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In the Storm: William Hansen and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee in Arkansas, 1962-1967

BRENT RIFFEL

STUCK INSIDE A JAIL CELL IN ALBANY, GEORGIA, in July 1962, civil rights activist William Hansen was having trouble meeting with his attorney. He had been arrested for participating in a demonstration, but when the attorney, C. B. King, insisted on seeing his client, Dougherty County sheriff “Cull” Campbell became enraged. “Nigger, haven’t I told you to wait outside?” he said. 1 Campbell then picked up a cane and began beating the attorney. The next day the New York Times published a photograph of King, his head bandaged, leaving the hospital. 2 Hansen, however, had met with even harsher treatment. He had been thrown into a cell full of whites who were by no means sympathetic to the cause of civil rights and even less sympathetic toward a northern agitator like Hansen. He was savagely beaten, with his jaw shattered and several of his ribs broken. Only twenty-one years old at the time, Hansen had a long career as a political activist ahead of him.

Hansen arrived in Little Rock, Arkansas, later that year to head up a new branch of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), a grass-roots organization that sought to harness the rising tide of black political consciousness in the South. Hansen’s organizational skills


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earned him appointment to the post, but his interest in civil rights and his desire to fight racism dated to his childhood. Born in Cincinnati in 1939, Hansen grew up in a strict working-class Catholic family. His religious upbringing helped propel him toward a life as a political activist. "The extreme moral rigidity of American Catholicism in the pre-Vatican II days," he later recalled, "had a way of leading in the direction I went with regard to race and politics . . . . Its rigid moral doctrine, if accepted, would lead logically toward a certain set of actions."3

Hansen’s direct experience with African Americans also shaped his political outlook. He recalled how attending baseball games—sitting in the cheap bleacher seats at Crosley Field to see the Cincinnati Reds play—allowed positive interactions with black people:

I was a ten to sixteen-year-old kid who made acquaintances with many of these older black men who, it seemed to me, knew everything about baseball. They took a liking to [me]. I remember at first not being able to figure out why all these Cincinnatians supported the Brooklyn Dodgers over their hometown team. I finally figured out it was because of Jackie Robinson. That realization told me something about the society I was being raised in.

Like many people of his generation, Hansen also watched the aftermath of the 1954 Brown v. Board of Education decision, as well as the 1956 Montgomery Bus Boycott, with rapt attention. He quickly found himself siding with civil rights activists, thinking "it was dumb to be arrested for sitting in the wrong seat in a bus."4

Personal relationships with blacks also played a role in the development of Hansen’s political consciousness. When he was seventeen years old, he became friends with Bill Mason, a young black man with whom he often played basketball. This was Hansen’s first friendship with someone from outside of his working-class neighborhood. Mason often invited Hansen back to his home, where Hansen found he was treated as a member of Mason’s family. Two years later, the Masons took Hansen in, and he lived with them for a year. Their warmth offered a stark contrast to how he had imagined blacks and whites normally interacted with one another.5

Hansen made his first foray into the civil rights movement in the fall of 1957 while attending Xavier University in Cincinnati. He became as-

3William Hansen, e-mail correspondence with author, April 10, August 2, 2004.
5William Hansen, correspondence with author, April 21, 2004.
sociated with David McCarthy, a local priest who had become active in the cause. Along with Bill Mason, Hansen and McCarthy formed the Xavier Interracial Council. Hansen later downplayed its significance, arguing that it was never more than "a venue for getting to know other people." But the council allowed Hansen to make important contacts with other civil rights organizations such as the Congress for Racial Equality (CORE). Hansen quickly helped set up a Cincinnati branch of CORE and also joined a local branch of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). After dropping out of Xavier, Hansen fully devoted himself to the movement. By the time of his 1962 arrest in Albany, Georgia, he had been involved in a number of protests and demonstrations across the South. He had become an active member of SNCC, which at the time represented the vanguard of the civil rights movement.

While many groups, including CORE and the Martin Luther King Jr.-led Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), played a major part in the movement, the "shock troops" of SNCC quite often broke down the first barriers of resistance. Concentrating on the rural Deep South, SNCC met with far more violence than these other groups. But the more violence SNCC staffers endured, the greater their devotion to the cause. As SNCC grew in size and strength, its members often felt that time was on their side and that eventually dramatic social change would occur. SNCC staffers internalized this commitment to change, seeking to transform themselves as well. Combating racism, many believed, began in the individual's heart. Violence and arrest gave them a shared experience and indicated to many that they were on a righteous mission. As Hansen recalled, "the times were very intense, and most of us lived close to the edge."8

The rise and fall of SNCC has been extensively examined. But much of this scholarship has focused on SNCC's voter registration drives and protests against segregation in rural Mississippi. There are obvious reasons for this. For one, many civil rights activists considered Mississippi the linchpin of the movement and, indeed, the symbol of Jim Crow. Forcing change there, they believed, would cause a chain reaction in which less intensely racist states (or at least states perceived as less intensely racist) would follow suit, enforcing integration and ending black disfranchisement. Yet, a more complete picture of the successes and failures of

8Ibid.
8William Hansen, e-mail correspondence with author, March 4, 2002.
9See Carson's seminal In Struggle, as well as Howard Zinn's participatory memoir, SNCC: The New Abolitionists (Boston: Beacon Press, 1964).
SNCC, its strengths and weaknesses, requires examination of its experience in other states. The case of Arkansas might be particularly instructive, considering that far fewer black people lived in Arkansas than in Mississippi and the considerable attention already drawn to the state by the Central High crisis of 1957. While the history of SNCC in Arkansas cannot be encompassed in any single article, William Hansen’s story reveals much about the organization’s career in the state and suggests something of the diversity within SNCC and the civil rights movement as a whole.

SNCC arrived in Arkansas at the request of the Arkansas Council on Human Relations, a local minority rights group, in October 1962. The history of SNCC’s Arkansas field office unfolded under the shadow of the Central High crisis. Many Arkansans were embarrassed by the national attention their state had received during the crisis. Sympathetic moderates often met civil rights groups more than halfway, seeking to appease the activists before another media onslaught cast the state in a negative light. Thus, many of the gains made by SNCC in Arkansas were achieved behind the scenes, even though, as Hansen noted, “a major tactic was to secure as much media attention as possible.” This markedly differed from SNCC activities in Mississippi, where civil rights workers acted in the constant glare of community and media attention.

Hansen had been appointed by the national SNCC office to be director of what became known as the Arkansas Project. Following Bob Zellner—one of the first white activists in SNCC—Hansen became the second white person to serve as a field organizer. Hansen’s credibility among SNCC members was unquestionable. He had participated in a number of signal episodes of the civil rights movement over the previous five years. The violent attacks he had endured cemented his reputation as a committed activist. Yet, while nominally the leader of the local SNCC office, Hansen later insisted that he was not the group’s sole leader, just the person the media came to first. SNCC prided itself on its lack of leaders and tended to avoid hierarchy in its organization.

By the time Hansen arrived in Little Rock, a number of young activists were already at work. As sit-ins and demonstrations spread across the South in 1960–61, all-black Philander Smith College had emerged as the

10Hansen, e-mail correspondence, August 2, 2004. See also telegram to SNCC communications director Julian Bond, October 7, 1962, ser. 1, box 33, folder 335, Arkansas Council on Human Relations Papers, Special Collections Division, University of Arkansas Libraries, Fayetteville.

11Hansen, e-mail correspondence, August 2, 2004.

center of Arkansas's student civil rights movement. On March 10, 1960, student activists held a demonstration in downtown Little Rock, at which a number of students were arrested. In other southern cities, whites had often responded to black demonstrations with violence and jeers. In Little Rock, the sit-ins and demonstrations produced a much different response. The white community, having perhaps learned some lessons from the 1957 crisis, proved more accommodating than in many other spots around the South. To quietly negotiate desegregation of the city, a secret committee was formed in early 1961. White businessman Grainger Williams served on the committee and acted as a liaison between the civil rights community and the white business owners of Little Rock: "I don't know whether it was formed by the Chamber of Commerce or who formed it, but somebody called me and asked me if I'd serve on this committee... and I said, certainly. I think they wanted it secret 'cause they didn't want anybody to know they were working on it. They just wanted it to occur."13

According to Hansen, the invitation extended to SNCC was part of a strategy to make integration appear as if it was occurring naturally and the city changing on its own, without the federal government having to get involved. Hansen suggested local white liberals saw SNCC as something of a lightning rod, helping advance desegregation while deflecting backlash away from local white supporters:

That's the reason they called SNCC in the first place in 1962 and asked for an organizer, precisely because they were too afraid for their reputations and their nice suburban lifestyles: "Call SNCC and have them take the heat. They'll do what we're afraid to do and then we'll step in later as the voice of reason and moderation and take the credit." And that's exactly what they did.14

Scholarly accounts of desegregation in Little Rock have highlighted the role that a wave of sit-ins Hansen helped orchestrate at Woolworths and other businesses played in speeding the integration in 1963 of local lunch counters, restaurants, theaters, and municipal recreational facilities.15 Yet Hansen later downplayed his own role, giving the greatest

13Will the Circle Be Unbroken," (transcript of a documentary produced by the Southern Regional Council, 2000), 5.
14Hansen, e-mail correspondence, August 2, 2004.
The Arkansas State Police photographed William Hansen in 1962 as part of its ongoing surveillance of civil rights activists. *Courtesy Special Collections Division, University of Arkansas Libraries, Fayetteville.*
credit to Philander Smith students in pushing the business community and the city to end Jim Crow.  

If SNCC, by Hansen’s account, played a small role in Little Rock racial politics, it focused considerable attention on eastern Arkansas, where a good portion of the state’s black population lived. The Arkansas delta resembled Mississippi in many ways, with its sharecropping and rigidly hierarchical divisions of race and class. Carrie Young, at the time a teenaged black woman from Helena, summed up the delta society of this era. “I got whippings every day,” she recalled. “I mean that was your life. A hundred pounds of cotton brought $3.00. And back then, I was glad to see SNCC and anything else that looked like ‘em because that was my ticket out of the cotton field.” Young became involved in the movement at age sixteen, joining SNCC and taking part in voter registration drives in Phillips County. One of the things about SNCC that appealed to delta blacks was its informality, according to Frank James. He recalled that, “[SNCC] was loosely put [together] so that any student could belong and you didn’t have to have a card to belong. So if you say you were a part of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, you were.” Black Arkansans also responded to the organization’s lack of dogma, as well as its ambivalent stance toward techniques of political action. According to Perlesta Hollingsworth, “[SNCC wasn’t] sold on [Dr. Martin Luther] King’s approach completely. It was a little divergence. They were thinking about—you know—striking back.” SNCC obviously adhered to the tenets of nonviolence, but some within the movement were moving toward embracing armed self-defense. As SNCC developed, it became increasingly split between activists like Hansen, who preferred grass-roots organizing, and men like Stokely Carmichael, who instead employed fiery separatist rhetoric and ultimately endorsed violence as a viable means of political action.

Historian John A. Kirk suggests that many locals in the Arkansas delta—both black and white—resented SNCC’s presence in the area. SNCC ignored local opinion, he argues, and simply imposed its ideas on the people there. Many black clergymen, in particular, actively opposed

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16 Hansen, e-mail correspondence, August 2, 2004.  
17 Hansen, “Will the Circle Be Unbroken?” 7.  
18 Ibid., 8.  
19 Ibid., 10.  
20 Ibid., 12.  
21 Stokely Carmichael headed SNCC’s national office during the organization’s final years.
SNCC because it threatened their church’s authority. But Hansen insisted most blacks responded to SNCC’s arrival with enthusiasm. “It was normal, everyday black folk who took us in, enfolded us, energized us, and took care of us.” He added “some ministers held us at arm’s length because they thought we threatened their political control. We probably did. On the other hand, many ministers supported us strongly. Where in the world did we hold those weekly mass meetings, but in churches?”

Hansen vividly remembered the day in fall 1963 that SNCC arrived in Phillips County:

We announced our presence with a sit-in at a Helena downtown lunch counter. As per usual, I was arrested along with a half-dozen or so locals, mainly teenagers . . . I was still in jail from this arrest on the day [John F. Kennedy was assassinated] . . . I thought it was all over. Who would pay any attention to the murder of a nobody civil rights organizer after what happened in Dallas?

According to Hansen, a lack of adequate staff and “a lot of trouble with police” forced SNCC to leave the city. But SNCC returned three months later. Helena would become, along with Pine Bluff, a focal point of its work in eastern Arkansas.

With SNCC’s encouragement, a young black factory worker ran for Helena’s city council as an independent. With only one ballot box left uncounted, he led by forty-eight votes. Two days later, when all of the votes had been tallied, he lost by over 200 votes. According to Hansen, voter fraud had obviously occurred:

From our investigation, we have found that much of this fraud was perpetrated by . . . the local Uncle Tom and his wife . . . who runs a beauty salon. Representing Sheriff Hickey, the most feared man among Negroes in Helena, [the Uncle Tom] approached many Negroes and told them to vote “absentee” at [the]

23Ibid., e-mail correspondence, August 2, 2004.
24Ibid., e-mail correspondence with author, March 22, 2002.
26Ibid.
beauty salon to avoid the crowds at the polls. Those that came were told to vote . . . and they would take care of the rest. [They] also voted for those who never came. By the way, [this man] is the president of the new Phillips County chapter of the NAACP.27

Thus by Hansen’s account, blacks as well as whites were complicit in electoral fraud. Mitchell Zimmerman, another white organizer who, like Hansen, had come to Arkansas to get involved with SNCC’s voter registration drives, wrote to the Justice Department’s Civil Rights Division, demanding an investigation into election rigging and harassment of black voters in eastern Arkansas.28

In Pine Bluff, SNCC focused on increasing voter registration among the city’s black population. According to the field reports Hansen frequently sent to the organization’s national office in Atlanta, these efforts succeeded in doubling the number of registered black voters to roughly forty percent of the entire black population of Pine Bluff.29 SNCC also made strides in encouraging blacks to run for political office. In Pine Bluff, one black candidate narrowly won a seat on the local school board.30 Two other blacks, Ben Grinage and James A. Bagby (both SNCC organizers), ran for state representative. As Hansen reported, “they both lost but we were encouraged by the voter turnout.”31

SNCC’s eastern Arkansas project occasionally met with intense resistance from the white community. Hansen reported to the national office that in Helena in the summer of 1964 “several houses were fired into by marauding whites and there was an unsuccessful attempt to bomb the Freedom House,” SNCC’s community center.32 Later that fall, SNCC organizer Frank T. Cieciorka was beaten in front of a polling place on election day.33 According to Hansen, many locals who had been supportive of SNCC’s efforts were threatened and harassed.34

SNCC organizers in the Arkansas delta found that their early attempts at integrating public spaces were “mostly unsuccessful,” accord-

27Hansen, Field Report, February 1965, box 8, folder 5, SNCC Arkansas Project Records.
28Mitchell Zimmerman to United States Justice Department, Civil Rights Division, February 1966, box 8, folder 5, SNCC Arkansas Project Records.
30Ibid.
31Ibid.
32Ibid.
34Hanscn, e-mail correspondence, March 22, 2002.
ing to SNCC’s newspaper, the *Student Voice*.\(^{35}\) Yet internal reports tell a different story, suggesting that the organization made considerable strides. SNCC had proved to local blacks that it would remain in the area in the face of widespread opposition. It showed them that they were not alone and that enormous political change was afoot. Beyond demonstrating its resolve, SNCC also achieved tangible results, helping, according to Hansen, over 2,000 blacks in the delta to register to vote.\(^{36}\)

Yet the organization could do little to ease the endemic poverty and racism facing eastern Arkansas blacks. Its experience in the delta suggested to many activists that the real battle had to be fought against the economic oppression that underlay race relations. Hansen later remarked that as SNCC grew larger its core leadership became more politically sophisticated, recognizing the systemic problems that perpetuated racial discord. He realized the challenge that this presented to the status quo:

>[SNCC] began questioning the nature of wealth and property in the United States: Who holds it? Why? How did they get it? By what right? Why are people poor? And what does the “system” have to do with it? These are questions one is not allowed to ask in America. Certainly not questions one is allowed to act on. Arguing that all Americans should be allowed to eat hamburgers wherever they wish, go to school wherever they wish, vote just like white people, are issues America is willing to discuss. Questioning the nature of American capitalism is beyond what is considered legitimate discourse. [Because of this] SNCC and other organizations had to be destroyed . . . and they were.\(^{37}\)

Such perceptions, together with the fact that the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965 had effectively ended *de jure* segregation and disfranchisement, moved civil rights activism in radical new directions. While the civil rights movement might have faded away following its legislative victories, the movement actually heightened its assault on the status quo. This was certainly the case in Arkansas, where the cooperation of the early 1960s gave way to misunderstandings and violent confrontations. Hansen and other SNCC activists had been met with violence in rural parts of the South, but events

\(^{35}\)Student Voice, August 5, 1964, quoted in *The Student Voice 1960-1965: Periodical of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee*, compiled by the staff of the Martin Luther King, Jr., Papers Project, Clayborne Carson, senior editor and director (London: Meckler, 1990), 179.

\(^{36}\)Hansen, Field Report, February 1965.

\(^{37}\)Hansen, e-mail correspondence, March 22, 2002.
in Little Rock had been comparatively peaceful. This changed in 1965 with a march on the State Capitol. The capitol building was one of the last public holdouts to integration in the city. Local civil rights activist Howard Love participated in the march, and recalled the intense resistance with which they were met. “We had gone out to the Capitol and tried to eat,” he recalled. “Well, they refused to serve us out there. The state police herded us out and back up the stairs. And that was a trap. They got us on the stairs and started spraying mustard gas.”

Clearly, some Little Rock whites felt they had accommodated black activists enough. According to Roy Reed, who worked as a reporter for the Arkansas Gazette and then the New York Times, “there was a feeling that these are kids, why should we deal with them? . . . Why do they have to [protest]? Why don’t they go to court? Let’s don’t have all of this disturbance. It’s not good for our image here in the town, or, it’s bad for business, or, people will get hurt.”

While violent eruptions like those at the 1965 march on the Capitol were an anomaly, the tumult of this protest signaled the emergence of a new element in the Little Rock civil rights scene. Many local SNCC members coalesced into a radicalized, militant bloc. Nationally, SNCC underwent a similar change in its ranks as the Black Power movement developed. Leaders like Stokely Carmichael and H. Rap Brown began pushing for a more aggressive approach. They felt that SNCC’s insistence on nonviolence had been a practical necessity. But, as race riots erupted throughout the United States in the summer of 1965, many within SNCC argued that nonviolence no longer had a place in the movement. With this radicalization came a new current, one that sought to expel white members from SNCC. The call for separatism within the organization initially fell on deaf ears but soon became an irresistible force.

Arkansas’s move toward Black Power came in 1966, with the emergence of the Black United Youth (BUY) as a new civil rights group in Little Rock. Many of its members had splintered off from SNCC. Indeed, there probably would never have been a BUY had SNCC not arrived first. BUY offered an implicit critique of SNCC’s more moderate philosophy of nonviolence and its cooperation—at least in Arkansas—with white authorities. Led by Bobby Brown, BUY combined radical political action with a new Afro-centric cultural awareness that typified Black Power groups. As local SNCC activist Lottie Shackleford, who would

38 Ibid., 9.
39 Ibid., 5.
40 Hansen, e-mail correspondence, March 22, 2002.
serve as mayor of Little Rock in the 1980s, recalled, "[BUY was] considered the rough guys. In fact, if you knew that BUY was going to be conducting some kind of activity some place, you probably avoided that area." 41 BUY continued the process of integration begun by SNCC, focusing on grocery stores, which at the time remained segregated on a de facto basis. At the same time young activists shifted toward Black Power, leaders like Hansen began questioning the new ideological directions of the movement. Thus, the Arkansas Project's membership began eroding from both ends.

Though he continued to work in Arkansas, William Hansen resigned from his SNCC directorship in 1964—citing the need for black leaders to take over the Arkansas Project. 42 He left the organization altogether in 1966. His departure broke all ties between the Arkansas Project and the early SNCC members who had been in the organization since 1960-61. Different rationales have been offered for Hansen's leaving SNCC. In his general history of SNCC, Clayborne Carson suggested that Hansen's departure stemmed from his unwillingness, in contrast to most Arkansas SNCC staffers, to toe the emerging party line of Black Power, a clearly untenable course for a white activist. 43 By this time, the Arkansas Project's staff had dwindled to an almost all-black membership. In 1962, Hansen had been the only white staffer in Arkansas. A number of white northern activists, including Mitchell Zimmerman, joined SNCC in 1963-64, yet by 1966 Hansen was one of only a handful of whites still involved in the project. 44

Hansen has offered more pragmatic reasons for leaving, citing the need to earn more money for his wife (he had married a black female activist from Pine Bluff during his days as director) and their newborn child. But Hansen has also given other reasons for resigning more in keeping with Carson's account. He felt that by the time of his resignation SNCC's programs "were dying on the vine with no resources and people leaving. I thought the way the Black Power slogan was being articulated was incoherent and confusing, thus undermining what we were trying to do." Hansen continued:

I knew the expulsion of whites was coming. Those who wanted to get rid of whites in the organization came to every meeting and

41 "Will the Circle Be Unbroken," 13. See also Kirk, Redefining the Color Line, 181-182.
43 Carson, In Struggle, 232.
44 Hansen, e-mail correspondence, March 22, 2002.
had been doing so for several years . . . . [This] led SNCC into an endless internal cycle of recrimination. For me, I did not want to undergo the indignity of being expelled from an organization that had consumed my life for the previous six, seven years. Particularly as the people who were demanding our expulsion were relative newcomers who hadn't even been there during the really tough years of the early sixties. For the most part, they had been on nice white campuses up North.\textsuperscript{45}

Still, Hansen's recollections suggest internal racial tensions did not play as large a role in the state field office as some historians have suggested they did nationally. Hansen argued that racial tension within the group was non-existent until after 1964 and the influx of many new, mostly white, members: "SNCC grew too fast after the summer of 1964, and tried to absorb a large group of people (largely white, largely educated, largely northern, and often quite aggressive) who were new to the organization, often overly romantic about what the 'movement' actually was." But even after 1964, whatever tensions did exist were, as Hansen recalled, "a very minor part of our collective relationship."\textsuperscript{46}

In many ways, William Hansen symbolizes the evolution of SNCC, from the boundless, idealistic energy of its early days to the fractured, internal struggles of its final period. Ironically, both in Arkansas and nationally, it became politically irrelevant almost as soon as it had become a powerful force. SNCC ultimately collapsed under its own weight, following the imposition of militant dogma on an organization founded on the notion of not having an ideology or hierarchy. The \textit{Arkansas Gazette} reported in May 1966 that Pine Bluff SNCC leader Benjamin Grinage had threatened to resign if the Arkansas Project adopted the national office's new platform.\textsuperscript{47} In July 1966, Grinage carried out his threat (at virtually the same time Hansen resigned)—though he cited the need to earn more money, not ideology, as his motive for leaving the Arkansas Project.\textsuperscript{48}

The need to earn money that both Grinage and Hansen cited in leaving SNCC could itself be traced back to the organization's ideological shift, which caused a dramatic drop-off in funding that began around 1965. The lack of funds filtered down to the state level, sending the or-

\begin{itemize}
\item\textsuperscript{45}Ibid.
\item\textsuperscript{46}Ibid.
\item\textsuperscript{47}\textit{Arkansas Gazette}, May 25, 1966, p. 1B.
\item\textsuperscript{48}Ibid., July 1, 1966, p. 12A. See also \textit{Pine Bluff Commercial}, July 1, 1966, in clippings file, ser. 1, box 33, folder 335, Arkansas Council on Human Relations Papers.
\end{itemize}
organization into disarray. Hansen cited two specific reasons why funding came to a virtual standstill: SNCC’s vehement opposition to the Vietnam War and support for Palestinian nationalism. SNCC had usually avoided international politics, but, by 1966, members of the organization began traveling to controversial political hot spots such as Havana and Hanoi. Its support for the Palestinian movement caused the most significant reaction against SNCC, because much of the group’s support came from sympathetic Jewish liberals. According to Hansen, the desertion of the Jewish community had a devastating effect:

Virtually overnight we were deprived of funds. Without at least some money the field programs began to wither and die. Organizers, needing to eat, left to find jobs, causing more decline in the field programs. As the organization shrank it left the door open to the loony ultra-nationalist fringe who were, I think, in large part, the infiltrators. We were vulnerable, and they got us.49

In referring to “infiltrators,” Hansen was alluding to COINTELPRO, a highly controversial, secret program headed by Federal Bureau of Investigation director J. Edgar Hoover. This program investigated, and hindered the actions of, political groups that certain elements of the government considered dangerous. Hansen believed infiltrators played a major role in SNCC’s collapse, and he suspected certain Arkansas Project staffers of being involved in subterfuge. As Hansen recalled, “there is no question in my mind—virtually all SNCC veterans agree with me here—that we were infiltrated . . . . Often those who claimed to be the ‘blackest’ (and I am definitely not talking about Stokely Carmichael here) were the ones I suspect of being agents provocateurs.”50 However, like everything associated with COINTELPRO, the evidence remains murky. Only as documents concerning COINTELPRO become more available through declassification will the effect this program had on SNCC become clearer.51

After leaving SNCC, Hansen moved to Atlanta where he worked for a number of organizations that sought to combat rural poverty: the Na-

49Hansen, e-mail correspondence, March 22, 2002. Hansen pointed out that he did not consider Stokely Carmichael to be part of this “looney ultra-nationalist fringe.” While Hansen never endorsed Carmichael’s most radical beliefs, they remained friends.

50Hansen, e-mail correspondence, March 22, 2002.

tional Sharecroppers Fund, the Southern Rural Project, and the Westinghouse Learning Corporation's Vista Training Project. By 1969, he had come to believe that these organizations were accomplishing little. Moreover, he had become increasingly disillusioned with the direction of the civil rights movement, which he considered to be, at the close of the 1960s, mired in "self-absorption and self-delusion with its ultra-romantic notions of armed revolution succeeding in urban America."\(^{52}\) Accordingly, Hansen moved with his wife and two young children to West Germany and, then, West Africa. In the mid-1970s, he returned to Germany, where he took a job writing for a weekly English-language newspaper, but his leftist politics quickly got him fired. He then moved to London to pursue graduate work in African politics. In 1979, he returned to the United States to begin work on a Ph.D. at Boston University. Shortly afterward, Ronald Reagan ascended to the White House and became, by Hansen’s estimation, "the first president to come to office with the explicit intent to roll back the sixties."\(^{53}\) During the 1980s, Hansen's political activism focused on two major issues: opposing nuclear proliferation and the arms race and the growing solidarity movement in South Africa.

Hansen remained active in various political causes during the 1990s, and in 1997 took a teaching position at the American University-Central Asia, in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan. He kept in contact with many of the civil rights leaders that he had worked with in the 1960s. In the spring of 1998, he took his son to meet former colleague Stokely Carmichael (by then known as Kwame Ture), two months before Carmichael would succumb to cancer. For Hansen, this encounter illustrated how SNCC still lived on:

"My son and I spent the day with Stokely Carmichael in an apartment in New York City . . . and talked about the old days, about Africa, about the continuing struggle, about his impending death. My white, freckle-faced, red-haired son [from Hansen’s second marriage] was in awe as Brother Carmichael treated him with respect and as a member of the collective struggle. His friendship with me was forged in countless places and countless instances over those short years of SNCC."\(^{54}\)

\(^{52}\)Hansen, correspondence with author, July 1, 2004.

\(^{53}\)Ibid.

\(^{54}\)Hansen, e-mail correspondence, August 2, 2004.
To Hansen, SNCC represented a "circle of trust, a band of brothers" that continued to exist and have meaning long after the organization ceased its activities.\textsuperscript{55}

William Hansen played an important, if overlooked, role in the history of the American civil rights movement and the history of Arkansas. SNCC’s willingness to work with white civic leaders in Little Rock helped the city to integrate quietly and with relative peace. In the Arkansas delta, SNCC’s presence probably did little to affect the larger social divisions there. But during his brief time as head of the Arkansas Project, Hansen helped delta blacks to develop greater political consciousness through his efforts at voter registration. And, through his leadership, William Hansen provided a model for young white activists, showing how sympathy for the plight of African Americans could be translated into overt political action.

\textsuperscript{55} Ibid.