Journal of American Studies, 48 (2014), 1, 291–308
doi:10.1017/S0021875813002545

Tell It Like It Isn't: SNCC and the Media, 1960–1965

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In recent decades, revisionist challenges to the traditional "declension hypothesis" have generated a much more nuanced and positive approach to the Black Power movement. However, attempts to explain the narrative's initial popularity have too often focussed on the latter half of the decade and blamed a media-assisted white backlash or the inflammatory rhetoric of Black Power activists. Concentrating instead on the earlier half of the decade, this article examines the media strategies of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and demonstrates how its public approach to nonviolence and interracial organizing purposefully hid developments within the movement that were seen to be at odds with the dominant discourse. By highlighting the ways in which the early media strategies of a militant organization like SNCC strengthened and legitimized a misleading movement narrative, this article challenges scholars to be more critical of early movement rhetoric and re-examine how and why Black Power was portrayed as a fundamental break with the past.

For many commentators in the late 1960s, the rhetoric of Stokely Carmichael, Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) chairman, symbolized a break with the nonviolent and interracial civil rights movement.[1] Having previously described SNCC as "one of the most militant and successful front-line groups," editorials in the *New York Times* typified mainstream press coverage when they condemned Black Power as "a hopeless, futile, destructive course expressive merely of a sense of black impotence."[2] Even sympathetic articles viewed the philosophy as emerging from a "wash of frustration" that was sweeping over the urban ghetto rather than legitimate political grievances, a view reinforced by "responsible" civil rights leader Roy Wilkins, who claimed that the philosophy could mean "only black death."[3]

Taking cues from, and often directly citing, contemporary commentators, early historians mirrored and legitimized the media's charge that Black Power

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[1] See "Black Power Is Black Death," *New York Times*, 7 July 1966 (hereafter *NYT*); "As Negro Militants Challenge Moderates," *NYT*, 16 July 1967.

[2] M. S. Handler, "Rights Unit Bars Truce in Battle," *NYT*, 29 Nov. 1963; "The Politics of Frustration," *NYT*, 7 Aug. 1966.

[3] "Mobilization of Black Strength," *Life*, 6 Dec. 1968; "Civil Rights: Ahead of Its Time," *Time*, 30 Sep. 1966 (from the online archive at http://content.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,836425,00.html, accessed 19 Nov. 2013); M. S. Handler, "Wilkins Says Black Power Leads Only to Black Death," *NYT*, 6 July 1966.

represented a pre-emptive and disastrous rejection of central movement tenets such as integration and nonviolence.[4] By the 1980s, this dichotomous view of the decade, known as the "declension hypothesis," became the widely accepted narrative. Indeed, even early historical works by former activists, such as Todd Gitlin, reinforced the contrast between the decade's positive beginnings and the urban violence that was seen to typify its end.[5] Subsequent works, however, have attacked this narrative on two fronts. First, scholars have looked to rehabilitate Black Power activists, stressing the political substance behind their demands whilst also crediting the movement for important cultural gains.[6] Second, historians have utilized grassroots studies to trace the roots of Black Power to the traditions and experiences of working-class African Americans in the rural South as well as the urban North.[7]

Although the last two decades may have seen the rise of a more nuanced and positive approach to Black Power, scholars have not adequately explained why such a flawed account of the movement initially emerged. Indeed, whilst investigating the early adoption of self-defence and other central Black Power tenets by civil rights workers and southern African American communities, historians have failed to examine the public-relations effort that prevented such practices from entering the mainstream narrative. Concentrating instead on the public reception of Black Power, accounts by historians such as Peniel Joseph are often too quick to blame the "bully pulpit" of the national press or the "violent rhetoric, misogyny, and bravado" in the speeches and actions of Black Power advocates that made them "easy targets for

[4] Wilkins's portent of "black death," for example, is often cited in early works, including the first major monograph on SNCC: Clayborne Carson, *In Struggle: SNCC and the Black Awakening of the 1960s*, 2nd edn (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 1996), 220.

[5] Todd Gitlin, *The Sixties: Years of Hope, Days of Rage* (Toronto and New York: Bantam Books, 1987).

[6] William L. Van Deburg, *New Day in Babylon: The Black Power Movement and American Culture, 1965–75* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1992); Jeffrey O. G. Ogbar, *Black Power: Radical Politics and African American Identity* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004); Peniel E. Joseph, "The Black Power Movement: A State of the Field," *Journal of American History*, 96 (2009), 751–77.

[7] Timothy B. Tyson, *Radio Free Dixie: Robert F. Williams and the Roots of Black Power* (London: University of North Carolina Press, 1999); Jeanne F. Theoharis and Komozi Woodard, eds., *Groundwork: Local Black Freedom Movements in America* (New York and London: New York University Press, 2005); Matthew Countryman, *Up South: Civil Rights and Black Power in Philadelphia* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006); Peniel E. Joseph, *Waiting 'Til the Midnight Hour: A Narrative History of Black Power in America* (New York: Henry Holt, 2006); Simon Wendt, *The Spirit and the Shotgun: Armed Resistance and the Struggle for Civil Rights* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2007); Hasan Kwame Jeffries, *Bloody Lowndes: Civil Rights and Black Power in Alabama's Black Belt* (New York: New York University Press, 2009).

demonization and dismissal."[8] In doing so, they ignore how civil rights organizations, including SNCC, were involved in the propagation of a sanitized movement narrative that contributed to the portrayal of Black Power as a fundamental break with the past.

Despite often criticizing the media in private, SNCC members were aware of the positive role it could play in their cause and placed a premium on cultivating favourable publicity. Created as a coordinating body in 1960, SNCC's initial public-relations effort was limited to the activities of Jane Stembridge, a white southerner and SNCC's only full-time staff member. SNCC's participation in the Voter Education Project (VEP) from 1962, however, prompted the creation of a dedicated Communication Section, which by 1965 had five full-time staffers under the direction of Julian Bond, a former journalist with the African American *Atlanta Inquirer*.[9] SNCC also established a photography arm, SNCC Photo, and ran its own printing press to produce publicity materials, including its newsletter, the *Student Voice*.[10] Consequently, while communications director Julian Bond later claimed that his work had made him feel like "a whore or a pimp," distaste for public relations did not prevent the organization from going "further than any other civil rights organization of the time by creating its own extensive media structure."[11]

The dilemma between the benefits of positive media coverage and the ideological and operational sacrifices needed to secure such publicity was not unique to SNCC or the civil rights movement. Indeed, given the role that the media play in "filtering or reframing the messages of social movements," this compromise is common to all organizations that attempt to reach society at large.[12] However, whilst scholars investigating other radical organizations of the 1960s and 1970s have adopted interdisciplinary approaches that engage with media and social-movement theory, civil rights historians have largely resisted such frameworks, even when examining the media strategies of civil rights organizations.[13] Consequently, and despite making heavy use of media

[8] Joseph, "The Black Power Movement: A State of the Field," 755, 751.

[9] Elizabeth Gritter and Julian Bond, "Interview with Julian Bond," *Southern Cultures*, 12, 1 (2006), 76–91.

[10] Vanessa Murphree, *The Selling of Civil Rights: The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee and the Use of Public Relations* (New York: Routledge, 2006); Leigh Raiford, "'Come Let Us Build a New World Together': SNCC and Photography of the Civil Rights Movement," *American Quarterly*, 59 (2007), 1129–57.

[11] Julian Bond in John Neary, "Julian Bond, A Militant Inside the System," *Life*, 8 Nov. 1968, 46; Raiford, 1140.

[12] Susan Dente Ross, "'Their Rising Voices': A Study of Civil Rights, Social Movements, and Advertising in the *New York Times*," *Journal of Mass Communication*, 75 (1998), 518–34, 519.

[13] For an example in literature on the feminist movement see Bernadette Barker-Plummer, "News as a Political Resource: Media Strategies and Political Identity in the U. S. Women's

sources, civil rights scholars have often failed to engage critically with the process of news construction.[14]

Promoting a hegemonic view of media power, supporters of the declension hypothesis such as former SNCC chairman John Lewis, have claimed that "without the media, the civil rights movement would have been like a bird without wings."[15] Negative media coverage towards the end of the decade, they argue, was not so much the result of media bias, but of later activists "fumbling the ball" of public relations.[16] Accounts by former journalists, such as Gene Roberts and Hank Klibanoff, have continued to exaggerate the importance of "race beat" journalists while downplaying the role that activists and organizations played in disseminating information to the press.[17] Importantly, such arguments have become part of the established movement narrative, with journalism professor Melvin N. Coffee praising the way in which reporters "stared down shotgun barrels and crawled out of ditches under gunfire to get stories."[18] Such glorification has led Gordon Mantler to criticize what he refers to as the "scholar's virtual lionization of journalists," criticizing accounts for "reinforcing the movement's traditional narrative."[19]

Recently, historians such as Vanessa Murphree and Dulcie Straughan have challenged the notion that civil rights organizations were passive participants in the formation of media discourse and looked to counteract what Straughan argues is the "little, if any, scholarly attention [that] has focused on the specific public relations tactics used by those organizations."[20] Whilst their work signifies a considerable advance, neither author fully engages with the relevant scholarship contained within the fields of sociology and communication

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Movement, 1966–1975," *Critical Studies in Mass Communication*, 12, 3 (1995), 306–24; For the LGBT movement see Steve Valocchi, "Riding the Crest of a Protest Wave? Collective Action Frames in the Gay Liberation Movement, 1969–1973," *Mobilization: An International Quarterly*, 4, 1 (1999), 59–73; for the New Left see Todd Gitlin, *The Whole World Is Watching: Mass Media in the Making and Unmaking of the New Left*, 2nd edn (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2003).

[14] This flaw is not limited to historians. See, for example, Linda Childers Hon, "'To Redeem the Soul of America': Public Relations and the Civil Rights Movement," *Journal of Public Relations Research*, 9, 3 (1997), 163–212.

[15] John Lewis in Charlotte Grimes, "Civil Rights and the Press," *Journalism Studies*, 6 (2005), 117–34, 118.

[16] John Lewis in "Ex-Chairman Quits 'Black Power' SNCC," *Washington Post*, 1 July 1966.

[17] Gene Roberts and Hank Klibanoff, *Race Beat: The Press, the Civil Rights Struggle, and the Awakening of a Nation* (New York: Vintage, 2007).

[18] Melvin N. Coffee in Grimes, 125–26.

[19] Gordon Mantler, "'The Press Did You In': The Poor People's Campaign and the Mass Media," *The Sixties: A Journal of History, Politics, and Culture*, 3 (2010), 33–54, 34.

[20] Murphree, *The Selling of Civil Rights*; Dulcie M. Straughan, "'Lift Every Voice and Sing': The Public Relations Efforts of the NAACP, 1960–1965," *Public Relations Review*, 30, 1 (2004), 49–60, 49–50.

studies. Indeed, as Mantler argues of the field more widely, "none of these studies ... combines a rigorous analysis of the media's 'framing', in terms of social movement theory, with an exploration of civil rights organizations' own efforts to frame their activities to the public."[21] Consequently, while Murphree's investigation of SNCC's Communication Section "focuses on the communication tools used to advance the movement," it fails to examine the nature of the external pressures which influenced such an effort.[22] Furthermore, by equating success with popularity in the mainstream media, such works often fail to criticize organizations for masking growing disillusionment with central movement tenets. In other words, while these accounts successfully challenge theories of media hegemony in news production, they do not adequately critique the notion that movement strategies were, and should be, aimed at gaining legitimacy in the eyes of mainstream society.

In contrast, this article examines how SNCC's Communication Section often chose to mirror the established movement narrative rather than highlight important discussion within the movement. More specifically, given that the rejection of nonviolence and interracial organizing represented two of the most controversial aspects of Black Power, this article challenges the depth of SNCC's commitment to interracial organizing as well as focussing on the way SNCC's Communication Section purposefully hid the growing acceptance of self-defence amongst field staff. This is not to deny the short-term utility of this approach, nor to argue that SNCC was somehow unique in hiding elements of its programme that fell outside the mainstream narrative. Instead, this article demonstrates that while movement rhetoric exhorted African Americans to withdraw their support for a system that oppressed them, the very construction and dissemination of that rhetoric was supporting a system that limited debate and restricted action.

SNCC AND NONVIOLENCE

SNCC's founding Statement of Purpose, which reads, "we affirm the philosophical or religious ideal of nonviolence as the foundation of our purpose, the presupposition of our belief, and the manner of our action," would suggest that any espousal of self-defence would be a betrayal of earlier principle.[23] Described by an article in *Ebony* in May 1964 as "every bit as nonviolent" as Martin Luther King's Southern Christian Leadership Conference

[21] Mantler, 47 fn 9.

[22] Murphree, 10.

[23] James Lawson, "SNCC Statement of Purpose," *Student Voice*, June 1960, in Clayborne Carson, ed., *The Student Voice, 1960–1965: Periodical of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee* (Westport, CT: Meckler, 1990).

(SCLC), it would also seem that SNCC's early actions reflected a philosophical commitment to nonviolence.[24] However, while the personal commitment of high-profile members such as Julian Bond and John Lewis may be beyond dispute, many members favoured tactical over philosophical interpretations of nonviolence. Importantly, Charles McDew, SNCC chairman from 1961 to 1963, has argued that this divide was present from SNCC's founding conference, where the unwillingness of many founding members to subscribe to philosophical nonviolence helped prevent SNCC from becoming a student wing of the SCLC.[25] SNCC's public commitment, then, should not be seen either as unyielding or as carrying the private support of all members. Instead, it should be seen as a tactical decision taken in the context of a dominant media discourse that characterized any violence on behalf of African American demonstrators, even in self-defence, as outside the realm of acceptable dissent.[26]

When SNCC members began to live and work in the Deep South, the dominance of tactical interpretations of nonviolence amongst workers became clear. Indeed, whilst the almost universal gun ownership among local African Americans unnerved some staff members, others have fondly recounted the presence of firearms on projects and the role that staff members played in the defence of Freedom Houses. McDew, for example, has described armed vigils during stays at the house of local leader Dr. William G. Anderson in the autumn of 1961, while Janet Jemmott Moses is one of many to recall the armed exploits of SNCC staffer Annie Pearl Avery, who guarded the Natchez Freedom House "with her .22" and has been described by Jean Wheeler Smith as a "gun-toting cab driver."[27]

While commonly associated with Black Power, self-defence was a topic of frequent debate within SNCC. An illustrative episode occurred during preparation for the 1964 Mississippi Summer Project, which brought almost a thousand mostly white volunteers to help local communities overcome segregationist resistance. Discovering that the Greenwood office in Mississippi had armed itself after credible rumours of planned KKK attacks, the organization confronted the issue of self-defence at a staff meeting in early June.

[24] "Police Are for Protection," *Ebony*, May 1964, 56.

[25] Charles F. McDew, "Transcript of Charles F. McDew," n.d., Morland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University (copy in author's possession).

[26] For an example of such treatment see Jenny Walker, "The 'Gun-Toting' Gloria Richardson: Black Violence in Cambridge, Maryland," in Peter J. Ling and Sharon Monteith, eds., *Gender and the Civil Rights Movement* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2004), 169–86.

[27] McDew; Janet Jemmott Moses in Faith S. Holsaert, ed., *Hands on the Freedom Plow: Personal Accounts by Women in SNCC* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2010), 266; Jean Wheeler Smith in Cheryl Lynn Greenberg, ed., *Circle of Trust: Remembering SNCC* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2003), 138.

During this meeting a number of members stood up in support of self-defence, pointing to the success of local armed African American communities in ending Klan violence, whilst others, including Don Harris, argued that if locals wished to arm themselves "what right [do] we have to stop these people from doing what they want to do?"[28] Significantly, arguments in favour of philosophical nonviolence were absent from the minutes. Instead, more pragmatic arguments, such as fear of white retaliation or isolating SNCC from the mainstream of the movement, dominated discussion. While the organization continued to officially prohibit members from carrying arms, the issue was clearly a point of contention. Indeed, SNCC volunteer Sam Walker recalls an impromptu discussion at the Oxford orientation sessions just weeks later in which Stokely Carmichael and others delivered "a really stunning, forceful presentation" that argued that nonviolence "had been very effective in some situations, but it was not clear that it had worked or would work in the future."[29] Segregationist violence during the Summer Project would cause such feelings to spread, with white volunteer Elaine DeLott Baker recalling, "we didn't talk much about the guns. Nonviolence was still the credo; in the trenches, however, self-defence was becoming the reality."[30]

Despite the clear acceptance of self-defence amongst many on staff, however, SNCC's communication efforts continued to suggest that the organization and its members were philosophically committed to nonviolence, even when presented with evidence to the contrary. For example, an article in the *Washington Post* in June 1964 claimed that in Jackson, Mississippi, "Negro guards are posted to guard the offices every night ... thus in Mississippi today the two sides already confront each other gun in hand."[31] Aware of the political and financial damage that this article might inflict, Bond penned a swift rebuttal: "let me state there are no armed guards outside, inside or around the COFO office in Jackson, or any civil rights office any-where in the state of Mississippi."[32] Written almost three weeks after such practices were the subject

[28] Don Harris, "SNCC Staff Meeting Minutes, June 9–11, 1964," Vertical File, Box 159–14, Folder 7, Civil Rights Documentation Project Material, Moorland-Spingarn Research Centre, Howard University (copy in author's possession).

[29] Sam Walker, "Interview with Sam Walker" by Mark Joseph Walmsley, 22 March 2009 (transcript in the author's possession).

[30] Elaine Delott Baker, "They Sent Us This White Girl," in Constance Curry, ed., *Deep in Our Hearts: Nine White Women in the Freedom Movement* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2000), 253–88, 276.

[31] Joseph Alsop, "Matter of Fact: Murder by Night," *Washington Post*, 17 June 1964.

[32] Julian Bond, "Letter to the *Washington Post*," 30 June 1964, SNCC Papers, A.VII.1, Slide 496. Whilst the Council of Federated Organizations (COFO) was officially a coalition of SNCC, CORE, SCLC, and the NAACP, many projects were entirely staffed and directed by SNCC. Consequently, publicity for COFO events often fell to both local and national SNCC communication workers. This dominance allowed the organization to tailor COFO's

of vigorous internal debate, however, it seems that the Communication Section was attempting to obscure local deviations from the organization's professed commitment to nonviolence. While it could be argued that Bond was personally unaware of such discussions, not only has he recalled "a big debate in SNCC once about carrying guns," but his colleague Ruby Doris Smith is also cited in the meeting's official minutes, arguing that "in 1961 people had arms, but nothing was made of it."[33]

Even if Bond was unaware of gun use amongst SNCC staff, he was certainly aware that many members rejected the philosophical nonviolence enshrined in SNCC's statement of purpose. Indeed, in 1963 he personally wrote an article for the journal *Freedomways* in which he claimed that "most of the activists working in the South" were tactically, as opposed to philosophically, committed to nonviolence.[34] When Bayard Rustin accused SNCC staffers of "advocating quite openly limited forms of violence" in *Fellowship* in July 1964, however, Bond's letter of protest not only dismissed Rustin's accusation, but also claimed that staffers "hold true today to our original statement of purpose."[35]

With *Fellowship*'s director of publications, James S. Best, claiming that "other reports have confirmed [Rustin's] observations," it would seem that SNCC's nonviolent mask was no longer holding up to close scrutiny. The organization, however, still emerged from the 1964 Mississippi Summer Project with its public image on the issue largely intact.[36] Drawing on the work of Jenny Walker, who has claimed that "race beat" reporters intentionally repressed stories of actual and threatened black violence in the South, this discrepancy could be seen as the result of a wider pattern of media sympathy towards the southern movement.[37] Journalist Fred Powledge, for example, has

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publicity to suit its own agenda, much to the ire of Roy Wilkins, who claimed in 1965 that COFO press releases were reproducing "the same phrases today that we heard during the Stalin era." Fred Powledge, "N.A.A.C. P. to Hold Citizenship Clinics," *New York Times*, 5 Jan. 1965, 20.

[33] Ruby Dorris, "SNCC Staff Meeting Minutes, 9–11 Jun. 1964," Vertical File, Box 159–14, Folder 7, Civil Rights Documentation Project Material, Moorland-Spingarn Research Centre, Howard University (copy in author's possession); Julian Bond in Howell Raines, *My Soul Is Rested: Movement Days in the Deep South Remembered* (New York: Penguin, 1983), 267.

[34] Julian Bond, "Nonviolence: An Interpretation," in Esther Cooper Jackson and Constance Pohl, eds., *Freedomways Reader: Prophets in Their Own Country* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2000), 72–76.

[35] Bayard Rustin, "Nonviolence on Trial," *Fellowship*, July 1964, SNCC Papers, A.VII.1, Slide 518; Julian Bond, "Letter to James S. Best," 28 Oct. 1964, SNCC Papers, A.VII.1, Slide 517.

[36] James S. Best, "Letter to Julian Bond," 2 Nov. 1964, SNCC Papers, A.VII.1, Slide 521.

[37] Jenny Walker, "A Media-Made Movement? Black Violence and Nonviolence in the Historiography of the Civil Rights Movement," in Brian Ward, ed., *Media, Culture, and the Modern African American Freedom Struggle* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2001), 41–66.

admitted that when contrasting African American protestors with white vigilantes, reporters found it "hard to adopt the reporters' fake sense of objectivity" because "it was so clear as to who the good guys were and who the bad guys were."[38] Indeed, such favourable bias did not go unnoticed by SNCC's Communication Section, which compiled a "Special Press List" of journalists they considered to be sympathetic.[39]

However, while it is plausible that journalists overlooked minor lapses in nonviolent discipline, sympathetic feelings towards the movement cannot fully explain how SNCC obscured the widespread rejection of philosophical nonviolence amongst its field staff. Instead, while reporters such as Claude Sitton have been venerated as a "voice for the voiceless," it is important not to overestimate the commitment of "race beat" journalists.[40] Whilst some reporters risked injury to cover southern demonstrations, most returned to white-owned hotels in nearby towns or cities rather than remaining with the local African American population. Operating in an industry that required certifiable facts or events on which to hang stories, what Herbert J. Gans calls a news "peg," journalists would consequently observe and report on the heroic displays of tactical nonviolence by demonstrators whilst the actions of McDew and Avery outlined above would remain, at best, unsubstantiated rumour.[41]

With local wire press operators often refusing to print movement stories, and the *New York Times* assigning only one permanent reporter to all eleven of the southern states before 1964, SNCC found that overt civil rights abuses often failed to draw much-needed media attention. Consequently, SNCC's early communication efforts had to serve as an alternative wire press in the South with Julian Bond instructing colleagues in SNCC's Washington Office to act as a "source for information" for journalists on stories that "they're too lazy to look up themselves."[42] In taking on this role, SNCC highlighted the pervasiveness of passive reporting, which is the practice of covering pre-scheduled publicity events or responding to press releases and other materials from organizations.[43] Relatively inexpensive, passive reporting was, and continues to be, a major part of mainstream journalism.[44] Crucially, passive reporting gave SNCC much greater control over the image that was projected

[38] Fred Powledge in Murphree, *The Selling of Civil Rights*, 59–60.
[39] Nancy, "WATS Report to Mike Sayer," n.d., SNCC Papers, A.VII.7, Slide 97.
[40] Melvin N. Coffee in Grimes, "Civil Rights and the Press," 126.
[41] Herbert J Gans, *Democracy and the News* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 53.
[42] Julian Bond, "Letter to Cynthia Washington," 14 Dec. 1963, SNCC Papers, A.VII.1, Slide 256.
[43] Gans, 50–55.
[44] In 1973, Leon Sigal found that 49.5% of *New York Times* and *Washington Post* articles depended on such practices. Leon V. Sigal, *Reporters and Officials: The Organization and Politics of Newsmaking* (Lexington, MA: D. C. Heath, 1973), 115.

through the mainstream media. On the rare occasions when journalists did attempt to investigate SNCC's position in more detail, the organization was careful to control the subsequent image that was received. During the Mississippi Summer Project, for example, the Communication Section instructed all volunteers to refer journalistic enquiries to project directors, presumably to make sure that the organization could better control what information made it to the press and, more importantly, what did not.[45] Even after the launching of the Black Power slogan, when some members felt that it might be "fruitful" to talk to the press about the positive role of arms in the movement, SNCC initially shied away from open discussion, with James Forman arguing at a staff meeting in June 1966 that "I think that's our business, and that we don't have to talk about it."[46] Indeed, having interviewed fifty-one SNCC veterans in 1968, Emily Stoper has argued that on the issue of nonviolence "the ideal appears to have declined in SNCC long before its statements to the press – or the press's treatment of those statements – began to reflect that decline."[47]

SNCC AND INTERRACIAL ORGANISING

SNCC's statement of purpose claimed that the "integration of human endeavor" was the "crucial first step" on the road to a "social order of justice permeated by love."[48] The reality of SNCC's "beloved society," however, was never as clear-cut as its founding statement, or indeed its reports to the press, would suggest. Whilst associated with Black Power, the expulsion of whites from SNCC had its foundations in long-standing tensions between interracial commitments and the psychological and practical needs of African Americans. Indeed, Stokely Carmichael has argued that the idea that Black Power ruined some form of "interracial Eden" within SNCC is typical of the "reductive, simplistic, media-driven version of history" clear in early accounts.[49]

This is not to argue that SNCC's commitment to an interracial "beloved community" was a falsehood perpetrated for the sake of positive publicity, but rather that the organization's media strategies during the summers of 1963

[45] Julian Bond, "Letter to Bruce Hanson," 16 May 1964, SNCC Papers, A.VII.3, Slide 470.

[46] Anon. and James Forman in "Staff Meeting," 13 June 1966, SNCC Papers, A.VI.19, Slide 708. Interestingly the whole passage talking about guns was labelled "to cut," suggesting that even internally such discussions were censored.

[47] Emily Stoper, *The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee: The Growth of Radicalism in a Civil Rights Organization* (Brooklyn, NY: Carlson Publishing Inc., 1989), 3.

[48] James Lawson, "SNCC Statement of Purpose," *Student Voice*, June 1960, in Carson, *The Student Voice*, 3.

[49] Stokely Carmichael and Ekwueme Michael Thelwell, *Ready for Revolution: The Life and Struggles of Stokely Carmichael (Kwame Ture)* (New York: Scribner, 2003), 306.

and 1964 have created a misleading impression of the scale and nature of this commitment. Before 1963 only a handful of whites were on SNCC's payroll, with those such as Jane Stembridge, Robert Zellner, and William Hansen agreeing that "whites in the freedom struggle should and would be, as far as leadership is concerned, in a secondary role."[50] Largely southerners, early white activists often had as much invested in the movement as the African Americans with whom they worked. Zellner, for example, recalled in his autobiography, "I didn't come south to help black people, I was already here, and I got involved to free myself."[51]

The nature of SNCC's early commitment to interracial struggle, therefore, was the result of a careful balance between the inclusion of whites and the preservation of African American independence. Indeed, while the expertise and commitment of early white volunteers was welcomed, it was agreed that their role would be limited to administrative duties or work on white campuses. Even when continued staff shortages meant that whites became more directly involved with southern projects in 1962, their presence was primarily seen as an important psychological tool that allowed rural African Americans, many of whom had never interacted with whites on an equal basis, to safely dispel Jim Crow myths about racial differences.[52]

SNCC's initial efforts in the South suggested that interracial organizing provoked segregationist violence, especially when it involved white women. In the same spirit that had seen SNCC members continue the Freedom Rides of 1961, however, the organization refused to bow to segregationist violence and saw the inclusion of white members as a point of principle. For example, when discussing the introduction of a white female volunteer in a field report in March 1963, project director Prathia Hall argued, "if there is violence we would like to feel that we have done all we could to prevent it – everything short of a dishonest compromise that is."[53]

When SNCC brought whites into Mississippi for the Freedom Vote in the summer of 1963, however, organizers found that the inclusion of a large number of white volunteers actually reduced segregationist violence. Indeed, Bob Moses recalled,

[50] Hansen, for example, who had become the second white person in SNCC ever to be promoted to field director when he was chosen to head the Arkansas Project in 1962, soon stepped down from his leadership role and became codirector of the project with local African American leader James Jones in 1964. Bob Zellner, *The Wrong Side of Murder Creek: A White Southerner in the Freedom Movement* (Montgomery, AL: NewSouth Books, 2008), 123.

[51] Ibid., 293.

[52] Zellner (ibid., 208), for example, remembers one student from Talladega College believing that his hair would smell like chicken feathers because he was white.

[53] Prathia Hall, "Field Report," 8 March 1963, SNCC Papers, A.IV.155, Slide 862.

that was the first time that I realized that the violence could actually be controlled. Turned, y'know, on and off. That it wasn't totally random. I realized that somewhere along the line, there was someone who, even if they didn't actually order it to happen, could at least send out word for it to stop.[54]

Rather than representing the success of interracial brotherhood or philosophical nonviolence, this reduction in brutality was the consequence of increased media coverage, with SNCC finding that "wherever its white sons and daughters went, intense interest would follow."[55] Importantly, this discovery meant that white involvement, at least en masse, became inextricably tied to its capacity to increase media coverage and temporarily reduce segregationist brutality.

Despite such advantages, many in the organization felt that college-educated, middle-class whites were unsuitable organizers of rural, working-class African Americans. Writing in a field report in November 1963 about a white volunteer under his command, Charles Cobb argued, "I know that we are all brothers, and that whites have a role in this 'movement', but I can't really escape thinking that Negroes are reacting to his whiteness, or completely accept the idea of a white directing Negroes to freedom."[56] Indeed, whilst superficially successful, the use of whites in organizing African Americans in the South was fraught with potential dangers. Attributing previous success to the fact that "black people are doing it themselves, in their own way, and articulating their own demands," SNCC staffers such as Cobb feared that the educated and trained white volunteers would undermine the fledgling leadership that SNCC was encouraging in the rural South.[57]

With Ivanhoe Donaldson claiming that mass white involvement risked "losing the one thing where the Negro can stand first," the majority of African American members at a November 1963 meeting in Greenville voted to reject the use of whites in the upcoming Summer Project.[58] According to James Forman, this opposition was eventually overturned by a rare display of personal leadership from Bob Moses, who declared, "I will not be part of a racist organization."[59] Moses has since admitted, however, that it was a desire to force federal involvement, rather than a commitment to interracial organizing, that motivated his stance. Indeed, he argues that the murder of

[54] Bob Moses in Carmichael and Thelwell, 353–54.

[55] Fred Powledge, *Free at Last? The Civil Rights Movement and the People Who Made It* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1991), 560.

[56] Charles Cobb, "Field Report," 8 Nov. 1963, SNCC Papers, A.IV.81, Slide 968.

[57] Ibid.

[58] Ivanhoe Donaldson in John Dittmer, *Local People: The Struggle for Civil Rights in Mississippi* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1994), 209. In deference to African American leadership of the movement, whites at the meeting abstained.

[59] James Forman, *The Making of Black Revolutionaries* (Seattle: Open Hand, 1985), 374.

Louis Allen in Liberty, Mississippi in January 1964 convinced him "that we had to do something, something big, that would really open the situation up. Otherwise they'd simply continue to kill the best among us."[60]

Produced for a white audience, the mainstream media focussed on events in the South that involved white volunteers, especially white northerners, and would often go to lengths to mention white participants.[61] Whilst the unusual nature of interracial organizing was a factor in the disproportionate attention given to the presence of white volunteers, it is clear that dominant racial attitudes also played a part in coverage, with one *New York Times* article naming the three white participants before reporting that "the seven others were Negroes."[62] Indeed, while the assassination of high-profile leaders such as Medgar Evers received considerable coverage, it was not until James Chaney was murdered alongside white activists Andrew Goodman and Michael Schwerner that the death of an African American civil rights worker became major national news. Such instances made it clear to observers like journalist Calvin Trillin of the *New Yorker* that "no sophisticated study of public opinion is needed to establish the fact that in the United States, North or South, a white life is considered to be of more value than a Negro life."[63]

In order to protect workers during the Summer Project, then, Doug McAdam has argued that SNCC "found themselves in the distasteful position of having to exploit the very racism that they had been victims of."[64] However distasteful, SNCC's Communication Section actively used the presence of white volunteers to boost its media exposure and secure "the limited protection that publicity affords."[65] Repeatedly requesting that workers submit and update bibliographical profiles, SNCC's Communication Section matched northern volunteers to their local and state newspapers and would send detailed reports when any volunteer was arrested, beaten, or otherwise involved in "newsworthy" activities.[66] Predictably, this situation generated resentment amongst the African Americans on staff who, McAdam argues, felt that "it wasn't black Mississippians or even the abstract concept of civil

[60] Bob Moses in Carmichael and Thelwell, 355; Moses also advocates this view in Henry Hampton and Steve Fayer, eds., *Voices of Freedom: An Oral History of the Civil Rights Movement from the 1950s through the 1980s* (New York: Bantam Books, 1991), 184.

[61] Claude Sitton, "Racial Problems Put to President: Negro Student Chiefs Urge Him to Act," *NYT*, 18 April 1960; Claude Sitton, "Negro Groups Split on Georgia Protest," *NYT*, 18 Dec. 1961.

[62] "10 Indicted in Virginia," *NYT*, 22 June 1963.

[63] Trillin, "Letter from Jackson," n.d., SNCC Papers, A.VIII.283, Slides 1057–8.

[64] Doug McAdam, *Freedom Summer* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 103.

[65] Communication Section, "Printed Communication Manual," summer 1964, SNCC Papers, A.VII.4, Slide 983.

[66] Julian Bond, "Letter to Julie Prettyman," 12 Sept. 1963, SNCC Papers, A.VII.3, Slide 97–100; Barbara Brandt, "Memo to Coworkers," 20 Nov. 1964, SNCC Papers, A.VII.4, Slide 841.

rights that concerned white America but simply the safety of its sons and daughters."[67]

While early white activists had often filled technical positions, such as typists, radio broadcasters and print setters, the recruitment of more southern African American students into the movement following the Summer Project meant that SNCC no longer relied on the technical expertise of whites and could be more selective in their hiring policies. Furthermore, by 1965 the growth in local leadership meant that many of those who had benefited from interaction with whites in the early stages of the movement had, according to SNCC staffer Dorothy Dewberry, "grown beyond that experience."[68] Indeed, white activist Charles Fager, who was an SCLC staffer from 1964 until 1966, argues that the fading utility of whites in the South meant that ideological commitments to interracialism became "the only real justification for our presence in the movement." Importantly for SNCC's enunciation of Black Power, however, Fager argues that whites "didn't want to deal with this question, so we used the coalitionist philosophy to avoid it."[69]

While reservations about the use of whites were now widespread, Charles Cobb has argued that when it came to openly expressing such fears, SNCC members were "victims of [our] own rhetoric, because at the same time, we were arguing desegregation, integration . . . so you couldn't argue that you were opposed to white people coming down."[70] Even internally, this issue was one with which many SNCC staffers struggled. Talking at a staff meeting on the eve of the Summer Project, for example, Dona Moses argued that during previous discussions, "we didn't really grapple with the problems because people were ashamed of admitting their feelings."[71]

These tensions were not unique to the organization. Indeed, when SNCC voted to bar whites from organizing in the African American community in May 1966, an aide to Dr. King told the *New York Times*, "we can understand why Snick no longer will let whites organize in rural areas," adding that while SCLC would not make such a blanket rule they were "becoming more selective about the whites we use."[72] While SNCC's move would be dismissed as racist by the mainstream press, it echoed the concerns of commentators in the African American community such as journalist Louis Lomax, who argued in

[67] McAdam, 103.

[68] Dorothy Dewberry, "Letter to the Editor," n.d., SNCC Papers, A.IX.131, Slide 932.

[69] Charles Fager, *White Reflections on Black Power* (Grand Rapids: W. B. Eerdmans Publishing Cmpany, 1967), 91.

[70] Charles Cobb in Raines, *My Soul Is Rested*, 287.

[71] Dona Moses in "SNCC Staff Meeting Minutes, June 9–11, 1964," Vertical File, Box 159–14, Folder 7, Civil Rights Documentation Project Material, Moorland-Spingarn Research Centre, Howard University (copy in author's possession).

[72] Aide to Dr. King in Gene Roberts, "Whites' Role Splits Leaders of March," *New York Times*, 12 June 1966.

August 1965 that "white liberal money and bodies have moved in and taken over every national civil rights organization with the exceptions of . . . CORE, and the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee."[73]

From the outset, SNCC's approach to white participation depended on a complex and highly variable process that prioritized the needs, both psychological and physical, of the local African American community. Indeed, white volunteer Larry Rubin, who worked as a voter registration worker for SNCC in Georgia from 1962 until 1965, argues that whilst there were always whites in SNCC, "their role was always a question. And it was answered differently in different places."[74] SNCC's communication output, however, whilst legitimately aimed at raising awareness, contributed to the notion that white northern volunteers were taking the lead in the southern movement.

CONCLUSION

When asked by Dr. Kenneth Clark in 1963 to explain the militancy of the "student non-violent movement" that had "made such an impact on America," James Baldwin argued that "the Negro has never been as docile as white Americans wanted to believe. That was a myth. We were not singing and dancing down on the levee – we were trying to keep alive; we were trying to survive."[75] This myth, however, was not shattered in 1960 when the first sit-in demonstrators gathered in Greensboro, or even when thousands of African Americans marched on Washington in August 1963. Indeed, while Forman would argue in June 1966 that SNCC had begun "to talk not in terms of just voter registration, but ultimately what lay beyond that" as early as 1961, SNCC's early interactions with the press intentionally accentuated elements of its programme that overlapped with the public goals of the movement.[76] The long-term consequences of this approach were discussed in a position paper prepared by Joanne Gavin after the Waveland Conference in November 1964. She wrote that SNCC is

[73] Louis E. Lomax, "The White Liberal," *Ebony*, Aug. 1965, 66.

[74] Larry Rubin, "Transcript of interview with Larry Rubin, 11 Nov. 1995, Interview conducted by John Rachal," Civil Rights in Mississippi Digital Archive, McCain Library & Archives, University of Southern Mississippi, at http://digilib.usm.edu/u?/coh,9831, accessed 20 Aug. 2011.

[75] Kenneth Clark and James Baldwin in "The Negro and the American Promise: Three Perspectives," *PBS*, at www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/mlk/sfeature/sf_video_pop_04b_tr_qry.html, accessed 27 March 2012.

[76] James Forman, "Staff Meeting," 13 June 1966, SNCC Papers, A.VI.19, Slide 699; see Dorothy Miller, "Letter to Police Chief Herbert T. Jenkins," 18 Oct. 1962, SNCC Papers, A.IV.362; "Press Release," 16 April 1962, SNCC Papers, A.VII.3, Slide 786.

getting money from a lot of nice liberal individuals, organizations, foundations, etc., under the pretense that we are registering voters, conducting freedom schools, building community centers, working for "integration," or whatever else we tell the public and our loyal supporters that we are doing. Now, there may be something to be said for taking these unenlightened folk for all we can take them for. But what scares me is what happens when they catch on?[77]

While dramatic, Gavin's analysis exposes the inconsistency between SNCC's radical agenda and the dominant media narrative in which it operated. Although Forman argues that this strategy emerged out of a belief that it was "ridiculous" to talk about deeper issues of political control before "flagrant violation of voter registration" had been overcome, it nevertheless contributed to a belief amongst whites that once civil rights were obtained, "only a little patience was needed to get through the 'transition period'" to black freedom.[78]

Media exposure was initially seen to carry three important benefits: it supported fieldwork in the South by reducing segregationist violence, it encouraged the flow of resources and donations to the organization's southern projects, and it won allies to the cause by exposing the barbarism of Jim Crow. Purposefully avoiding the term "public relations," however, SNCC's approach to media strategy differed from that of other civil rights groups. Complaining to the *New York Post* in May 1962 that "it is distressing commentary when to exist, one must have an 'image' and to have an 'image' one must often compete with others whose 'image' is built on publicity alone," Bond and others within the organization saw publicity as reinforcing, rather than replacing, active fieldwork.[79] It is not surprising, therefore, that SNCC's approach changed when the benefits of media coverage were no longer seen to outweigh the logistical, operational, and strategic costs of securing publicity.

For example, while the federal government's reluctance to protect civil rights workers in 1962 had led SNCC to maximize coverage, faith in the media's ability to protect workers was fading by 1965 as it became clear that "while civil rights workers now could assume there would be a thorough investigation if they were murdered, they were still on their own in the matter of staying alive."[80] Working largely in rural areas that the mainstream media was either unwilling or unable to cover, SNCC staffers increasingly found that arms, whether carried by community members or by activists themselves,

[77] Joanne Gavin, "Position Paper: Funds-Sources and Staff Salaries," SNCC Papers, A.VI.24, Slide 787.

[78] James Forman, "Staff Meeting," 13 June 1966, SNCC Papers, A.VI.19, Slide 699; Paul Good, "The Meredith March," in Clayborne Carson, ed., *Reporting Civil Rights*, Volume II (New York: Penguin Putnam, 2003), 495–515, 495.

[79] Julian Bond, "Letter to the New York Post," 17 May 1962, SNCC Papers, A.VII.1, Slides 920–48.

[80] Powledge, *Free at Last?*, 571.

often provided the only tangible and reliable protection against organized segregationist violence. Afraid of alienating supporters, however, SNCC initially denied this widespread deviation from the founding principles of the organization and encouraged the romantic belief that workers in the South were confronting segregationist violence with only love and forgiveness rather than organized, armed resistance.

Similarly, while the limited early involvement of whites in SNCC was embraced as part of the organization's "beloved community," their mass involvement in the Summer Projects of 1963 and 1964 helped create a misleading image of interracial organizing. With mass white participation predicated on the publicity it brought, rather than on any ideological commitment, it was inevitable that interracialism within the organization would decline when members began to question the benefits of mainstream coverage. When SNCC eventually attempted to limit white participation to activities in the white community, this idealized image of interracial cooperation helped the organization's opponents accuse it of racist black nationalism and obscured the fact that this was a return to previous practice that was also being adopted by other civil rights organizations across the South.[81]

Without the NAACP's membership dues or SCLC's ties to the African American church, SNCC was unusually dependent on donations from liberal allies. While critics of Black Power have argued that its rhetorical excesses alienated liberal support, Herbert Haines has shown that average monthly donations in the seven months prior to the slogan's launch were almost 50 percent down on the previous year. Indeed, 1966 saw overall contributions to the movement fall for the first time in over ten years and SCLC's funding fall by a larger percentage than SNCC's.[82] Mirroring lessons that SNCC had found in its southern projects, this decline in the media's ability to raise funds for the organization encouraged the idea that economic self-sufficiency within the African American community was a necessary first step to the establishment of a successful political movement. In turn, this movement towards the African American community meant that SNCC's communication efforts would be aimed at a fundamentally different audience and so would take on a fundamentally different tone. Consequently, SNCC's

[81] In one of the movement's many ironies, David Danzig charges that white NAACP Defense Fund head Jack Greenburg was asked not to attend the NAACP conference at which Roy Wilkins denounced Black Power as racially divisive. David Danzig, "In Defense of Black Power," *Commentary*, Sept. 1966, SNCC Papers, A.VIII.134, Slide 837. For a discussion of Black Power within the NAACP see Simon Hall, "The NAACP, Black Power, and the African American Freedom Struggle, 1966–1969," *The Historian*, 69 (2007), 49–82.

[82] Herbert H. Haines, "Black Radicalization and the Funding of Civil Rights: 1957–1970," *Social Problems*, 32 (1984), 31–43, 36.

espousal of Black Power was intrinsically linked to shifting attitudes towards the mainstream media and its role as a gateway to mainstream white America.

Peniel Joseph argues that the declension narrative means that Black Power "can be conveniently blamed for the demise of the Civil Rights Movement, rather than being viewed as an alternative to the ineffectiveness of civil rights demands in critical areas of American life."[83] What Joseph omits, however, is that by adopting and reinforcing certain strands of movement discourse, the early rhetoric and public actions of civil rights organizations helped to hide such ineffectiveness. It also enabled the legitimate and popular criticisms contained within Black Power to be associated with urban unrest and violent rhetoric, rather than the grassroots communities of the rural South where they were formed. While one can understand why SNCC felt it necessary to craft its public face to match the demands and needs of a white mainstream media, it is nevertheless important to understand how the early rhetoric of civil rights organizations strengthened and legitimized the now debunked declension narrative.

[83] Peniel E. Joseph, "Introduction: Toward a Historiography of the Black Power Movement," in Joseph, ed., *The Black Power Movement: Rethinking the Civil Rights–Black Power Era* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 1–26, 3.