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Searching for Democracy***

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Doris Wilson gets foot treatment from Dr. June Finer during the  
1965 Selma to Montgomery march. © 1978 Matt Herron

# SOCIAL MOVEMENTS OF THE 1960s

*Searching for Democracy*

Stewart Burns

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*For my parents*

## *Chapter One*

# We Shall All Be Free

## My Soul Is Rested

In August 1955 a fourteen-year-old black youth from Chicago visited relatives near Greenwood, Mississippi, gateway to the flat, fertile, cotton-rich Delta. Emmett Till had once had polio and had a speech defect as a result. After buying some candy at a rural store in Money, the high-spirited boy allegedly said "Bye, baby" to the white female proprietor. Hardly a more serious crime existed in the canons of Jim Crow justice. Three days later, after midnight, her husband and brother dragged him from the cabin where he was staying to a barn at a nearby plantation, where they found a photo of a white girl in his wallet. Unfamiliar with Southern etiquette, he told them she was his girlfriend. The men beat him savagely, shot him through the head, cut off his testicles, and dumped him in the Tallahatchie River with a heavy cotton gin fan wired to his neck. Till's mutilated body somehow bobbed to the surface and was discovered by a white teenager fishing. The killers, who later confessed, were acquitted. The case drew a surprising degree of national publicity. Why all this fuss over a dead nigger in the Tallahatchie? asked a white Mississippian. "That river's full of niggers."<sup>1</sup> It was a particularly barbaric example of a "normal" practice of white repression by which at least 4,000 black people had been lynched since Reconstruction. Lynching was the core of a violent system of social control that sanctioned beatings, bombings, and other terrorism to make black people afraid to assert their rights.

Legal slavery had been abolished by the Thirteenth Amendment at the close of the Civil War, but in the century that followed white Southerners had fought to preserve its psychological, social, and economic foundations by other means. After the plantation economy collapsed—in part because “freed” blacks refused to continue laboring under slavery-like conditions—Southern oligarchs imposed a new system of official segregation to restore their control. The Fourteenth Amendment, which ostensibly guaranteed black people “equal protection of the laws,” was used by the Supreme Court in 1896 to put a national stamp of approval on mandatory segregation as long as it was “separate but equal.” The *Plessy v. Ferguson* ruling signified the expiration of the “first cycle” of black struggles for civil rights, which had reached its zenith during the Reconstruction era.

Just when Southern whites succeeded in reconsolidating their hold over the black population, the worldwide demand for the South’s agriculture, especially cotton, plummeted and it became increasingly mechanized. These changes pushed many black sharecroppers and farm laborers off the land into Southern cities. The expansion of Northern industry fueled by World War I generated a mass migration of several million black people to the North by the end of the next world war—one of the largest migrations in human history. “In the course of a few decades,” write Frances Fox Piven and Richard Cloward, “a depressed southern rural peasantry had been transformed into a depressed urban proletariat” in both the North and the South.<sup>2</sup> Whatever small economic strides blacks made during the 1920s were reversed by the Great Depression, and New Deal relief and job programs did not help much. Those black families who had stayed on the land in the South were hurt by federal farm policies favoring big growers. War production and military service helped many blacks escape from poverty. (President Roosevelt instituted fair hiring rules in the defense industry after black labor leader A. Philip Randolph threatened a march on Washington in 1941.) As peace broke out and black veterans returned with new self-esteem, expectations rose for greater advances in the postwar era. Two new circumstances made black freedom more auspicious: the diminished need of dominant economic interests to preserve the Jim Crow system, since blacks had become somewhat marginal to Southern agriculture; and the difficulty faced by the federal government in winning the allegiance of Third World nations, especially in Africa, while graphic racial subjugation still existed in the United States. The main barrier was no longer economic forces but entrenched racism itself—and the white power structures, state and local, that depended on it.

Southern black people never ceased fighting for their rights, despite the stranglehold of institutionalized “white supremacy” tacitly supported by Northern elites. But protests were sporadic, small-scale, and generally unnoticed beyond the locality. As before, “legal” and extralegal violence, or threats of it, hounded those who did not fully obey the rigid code of conduct.

The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), founded in 1909 by path-breaking black scholar W. E. B. Du Bois and others (replacing the unsuccessful National Afro-American League), resolved to focus on fulfilling the constitutional promise of the Fourteenth and Fifteenth amendments by taking a juridical approach aimed at civil and political (but not economic) rights for African-Americans; this approach created the framework for the later freedom movement. It distanced itself from the then-popular philosophy of Booker T. Washington, which stressed moral and economic uplift rather than legal rights. The NAACP devoted the next half-century to fighting within the federal courts for freedom, in particular by doggedly pursuing test cases that challenged segregation in education. In the 1930s and 1940s the other main organizational support for black rights came from the Communist party; consequently, a number of leading black reformers like Du Bois, actor/singer Paul Robeson, and novelist Richard Wright gravitated toward it.

The NAACP’s ultimate triumph was the unanimous Supreme Court decision in May 1954, *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas*, which nullified *Plessy v. Ferguson* and declared public school segregation unconstitutional (and, by implication, all segregation). It is probable that the ruling would not have been reached, and certainly not with unanimity, had it not been followed by an order to integrate schools gradually—“with all deliberate speed”—which was in fact what happened. Still, the historic decision triggered “massive resistance” to ending Jim Crow by state and local politicians and the newly formed White Citizens Councils, all of whom employed legal maneuvers, economic reprisals, and outright defiance. The resurgent Ku Klux Klan and its kin resorted to covert terror.

The same month that Emmett Till was killed, Rosa Parks, a forty-two-year-old black woman from Alabama, took part in a workshop on racial integration at the Highlander Folk School in the Appalachian Mountains of Tennessee. Long active in civil rights work, she had served for years as an officer of the Montgomery chapter of the NAACP, had organized the local NAACP Youth Council (whose members had tried to desegregate city buses), and had been secretary of the Alabama NAACP. Highlander had been started in the depth of the Depression by an indomitable,

witty white man named Myles Horton, born and bred in the poverty of Appalachia, who burned with desire to help poor people gain power to improve their lives. Highlander became a key training center for Southern community activists and labor organizers. Like a modern-day Socrates, Horton would fire one question after another at workshop participants to enable them to find answers to social problems from their own experience, then would teach them how to use this method to develop grass-roots leadership and activism.

Parks was deeply affected by her visit to the mountain retreat, which at that time was mainly devoted to supporting civil rights agitation. She experienced Highlander as a microcosm of a racially integrated society: "I found out for the first time in my adult life that this could be a unified society, that there was such a thing as people of differing races and backgrounds meeting together in workshops and living together in peace and harmony. . . . I gained there strength to persevere in my work for freedom."<sup>3</sup>

Four months later, in the early evening of 1 December 1955, Rosa Parks climbed on a city bus after working hard all day at her tailoring job in a big Montgomery department store next to historic Court Square, once a center of slave auctions and the first capitol of the Confederacy. The square sparkled with Christmas lights, and a bright banner declared, "Peace on Earth, Goodwill to Men." She sat down in a row between the "white only" section and the rear seats reserved for "colored"; custom was that blacks could sit in the midsection if the back was filled. Soon a white man got on the crowded bus and the driver—who a decade before had ejected Parks for refusing to enter through the back door—ordered her and three other black passengers to stand so that the white man could sit alone. The others reluctantly got up but Parks did not budge; she was put off by the driver's command, since she believed she was not violating the law. He called the police, but she felt no fear. She was taken to jail and convicted of breaking the segregation code. Parks had not planned her quiet protest but had prepared well for it. "I had almost a life history of being rebellious against being mistreated because of my color," she recalled. On this occasion more than others, "I felt that I was not being treated right and that I had a right to retain the seat that I had taken. . . . The time had just come when I had been pushed as far as I could stand to be pushed. . . . I had decided that I would have to know once and for all what rights I had as a human being and a citizen."<sup>4</sup>

Parks was bailed out by E. D. Nixon, an older activist who had been president of both the local and state NAACP, worked as a Pullman porter on the train to Chicago, and served as a regional officer of the Brother-

hood of Sleeping Car Porters founded by A. Philip Randolph. Considered by associates the "most militant man in town," he was the backbone of civil rights activity in Montgomery. Parks had worked closely with him for years; it was he who had arranged for her to do the Highlander workshop.<sup>5</sup> Nixon had been waiting for just such a test case to challenge the constitutionality of the bus segregation law that had inflicted so much daily injustice on most of Montgomery's black population. Two women had been arrested for similar "crimes" in the past year, including a fifteen-year-old high school student, but those cases did not seem promising. Parks was ideal—no one had more respect in the black community. "If ever there was a woman who was dedicated to the cause," Nixon recalled, "it was Rosa Parks."<sup>6</sup>

Word of her arrest spread quickly to members of the Women's Political Council, a superbly organized civil rights group of black professional women led by Jo Ann Robinson, a dynamic English professor at the black Alabama State College. Daughter of a poor Georgia farmer, she herself had been mistreated by a white bus driver six years before; with her humiliation turned to anger, she had been challenging the bus law through "proper channels" ever since, to no avail. The council had been planning a bus boycott for months and decided the time had come. Members stayed up all night after Parks's arrest mimeographing thousands of leaflets at Robinson's office and with the help of her students handed them out all over town. The women contacted Nixon, who agreed to spearhead the effort. He came home, took a sheet of paper, and drew a rough sketch of the city, measuring distances with a slide rule. "I discovered nowhere in Montgomery at that time a man couldn't walk to work if he wanted to." He said to his wife: "We can beat this thing."<sup>7</sup>

Nixon knew that to have any chance of success the boycott had to get the united support of black ministers, the traditional leaders of black communities. He called them one by one, starting with Ralph Abernathy, the passionate young pastor of the First Baptist Church who had an earthy sense of humor and a "gift of laughing people into positive action." Abernathy thought the boycott was a great idea.<sup>8</sup> Third on the list was twenty-six-year-old Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., the new minister of the reputable Dexter Avenue Baptist Church who had lived in Montgomery for only a year. "Brother Nixon," he replied, "let me think about it awhile, and call me back." When Nixon did so, King was enthusiastic. "I'm glad you agreed," Nixon said, "because I already set the meeting up to meet at your church."<sup>9</sup>

King had grown up in Atlanta, the son of a prosperous minister of one of the largest Baptist congregations in the country. Despite his promi-

ment position among Atlanta's blacks and his influence with the white power structure, "Daddy" King was incensed by segregation and led efforts against it in the 1930s, including a voting rights march to City Hall. He ruled his home "like a fierce Old Testament patriarch," frequently whipping his kids, but Martin Jr. admired him, declaring him to have been "a real father to me."<sup>10</sup> Second child and first son, Martin was a gifted boy with a quick mind who excelled at everything—schoolwork, sports (especially wrestling), dancing, debating, oratory. From age six he soloed hymns at church services and conventions, and by his early teens his voice had matured into a rich, deep baritone that awed his listeners in song or speech.

Wounded by the barbs of segregation yet motivated by his mother's constant counsel to believe he was "somebody," he resolved to improve the lives of black people—but how? In adolescence he rebelled against Daddy King's demand that he also become a minister but eventually changed his mind and, fully trained at eighteen, was installed as assistant pastor of his father's church. After graduating from Atlanta's Morehouse College a year later, he attended Crozer Seminary in Pennsylvania and earned his doctorate at Boston University, where he scrutinized the whole gamut of Western philosophy and theology and searched for ways to translate the ideas that inspired him, from Social Gospel to Reinhold Niebuhr, into an effective method of social change. Hired to take over the middle-class Montgomery church, he moved there with his wife Coretta Scott King, a talented singer who had given up a musical career to marry him. By the time of Nixon's call, King had dabbled in civil rights work and had considered running for president of the local NAACP.

The 2 December meeting of black leaders at King's church decided unanimously to organize a bus boycott. By meticulous organizing, the joined networks of the Women's Political Council and the black ministers spread the message to virtually all of Montgomery's 50,000 black citizens that weekend, especially at Sunday services. On Monday morning, 5 December, barely a dozen black people got on the buses. Thousands rode cut-rate cabs, horse-drawn wagons, and mules, or walked. Day one was successful beyond anyone's expectations. A community meeting had been called at the Holt Street Baptist Church, the city's largest, that night, and the boycott leaders gathered beforehand to plan. They created an organization to coordinate the protest—Abernathy named it the Montgomery Improvement Association—and King was elected president unopposed. This was partly because he was new to the community and free

from involvement in divisive conflicts that had weakened local leadership, and partly because his oratorical gifts were already respected by his colleagues. The parley left it to the mass meeting to decide whether the boycott would continue.

When King got home he had twenty minutes to prepare what he thought would be "the most decisive speech of my life," one that had to not only fire up his audience but blend militance with moderation.<sup>11</sup> Feeling paralyzed, overcome by anxiety and inadequacy, he prayed; then he hurriedly sketched an outline and tore off to the church, which was overflowing long before starting time. As the meeting opened with "Onward, Christian Soldiers" and other spirituals, 5,000 black people patiently stood outside in the cold night listening to the meeting through loudspeakers. "I've never heard singing like that," said a reporter. "They were on fire for freedom."<sup>12</sup>

After prayers and scripture readings King walked to the pulpit, gazed out at the television cameras, put aside his scribbled notes, and gave an electrifying speech that retold the story of Parks and all others who had been abused on the buses, exhorted the boycotters to use persuasion and not coercion, and ended by proclaiming: "If you will protest courageously, and yet with dignity and Christian love, when the history books are written in future generations, the historians will have to pause and say, 'There lived a great people—a black people—who injected new meaning and dignity into the veins of civilization.' This is our challenge and our overwhelming responsibility."<sup>13</sup> His words were greeted with long, loud applause, which erupted again when Parks was introduced and everyone acclaimed their hero. Abernathy read the boycott demands, and with ecstatic spirit all stood up to affirm that they would not ride the buses until the demands were met. Wild cheering echoed from inside and out. King wrote that the real victory had already been won in this first great meeting of the freedom movement, "where thousands of black people stood revealed with a new sense of dignity and destiny."<sup>14</sup>

When the city prohibited the black-run taxis from lowering their fares, the Women's Political Council constructed a remarkably efficient car pool system—modeled on one used in a successful Baton Rouge boycott three years before—that became the critical tool to sustain the protest. The small army of drivers included ministers, businesspeople, teachers, laborers, students, and homemakers. Private cars, pickup trucks, and a fleet of shiny, brand-new, church-owned station wagons collected passengers at forty-eight dispatch stations—many of which were churches, where passengers could stay warm at dawn—and brought them back to

the stations after work. Hymns wafted out the car windows as these "rolling churches" criss-crossed the city with what the arch-segregationist White Citizens Council admitted was "military precision."<sup>15</sup> Some preferred to walk, as far as twelve miles a day, to underline their determination and hope. "I'm not walking for myself," said an elderly woman turning down a ride. "I'm walking for my children and my grandchildren." Another woman, Mother Pollard, vowed to King that she would walk until it was over. "But aren't your feet tired?" he asked. "Yes," she said, "my feet is tired, but my soul is rested."<sup>16</sup>

Mass meetings were held twice weekly, rotating between churches, and along with prayers and passionate singing of spirituals, the ministers took turns giving rousing "pep talks" to inform and fortify the participants. As King put it, "Christ furnished the spirit and motivation, while Gandhi furnished the method."<sup>17</sup> King had been attracted to nonviolent doctrines since he had first read Thoreau's essay on civil disobedience as a college student at Morehouse, and he had learned about Gandhi at Crozer; but it was all intellectual until Rosa Parks made it real for him. Tutored by Bayard Rustin and Glenn Smiley, experienced Gandhian activists from the Fellowship of Reconciliation, and later by James Lawson, King got a quick education in the theory and practice of *satyagraha*, or truth force (literally translated, "clinging to the truth").<sup>18</sup> He and his colleagues turned the church meetings into schools of nonviolent resistance, explaining it as "Christianity in action," and ran workshops to train people in direct action techniques. As sociologist Aldon Morris points out, the "religious doctrines of the black church provided the ideological framework" within which the nonviolent philosophy was communicated.<sup>19</sup> Though King came to accept nonviolence as an entire worldview and way of life, most participants in the freedom movement then and later, having been subjected to years of personal and institutionalized violence, had to make a leap of faith to go along with it even as a tactic. Moments arose during the year-long boycott in Montgomery when participants' commitment to tactical nonviolence was sorely tested by the white bombings of ten homes and churches.

The public demands of the boycott for fairer treatment were moderate and could have been implemented without even changing the segregation law, but the intransigent mayor and commissioners tried every trick to preserve the precarious status quo—ploys to divide the leaders from each other and their followers, concocting a bogus settlement, and mass prosecution of King and ninety others. Yet the black citizenry persevered month after month and their solidarity kept growing. On the same day in

November 1956 that the city won an injunction to shut down the car pools, the boycott's circulatory system, the U.S. Supreme Court upheld a June ruling of the federal court in Montgomery that the state and city bus laws were unconstitutional. A legal order came a month later. At two giant meetings four days before Christmas, 8,000 souls voted triumphantly to end the boycott, the largest and longest organized protest by black people in the nation's history up to then. Despite more violence by white extremists, desegregation of the buses moved fairly smoothly. Other bus boycotts were organized in Birmingham, Mobile, and Tallahassee. Martin Luther King, Jr., emerged from the victorious crusade the most celebrated black leader since Booker T. Washington. The freedom movement had taken off.

Through every twist and turn of the movement during the next decade, the black church—Baptist churches mainly, but also African Methodist (AME)—would be its driving force and institutional base, at once spiritual, moral, cultural, political, organizational, and financial. The black church was "born in protest" in the early days of slavery, and the "invisible institution" had served the dual purpose of helping blacks to survive while motivating them to improve their conditions.<sup>20</sup> Nat Turner was not the only preacher to lead a slave revolt, and black churches North and South played a vital role in the abolitionist movement. After Reconstruction, however, many Southern churches lost their combative spirit and accommodated to Jim Crow. Ministers gained influence and prestige as brokers between white elites and black folk. E. Franklin Frazier writes that as "a result of the elimination of Negroes from the political life of the American community, the Negro Church became the arena of their political activities . . . the arena in which the struggle for power and the thirst for power could be satisfied."<sup>21</sup>

Though the Southern black church had grown into a formidable and quite visible institution, its deep involvement in the freedom movement harked back to its role in resisting slavery. The resources it provided included skillful, charismatic leaders insulated from white society; a large, tightly organized constituency; a communications network; an independent financial base; relatively safe meeting places in which to plan tactics and generate commitment; and most critical, the "common church culture"—grounded in a rich heritage of empowering prayers, oratory, and spirituals—that could be directly applied to political goals.<sup>22</sup> Ever since slavery the male preacher had been the acknowledged leader of the black community, closely attuned to the needs and aspirations of his followers.



Oratorical wizards like King now had ready opportunity to reshape the cultural content of black religion into a weapon of protest—for example, by reinterpreting Biblical stories and portraying Jesus and Moses as revolutionaries. The dynamic relationship between the charismatic clergy and the common church culture created a mighty engine of grass-roots social power.

Since in Montgomery King had supremely demonstrated the leadership style of the black preacher, there was never any doubt that his fellow ministers would choose him to head a new regional federation intended to link up the church-based movements that were sprouting in several Southern cities. The genius of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) and its affiliates was its “ability to unite community leaders by bringing them directly into leadership positions while simultaneously organizing the black masses”; indeed, the mass base of the church was “built into” the SCLC structure.<sup>23</sup>

King took the reins of SCLC in the fashion that the activist ministers who formed it were accustomed to: he was to them as each was to his own congregation, the unquestioned authority and center of attention. Yet King nurtured a remarkable cadre of second-level leaders, both in the Atlanta headquarters and in the affiliates: gifted and courageous organizers like Fred Shuttlesworth, Hosea Williams, James Bevel, Andrew Young, and Ralph Abernathy, his closest confidant. He encouraged exhaustive debate among these leaders before making the final decisions. Journalist Lerone Bennett commented that King, like Franklin D. Roosevelt, showed “a rare talent for attracting and using the skills and ideas of brilliant aides and administrators.”<sup>24</sup> As its name implied, SCLC was run by strong collective leadership, but King’s dominant role made it seem more like a typical organizational hierarchy. Unlike in a hierarchy, however, the source of King’s power was his ability “to get more warm bodies in the street at one time than anybody else” in American history.<sup>25</sup>

How would they use this power to effect change after the victory in Montgomery? As it solidified itself institutionally and financially, SCLC floundered in charting a strategy and direction for the budding movement. It tried to mount a South-wide voter registration campaign with little success, organized a “Prayer Pilgrimage” to Washington for voting rights, and built solidarity among activists in isolated communities, but the momentum of the freedom movement slowed to a crawl. Was Montgomery just an aberration?

## The Students and “De Lawd”

Late Monday afternoon, 1 February 1960, four well-dressed young men, first-year students at the mainly black North Carolina A&T College in Greensboro, bought some school supplies at Woolworth’s, then sat down at the lunch counter and ordered coffee. “I’m sorry,” the waitress said, “we don’t serve you here.”<sup>26</sup> Showing their purchases, the students asked why they could be served at one counter and not at another. She called the manager, who tried to reason with them, and a cop paced back and forth behind them, holding his club but not sure what to do. The students refused to move until the store, crowded with onlookers, closed for the day. The four close friends planned this protest the night before; it was the culmination of weeks of “bull sessions” about the injustice of segregation and how it violated the country’s democratic ideals. Franklin McCain later recalled that, though influenced most by Gandhi, what precipitated their action was the “courage that each of us instilled within each other.”<sup>27</sup> They quickly organized their college and others nearby and returned to the lunch counter every day that week in growing numbers until by week’s end hundreds had joined the “sit-in.” Soon, more than 90 percent of the area’s black college students were sitting in, picketing, or boycotting segregated eating places.

By wire service and student grapevine, news of the sudden protest flashed across North Carolina and the nation. Though a few experimental sit-ins had been tried in Nashville and elsewhere, the idea now spread “like a fever.”<sup>28</sup> The next week students staged lunch counter sit-ins in Winston-Salem, Durham, and other North Carolina communities. By February’s end protests had erupted in over thirty cities in seven states, and by April sit-in protests pervaded the entire South. Local movements were particularly strong in Nashville, Atlanta, and Orangeburg, South Carolina. Almost without exception the young women and men stayed calm and resolute when catsup and other food was flung at them, and when they were jabbed with lighted cigarettes and sometimes badly beaten—with little police interference. As the actions grew larger and better organized and moved further south, white violence increased, and so did arrests. Historian Clayborne Carson notes that “never again during the decade would the proportion of students active in protest equal the level reached at southern black colleges” during this period.<sup>29</sup>

By the end of 1960 hundreds of lunch counters and restaurants had been opened to all. Why did this spectacular wave of protest surge forth

at the dawn of the new decade? The answer lies in a combination of factors: favorable media attention, a carefully built protest infrastructure revolving around SCLC, a concentration of students in Southern black colleges, and the gripping example of African liberation movements.

When Ella Baker, executive director of SCLC, first heard about the sit-ins, she called her long list of contacts at Southern colleges. "What are you all going to do?" she asked in the deep, resonant voice that made her a powerful speaker. "It is time to move."<sup>30</sup> In her mid-fifties, Baker had acquired enormous wisdom in three decades as an organizer. As a young child growing up in a small North Carolina town, she heard stories from her ninety-year-old grandmother about slave revolts—and about how she had been flogged for refusing to marry the man chosen by her owner; instead, she married a rebellious slave preacher. Valedictorian of her class at Raleigh's Shaw University, Baker moved to Harlem just before the Depression. During the 1930s she traveled the country setting up black consumer cooperatives. In 1940 she began a long association with the NAACP, recruiting members and organizing chapters and Youth Councils throughout the South, later serving as director of branches and head of the New York office. She had an extraordinary ability to inspire people of all ages, especially young people, and to give them a deeper perspective on social change. A founder of SCLC, she rose to the challenge of directing its Atlanta headquarters. Because she was a woman, Baker was never accepted as an equal by King and his associates, despite her genius as an organizer. They did not take seriously her bold suggestions to improve SCLC and its voting rights campaign. She grew more and more critical of its centralized, charismatic leadership and resigned in the summer of 1960. Her successor, Rev. Wyatt Walker, commented that she "could not fit into the mold of a preacher organization. It just went against the grain of the kind of person she is and was."<sup>31</sup>

Baker realized that the new student movement would not last unless a structure was created to provide communication and coordination between local groups. Borrowing funds from SCLC, she organized a conference of student activists from over fifty colleges and high schools in twelve Southern states, at Shaw University during Easter weekend of 1960. King spoke to the 200 fervent activists, but Baker fought an attempt by SCLC to capture the student groups as its youth wing. As did most of the students, she believed they needed an autonomous organization "with the right to direct their own affairs and even make their own mistakes."<sup>32</sup> She hoped that they would be less cautious and more radical than the organization she was leaving. The young activists set up the

loosely structured Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), with delegates from every Southern state, and adopted a statement of purpose that affirmed its commitment to nonviolence as "the foundation of our purpose, the presupposition of our belief, and the manner of our action." Baker donated a small office in the Atlanta SCLC headquarters, and during the rest of 1960 she and Jane Stenbridge, a white seminary student, breathed life into the organization. SNCC (pronounced "snick") aimed at ending all forms of racial domination and building a "redemptive community."<sup>33</sup> But as the sit-in movement slowed, the new body shifted from being the coordinating arm of a mass movement into a cadre of ex-students committed to long-term organizing, mainly in rural Southern communities.

Inspired by Ella Baker, SNCC came to embody an idea and style of leadership that would clash with the leadership model of SCLC. Opposed to the centrality of one or a few charismatic leaders able to attract big crowds, big media, and big money but who do not stay around for follow-through and tend to get co-opted, SNCC stood for what Baker called "group-centered leadership." She believed that what grass-roots movements needed was "the development of people who are interested not in being leaders as much as in developing leadership among other people."<sup>34</sup> It boiled down to the question of how change comes about. SNCC activists asserted that deep and lasting change can only come from empowering people at the grass roots, and that this takes commitment to local people over time—not to ephemeral media stars. Here was no abstract position: it grew out of the understanding that if racial subjugation were to be overcome, especially in the rural South, black people would have to rely on themselves, not on outside leaders. Because most SNCC activists believed that they and their organization had to exemplify their values, prefiguring the redemptive society they sought to create, and because they shared a common risk of death, they were reluctant to recognize leaders among themselves, or claimed that "we are all leaders."<sup>35</sup> This antileadership ethos—actually a vision of an alternative kind of leadership, decentralized and participatory—and the emphasis on the process of change, expressed by its slogan "Let the people decide," became SNCC's hallmark in the next few years, and the closest it came to an ideology. SNCC represented not a coherent set of ideas as much as an intangible mood and spirit, a way of life.

SNCC's identity and reputation for fearless militancy were established by the legendary "freedom rides" of 1961 to desegregate bus terminals in the heart of the Deep South. This bold tactic was conceived and or-

ganized by the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), founded by James Farmer and others, which had pioneered the use of nonviolent direct action to integrate restaurants in Chicago in the early 1940s. In 1947 CORE had joined the Fellowship of Reconciliation in a freedom ride through the Upper South. Since the Supreme Court had earlier in 1961 declared segregated terminals unconstitutional, Farmer and other CORE leaders hoped that "putting the movement on wheels," and refusing to bail out of jail, would generate massive publicity and force federal intervention to carry out the law.<sup>36</sup>

A dozen CORE activists, half black and half white, boarded two buses and left the nation's capital in early May 1961, intending to traverse every Deep South state and reach New Orleans ten days later. They eluded violence until Rock Hill, South Carolina, where Nashville seminary student and SNCC organizer John Lewis and Albert Bigelow, a white World War II Navy commander turned pacifist, were assaulted by white toughs when they entered the waiting rooms of the bus terminal. The journey continued through Georgia, and then, across the Alabama border, a brutal mob armed with iron bars attacked the Greyhound bus in Anniston, smashed its windows, slashed its tires, and forced it to make an unscheduled stop outside of town. A fire bomb thrown inside ignited a blazing inferno, and the choking protesters barely escaped before the bus exploded. When the second bus pulled into Anniston an hour later, eight men jumped on, tore into the freedom riders, and nearly killed a retired white professor. Demanding that black and white sit apart, they accompanied the riders to Birmingham, where the Ku Klux Klan awaited them.

Long-time CORE activist Jim Peck, a white, told what happened when he and a black youth named Charles Person tried to integrate the terminal there: "As we entered the white waiting room and approached the lunch counter, we were grabbed bodily and pushed toward the alleyway leading to the loading platform. . . . Six of them started swinging at me with fists and pipes. Five others attacked Person a few feet ahead. . . . When I regained consciousness, the alleyway was empty. Blood was flowing down my face. I tried to stop the flow with a handkerchief but it soon became soaked."<sup>37</sup> Rev. Fred Shuttlesworth, Birmingham SCLC chief, called an ambulance. After shaking hands with Person, whose face was badly swollen, Peck was taken to the hospital, where he lay for hours in surgery and left with fifty-three stitches in his head. Having faced enough danger for the moment, the CORE activists decided to halt their ride for freedom.

It was SNCC's turn. Diane Nash and other leaders of the Nashville student movement resolved that the ride must continue at all cost. Ten students, mostly black, took a bus to Birmingham. "These people faced the probability of their own deaths before they ever left Nashville," Nash remembered. "Several made out wills. A few more gave me sealed letters to be mailed if they were killed. Some told me frankly that they were afraid, but they knew this was something that they must do because freedom was worth it."<sup>38</sup> They were arrested at the Birmingham bus station, held in jail, and then driven by Police Commissioner Eugene "Bull" Connor over a hundred miles to the Tennessee border, where he dropped them off on a deserted highway just before dawn. Fiercely determined to complete their mission, they had Nash send a car to return them to Birmingham.

Joined by a few comrades at the terminal, among them eighteen-year-old Spelman College student Ruby Doris Smith, the SNCC activists had trouble finding a bus driver brave enough to take them to Montgomery. "I have only one life to give," one exclaimed, "and I'm not going to give it to NAACP or CORE!"<sup>39</sup> After a night fortifying themselves with "freedom songs," the group finally got to the Alabama capital on a bus protected by police cars and helicopters; the new attorney general of the United States, Robert Kennedy, had intervened on their behalf. But when they pulled in to the bus station, the police had disappeared and the riders were attacked by a vicious mob. John Lewis was beaten until blood gushed from his head, and Justice Department official John Siegen-thaler, President Kennedy's personal emissary, was knocked out cold when he came to someone's aid. Two riders were nearly beaten to death; one of them was badly maimed. The president issued a public statement expressing his concern and calling for peace. This was the city where a longer battle over buses had been fought and won five years before.

A mass meeting was held the next night at Ralph Abernathy's church, and King flew in to speak in support of the freedom riders. He had already been on the phone with Attorney General Kennedy. Before the meeting King conferred in the church basement with James Farmer, Diane Nash, and Abernathy about what to do. The phone rang. Kennedy was calling again to ask King to stop the freedom ride to allow a cooling-off period. Nash shook her head. "The Nashville Student Movement wants to go on," she said firmly. Farmer asked King, who was ambivalent, to "tell the attorney general that we have been cooling off for 350 years." "I understand," he responded, and turned down Kennedy's request.<sup>40</sup>

As the meeting took place upstairs, several hundred white rioters besieged the church, throwing rocks through its stained-glass windows. Those inside, showered with glass, emboldened themselves for hours with spirited singing. The mob was about to break down the doors when a battalion of U.S. marshals, sent by the attorney general, dispersed them with tear gas. Kennedy recalled a later phone call with King, who feared for his life. "I said that our people were down there. And that as long as he was in church, he might say a prayer for us. He didn't think that was very humorous. He rather berated me for what was happening to him at the time. And I said to him that I didn't think that he'd be alive if it wasn't for us, and that we were going to keep him alive, and that the marshals would keep the church from burning down."<sup>41</sup> The marshals were reinforced later that night by National Guard troops reluctantly activated by the Alabama governor, John Patterson, a JFK ally who nevertheless had been evading phone calls from the president.

Three days later two busloads of freedom riders, National Guard, and reporters left for Jackson, Mississippi, escorted by legions of police in cars and aircraft. It was like a military operation, Farmer remembered. The young riders were angered when King refused to come with them, saying he was on probation. "We're all on probation," one told him. "That doesn't stop us. We're in a war."<sup>42</sup> Onlookers in Jackson witnessed the amusing spectacle of protesters being led into the terminal by National Guardsmen, with police opening doors for them, then promptly being arrested. They served almost two months in county jails and at the tough Parchman state pen, where defiant singing of freedom songs got them through. The training ground of prison steeled their commitment to an uncertain future of struggle. Freedom rides continued over the summer. Hundreds of SNCC activists descended upon the Jackson bus station and joined their sisters and brothers in jail. In September 1961 the Interstate Commerce Commission (ICC) banned segregation in interstate terminals. The freedom rides not only "led to desegregation of southern transportation facilities," Carson concludes, they also "contributed to the development of a self-consciously radical southern student movement prepared to direct its militancy toward other concerns."<sup>43</sup>

An important turning point in the freedom movement was the frustrating, year-long campaign against segregation in Albany, the hub of rural southwest Georgia; it was to be the first full mobilization of a black community since Montgomery, the first serious interorganizational conflict, and the first defeat. Youthful SNCC organizers Charles Sherrod,

Cordell Reagon, and Charles Jones moved to the city of 60,000 (almost half black) in fall 1961. Initially rebuffed by older black leaders and the local NAACP, they concentrated on mobilizing students at the all-black high school and at Albany State. Some of their recruits were active in the NAACP Youth Council and had recently held a rally against white harassment of black women at the college. Discovering that the bus and train terminals had not complied with the ICC ruling, the SNCC trio and the Youth Council launched mass protests to enforce desegregation of these and other public places, including schools, libraries, and parks. Not wanting to be overshadowed, the more moderate local leaders formed a coalition with SNCC called the Albany Movement, made up of most active black organizations. The NAACP elders kept at arm's length, however; they were at loggerheads with SNCC's nonviolent militance and sought to discredit it.

When in December the campaign sagged and the local leaders invited King to help revive it, his jailing for leading a peaceful march in Albany sparked huge turnouts and national publicity. But SNCC people resented King, whom they derisively called "De Lawd," for his cautious style and willingness to "settle for half a loaf"—especially after an oral "agreement" negotiated by moderate blacks with city officials turned out to be a hoax.<sup>44</sup> And they accused SCLC and executive director Wyatt Walker of trying to monopolize the movement they had pulled together. Civil disobedience continued into the spring and summer coupled with effective boycotts of white-owned stores and segregated city buses (forcing the bus company out of business). Yet the Albany Movement proved no match for ingenious Police Chief Laurie Pritchett, who had studied earlier protests and had even read King's book on Montgomery. His officers arrested thousands without violence, impressing Northern reporters, and he found plenty of jail space in nearby towns. The chief and the uncompromising city commissioners maneuvered deftly through the movement's divisions and held fast to Jim Crow. Albany had nothing comparable to the vivid brutality brought on by the freedom rides to force federal intervention. Pritchett's "efficient police state" took the heat off the Kennedy administration, which preferred "order over justice."<sup>45</sup> Activists felt betrayed by the new president. By late summer 1962 the local crusade seemed a lost cause. King and SCLC left town, but SNCC activists, entrenched in the community, dug in for a few more years of diligent organizing.

Though defeated in its immediate goals, the "singing movement" of Albany was triumphant on another level—as an unprecedented expres-

sion of black cultural and spiritual power, rooted in a shared heritage of oppression and resistance. In church, on the street, and in jail, protesters of all ages poured out their souls in freedom songs. At mass meetings there was more singing than speaking. Some of the songs were traditional to the south Georgia black belt. Others were shaped by participants in the heat of battle, with words about the latest crisis—"Ain't gonna let Chief Pritchett turn me 'round"—fused with old spirituals that had been sung by slaves. Bernice Johnson Reagon, an Albany State student activist, daughter of a local Baptist preacher, and soon one of the traveling SNCC Freedom Singers, commented that after singing, "the difference among us would not be as great. Somehow, making a song required an expression of that which was common to us all." Singing was the main language of protest, especially for the illiterate, and the vital tool to build solidarity, sustain morale, instill courage, and deepen commitment. "A transformation took place inside of the people," Reagon recalled. "The singing was just the echo of that."<sup>46</sup>

One song she led, with "a force and power within myself I had never heard before," was called "We Shall Overcome." Striking South Carolina tobacco workers had adapted it from a slave spiritual and brought it to Highlander Folk School, a spawning ground of freedom songs, and a place where organizers learned them; at Highlander Zilphia Horton and Pete Seeger wrote new lyrics for it. By 1961 "We Shall Overcome" was already a favorite of the freedom movement, but Reagon and other Albany song leaders molded it into the movement's anthem; its battle hymn, sung at the end of every big meeting—all standing, crossing arms and holding hands, gently swaying back and forth—and at almost every protest. Its power was indescribable. When they rose to sing it, Charles Sherrod remembered, "nobody knew what kept the top of the church on its four walls. It was as if everyone had been lifted up on high."<sup>47</sup> This magnificent singing spirit and the songs that sprung from it were the rich harvest of Albany's black community and part of its legacy to future struggles.

Six years had passed since SCLC's only decisive victory over Jim Crow, in Montgomery. SCLC leaders learned from the Albany experience that an effective citywide movement must focus on a single target and a clear-cut goal; have a definite strategy and careful planning; be unified, and controlled by SCLC leaders; and get help from a police chief who, unlike Albany's Pritchett, was willing to use brutal tactics and expose the ugliness of racism for the nation to witness. With these lessons in mind, SCLC decided to wage an all-out, systematic campaign of direct

action in Birmingham (population 350,000, 40 percent black), the industrial center of the South and reputed to be the most segregated city in the country, an American Johannesburg. White terrorists had blown up so many buildings that locals called it "Bombingham." SCLC had an impressive affiliate there, led by Fred Shuttlesworth, that had prepared the soil with boycotts and community organizing. The immediate goal would be to desegregate lunch counters and hiring at the downtown department stores. The strategy was for SCLC to throw its resources into mass demonstrations and a boycott of the stores, aiming to split the business elite from the political elite. They sought a morale-lifting victory that would "set the pace" for the South and spur the federal government to enact sweeping legislation outlawing segregation.<sup>48</sup>

SCLC leaders saw the campaign as a drama, building up "step by step, until it reached a crisis point, where the opposition would be forced to yield." The top command divided up responsibilities and methodically planned every detail of this "tremendous organizational operation," down to counting the chairs, stools, and tables in each store.<sup>49</sup> King met with many local black leaders to overcome their initial opposition. Workshops trained thousands in nonviolent combat, and mass meetings in churches were held every night for over two months, fueled by passionate speeches and the freedom songs that King called "the soul of the movement."<sup>50</sup>

SCLC postponed the start until after the mayoral election in March 1963 between Police Commissioner Bull Connor and a more moderate segregationist. With the electoral outcome in dispute, Birmingham had two city governments, in effect, until the courts ruled against Connor a few weeks later. Not willing to wait, SCLC took to the streets. After several small skirmishes Connor won a state court injunction barring King and his colleagues from leading more protests. King declared at a spirited mass meeting that he would violate the order, even though the movement had run out of funds and he was needed to raise bail money. On Good Friday, King and Abernathy, both in blue jeans, and fifty others marched downtown in a glare of publicity. The two walked up to the burly Connor, then knelt in prayer. Several police grabbed them by the backs of their shirts and threw them into paddy wagons, the others joining them in jail. King was held incommunicado in a dark cell with no mattress or blanket until, at Coretta King's request, President Kennedy interceded.

When conditions suddenly improved, he spent his week behind bars scribbling a long letter in the margins of a newspaper and on scraps of paper, responding to a statement in a Birmingham daily by white Alabama

clergy condemning his tactics and timing. "Letter from Birmingham Jail," published widely, was the most cogent justification of civil disobedience since the essay by Thoreau that he had read years before. King offered an American reinterpretation, not of quiet pacifism, but of Gandhi's militant method of *satyagraha*. He had been well schooled since the day of Rosa Parks's arrest.

"You are quite right in calling for negotiation," he wrote the white ministers.

Indeed, this is the very purpose of direct action. Nonviolent direct action seeks to create such a crisis and foster such a tension that a community which has constantly refused to negotiate is forced to confront the issue. It seeks so to dramatize the issue that it can no longer be ignored. . . . I have earnestly opposed violent tension, but there is a type of constructive, nonviolent tension which is necessary for growth. . . . I submit that an individual who breaks a law that conscience tells him is unjust, and who willingly accepts the penalty of imprisonment in order to arouse the conscience of the community over its injustice, is in reality expressing the highest respect for law.<sup>51</sup>

When King and Abernathy were set free, the crusade moved into full swing. While the boycott disrupted downtown business, wave after wave of men and women marching to City Hall were mauled by police dogs and hurled against walls and pavement by ferocious, machine gun-like fire hoses. Connor's jails had no more room for them. In early May the leaders decided to unleash their secret weapon, an army of children as young as six, carefully trained by James Bevel, an organizing genius who, said SCLC associate Hosea Williams, "could do more with young people than any human being on the face of the earth."<sup>52</sup> In the following days thousands of jubilant youngsters, braving dogs and fire hoses with songs and shouts of "We want freedom!" rode off to jail in school buses.

One Sunday afternoon in May an uncanny event interrupted the daily routine of brutality and augured victory. Rev. Charles Billups, a local preacher, led hundreds of black people on a prayer pilgrimage to the city jail, singing "I Want Jesus to Walk with Me" and other spirituals. At the border of white Birmingham they were blocked by Bull Connor's men and an armored car. The police commissioner ordered them to turn around, but instead they prayed. "Turn on your water, turn loose your dogs," Billups replied. "We will stand here till we die." "Dammit," Connor yelled to his men, "turn on the hoses."<sup>53</sup> The police and fire fighters, "their deadly hoses poised for action, stood facing the marchers," King

recalled. The latter, "many of them on their knees, stared back, unafraid and unmoving. Slowly the Negroes stood up and began to advance. Connor's men, as though hypnotized, fell back, their hoses sagging uselessly in their hands while several hundred Negroes marched past," despite Connor's screams to stop them.<sup>54</sup> A few fire fighters cried. "You would have to say that the hand of God moved in that demonstration," said one participant.<sup>55</sup> If not by God, they were surely empowered by their shared movement culture.

The forces of "public safety" were not as restrained the next week, and young blacks on the sidelines responded with rocks and bottles, hinting at the possibility of a violent uprising. The Kennedys pressured major steel corporations with Birmingham branches to use their influence and sent an assistant attorney general to negotiate the boycott demands with white business leaders. When King agreed to a temporary halt in the protests, Shuttlesworth—hospitalized from a serious fire hose injury—was furious, and reminded King that they had resolved to fight until victory. Shuttlesworth threatened to go on regardless. "That's what people are saying," he scolded his superior. "You go to a point and then you stop. You won't be stopping here."<sup>56</sup>

Fortunately for the unity of SCLC and the movement, the business elite, hurting badly from the boycott and negative publicity and realizing the city had been paralyzed, agreed to most of the demands, which were still opposed by intransigent city officials. Despite the bombing of the home of King's brother a few days later and other white retaliation, King and SCLC had won a crucial though limited victory. The campaign would show, David Garrow suggests, that "even small tangible gains could represent extraordinary symbolic victories, even if those people closest to the struggle could not appreciate it at the time."<sup>57</sup> The electrifying drama of Birmingham, conveyed by unprecedented television coverage, sparked protests throughout the spring and summer in hundreds of cities across the South, a contagious phenomenon that King called a revolution.

Of the major civil rights organizations, only the NAACP (especially its state and local chapters) had given primary attention to the campaign to desegregate public education, partly because this arena was more amenable to a legalistic approach. Yet the pace was slower than even the Supreme Court had desired, and a decade after the historic decision little more than cosmetic changes had come to pass. De jure and de facto tactics of delay and evasion proved so effective that by 1963 only about one percent of Southern black children attended school with whites. Washington acted decisively only as a last resort when unyielding South-

ern governors brazenly flouted federal commands. A reluctant President Eisenhower, who had not publicly backed the Brown ruling, sent 1,000 paratroopers to Little Rock, Arkansas, in 1957 after a vicious mob, encouraged by the defiance of Governor Orval Faubus, tried to prevent nine black students from entering Central High School. Five years later President Kennedy ordered the Army and National Guard to enforce the admission of James Meredith to the lily-white University of Mississippi. Two days of fierce street battles between the troops and a few thousand incensed whites left two dead and hundreds injured. Governor Ross Barnett finally gave in. Then in June 1963, shortly after Birmingham, Alabama's new governor, George Wallace, won lasting fame, and a few elections, by "standing in the schoolhouse door" of his state's university to block Vivian Malone and James Hood from enrolling. At the last minute he stepped aside to avoid arrest by U.S. marshals. Many smaller confrontations with less visibility integrated other schools and colleges from Virginia to Texas.

The more established civil rights leaders, like Roy Wilkins and Whitney Young, and their white liberal allies, worried that the revolution might get out of hand, and thought that it should be managed from above. Thus, in spring 1963 multimillionaire philanthropist Stephen Currier of the Taconic Foundation formed the Council on United Civil Rights Leadership (CUCRL), a coalition of the "Big Six" organizations represented by Wilkins (NAACP), Young (Urban League), King (SCLC), James Farmer of CORE, SNCC executive secretary James Forman (rotating with chair John Lewis), and Dorothy Height of the National Council of Negro Women. Farmer discovered that "civil rights generalship was one-fourth leadership, one-fourth showmanship, one-fourth one-upsmanship, and one-fourth partnership."<sup>58</sup> Though Forman considered it mainly a "fund-raising gimmick" and much of the discussion had to do with how money would be divided (with SNCC at the losing end), CUCRL did provide a forum to try to resolve interorganizational grievances and to think about broader strategy.<sup>59</sup> The elite council was often polarized between the bureaucratic inertia of Wilkins and Young and Forman's impatient militancy. Caught in the middle, King's thoughtful, low-key presence served as a reconciling force between opposites.

At one of CUCRL's first meetings revered labor leader A. Philip Randolph proposed that the Big Six organize a massive march on Washington to pressure Congress to pass a comprehensive civil rights bill; after all, Randolph's mere threat to invade the capital in 1941 had forced FDR to ban discrimination in war industry. The leaders seized on the "march for

jobs and freedom" as also a way to unify the movement at this crossroads—in King's words, "to unite in one luminous action all of the forces along the far-flung front" and to provide an appropriate climax to the "thundering events of the summer."<sup>60</sup> Randolph asked his protégé Bayard Rustin to be the architect of the delicate supercoalition (including white religious and labor leaders) required to pull off this endeavor. In late June CUCRL leaders met with President Kennedy, who tried to talk them out of it, fearing violence that would damage the civil rights bill Birmingham had put on his front burner. Randolph's eloquence persuaded him to give it equivocal support.

August 28, 1963—the day after pioneering black leader W. E. B. Du Bois died at ninety-five—a quarter of a million people, black and white together, surged forth in the summer heat from the Washington Monument to the Lincoln Memorial. They had come on buses and trains from all over but especially from the Deep South, and large contingents represented white religious faiths and, despite lack of support by the AFL-CIO, many labor unions. Haunting freedom songs—including "Oh, Freedom!" by Odetta and "We Shall Overcome" by Joan Baez—blended with speeches by the civil rights generals. Though forced by the more moderate leaders to soften his words, SNCC's John Lewis pierced the optimistic mood with a candid speech that criticized conventional liberalism and expressed "great reservations" about Kennedy's legislation, since it would do nothing about police brutality or voting rights.<sup>61</sup>

At the end of the long afternoon Martin Luther King, Jr. stood beneath the anguished chiseled face of Abraham Lincoln and, inspired more than ever by the sea of listeners, left his carefully crafted text and in powerful rippling cadences painted in rich colors his vibrant dream of racial justice. It would be acclaimed as one of the greatest speeches in national history, equalled perhaps only by the Civil War address at Gettysburg given 100 years before by the man in stone gazing out over King's shoulder. None were more uplifted by the dream and the day's drama than the thousands of poor black people whom SNCC had bussed from the Deep South. "It helped them believe that they were not alone," a SNCC activist remarked, "that there really were people in the nation who cared what happened to them."<sup>62</sup> Yet some Southern organizers had a hard time sharing De Lawd's dream. Sitting on the grass, young black activist Anne Moody of CORE told herself that back in Mississippi, "we never had time to sleep, much less dream."<sup>63</sup>

On a Sunday morning two weeks afterward King's dream was shattered, at least for the moment, when a dynamite bomb exploded in Bir-

mingham's Sixteenth Street Baptist Church—a center of the spring crusade—killing four black girls as they were putting on their choir robes.

Later in the fall John F. Kennedy died in Dallas. Congress passed the Civil Rights Act the next spring.

### The Salt of the Earth

In late August 1962, one year before the March on Washington, a tired, strong-willed woman with a great smile and shining eyes strode into a meeting at her church in Ruleville, a Mississippi Delta town not far from where Emmett Till had been bludgeoned to death. "Until then I'd never heard of no mass meeting and I didn't know that a Negro could register and vote," Fannie Lou Hamer recalled.

Bob Moses, Reggie Robinson, Jim Bevel and James Forman were some of the SNCC workers who ran that meeting. When they asked for those to raise their hands who'd go down to the courthouse the next day, I raised mine. Had it up high as I could get it. I guess if I'd had any sense I'd a-been a little scared, but what was the point of being scared. The only thing they could do to me was kill me and it seemed like they'd been trying to do that a little bit at a time ever since I could remember.<sup>64</sup>

Forty-four years old, Hamer was the youngest of twenty children of sharecropper parents. She had picked cotton all her life, for the previous eighteen years with her husband on a nearby plantation. She had always known poverty and injustice. When she was a young girl, a white farmer had poisoned their mules just when her family was getting a little ahead. For a long time she had wanted to help her kind. "Just listenin' at 'em, I could just see myself votin' people outa office that I know was wrong and didn't do nothin' to help the poor. I said, you know, that's sumpin' I really wanna be involved in."<sup>65</sup> Chief among those who did not care about poor people, in her opinion, was powerful Senator James Eastland, owner of a huge cotton plantation in Hamer's county. He ruled the county like a feudal baron.

Hamer rode with seventeen others on a SNCC-chartered bus to the county seat of Indianola, birthplace of the White Citizens Councils, where the registrar "brought a big old book out there, and he gave me the sixteenth section of the Constitution of Mississippi, and that was dealing with de facto laws, and I didn't know nothin' about no de facto laws." Unable to interpret it to his satisfaction, she "flunked out" along with the



Fannie Lou Hamer pickets at SNCC voter registration protest, Hattiesburg, Mississippi, Courthouse, 1963. © 1978 Matt Herron



others. Driving home they were all arrested because the bus was "too yellow." The plantation owner kicked her off her land—"I didn't have no other choice because for one time I wanted things to be different"—and the house where she stayed in town was shot up by vigilantes. It was one hell of a winter. "Pap couldn't get a job nowhere 'cause everybody knew he was my husband. We made it on through, though, and since then I just been trying to work and get our people organized."<sup>66</sup> Soon she joined SNCC, its oldest field organizer.

Why was she drawn to this brash young outfit?

Nobody never come out into the country and talked to real farmers and things. . . . Because this is the next thing this country has done: it divided us into classes, and if you hadn't arrived at a certain level, you wasn't treated no better by the blacks than you was by the whites. And it was these kids what broke a lot of this down. They treated us like we were special and we loved 'em. . . . We didn't feel uneasy about our language might not be right or something. We just felt like we could talk to 'em. We trusted 'em, and I can tell the world those kids done their share in Mississippi.<sup>67</sup>

SNCC had been struggling for a year to register black voters in the "closed society" of Mississippi, the most white-supremacist state of the South, where rural blacks were still treated much like slaves. Blacks were almost half the population but only 5 percent were registered—in some counties none at all—owing to intimidation and reprisals in general, and the literacy test and poll tax in particular. An alternative to King's strategy of dramatic appeals to the liberal conscience to effect federal action, the Mississippi campaign was the outcome of a conflict within SNCC between those who favored more civil disobedience to force desegregation and others who argued that racism would not be overcome until blacks had political power, and that it made practical sense to concentrate on rural areas that were disproportionately represented in legislatures and Congress. Wary of co-optation, some were suspicious of a voter registration strategy because it was urged by the Kennedy administration, which would obviously benefit from an enlarged black electorate. The attorney general had proffered the carrots of foundation money and tax exemption if the movement would abandon direct action and had helped set up the Voter Education Project to disperse funds. At a SNCC conference at Highlander, Ella Baker broke the logjam with a proposal to have two wings in SNCC, one for direct action and another for voter registration. But voter registration won out as SNCC discovered that no



Citizenship education leader Septima Clark teaches literacy for voter registration, Southern Voter Education Project, Camden, Alabama, 1965. Bob Fitch

action was riskier, more militant, even more revolutionary, than organizing blacks to vote in Mississippi, whose reputation for terrorism had kept it off-limits to SCLC and the rest of the movement.

Bob Moses, the driving force behind the voting campaign, moved to McComb, a small city in southern Mississippi, where he set up the first of a string of registration "schools." In his mid-twenties, the quiet and contemplative Moses had grown up in Harlem, had been a Harvard graduate student in philosophy and a fan of Camus, and was teaching high school when he heard about the North Carolina sit-ins and abruptly volunteered for duty at the makeshift SNCC office in Atlanta. On a visit to Mississippi that summer he was persuaded by a local NAACP leader, Amzie Moore, that enfranchising black people should be SNCC's main mission. Moses would become a legend in SNCC not only for courage but for his ability to motivate participation and leadership in others, symbolized by his habit of sitting in the back of the room at meetings and saying little. "Organizers raise certain questions," he once said. "People develop answers."<sup>68</sup> With Moses as guide, SNCC activists learned "how to find potential leadership, how to groom it," Lawrence Guyot recalled,

"and the most painful lesson for some of us was how to let it go once you've set it into motion."<sup>69</sup>

McComb tested the mettle of Moses and his small cadre and set the tone for further campaigns. They were routinely beaten and arrested—more than once in a town called Liberty—when they accompanied local blacks to the county courthouse. Herbert Lee, one of the brave farmers who supported them and a father of nine, was gunned down by a state legislator, who was never prosecuted. After a march to protest the cold-blooded murder, Moses and his associates were jailed for two months. Routed for the moment, they left McComb in December 1961, recruited people from the grass roots, and fanned out into several other counties, centering their efforts in the flat Delta country.

Risk and repression became a way of life. Diane Nash, married to James Bevel and pregnant at that time, was sent to prison for teaching nonviolence to young people. Refusing bail, she declared that "since my child will be a black child, born in Mississippi, whether I am in jail or not he will be born in prison."<sup>70</sup> SNCC people were fired at in their cars—twenty-year-old Jimmy Travis barely survived a bullet in his spine—and SNCC offices were invaded by mobs. When Leflore County supervisors cut off federal food aid to poor blacks as punishment, SNCC went all out to mobilize food caravans from the North, helped by comedian Dick Gregory. This action greatly boosted the registration campaign, since activists could easily draw the connection between children going hungry and lack of political power. In several county seats SNCC organized "Freedom Days," which culminated in courthouse marches to register en masse.

An incident in June 1963 typified SNCC's battle for democracy in Mississippi. Returning from a voter registration workshop in South Carolina, Fannie Lou Hamer and a few coworkers got off the bus for a rest stop in the small Delta town of Winona. When they tried to use the white-only cafe, they were arrested and taken to county jail. Hamer heard SCLC's Annelle Ponder screaming, and praying to God to have mercy on her captors. She heard more screams from another direction, and sixteen-year-old June Johnson passed by her cell, face bloodied. Then they came for her. "You, bitch, you," they yelled. "We gon' make you wish you was dead."

The memory burned into her soul:

The State Highway patrolman came and carried me out of the cell into another cell where there were two Negro prisoners. The patrolman gave the first Negro

a long blackjack that was heavy. It was loaded with something and they had me to lay down on the bunk with my face down, and I was beat. I was beat by the first Negro until he gave out. Then the patrolman ordered the other man to take the blackjack and he began to beat. That's when I started screaming and working my feet 'cause I couldn't help it. The patrolman told the first Negro that had beat me to sit on my feet. I had to hug around the mattress to keep the sound from coming out."<sup>71</sup>

The merciless beating left her permanently injured, but more determined than ever to fight for human rights. While she was in jail, state NAACP leader Medgar Evers was assassinated at his home in Jackson.

That fall the Council of Federated Organizations (COFO), set up to coordinate the registration work of all civil rights groups in Mississippi but staffed mainly by SNCC, decided to conduct an alternative election in November to demonstrate blacks' desire to vote. COFO nominated for governor black pharmacist Aaron Henry, the new head of the state NAACP, and for lieutenant governor, white Tougaloo College chaplain Ed King, who had been badly beaten in a Jackson sit-in. Reinforced by white students from the North, COFO workers canvassed the state and over 80,000 black people cast "freedom ballots" in churches, homes, grocery stores, and on the street—four times the number officially allowed to register. The success of the bold venture, making COFO a statewide force, persuaded Moses and other SNCC organizers that Mississippi blacks could build an electoral vehicle independent of the state Democratic party.

In early 1964 SNCC initiated a campaign to sign up voters for the Mississippi Freedom Democratic party (MFDP), founded at a Jackson rally in April. Its immediate purpose was to challenge white Democrats for recognition as the legitimate Mississippi delegation at the Democratic National Convention in August. Intended to be a truly participatory political organization that might someday supplant its rival, the MFDP was also seen as the "best means of physically organizing the Negroes of Mississippi, of finding indigenous leadership."<sup>72</sup> When as expected MFDP workers were systematically excluded from the segregated party's precinct and county meetings, they set up their own, meticulously adhering to legal procedures. Four MFDP nominees qualified for the June Democratic primary, among them Hattiesburg activist Victoria Gray to oppose Senator John Stennis, and Fannie Lou Hamer as a candidate for Congress. Unsuccessful, they ran as independents in the fall.

Meanwhile, COFO launched the Mississippi Summer Project, a grandiose plan to import hundreds of white college students to help in a climactic registration campaign parallel to the MFDP effort. They needed white students to create a crisis that would force meaningful federal intervention to protect activists and voting rights. (South-based FBI agents did nothing except take notes and mingle with local cops.) COFO staff calculated that if white students were beaten or killed, it would grab the attention of the nation, which had ignored the black victims of Mississippi's reign of terror—sixty deaths since 1961. Many in SNCC were very concerned, however, that the more articulate and highly educated whites would overshadow the indigenous organizers, worsen the deference and powerlessness of poor blacks, and take over leadership roles.

In mid-June, while volunteers learned the ropes in a marathon training workshop at an Ohio college—Hamer lifting them to the heavens with her singing and Moses preparing them for possible death—three civil rights activists disappeared in Neshoba County after a traffic arrest. Two were white—CORE organizer Michael Schwerner, and Andrew Goodman, fresh from the first Ohio training session; one was black, eighteen-year-old James Chaney from Meridian, Mississippi. As usual, the FBI was slow to respond. COFO demanded that the Justice Department send marshals to protect the movement, but Robert Kennedy and aides replied that they had no authority. Six weeks later the bodies of the three men were found buried in an earthen dam. They had been beaten and shot, Chaney horribly mutilated. The deputy sheriff who arrested them had turned them over to the Klan. The lynching fastened the eyes of the nation on Mississippi Freedom Summer.

By late June 1964 upwards of a thousand mostly white Northern students were settling into dozens of communities all over the state. The young women and men stayed with black families who generously made room for them, or slept on cots and mattresses in ramshackle "freedom houses." In 100-degree heat they trudged along dusty dirt roads in their straw hats and blue denim and nervously talked with people on cabin porches about their right to vote. The students escorted the few who dared register to the courthouse, where most often they failed the rigged exam. Rejected for the ninth time, one old man looked down as he walked out and said wistfully, "I want my freedom all right. I do mighty bad, I'll tell you that."<sup>73</sup>

Over the summer more black people were killed for aspiring to be citizens, and dozens of church headquarters were burned or bombed. Volunteers helped organize marches to protest brutality by police and

the Klan, and many were jailed. At times even SNCC had trouble keeping up with the feisty militance of local black teenagers bent on integrating restaurants and movie theaters. "The kids were moving, with or without us."<sup>74</sup>

Many college students taught in the forty "freedom schools," directed by Yale historian Staughton Lynd. These schools were set up to provide an alternative to inferior public schools, to teach literacy and other skills, and to build the foundation for a statewide youth movement. Gathering under trees or on church steps, black high school students—2,000 altogether—learned not just the three R's but literature, foreign languages, black history and culture, how social problems might be solved, and the meaning of democracy. It was not what they learned but how that mattered most: by role-playing, by talking and writing stories and poems about their lives, by feeling equal with and teaching their teachers. In August freedom school students assembled for a convention in Meridian, where they articulated their grievances in an impressive, wide-ranging platform.

Having made but modest gains, the nonpartisan registration crusade lost steam as attention shifted to the Freedom Democratic party. "Have you freedom-registered?" was asked everywhere, in churches, on backwoods roads, and long before sunup riding plantation buses with cotton pickers. Party conventions in each county chose delegates to the five congressional district conventions, which in turn would send delegates to the state convention in Jackson. At one district convention Hamer stood at the front of the church, warmly greeting, hugging, and laughing with delegates, participant Sally Belfrage reported. "Volunteers who had never seen her before met her now and were instantly cowed with admiration. . . . People straight out of tarpaper shacks, many illiterate, some wearing a (borrowed) suit for the first time, disenfranchised for three generations, without a living memory of political power, yet caught on with some extraordinary inner sense to how the process worked, down to its smallest nuance and finagle. And yet when all the wheeling and dealing was done, they had chosen the four best people among them."<sup>75</sup> The Freedom Democratic party's skillfully organized, singing state gathering was "probably as close to a grass roots political convention as this country has ever seen," in historian Howard Zinn's judgment.<sup>76</sup> Most of the 800 delegates were black, most were poor, and many were women. Ella Baker gave a passionate keynote address, and sixty-eight men and women were elected to fight for the party at the national convention in Atlantic City, New Jersey. The MFDP had sud-

denly sprouted into a serious threat to the Democratic power structure of Mississippi—and of the nation.

The balloons, bright lights, and glitter of Atlantic City—its ocean air smelling of “popcorn and seaweed”—felt like another world to the MFDP delegates.<sup>77</sup> Not that they left Mississippi behind; 1,000 of their constituents followed them to the resort town, all wearing their Sunday best. The delegates and supporters had two tasks: to vigorously lobby every delegate they could get their hands on to back the MFDP challenge, and to sustain a round-the-clock vigil on the famed boardwalk in front of the convention hall. James Forman was surprised to see SNCC organizers Ivanhoe Donaldson and Charles Cobb, “the blue jean twins of Mississippi . . . all dressed up now in Ivy League outfits,” pressing the flesh as if their lives depended on it.<sup>78</sup> With nine state delegations already lined up, and a thorough legal brief submitted by prominent Democratic broker Joseph Rauh, counsel for the United Auto Workers, the MFDP strategy was to garner enough votes in the credentials committee to force a roll-call vote on the floor to decide on recognition. Their trump card was that their state’s all-white delegation was unwilling to declare loyalty to the national party and its nominees. King, James Farmer, and other notables testified on the MFDP’s behalf at a nationally televised hearing, but far more telling arguments came from black Mississippians who explained what happened when they tried to vote. Hamer stole the show and won the country’s heart with her gripping tale of being beaten in jail “til my hands was as navy blue as anything you ever seen.” She concluded that “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. Is this America,” she asked, “the land of the free and the home of the brave?”<sup>79</sup>

The millions watching did not see the end of Hamer’s live testimony because President Johnson abruptly cut it off with an impromptu press conference. The president, who had ordered the FBI to wiretap SNCC and MFDP phones in Atlantic City (as well as King’s), was adamant against seating the challengers—especially Hamer—lest he lose white Southerners in November. But the ex-sharecropper had such an electrifying effect and the public response was so overwhelmingly sympathetic that he had to offer a slight compromise: two at-large votes for the delegation heads and guest passes for the rest, along with a nondiscrimination pledge for the future. The MFDP would have accepted “any honorable compromise” and endorsed the proposal by Congresswoman Edith Green to seat both delegations.<sup>80</sup> But Johnson’s offer felt like a slap

in the face—two token seats, not even representing their state, hand-picked by the white party bosses. And the nondiscrimination pledge meant little without guaranteeing black voting rights.

Resisting eloquent cajolery by King, Bayard Rustin, and other big guns who feared funding cutoffs by liberal and labor backers—Rustin pleading for the primacy of practical politics over moral protest—the MFDP delegates followed Hamer’s lead and voted almost unanimously to reject the offer. “We didn’t come all this way for no two seats!” she exhorted her colleagues.<sup>81</sup> Feeling “cheated,” the normally gentle Moses stormed out of a meeting with Hubert Humphrey, slamming the door behind him. Hamer told the vice presidential hopeful she would pray for his soul. The battle was lost when their supporters on the credentials committee caved in to intense arm-twisting by the White House and Humphrey forces. “I have never seen such just really blatant use of power” to block her proposal from floor debate, Edith Green recalled.<sup>82</sup> The MFDP’s last hurrah was a dramatic, televised sit-in in the empty seats of the regular delegation, whose members had already walked out in protest of the ill-fated compromise.

The boardwalk vigil grew very large on the last night of the convention, as a thousand voices chanted “Freedom now!” and led by Hamer, sang the movement’s anthem, joining hands more tightly than ever. The grass-roots army that had valiantly tried to inject moral passion and commitment into cautious electoral politics returned to the Southern battlefield dejected, disillusioned, angry, but far from giving up. Many had learned that, whether or not they could ever hope to build alliances with white liberals, they had to first have power of their own.

A harsh critic of the Atlantic City setback was thirty-nine-year-old Malcolm X, who was rapidly emerging as the leading spokesperson for the emotions and aspirations of the black poor in the nation’s large cities. He called 1964 “the Year of Illusion and Delusion,” the year of the “great doublecross” of blacks.<sup>83</sup> Tall, slim, and pensive, Malcolm Little was the son of a Baptist preacher who in the 1920s had organized for Marcus Garvey’s black nationalist Universal Negro Improvement Association. A high school dropout, Malcolm was educated in the ghettos of Roxbury and Harlem, making his way as a hustler, drug dealer, and pimp. In the middle of a six-year prison term for robbery, he converted to the separatist Nation of Islam, or Black Muslims, founded by Elijah Muhammad. He gained increasing recognition as a phenomenal stump speaker and organizer for the Muslims, but conflicts with Muhammad led to his de-

parture in March 1964. In a hurricane of activity he set up his own Muslim group, founded the Organization of Afro-American Unity, and took two long journeys to the Mideast and Africa, during which he converted to orthodox Islam and talked deeply with African revolutionary leaders.

Back at home he lectured to countless audiences—shifting expertly from focused fury to incisive reasoning and pungent wit—about what he had learned in his explorations and his evolving vision of black liberation. In late December 1964 he spoke to black teenage activists from McComb, whom SNCC had brought to New York for the Christmas holidays:

Never at any time in the history of our people in this country have we made advances or progress in any way based upon the internal good will of this country. . . . The only time the black man in this country is given any kind of recognition, or even listened to, is when America is afraid of outside pressure, or when she's afraid of her image abroad. So we saw that it was necessary to expand the problem and the struggle of the black man in this country until it went above and beyond the jurisdiction of the United States. . . . The greatest accomplishment that was made in the struggle of the black man in America in 1964 toward some kind of real progress was the successful linking together of our problems with the African problem, or making our problem a world problem. . . . I wanted to point this out to you because it is important for you to know when you're in Mississippi, you're not alone.<sup>84</sup>

This was Malcolm's grand strategy: to internationalize the struggle of African-Americans, to ground it firmly in the global context in which people of color were the majority, and to get moral, diplomatic, and material help from Third World countries; to "expand the civil-rights struggle to the level of human rights," and as a first step to put American racism on trial before the United Nations.<sup>85</sup> No longer was Malcolm an absolute separatist, except as a temporary necessity, and his commitment to black nationalism was tempered by his newfound internationalism. Nor was he a Marxist, though he identified with African-style socialism. Despite his criticism of civil rights leaders like King for their caution and subservience to white money, he wanted to cooperate with the freedom movement. He argued that it had to play by different rules, however, and that the chief priority was for blacks to unify themselves before they could think about making alliances with whites, rich or poor. He felt that freedom would ultimately come either "by ballots or by bullets."<sup>86</sup> He had little tolerance for the "masochism" of nonviolence and adamantly justified

not only armed self-defense but "tit for tat" revenge against the Klan and other white terrorists. That issue divided him most sharply from the movement mainstream, from its leaders anyway, though not so much from SNCC, which by that time tacitly supported the right of armed self-defense.

On 21 February 1965 Malcolm X was assassinated (apparently by Black Muslim loyalists) as he was about to unveil a new political program at Harlem's Audobon Ballroom. He had just started to forge closer ties with the Southern movement. Two weeks before SNCC had brought him to Selma, Alabama, where he was warmly cheered by young protesters getting ready to march; though he had toned down his remarks, SCLC officials worked hard to calm the marchers' excitement. Malcolm's promise was cut short, but his vision and legacy were to loom large over the rest of the decade and beyond.

In January SCLC had decided to conduct a major voting rights campaign in Selma, where a small band of SNCC activists had been organizing ward meetings and registration marches for two years, braving fierce attacks by Sheriff Jim Clark and his volunteer posse. They were ambivalent about King's people coming in, but gave the effort full support, knowing it would boost the registration drive even if it might weaken indigenous leadership. Out of 15,000 eligible black voters in the county, only 300 were registered, most of them professionals; the percentage was lower in neighboring rural counties. Registration was permitted only two days per month, and black applicants were processed so slowly that even if everyone passed the fraudulent exam, it would take years to enfranchise all of Selma's black citizenry.

Fresh from the pinnacle of world acclaim for winning the 1964 Nobel Peace Prize, King led a march toward the courthouse where, after kneeling in prayer, he, Abernathy, and hundreds of others were jailed. Protests grew during the week until over 3,000 had been arrested. Two weeks later black people in the nearby town of Marion were savagely set upon by a squad of state troopers when they marched peacefully at night, and twenty-six-year-old Jimmie Lee Jackson was shot in cold blood trying to protect his mother and grandfather, both of whom were badly beaten. When he died a few days later, local blacks decided to march on the state capital. SCLC's James Bevel had the same idea.

On Sunday, 7 March, Hosea Williams of SCLC and SNCC's John Lewis led 600 people out of Brown AME Chapel, defying Governor George Wallace's ban on marching. King was back in Atlanta. As they crossed

the Edmund Pettus Bridge—named for Selma's own Confederate general—on the highway to Montgomery, forty-five miles away, they were halted by a solid phalanx of helmeted and gas-masked state troopers, who with little warning lunged at them, smashing heads and lobbing tear-gas grenades. The troopers and Sheriff Clark's posse, on horses, chased and trampled the marchers all the way back to the church, madly flailing whips, clubs, and cattle prods, and hurling one youth through a stained-glass window that depicted Jesus. Despite a fractured skull, Lewis found strength to direct his fallen comrades out of danger. Protests against "Bloody Sunday," demanding federal action, erupted in cities all over the country, including a SNCC sit-in at the attorney general's office and an expanded vigil and picket line at the White House.

SCLC flashed telegrams to hundreds of Northern clergy urging them to join King two days later to pick up the march. When federal judge Frank Johnson issued an injunction against it, King wavered but then decided to proceed. When the singing and chanting marchers, their ranks swelled by many religious notables, recrossed the Pettus Bridge, troopers stopped them again. As King led the gathering in prayer, the troopers strangely moved out of the way; but instead of pushing on, he ordered his followers to turn back. They retreated to the church singing "Ain't Gonna Let Nobody Turn Me 'Round," the Selma theme song—an irony not lost on everyone. King's maneuver, the result of a last-minute agreement with federal officials, angered the more militant protesters and furthered SNCC's distrust of King and SCLC.

Yet the rapid-fire series of events, including the murder of a white Unitarian minister from Boston—which, predictably, prompted the national concern that Jackson's death had not—already had worked magic on Washington politicians, not least the supreme politician in the Oval Office whose own residence was briefly disrupted by a sit-in. As demonstrations continued around the country, Lyndon Johnson finally resolved to make a voting rights bill—with key provisions for federal registrars and a ban on literacy tests—his highest domestic priority. Virtually overnight he and Attorney General Nicholas Katzenbach crafted a congressional coalition to enact it.

On Monday evening, 15 March, Selma protesters huddled around television sets to watch the president plead for the bill, with uncharacteristic passion, before a joint session of Congress. "At times history and fate meet in a single time in a single place," he began, his big frame hunched over the podium, "to shape a turning point in man's unending search for



Kneeling Selma to Montgomery marchers look at John Birch Society billboard of Martin Luther King, Jr., at Highlander workshop, March 1965.

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freedom. So it was at Lexington and Concord. So it was a century ago at Appomattox. So it was last week in Selma, Alabama." After promising the nation that "we shall overcome," he closed by reminiscing about his own encounter with discrimination against Chicanos as a young Texas teacher and declared: "I do not want to be the President who built empires, or sought grandeur, or extended domain. I want to be the President who helped to feed the hungry."<sup>87</sup> It was his finest hour, though the bill did not reach his desk until late summer.

Despite this high-level attention, the march to Montgomery would not be held back. With a go-ahead from the federal court and careful logistical preparation, hundreds of marchers set off for the Alabama capital, closely guarded by nearly ten times as many National Guard and Army troops deployed by the president. For five days the "mudcaked pilgrims" trekked through the heat and drenching rain, through the dense swamps of Lowndes County, past half-collapsed shacks, rickety Baptist churches, and a dilapidated black school in Trickem without a roof.<sup>88</sup> Their numbers multiplied on the final night, and they were regaled by famous entertainers in their campground.

The next day, as Governor Wallace peered out sheepishly at the surging mass of humanity below his office window—impressed in spite of himself—Martin Luther King, Jr., stood near the bronze star marking the site of the inauguration of Confederate president Jefferson Davis. Down beyond the protesters he could see the church he had pastored, where the bus boycott had been launched a decade before. The decentralized movement had traversed the South and grown into, perhaps, the nation's preeminent political force; now thousands of participants had returned to its birthplace. "How long?" King asked the marchers. "Not long," he answered, repeating the litany again and again as more and more voices joined the surging rhythm. "How long?" he concluded. "Not long, because mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord; tramping out the vintage where the grapes of wrath are stored. . . . His truth is marching on!"<sup>89</sup>

One of his rapt listeners was Viola Liuzzo, a white volunteer from Detroit who had labored with boundless energy to make the march a success. That morning she had felt a strong premonition that someone would be killed. As she drove her conspicuous green Oldsmobile back to Montgomery with a black teenager to ferry another carload home, she was shot to death by four Klansmen, one of them an FBI informer, on a desolate highway in the swamps of Lowndes County.



Marchers from Selma enter Montgomery in the rain, March 1965.

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## A Dream Deferred

What happens to a dream deferred?

Does it dry up  
like a raisin in the sun?  
Or fester like a sore—  
And then run?  
Does it stink like rotten meat?  
Or crust and sugar over—  
like a syrupy sweet?

Maybe it just sags  
like a heavy load.

Or does it explode?

—Langston Hughes, "Harlem"

The day after Viola Liuzzo's murder, and partly in response to it, seasoned SNCC organizer Stokely Carmichael arrived in Lowndes County, Alabama, with a sleeping bag and the name of someone to stay with. SNCC had decided that if they could get impoverished blacks to vote in this "totalitarian" county—where they were four-fifths of the population and not a single one had been able to vote—it could be a model for the entire black belt.<sup>90</sup> Born in Trinidad, Carmichael grew up in New York ghettos and graduated from the select Bronx High School of Science, where he hobnobbed with children of the Old Left, black and white. Then he attended Howard University in Washington and threw himself into the sit-ins and freedom rides—one of those whose baptism by fire was Mississippi's Parchman Penitentiary. He had recently gained recognition as a district director of the Mississippi Summer Project.

Having learned from the MFDP that blacks could not rely on white allies and must create their own base of power independent from the Democratic party, Carmichael and his cadre carefully mobilized local citizens, notably ministers and older women, to form the Lowndes County Freedom Organization (LCFO), aided by an obscure law making it not hard to qualify an alternative county party. Its symbol was a black panther, an animal "that when it is pressured it moves back until it is cornered," explained LCFO chair John Hulett, a longtime local activist and father of seven, "then it comes out fighting for life or death. We felt we had been pushed back long enough."<sup>91</sup> The plan was simple, wrote SNCC program secretary Cleveland Sellers: "We intended to register as many blacks as we could, all of them if possible, and take over the county. . . . After achieving success in Lowndes, we intended to widen our base by branching out and doing the same thing in surrounding counties. We were convinced that we had found The Lever we had been searching for."<sup>92</sup>

Black enfranchisement took hold, boosted by new federal registrars, bringing with it a rise in white retaliation. An LCFO convention nominated candidates for all county offices and conducted a remarkable grassroots campaign during summer and fall 1966. At a large, spirited church rally on election eve, the candidate for tax assessor, Alice Moore, gave a very short speech: "My platform is tax the rich and feed the poor," she announced to roaring applause.<sup>93</sup> Hulett promised that they would govern the county "as a model for democracy."<sup>94</sup> Though they lost every seat, the party of the black panther had made a good start toward building a network of indigenous black political organizations.

During this period SNCC was beset by growing pains and battle fa-

tigue, new political questions, and a need to look for new directions. An influx of white organizers after Mississippi Freedom Summer intensified black-white friction, and conflict arose between the more individualistic "freedom high" faction trying (as they saw it) to carry on the original SNCC spirit and lifestyle, and the "hardliners," led by Forman and Sellers, who wanted a more disciplined, centralized, and politically effective organization and were challenging the leadership style championed by Bob Moses and Ella Baker.

A heated issue that could not be ignored was the sudden escalation of the Vietnam War by President Johnson. Moses and others had taken part in the earliest antiwar rallies. In January 1966 SNCC came out against the war with a strong statement condemning the government for its hypocrisy in ostensibly defending freedom and democracy in the Third World when it refused to do so in the American South. In fact, SNCC felt growing affinity with national liberation movements in Vietnam and elsewhere. Since SNCC men were vulnerable to conscription and were harassed by their local draft boards, the statement also supported those who resisted the draft in order to build democratic forms at home: "Where is the draft for the freedom fight in the United States?"<sup>95</sup> Despite blistering attacks by the media, politicians of all stripes, and black moderates, SNCC did not retreat, which cut it further adrift from the civil rights mainstream. SNCC organizer Julian Bond, just elected to the Georgia legislature, was barred by fellow legislators from taking office for backing the Vietnam stand. SNCC did antidraft organizing in its communities, and several staff members refused induction—Sellers was sentenced to five years. The organization led disruptive protests at the Atlanta induction center, where they invented a famous slogan, "Hell no, we won't go!" Later they would help create the National Black Anti-War Anti-Draft Union.

In early June 1966 James Meredith, who had integrated "Ole Miss" with the aid of federal troops, set off on a solitary march through Mississippi to make the point that black people could live like human beings. His ambush by shotgun, seriously injuring him, precipitated a dramatic conflict among the movement's leaders that had vast repercussions: The chief civil rights leaders converged at Meredith's hospital bedside in Memphis and resolved to jointly continue his "march against fear," to reunify the movement and to push registration in places where the government was delinquent in enforcing the new voting law. King had just started an SCLC campaign in Chicago, ultimately unsuccessful, to force Mayor Richard Daley to end racism in hiring and housing and to prove



that nonviolent action could work in explosive Northern ghettos. To symbolize his commitment he had moved with his family into a dingy, urine-stenched tenement in one of the Windy City's worst slums. Stokely Carmichael had been elected chair of SNCC in May, along with dynamic ex-freedom rider Ruby Doris Smith Robinson replacing Forman as executive secretary, at a pivotal meeting in which it was decided that white SNCC members should organize only in white communities. Roy Wilkins and Whitney Young angrily packed their bags, however, when Carmichael, backed by CORE's Floyd McKissick, got King's reluctant assent for the march to minimize white participation, to have protection from the armed Deacons for Defense, and to aim at promoting independent black organizations.

As the marchers trod through familiar SNCC territory in the Delta, they roused the local folk and expanded voting rolls but were met by ferocious police assaults. After his jailing for setting up sleeping tents, Carmichael was warmly welcomed by a huge night rally in Greenwood. "This is the twenty-seventh time I have been arrested—and I ain't going to jail no more!" The crowd cheered him on. "The only way we gonna stop them white men from whuppin' us is to take over. We been saying freedom for six years and we ain't got nothin'. What we gonna start saying now is Black Power!"<sup>96</sup> SNCC organizer Willie Ricks led the assembly in passionate cries of "Black power!" repeated over and over. The expression, which starkly encapsulated SNCC's political vision, had been used before by Richard Wright, Paul Robeson, and Adam Clayton Powell, but now caught on and electrified black youth all over the country as it ignited a storm of criticism from older leaders and white liberal allies. On the march the nightly rallies turned into contests over which chant, "Black power" or "Freedom now," could drown out the other.

In Yazoo City, where to his chagrin he had been booed by some marchers, King held a long summit meeting with Carmichael, McKissick, and other leaders to try to resolve the antagonism. He said he understood the new slogan's magnetic appeal to young blacks, whose expectations had been lifted by himself and others but who felt bitter and betrayed because their elders were unable to deliver on promises. Yet he argued that the slogan would be self-defeating for the movement. Leaders must be concerned with how their rhetoric is interpreted, he counseled. While the *concept* of Black Power was sound, the slogan had the "wrong connotations." He worried about the violent images it conjured up and the media's alarmism. Carmichael replied that every other ethnic group had created its own power base to advance itself, why not black people?



Leaders meet during the spring 1966 Mississippi march in Greenwood just after Stokely Carmichael's "Black Power" speech. Bernard Lee (*left foreground*), Carmichael (*on floor*), Andrew Young and Martin Luther King, Jr. (*left and right on couch*), and Lawrence Guyot (*upper right*). Bob Fitch

"That is just the point," King answered.

No one has ever heard the Jews publicly chant a slogan of Jewish power, but they have power. . . . The same thing is true of the Irish and Italians. Neither group has used a slogan of Irish or Italian power, but they have worked hard to achieve it. This is exactly what we must do. We must use every constructive means to amass economic and political power. This is the kind of legitimate power we need. We must work to build racial pride and refute the notion that black is evil and ugly. But this must come through a program, not merely through a slogan.

"Martin," Carmichael confessed, "I deliberately decided to raise this issue on the march in order to give it a national forum, and force you to take a stand for Black Power." King laughed. "I have been used before. One more time won't hurt."<sup>97</sup> Neither side swayed the other, but out of respect for De Lawd the SNCC and CORE chiefs agreed to stop using either slogan until the expedition was over. Later King disavowed the Black Power slogan, but he never repudiated Carmichael or SNCC. He still hoped for a united black movement.

Despite the acrimony, some SNCC activists were very impressed with King when they made friends with him hiking along the hot highway, "discussing strategy, tactics and our dreams." He had an engaging sense of humor and an open mind, Sellers discovered, and was "much less conservative than we initially believed. . . . I will never forget his magnificent speeches at the nightly rallies. Nor the humble smile that spread across his face when throngs of admirers rushed forward to touch him." He was "a staunch ally and a true brother."<sup>98</sup>

There is no question that King was moving leftward as the decade of the 1960s raced along at its relentless pace. And in direct proportion, he became an increasing threat to the higher circles, especially the president and J. Edgar Hoover. The latter had called him "the most notorious liar in the country" for criticizing the FBI's collusion with Southern police.<sup>99</sup> Obsessed with hatred, the FBI czar had conducted unremitting espionage against King—to which the Kennedys and Johnson acquiesced—aimed at smearing him with alleged Communist ties and sexual improprieties. What began as a personal vendetta turned into a major, covert federal program to harass and discredit the potential "black Messiah" after he spoke out against the war in Vietnam.

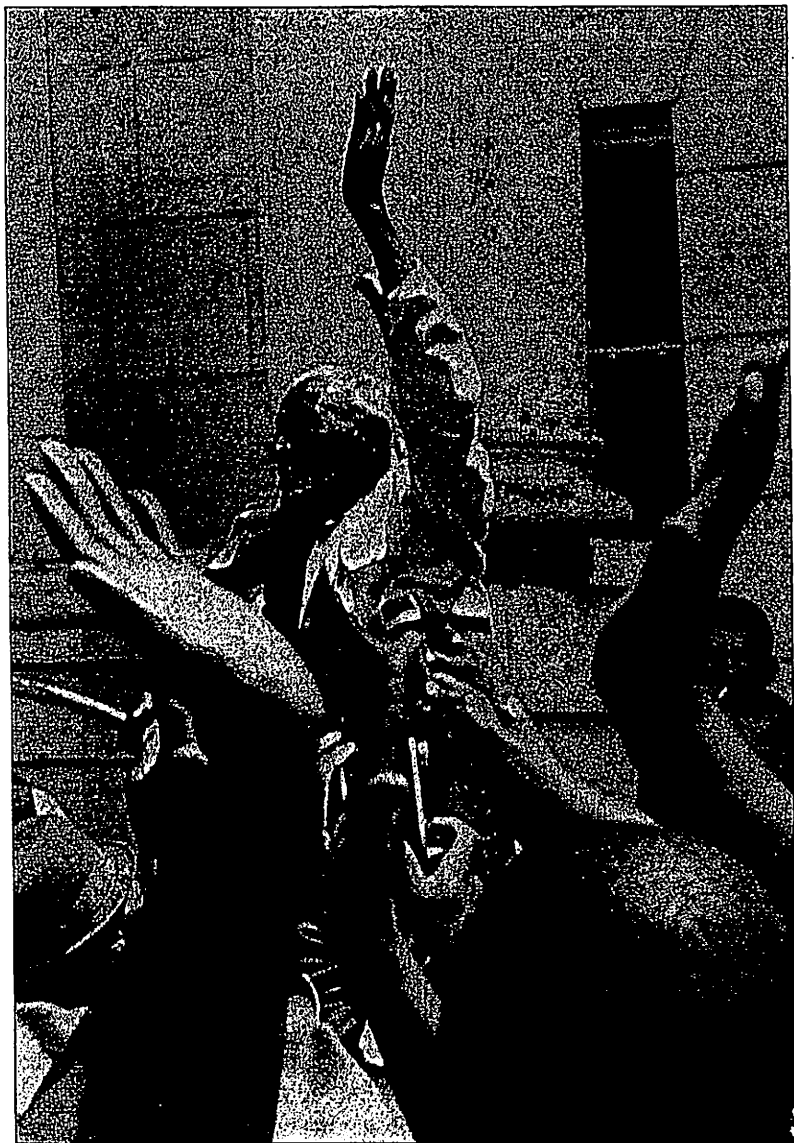
King had agonized about his moral responsibility in regard to Vietnam at least since the bombing began in early 1965. Overriding objections from his aides, who were worried about losing financial donors, he started criticizing Johnson's policy that August, but his public comments were restrained. By spring of 1967, prodded by the burgeoning antiwar movement and one of its advocates, Coretta Scott King, his soul-searching led him to believe that he must be more forthright. Speaking before 3,000 at New York's Riverside Church in early April, he declared that he had been moved to "break the betrayal of my own silences" and condemn "the greatest purveyor of violence in the world today—my own government. . . . Somehow this madness must cease." He opposed the war not only because it was morally wrong, he said, but because it robbed the country of resources needed to fight racism and poverty, and because young black men were dying for a freedom in Vietnam they could not have at home. He could no longer segregate his moral concerns; Vietnam and civil rights were intertwined. Thus, "we must combine the fervor of the civil rights movement with the peace movement."<sup>100</sup> The most prominent American to join the antiwar forces, the Nobel Peace Prize winner was denounced by the *New York Times* and other liberal media for linking the issues and for incompetence in foreign affairs, and by black leaders like Wilkins and Young for alienating LBJ and jeopardizing the delicate civil rights coalition.

During the same period that King emerged as probably the most influential critic of the war, he was also critical of past civil rights strategies, particularly his reliance on dramatic short-run confrontations to shake the nation's conscience, and he moved closer to SNCC's belief in long-term community organizing. He eventually came to see that what was most needed was not the elite coalitions so jealously guarded by Wilkins, Young, and their ilk, but grass-roots, class-based, interracial alliances of the poor. His ultimate goal was now "a reconstruction of the entire society, a revolution of values," and the building of a "socially conscious democracy which reconciles the truths of individualism and collectivism."<sup>101</sup> His first concrete step toward this vision was to try to mobilize an army of poor people to shut down the nation's capital until they were given butter instead of guns—to win the war against poverty once and for all. He saw it as a supreme test of nonviolent action.

But on 4 April 1968—just when King might have begun to forge the grand alliance against poverty and militarism that was his final dream—he was shot dead on a motel balcony in Memphis, where he was supporting a strike by sanitation workers. The thirty-nine-year-old leader, who had suffered more and more from the government's incessant hounding and from attacks within his own movement and had readied himself for his death, was laid to rest at his father's church in Atlanta. While many Americans grieved quietly, black youth in a hundred cities expressed their rage in the most widespread urban violence the country had ever seen. Overtaken by the tornado of events, the poor people's army in Washington fizzled in the hard spring rain.

The conflagration that greeted King's killing followed half a decade of escalating rebellions in black ghettos, where racist police practices, lack of jobs, inhumane housing, and associated ills had produced an "explosive mixture which had been accumulating in our cities since the end of World War II," concluded the national commission on civil disorders the same month that King fell.<sup>102</sup> Moreover, the unfulfilled promises of the freedom movement, and its minimal attention to cities outside the South where segregation was not the issue, persuaded many young ghetto dwellers that they would have to act on their own, without plan, organization, or allies. Most of the urban uprisings were ignited by instances of police misconduct. The white cops who patrolled the ghettos both symbolized and actualized the power, racism, and repressiveness of "the Man." They gave the "mean streets" the feel of a Third World colony.

In August 1965, four days after President Johnson signed the Voting Rights Act, the first large-scale "riot" broke out during a sweltering heat



Newly registered voter, Batesville, Mississippi, summer 1966. *Bob Fitch*

wave in the vast Watts section of Los Angeles. For five days black men and women looted stores and firebombed buildings, their principal intent "to destroy property owned by whites, in order to drive white 'exploiters' out of the ghetto."<sup>103</sup> The California National Guard belatedly restored order using excessive firepower. Thirty-four people died, mostly black; hundreds were injured, nearly 4,000 jailed. Despite the loss of black lives, the young insurgents of Watts believed they had won—they had drawn the nation's attention to their plight.

Two summers later, in July 1967, the ghettos' spontaneous combustion verged on outright civil war in two cities; half a dozen others had lesser disturbances. Pent-up political powerlessness in Newark, New Jersey, resulting from an unresponsive, white-dominated city hall, fueled a rampage of looting and property wreckage triggered by the police beating of a black cab driver. Poorly coordinated police and National Guard troops stifled the revolt with much indiscriminate gunfire, some of it against imaginary snipers. Nearly half of the twenty-one blacks they killed were uninvolved, including a seventy-three-year-old man, six women, and two young children.

The most catastrophic urban rebellion in U.S. history erupted a week later in Detroit, which had seen a major race riot in 1943, mainly whites attacking black newcomers. By the mid-1960s, after further migration from the South, the once-integrated area centering on 12th Street was among the nation's most densely populated urban districts, with overcrowded, dilapidated apartment buildings and rampant unemployment among its predominantly black inhabitants. "Open warfare" with police had been growing since the earlier conflict.<sup>104</sup> A late-night raid of a black club drew a furious crowd that started a chain reaction of looting and burning, young blacks seeming to be "dancing amidst the flames."<sup>105</sup> Most of the several hundred gutted buildings were destroyed by spreading, wind-swept fires. Fire fighters reportedly withdrew 300 times when the police failed to protect them. Governor George Romney flew over the battleground at dusk on the second day. "It looked like the city had been bombed on the west side," he testified later, "and there was an area two-and-a-half miles by three-and-a-half miles with major fires, with entire blocks in flames."<sup>106</sup> Five thousand National Guardsmen were reinforced by 2,700 Army paratroopers dispatched by the commander-in-chief. As in Newark and Watts, the devastation was compounded by chaos within the armies of the law, who often did not know who, where, or why they were shooting. Most of the forty-three deaths of men, women, and children—thirty-three of them blacks—were "accidental."

Conditions improved little in the aftermath, and in the long run got worse. More federal effort went into making riot control forces more efficient than into eradicating the underlying problems of poverty and racism. The government, already scaling down its inadequate antipov-erty programs, refused to heed its own investigative commission's warn- ing that "our nation is moving toward two societies, one black, one white—separate and unequal. . . . White society is deeply implicated in the ghetto. White institutions created it, white institutions maintain it, and white society condones it." Perhaps the "unprecedented levels of funding and performance" the Kerner Commission called for would have been more available had it not been for the other war 10,000 miles away.<sup>107</sup>

When in the mid-1960s the Southern-based freedom movement turned into a broader nationwide struggle for black liberation, it pursued several paths that intersected but also diverged, ranging from revolt in the ghetto to black capitalism. Black Power emerged as the unifying theme for all those who rejected the goal of integration, but it had various meanings to suit various agendas. Unable to fashion a clear political strategy to implement it, black radicals exploited its ambiguities to widen their appeal. In the most basic sense, inspired by Malcolm X, it stood for racial pride and racial identity—black consciousness—conveyed by the slogan "Black is beautiful." More concretely, it expressed democratic aspira- tions for collective self-determination and political control of black com- munities. On the economic front, it was interpreted as a mandate to develop and support black-owned businesses.

More and more, Black Power came to be entwined with a new version of black nationalism—the conception of African-Americans as a colonized people with a rightful claim to nationhood (a perspective antedating the Civil War). Black nationalism implied separatism from whites, but dis- agreements arose about how far to go, and whether coalitions with whites were acceptable on black terms. Some followed Malcolm X in seeing separatism more as a strategy than as an ultimate aim. Two con- flicting strands of nationalism vied for Malcolm's mantle: political nation- alists, such as the Black Panthers, who emphasized class oppression as much as race and sought alliance with white radicals; and cultural nation- alists, the most well-known of whom were Ron Karenga and playwright Imiri Baraka (Leroi Jones), who celebrated African roots and espoused cultural revolution. Both strands were profoundly influenced by Frantz Fanon's study of the Algerian war against France. Fanon argued that for a colonized people to gain liberation, violence was not only a strategic

necessity but a psychological need. Yet the violence of some Black Power groups was mainly on a rhetorical and stylistic level. Despite a fetish with guns, overt violence rarely went beyond armed self-defense, ostensibly a constitutional right.

By the time of the Newark and Detroit disorders, SNCC had shifted its center of gravity to the Northern war zones, setting up shop in a number of cities. Providing a political framework for the growing fury of urban blacks, Stokely Carmichael emerged as the leading popularizer of Black Power and an international celebrity—which rankled many SNCC members who felt his cult of personality violated their ethic of group-centered, accountable leadership. Acting increasingly on his own, Car- michael moved toward cultural nationalism and complete separatism, while under James Forman's tutelage SNCC tried to synthesize class and racial politics. CORE also adopted Black Power, like SNCC removed its white members, and engaged in militant organizing in Northern cities; before long it promoted black capitalism as a solution. Black Power as- sumed different shapes and textures in different urban locales, some or- ganizers continuing efforts to desegregate jobs, housing, and education, some mobilizing for the expansion of welfare payments and "welfare rights," others creating separate, black-controlled institutions to meet black needs. In several places activists put together all-black, citywide coalitions, or "united fronts"; a model was the Black Congress in Los Angeles, formed after the Watts uprising, in which Karenga's "US" or- ganization played a key role.

One black liberation group seized such extraordinary media attention that it overshadowed all others. Taking its name from the symbol of the Lowndes County Freedom Organization in Alabama and identifying closely with Third World liberation struggles, the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense (BPP) was founded in late 1966 by Huey Newton and Bobby Seale in Oakland, California. The BPP's chief mission was to en- force civil rights laws and constitutional guarantees, a task the Southern movement had neglected. In particular, they engaged in "patrolling the police" and informing black people of their rights when facing arrest. This activity led to a sensational shoot-out in the Oakland ghetto during which Newton allegedly killed a white cop. Convicted of manslaughter, the Panthers launched an all-out campaign to "free Huey" that eventually won his release.

Militaristic and highly centralized, the BPP promulgated a ten-point platform centering on community control, freedom for all black prisoners, and "our major political objective, a United Nations-supervised plebiscite

to be held throughout the Black colony . . . for the purpose of determining the will of Black people as to their national destiny."<sup>108</sup> Forming chapters in several dozen cities, the BPP organized "survival programs" to help needy blacks, including free breakfasts for ghetto children. In 1968 it formed an electoral coalition with the white-led Peace and Freedom party, whose presidential candidate was the Panther's chief communicator, Eldridge Cleaver. The same year it contrived a short-lived alliance with SNCC to take advantage of the latter's organizing skill and resources, and Carmichael's notoriety. What Cleaver called a "merger" of the two groups was barely more than a tenuous link with Carmichael, appointed BPP "prime minister."<sup>109</sup> Personal and ideological clashes produced deepening distrust and hostility, and the alliance shattered in open recrimination. Unable to surmount its own internal divisions, which were intensified by external repression, SNCC faded into obscurity a year later.

Hampered by their authoritarian leadership and violent image, the Black Panthers never built a solid base in the black community, outside of Oakland; their most reliable support came from the white left. The harder they clung to Marxism-Leninism, the less they were able to reconcile black nationalism and socialism. Though Black Panther violence was far more of word than deed, local and national police agencies teamed up in a concerted effort to extinguish the organization. The campaign included illegal arrests, spurious prosecutions, premeditated murder by police (Fred Hampton and Mark Clark in Chicago), and FBI "Cointelpro" operations that fomented divisiveness and paranoia within the party and toward other militant groups such as SNCC and Karenga's US. (FBI machinations precipitated a Los Angeles gunfight in which US members killed two Panthers.) As with SNCC's demise, it is hard to determine whether warfare from within or without took the heaviest toll—harder still to disentangle the two. With most of its leadership killed, imprisoned, or self-exiled, the Black Panther party survived the decade a shadow of its luminous past.

As it migrated northward, the black freedom movement vividly reproduced the historic duality of separatist versus integrationist perspectives that had always characterized the African-American struggle. If the Southern movement's great achievement was the abolition of legalized segregation, the legacy of Black Power was by and large the fruit of its distinct movement culture, which owed more to African origins and urban folkways than to the black church. Among its enduring contributions are the hard-won black studies programs that have taken hold in many col-

leges and universities (even high schools), and a flowering of African-American art, literature, music, drama, and film. New generations of black people still face multilayered disadvantages, but thanks to the culture of black liberation they now have an advantage not enjoyed by most whites: a rich heritage to take pride in and a collective identity to celebrate. The resulting self-respect and self-confidence are crucial tools of empowerment in the continuing struggle for black equality.

Political and cultural expressions of Black Power lived on through the 1970s and beyond, but the black liberation movement lost its cutting edge with the collapse of SNCC and the Panthers. Two closely linked episodes in 1971 marked the movement's eclipse. Prison organizer and Panther field marshal George Jackson, locked up eleven years for a \$70 robbery—seven of those years in solitary confinement—and author of *Soleadad Brother*, a compelling indictment of prison racism, was shot through the head by a guard at California's San Quentin in an alleged escape. "George's death has meant the loss of a comrade and revolutionary leader," black activist/intellectual Angela Davis, a close friend, wrote from her jail cell several miles away.<sup>110</sup> She had been accused of involvement in an attempt to free prisoners from a courtroom during which Jackson's teenage brother had been slain.

The next day, across the country at Attica prison in upstate New York, inmates fasted and protested silently. Jackson's book had uplifted them; he was a hero. Two weeks later over half of Attica's population, mainly blacks and Puerto Ricans, seized control of the prison, took dozens of hostages, and issued demands for long-overdue improvements. They called in an unusual team of "observers," including Panther chair Bobby Seale and *New York Times* columnist Tom Wicker, to negotiate for them. When talks broke down and Governor Nelson Rockefeller refused to step in, helicopters suddenly flooded the interior with tear gas as a battalion of state troopers sneaked in with high-powered rifles and in a few minutes wiped out thirty prisoners and ten hostages. The Attica massacre was the bloodiest crushing of a prison revolt in American history. A survivor, inmate John Lee Norris, wrote a poem about it:

. . . And another page of history is written in black blood  
 And old black mamas pay taxes to buy guns that killed their sons  
 And the consequence of being free . . . is death  
 And your sympathy and tears always come too late  
 And the only thing they do right is wrong  
 And it's just another page.<sup>111</sup>

Many others had reason for hope. Dewey Greene of Greenwood, Mississippi, father of two SNCC activists, summed up the meaning of the change wrought by the freedom movement he had participated in: "That Negro won't take no beating," he said. "So, I guess it's coming little by little, but I know it's come that far."<sup>112</sup>

## *Chapter Two*

# Everything Is Possible

## Phoenix Rising

June 1958. The *Phoenix* left Honolulu harbor under full sail heading southwest into the Pacific. Sailing the fifty-foot ketch were skipper Dr. Earle Reynolds, Barbara Reynolds, their teenage children Ted and Jessica, and Nick Mikami, citizen of Hiroshima, their ultimate destination. Close relatives of Mikami's had been victims of the nuclear holocaust in 1945. Dr. Reynolds was an anthropologist who had done a study for the Atomic Energy Commission (AEC) on the effect of radioactivity on the bones of Hiroshima children born shortly after the bombing. The stunting of bone growth was so appalling that the AEC refused to let him publish it. Infuriated, he quit his job, built the *Phoenix* in Hiroshima, and embarked with his family and Mikami on a four-year journey around the world, a lifelong dream. Stopping in Hawaii to prepare for the last leg, they found that the AEC had cordoned off a vast area of the Pacific for H-bomb tests that summer, blocking their route back to Japan. While on shore they met the crew of the *Golden Rule*, including CORE activist Jim Peck and skipper Albert Bigelow, a former Navy commander and Massachusetts housing commissioner (both future freedom riders)—who had tried twice to sail into the Eniwetok test zone only to be caught by the Coast Guard a few miles out to sea, arrested, and jailed.

Though Earle Reynolds had first thought the pacifist sailors a little crackpot and was interested in the legal and scientific more than the moral issues, his wife persuaded him that they should continue the voy-

ciples of the American creed—the only real commonality that citizens of this land share. Explicit democratic visions that spelled out concrete change might have opened doors to Americans alienated from the democracy of smoke and mirrors, of forms with little substance, that was unable to resolve the pressing problems of the era. They might have provided a language to help activists with clashing goals and priorities bridge their differences, and help them connect diverse issues and constituencies behind broader aims of democratization.

With so much begun, and so much left unfinished, the collective aspiration to see democracy live up to its root meaning—people empowered—is an enduring legacy of these movements to those citizens who make history today and tomorrow.

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