

Stokely Carmichael and SNCC:  
The Decline of a Civil Rights Organization

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In 1960, four college students from North Carolina A and T College decided to sit down at a Woolworth's lunch counter to protest Jim Crow laws. This led to other students sitting in and the movement spread throughout Southern cities. They had success and many dining facilities were integrated that year. These protests were still ongoing throughout many cities at the time and, to formally organize, students held a conference. After this, in April 1960, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) was founded. Stokely Carmichael became a leading figure in the Civil Rights Movement. He became the chairman of SNCC in 1966 and with his leadership, SNCC changed its direction. The conflict between the other civil rights organizations had already existed, such as in Albany, Georgia where the Civil Rights Movement suffered a major defeat from SNCC and the SCLC's fight for political power and financial support. However, Carmichael's call for "Black Power" in the Selma to Montgomery March brought it to its peak. Carmichael began to isolate SNCC from the other civil rights organizations. He started to question non-violence as a strategy and to expel white members from SNCC. After this, SNCC began to decline. Stokely Carmichael's shift in philosophy would alienate white people and increase opposition against SNCC, ultimately leading to the decline of SNCC.

The start of the Civil Rights Movement was in 1954. This is wherein *Brown v. Board of Education*, segregation in schools is declared unconstitutional. The next major victory for blacks comes in December 1954 with the start of the Montgomery bus boycotts. The boycott resulted in the Supreme Court declaring segregation on public buses unconstitutional. However, the Civil Rights Movement featured little action after that until the emergence of the Sit-In Movement. The sit-ins led to the creation of a new organization called SNCC. After its creation in 1960,

SNCC continued to do sit-ins. In 1961, SNCC joined the Freedom Ride to combat segregation in the South. This was to continue on a project started by CORE, another civil rights organization. The United States Attorney General, John F. Kennedy, asked civil rights organizations to focus on voter registration. With this new direction, SNCC sponsored voter registrations throughout the many cities in the South. SNCC was considered courageous because a lot of the work that they did, was in areas considered too dangerous by other organizations. They had a Freedom Ballot. This ballot was for black people too intimidated to vote and a way to show black people did care about politics. The success of this project led to the creation of Freedom Summer. Freedom Summer included voter registration drives and freedom school where people were taught how to be activists, how to read, and about voting. Black people were systematically prevented from voting in Mississippi, even after the Civil rights Act of 1964 prohibited unequal voter registration requirements. So in 1964, SNCC helped to establish the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party. This was to provide delegates that actually represented all of Mississippi since the Democratic party was voted in by only white people. Their party went to the National Democratic Convention and tried to get seated. The administration would not agree to their terms but was willing to compromise. SNCC did not accept this. SNCC felt that it had failed and its attitude started to shift. In March 1965, SNCC took part in the Selma marches with other civil rights organizations. They wanted to take a militant approach to the situation, but Martin Luther King wanted to obey the laws. This led to SNCC being more alienated from civil rights groups and the start of the questioning of non-violence strategies. In 1966, with the election of Stokely Carmichael, these tensions would reach a peak and have a large effect on the direction of SNCC.

There are published sources on SNCC and Stokely Carmichael. For example, Schäfer gives a history of SNCC and how it served as a role model for the German student movement. Schäfer discusses the decline of SNCC and explains why it failed. She briefly discusses why Carmichael's rhetoric was popular in SNCC. Stoper discusses how SNCC was a redemptive organization and discusses the ethos of SNCC. She reviews SNCC's history and she also focuses on the frustration felt and how that affected members. There is an interview with Stokely Carmichael. During this, he explains his views and how SNCC needed white people to fight racism in their communities. "Eyes on the Prize", a documentary film, gives a view of SNCC after its ideology shifted. Other sources were written by SNCC members such as Cleveland Sellers. Sellers gives a clearer view of how SNCC members felt about the direction SNCC was going towards and how they disagreed with Carmichael. Actual members' feelings and words on it are in it. The FBI files on Stokely Carmichael give out a lot of the militant ideas he said.<sup>1</sup> The FBI investigated him because he held a high role in the movement and they wanted to establish that he was a communist. The files also have a lot of the smaller demonstrations and times he was arrested in them. Another SNCC member, Zinn, discusses SNCC and its members. Member's time in jail, speeches, arguments, and experiences while in SNCC are discussed. Jenkins analyzes how elite patronage affected the movement. He uses graphs and stats to analyze groups in the movement and gives a different view than the usual about why they declined. Haines also uses data. He uses financial stats to analyze how groups' finances may have been affected based on how radical they were. Lehman discusses the decline of the Civil Rights

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<sup>1</sup> Quotes in FBI files, "Our country does not run on reason; it is run on violence. That's the reality of how things are done here." "I might be non violent but I would not try to push that on the people I'm trying to organize." (*FBI Records*. [https://vault.fbi.gov/Stokely Carmichael/Stokely Carmichael Part 1 of 5/view](https://vault.fbi.gov/Stokely_Carmichael/Stokely_Carmichael_Part_1_of_5/view).)

Movement in general. It gives a view of the effects of Carmichael's new ideologies, and how they were divisive. Carmichael's anthology of his works is informative of all of his ideas and philosophies as he progresses. He gives a better sense of what SNCC did that was not major news. He gives his view on all situations that happened throughout the movement.

In order to discuss, I plan to use various source types. For example, newspapers. This is in order to see what views were being pushed to the public. There are many different views about the movement during the time, so I am using different newspapers from different sources and groups. So SNCC's publications as well as local newspapers. I am using autobiographies of SNCC members. The autobiographies will give a more intimate view of the inner workings of SNCC. It will give a sense of the challenges they faced after Stokely Carmichael became chairman. I will use it mainly to see how other SNCC members felt about Carmichael and his leadership. I am using a monograph that will discuss the decline of the civil rights movement. This monograph will allow me to see how things besides ideologies affected SNCC. I use an anthology of Carmichael's essays, articles, and speeches. This will allow me to see a lot more of Carmichael's viewpoints and allow me to see how that affected SNCC's ideology. The FBI documents will give me all of the more militant quotes Stokely says and to see more clearly how white people could take him negatively. They give more dates and different demonstrations besides the major ones. This will allow me to discover less researched events and information.

In 1966, Stokely Carmichael became the director of SNCC. There were many different philosophies held by members within SNCC, but the main one held was that of non-violence. With Carmichael's leadership, a new and different philosophy guided SNCC. The philosophy of black power. Black Power is the idea of black self-determination and black self-identity and is

“Full participation in the decision-making processes affecting the lives of black people, and recognition of the virtues in themselves as black people.”<sup>2</sup> Basically, pride in being black and black people determine how they will move ahead, being economically, politically, or socially. However, this was not understood by all to be what black power meant. To some, black power was seen as a philosophy of reverse racism and black supremacy. With this new philosophy came the alienation of whites, denouncement by other civil rights groups, and lessening of support from others. All of these factors caused by this philosophy would lead to SNCC’s decline. Yet, there were other factors, beforehand, that laid the seeds for what would come.

SNCC was an idealistic group with the hope that integration would help to bring about positive change and the end of oppression for black people. This began to shift in 1964 during the Freedom Summer. After going to the National Democratic Convention with its party, the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party (MFDP), and receiving lots of support, SNCC’s Democratic party was unable to unseat the Democratic party. This was due to a compromise offered to seat two of their delegates, which prematurely ended the party’s fight.<sup>3</sup> SNCC considered this a major loss. During Freedom Summer, over 800 whites came to work with SNCC and afterward over 100 stayed. SNCC usually consisted of a small number of whites, so with this change, came racial tension.<sup>4</sup> The question of whether whites could effectively help to

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<sup>2</sup> Stokely Carmichael. “*Stokely Speaks: From Black Power to Pan-Africanism.*” Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 2014), 44.

<sup>3</sup> Zinn explains how the MFDP had gathered the support of the Credentials Committee so that their proposal that votes between the two parties be split, could be on the floor. However, Johnson’s Administration offered a compromise that stopped this. (Howard Zinn. *SNCC: The New Abolitionists.* Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2014), 252-254.

<sup>4</sup> Emily Stoper. *The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee.* (Journal of Black Studies, vol. 8, no. 1, Sept. 1977), 11.

organize blacks was seriously considered in SNCC by both its white and black members. The eventual conclusion was no.

In 1964, SNCC faced much hostility, while campaigning in the South. This came from not only the police but local whites who were often the poor ones. This was because politicians often pitted poor whites against blacks, who were also often extremely poor and uneducated, so that they did not have to respond to their economic and educational needs. The civil rights movement was about addressing black issues and this increased hostility from white people. A SNCC member noted, "The less the movement does for them, the more likely they will be threatened by us, and the more they will be violent towards us."<sup>5</sup> To combat this, a small group of white SNCC members decided to try to add poor white people to the movement. This was called the White Folks Project. Only successful in registering a small number of whites, the small group ultimately failed because, "Rumors circulated that the local SNCC office was to be used to help get jobs for black rather than whites."<sup>6</sup> This was a major weakness of SNCC. It was highly susceptible to its intentions being misinterpreted. This would be a larger problem with Carmichael's idea of black power and the idea that whites should be excluded from SNCC. Carmichael's philosophy that blacks and whites should organize separately for the movement, would be misinterpreted as one of racism. His felt that, "The need for psychological equality is the reason why SNCC today believes that blacks must organize in black communities." Also in regards to whites organizing black communities, "They admonish blacks to be non-violent; let them preach non-violence in the white community... We hope to see, eventually, a coalition

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<sup>5</sup> Clayborne Carson. *In Struggle: SNCC and the Black Awakening of the 1960s*. (Harvard University Press, 1982) 118.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 119.

between poor blacks and poor whites.”<sup>7</sup> The idea of white superiority would be furthered if, to help get their freedom, black people had to wait for white people to help them to do it. And, his goal was eventually to have poor whites work with blacks to fight for things both needed. Some within SNCC left because they understood this. However, many of SNCC’s white supporters did not. The media characterized SNCC becoming an only black organization as separatism and racism. Whites, of course, being alienated from SNCC does, in fact, look like overt separatism and this also could have contributed to the loss of white support. Many of SNCC’s financial supporters were northern white liberals and SNCC no longer an organization for whites, lost that support. SNCC’s organizers were white and in kicking them out, SNCC lost not only lots of funding, but lots of members. Stokely’s idea of separating black and white people to fight for movement, led to the loss of white members. This contributed to SNCC’s decline because white members provided were a large number of organizers that SNCC had. The loss of white people in the organization lead to the loss of white support from members and non-members. Civil Rights organizations were heavily funded by elite contributors such as corporations, foundations, and the federal government during the later 60s.<sup>8</sup> They were supporting more moderate civil rights organizations, and with Carmichael’s new way, SNCC was too radical. Kicking out whites did not simply eliminate financial support, but also just white support in general. White people working with blacks usually drew more attention and support to civil rights organizations and their protests. Since SNCC no longer had white people, they no longer had much of the support necessary to continue on as an organization. Carmichael’s idea that whites be excluded from the

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<sup>7</sup> Carmichael, 45.

<sup>8</sup> Herbert H. Haines. "Black Radicalization and the Funding of Civil Rights: 1957-1970." *Social Problems* 32, no. 1 (1984), 31-43.



movement, was a major reason SNCC started to decline, however separation from whites was not the only reason SNCC lost support and started to decline. Not only did Carmichael alienate whites, but it also drew much opposition from them.

In 1966, in Greenwood, Mississippi, James Meredith started the March Against Fear, a solo march that ended the 2nd day when he got shot. This march was continued by other civil rights groups, SNCC was one of them. Stokely Carmichael was there and during the march, was arrested. At a night rally afterward, during his speech, Carmichael exclaimed, “Black Power!” People started yelling it back. Willie Ricks hopped on stage and went back and forth with the crowd. “What do you want?” “Black Power!” “What do you want?” “Black power!” A white SNCC member described it as chilling.<sup>9</sup> Of course this disturbed whites, but it also disturbed many black supporters of the movement. At the NAACP’s national convention, black power was attacked. Roy Wilkins, the head of the NAACP at the time, said, “The term ‘black power’ means anti-white power. It has to mean going it alone. It has to mean separatism.”<sup>10</sup> The goal of the civil rights movement was integration. Black power, initially, was perceived as just a call for black people to go against whites. This was what a lot of prominent black leaders thought or at least said of it. This was definitely the perception whites had of it. The Vice President of the US, Hubert Humphrey, said about black power that, “We must reject calls for racism, whether they come from a throat that is white or one that is black... Integration must be recognized as an essential means to the ends we are seeking .” These sentiments were echoed by critics, ranging

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<sup>9</sup> James A. DeVinney and Lacy D. Madison, directors. “Eyes on the Prize The Time Has Come: 1964-1966.” PBS, 1990.

<sup>10</sup> Sellers, 170.

from the newspapers to talk shows and from Senators to the President.<sup>11</sup> With black power's strong connotation of anti-white violence, it drew opposition from many different Americans. Civil rights leaders denounced it because of this. They felt that the progress they had made with whites, and the civil rights movement, would be threatened by black power. SNCC was one of the major civil rights organizations and with them expressing those views, it would seem like the Civil Rights Movement supported black power. So, of course: Carmichael, SNCC, and black power had to be denounced by the other civil rights organizations. This was to distance the Civil Rights Movement from black power and its connotations. Black power also alienated blacks within SNCC. Some shared the sentiment that black power was not the right direction for SNCC, while others were simply jealous of Carmichael's notoriety from black power. They did not like to be referred to and portrayed as Carmichael's followers, especially since SNCC was supposed to be an organization where everyone was relatively equal.<sup>12</sup> This would lead to growing opposition towards Carmichael's leadership and would cause members to resign and even go against SNCC. This led to SNCC having fewer members and made it even harder for it to function. Not only did black power lead to SNCC facing vocal opposition, but also increased political and physical opposition. "Southern congressmen won approval for "anti-riot" amendments to the... civil rights proposals... local authorities... attempted to disable SNCC projects in several cities by arresting and harassing SNCC workers.<sup>13</sup> SNCC faced harassment, false allegations, and opposition from the police that would succeed in stopping some of their few projects left, turning more of the public against them, and draining its already diminished

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<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 171.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 182-184.

<sup>13</sup> Carson, 225.

finances. Carmichael's philosophy had not only alienated people from SNCC, but brought on opposition that it could not handle.

However, Carmichael did try to clarify that black power was not an anti-white message. That the reason the switch was from integration to black power was that, "Without the capacity to participate with power, i.e., to have some organized political and economic strength to really influence people with whom one interacts, integration is not meaningful."<sup>14</sup> However, this was too late in coming and was not to be understood by many. The press and other public figures had already characterized black power as an anti-white philosophy and would continue to do so throughout the movement. Carmichael's failure to clarify the meaning of black power quickly led to others interpreting the word. Many did so in a way that would gather opposition against the idea, its creator, and SNCC.

With the introduction of black power, Carmichael helped to bring a lot of attention to SNCC and the enthusiastic support of poor blacks. However, this philosophy would cause the alienation and opposition of SNCC from most other groups. White people supported SNCC, but black power calls for black people doing things for themselves. Kicking them out made whites stop supporting SNCC and black power made white people stop supporting SNCC in general. Not only did black power draw opposition from white politicians, leaders, and local governments, but also black politicians and black leaders. This was due to the ambiguity of the term 'black power' that Carmichael took a while to clear up and the connotations that come from such a term in such a society. Stokely Carmichael, fed up like many black Americans and disappointed with the philosophy of nonviolence, tried to replace it with a new philosophy: black

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<sup>14</sup> Carmichael, Stokely, and Charles V. Hamilton. *Black Power: the Politics of Liberation in America*. Vintage Books, 1992.

power. However, it was a term that was racially charged and undefined. Many did not support it and many even opposed it. Eventually, this term would lead to SNCC's decline because it would cause the alienation and opposition that brought SNCC to its knees. Carmichael's philosophy unintentionally brought about the decline of SNCC.

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