S.N.C.C. and the Civil Rights Movement in Mississippi, 1963-64: A Time of Change

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In 1963 a consortium of civil rights organizations including S.N.C.C. (Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee), C.O.R.E. (Congress of Racial Equality), N.A.A.C.P., and the Urban Coalition began a drive to register black voters and form a political party that included Negroes in Mississippi. Of this consortium, S.N.C.C. was most responsible for the significant political transformation that would take place over the next year and a half. The story of the civil rights movement in Mississippi during this period is really the story of S.N.C.C.: it organized the movement, and through the Mississippi movement, came into its own as a political organization.

However, while the Mississippi movement gave S.N.C.C. its identity, the effort caused a fundamental change in the basic philosophy of S.N.C.C. Before and during the Mississippi movement, S.N.C.C., as its name implied, used exclusively nonviolent tactics and tried to achieve change through the established channels of government and society. After the Mississippi movement, S.N.C.C. abandoned nonviolent tactics and attempted change without the blessing or help of the government. These changes, which represented a break from the mainstream black and white civil rights movements, can be traced directly to the voter registration movement from its inception in 1963 to the 1964 Democratic convention where the movement experienced what S.N.C.C. considered a major setback.¹

When investigating the civil rights movement in Mississippi, one must understand that going into Mississippi to organize was not like
going into any other state in the South. Mississippi was the heart and soul of segregation. It had resisted integration more fiercely than any of the other southern states. That resistance included state legislation of anti-integration laws and statutes that effectively made it impossible for Federal agents to monitor or enforce integration efforts. In addition, Mississippi countered integration with extreme violence, perpetrated by police and citizens alike. By 1963, Mississippi was a virtual police state where segregation reigned supreme. As Fannie Lou Hamer, one of the most important native Mississippians in the Mississippi movement, said, "There was no civil rights movement in Mississippi before the summer project [summer 1964]."

The Mississippi project was the most ambitious effort S.N.C.C. had ever undertaken in its short history. S.N.C.C. was formed in 1960 as a temporary committee to bring about communication between local civil rights groups conducting sit-ins. In 1961, it became a recognizable political organization when it continued the Freedom Rides after they had been abandoned by C.O.R.E. in the face of tremendous violence. Throughout 1961 and 1962, S.N.C.C. continued to grow as did its reputation and influence in the civil rights movement.

In 1963 S.N.C.C. decided to attempt a voter registration drive in Mississippi. In conjunction with voter registration, S.N.C.C. began to form a political party which included blacks to challenge the loyalty of the Mississippi Democratic Party to the National Democratic Party. In 1963, voter registration was thought to be of far more importance than the formation of a political party. However, by late 1964 the political party had become one of the greatest achievements of the civil rights movement to that time. The Mississippi movement started slowly, but by the fall of 1963 was strong enough to hold a "freedom vote" in which 80,000 unregistered "black votes" were cast for black and white candidates in an unofficial election held to show the potential power that blacks could possess.

In the spring of 1964 a tremendous controversy brewed within S.N.C.C. A proposal was made to bring several hundred white college students to Mississippi to work for the movement that summer. S.N.C.C. was almost completely black, and many of its leaders did not want to admit whites for fear that the whites might dominate and eventually take over the organization. The man who most vehemently opposed bringing in the whites was Stokely Carmichael, what later became head of S.N.C.C. In the end, S.N.C.C. decided to include the white students, and what followed was the
“Freedom Summer.” However, Carmichael refused to work with whites that summer.12

As colleges recessed for the summer, the students began to arrive in Mississippi. They lived with black families and spent their days trying to convince blacks to register and join the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party.13 Voter registration was extremely difficult for several reasons. Most blacks were intimidated by the white establishment of Mississippi and were very reluctant to attempt any kind of challenge to its authority.14 In addition, blacks who attempted to register suffered economic and physical persecution. These abuses included loss of jobs, beatings, residential and church burnings and bombings, and police harassment.15 Signing up members for the M.F.D.P. presented similar problems. Even though members could sign up in the privacy of their own homes, blacks still felt intimidated and feared reprisals. Many of the volunteers became frustrated because of the seeming passivity of many Mississippi blacks; but the volunteers gamely continued, and generally there was an air of hopefulness throughout the movement.16

One disturbing aspect of the movement was the violence with which white Mississippi retaliated. During the summer, three volunteers were killed, four shot and wounded, fifty-two beaten, and 250 arrested in connection with the project. Thirteen Negro churches were burned to the ground, seventeen churches and other buildings were damaged by fire or bombing, and ten automobiles were damaged or destroyed.17 However, in most cases, the violence only helped to strengthen the resolve of the movement. In addition, the violence helped generate favorable publicity nationwide for the movement.18

One element conspicuously absent over the summer was federal protection for civil rights workers and blacks who tried to register to vote. One hundred and thirty-six F.B.I. agents were sent to Mississippi during the summer, but they were sent to observe the events, not to protect those involved.19 The Justice Department claimed that it had no legal power or precedent for interfering in Mississippi.20 However, later that summer, several Harvard law professors wrote the “Howe Memo” in which it was forcefully argued that the government had both the legal power (under Section 332 of Title 10 of the United States Code)21 and the legal precedent (in Mississippi in 1962; Little Rock, Arkansas, in 1958; and Alabama in 1962) to intercede.22 Evidence would suggest that the Justice Department did not interfere simply because it did not want to.
Outwardly, the Mississippi movement seemed to be completely unified. However, with the influx of white students into the movement came racial tension and dissension. Many of the veteran S.N.C.C. workers resented the presence of the white volunteers. There were several reasons for the resentment. First, for the black worker to feel gratitude for the help of the white volunteers was to admit inferiority. Second, whereas the white volunteers could, literally, blend back into society after the summer, the blacks were fighting a battle that was a lifetime battle and one that could not be ignored or avoided. Sally Belfrage was a white volunteer. In Freedom Summer she described the racial problems within the movement as such: "Black and white had to fight together in the movement, but the fight was as much against its own internal racism as the outer world's."

Despite its problems, the successes of the movement began to mount. More blacks were registering and joining M.F.D.P. The goals that S.N.C.C. were working for seemed attainable. Once people could see the results they became more militant about achieving them. S.N.C.C. did not even bother testing the 1964 Civil Rights Act (PL88-352) when it was passed in July because S.N.C.C. had realized that its objectives went far beyond being able to eat a hamburger in a white "grease joint" or take a swim in a public swimming pool. As expectations rose, the movement steadily built to a climax.

In August the emphasis was shifted from voter registration to the membership drive for M.F.D.P. in anticipation of the Democratic National Convention in Atlantic City which would be held later that month. To challenge effectively the regular Democratic Party in Mississippi, M.F.D.P. had both set up a parallel structure to that of the regular Democratic Party, to establish political legitimacy, and tried to join the regular Democratic Party in order to show that its members were denied access, thereby proving that the regular Democratic Party excluded blacks and did not accurately represent Mississippi Democrats. Blacks who attempted to attend local regular Democratic Party conventions were either turned away or found that the conventions were not being held where they had been announced. By the Atlantic City convention, M.F.D.P. had a delegation that represented 100,000 blacks and whites in Mississippi.

The grounds on which M.F.D.P. wished to replace the regular Democratic Party were substantial. M.F.D.P. was an integrated loyal party, whereas the regular Democratic Party was openly segregationist in its policies. The Mississippi State Democratic Party
platform expressly condemned the decision of the Supreme Court in the Brown school case (Brown v. Board of Education: 347 U.S. 483, 1954) to integrate public schools;29 it opposed anti-poll tax measures; it also stated, "We believe in segregation of the races and are unalterably opposed to the repeal or modification of the segregation laws of this state . . . "; and it rejected the platform of the National Democratic Party. The M.S.D.P. would later support the Republican candidate Barry Goldwater in the 1964 Presidential election. Politics aside, M.F.D.P. seemed to have an "airtight" case.

As S.N.C.C. and M.F.D.P. prepared for the challenge, expectations were mixed. In an interview, Joseph Rauh, the lawyer who argued for M.F.D.P. at the convention and a delegate from the District of Columbia who sat on the Credentials Committee of the convention, stated that he had expected that both sides would be seated at the convention. He felt so for several reasons. First, Lyndon Johnson was going to win the nomination and the election, and he wanted to win in the South. If Johnson supported seating M.F.D.P., he would lose the South. However, he could not refuse M.F.D.P. because to do so was contradictory to the principles of the party platform and would inflame many of the Northern states, which wholeheartedly supported him. Therefore Johnson would probably seek a compromise. 30 Secondly, at the 1948 Democratic convention, a similar situation had occurred with two delegations from Texas and was resolved when both sides were seated. Johnson had been in the Texas delegation at the time.31 Bob Moses, head of S.N.C.C. in Mississippi, was more pessimistic and doubted that the M.F.D.P. would be seated.32 However, the rank and file remained hopeful.

As the events happened, the Credentials Committee, under heavy pressure from Johnson, adopted a compromise. Under its terms all regular Mississippi Democratic Party delegates who took a loyalty oath to the National Democratic Party would be seated. In addition, two M.F.D.P. delegates, Aaron Henry and Edwin King, would be seated as at-large delegates. Guarantees were given that no segregated delegation would be seated in the future.33 The regular Mississippi delegation left the convention rather than take the loyalty oath. M.F.D.P. rejected the compromise but managed to slip onto the convention floor the next day.

Several opinions exist on why M.F.D.P. rejected the compromise. Stokely Carmichael felt that M.F.D.P. had been sold out by the Democratic Party and by those who supported the compromise, including Martin Luther King, Aaron Henry, Roy Wilkins, and Joseph Rauh. 34 As Carmichael wrote in Black Power, "The Freedom
Democrats went to Atlantic City to replace the racist Mississippi party, not to join it!" Joe Rauh believed that the compromise was rejected because the delegates who were to represent M.F.D.P. at the convention were chosen by Johnson, not M.F.D.P. He argued that "the entire affair was too high-handed."

The rejection at the convention was a turning point for S.N.C.C. Its leaders felt betrayed by Johnson and the Democrats, by King and the civil rights leaders, even by Rauh. As a result, S.N.C.C. turned sharply away from the tactics it had used in the past. S.N.C.C. adopted new tactics to achieve its goals without regard for societal conventions, the most important being the use of violence as a method to achieve change. Coincidentally, Bob Moses left S.N.C.C. and would not talk to white men. Many of S.N.C.C.'s leaders came to think that the law was not an impartial institution that would bring them justice, but a tool of political power. As Stokely Carmichael wrote, "Black people would have to organize and obtain their own power base before they could begin to think of coalition with others." The new way was clear!

S.N.C.C. had finally had enough. By September, 1964, the turning point had been reached. The beatings by whites, passivity of the government, and betrayal by their allies had taken their toll. S.N.C.C. would counter violence with violence. It no longer felt a moral obligation towards white conventions or established government, and it also rejected the participation of whites within the organization. Over the next several years, S.N.C.C. would become not only a civil rights organization, but a proponent of Black Power.

Notes

3. Lord, p. 18.
6. The Freedom Rides were begun by C.O.R.E. to test the anti-segregation laws on interstate bus lines in the South. Blacks riding buses attempted to use segregated facilities at bus stations all through the South.
12. Viorst, p. 75.
18. Interview with Frank Stewart.
22. The Howe Memo.
23. Belfrage, p. 81.
27. Carmichael, p. 91.
31. Interview with Rauh.
32. Interview with Rauh.
34. Carmichael, p. 95.
35. Carmichael, p. 92.
36. Interview with Rauh.
37. Shortly thereafter Moses went to Tahiti to teach. In an interview Rauh said, “I swore I would see Moses before I died.” Several years ago, Joseph Rauh visited Moses, who had returned to Boston, and they did speak.
38. Carmichael, p. 95.

Appendicies

In the interest of space, appendices containing interviews with Joseph Rauh and Frank Stewart, the Howe Memo, and the 1960 Platform and Principles of the Mississippi State Democratic Party have been omitted.
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