In 1961,
when Moses started his work, only 6.7 percent of Mississippi blacks were regis-
tered to vote, the lowest percentage in America. The entire voter-registration
campaign was done by a coalition of forces called the Mississippi Council of Fed-
erated Organizations (fig. 6: Annette Ponder, COFO Secretary), which was led
by the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, and included the Congress
of Racial Equality (CORE), and the National Association for the Advancement
of Colored People (NAACP). By Moses mobilizing volunteer white college stu-
dents from the North to join them, the coalition scored a major public relations
coup as hundreds of reporters came to Mississippi from around the country to
cover the voter-registration campaign.

The organization of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party (MFDP) was a
major focus of the Mississippi Project, COFO (fig. 7: COFO Staff Meeting),
and the summer program. More than 80,000 Mississippians joined the new po-
litical party, which elected a slate of sixty-eight delegates to go to the national
Democratic Party convention in Atlantic City in the Fall of 1964. The MFDP
delegation would challenge the seating of the delegates representing Mississippi’s
all white Democratic Party. Although the effort to unseat the all white delega-
tion failed, it drew national attention and led to a ban on racially discriminatory
delégations at future conventions.

SNCC workers also established 30 “Freedom Schools” in small towns throughout
Mississippi to address the racial inequalities in Mississippi’s educational system
(fig. 8: Doris Derby, John Cross the Literacy Project). Mississippi’s black
schools were poorly funded, and teachers had to use textbooks that offered a
racist slant on American history. Many of the volunteer white college students
were assigned to teach in these schools, whose curriculum included black history,
the philosophy of the Civil Rights Movement, and leadership development in
addition to remedial instruction in reading and arithmetic. By the end of 1964
the Freedom Schools had over 3000 students. The schools became a model
for future social programs like Heat Start, as well as alternative educational
institutions.

The five years of hard organizing from 1961 to 1965 that went into the build-
ing of the Mississippi Project was extremely dangerous work. Lee Morton took
time from his occupation to work with the Council of Federated Organizations Mississippi Literacy Project. COFO workers faced threats, harassment, arrests, beatings, bombings, and killings throughout the campaign, not only from white supremacist groups, but also from local residents, thugs, and police (fig. 9: Freedom Rally, Hattisburg). Local black leaders were shot and killed, including Medgar Evers, Herbert Lee and Louis Allen. 20 project offices, 37 black churches, 30 black homes and businesses were firebombed or burned during the Freedom Summer alone, and most of the cases went unsolved (fig. 10: The Burning of Vernon Dahmer’s Home in Hattisburg). During the summer more than 1000 black and white were arrested, and at least 80 were beaten by white mobs or racist police officers.

The worst act of violence was the murder of three young civil rights workers, a black SNCC volunteer, James Chaney, and his white co-workers, Andrew Goodman and Michael Schwerner. On June 21, 1964 Chaney, Goodman, and Schwerner set out to investigate a church bombing near Philadelphia, Mississippi, but were arrested that afternoon and held for several hours on alleged traffic violations. Their release from jail was the last time they were seen alive before their badly decomposed bodies were discovered under a nearby dam six weeks later. Goodman and Schwerner had died from single gunshot wounds to the chest, and Chaney from a vicious and savage beating (fig. 11: Rev. Art Thomas on the right, our National Council of Churches Rep. In the Southern Freedom Movement).

This writer can testify to several incidence of violence, especially one such incident that happened one month after the disappearance of the three civil rights workers. On July 15, 1964 at 10:30 P.M., I was driving a truckload of voter registration materials and other supplies to Greenville and Greenwood, Mississippi for rallies that were to take place the following day. Accompanying me were two local black youths who had volunteered to help, Melvin McDavia and Robert Ellis, and a white summer volunteer, Steven Smith. Outside of Canton in Madison County, we were forced to the side of the highway by four carloads of white men in unmarked cars. When they got out of their cars, I saw that they were armed with pistols, rifles, shotguns, ropes, chains, and clubs. I recognized two of the men, Trooper O’Neil of the Mississippi State Police and Sheriff Bruno Evans of Madison County.

They were all drunk and reeking of white lightning. Evans and O’Neil proceeded to pistol whip me while cursing and daring me to take their guns. The others terrorized and beat Smith, Ellis, and McDavia. I heard them order the two youths to start running back towards Jackson. Laying on the ground, dazed and bleeding, I could see them reaching for their guns stuck in their belts and holsters, as if they were planning to take shots at the fleeing kids. Before they could do so, another car pulled to a halt on the other side of the highway and four white men dressed in dark suits, white shirts and ties got out. They beckoned for Sheriff Evans. Evans conferred with them for several minutes. The four suits
got in their car and drove away. Fortunately, Ellis and McDavia got away.

When Evans returned, it was obvious that their original plans now had changed. They no longer talked about lynching us. They tried to convince me that they only wanted to arrest Smith and that I was free to get in the truck and drive away. I realized that they now had to make a pretense of legality by enticing me to leave so that I could be shot for attempting to escape. I refused to move. I told Evans to arrest both of us or release both of us. He responded by beating me into unconsciousness. I woke up in the Canton City jail, was fed a breakfast of cold collard greens, fatback, and corn bread. The next day we were taken to a distant rural farm where we appeared before the local magistrate who presided in his barn. Bail was set and we were then returned to the Canton jail. That evening, Bob Moses bailed us out and drove us back to Jackson with a uniformed Trooper O’Neil following us in an official car of the Mississippi State Police. Along the way, Steven Smith broke down and cried. I understood exactly how he felt.

The murders of Chaney, Goodman, and Schwerner made headlines all over the country, and provoked an outpouring of national support for the Civil Rights Movement. But SNCC workers realized that because two of the victims were white, these murders were attracting much more attention than previous murders and attacks in which the victims had been black, and this added to the growing resentment they had already begun to feel towards the white volunteers. The dormant issues of race, class, and gender began to surface within SNCC. There was growing dissent within the ranks over charges of white paternalism and elitism. Some SNCC workers and black volunteers complained that the whites seemed to think they had a natural claim on leadership roles, and that they treated the rural blacks as though they were ignorant. There was also increasing hostility from both black and white workers over the interracial romances that developed during the summer. Meanwhile, the women of both races were charging both the black and white males with sexist attitudes and behaviour.

However, the Freedom Summer had a tremendous impact on the movement and left a positive legacy (fig. 12: The Cross Family of Tougalo, Mississippi). The Mississippi Project focused national attention on the subject of black disenfranchisement, and this led to the passage of the 1965 Voting Rights Act and Civil Rights legislation. Fannie Lou Hamer said it best: “Before the 1964 project there were people that wanted change, but they hadn’t dared to come out. After 1964 people began moving. To me it’s one of the greatest things that ever happened in Mississippi.” Everything We Did Was Ultimately for Them Our Beautiful Children (fig. 13: Everything We Did Was Ultimately for Them Our Beautiful Children).
Citation Format