Further Reading


1960

Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee Rallies Young People to the Civil Rights Movement

The Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) emerged in 1960 from sit-in demonstrations begun by black college students in Greensboro, North Carolina, to protest racial segregation. Within a few short years, SNCC changed from fighting for civil rights to fighting for black power, and, as it did so, it embraced the use of violence.

On February 2, 1960, the New York Times reported: “A group of well-dressed Negro college students staged a sit-down strike in a downtown Woolworth store... and vowed to continue it in relays until Negroes were served at the lunch counter.” The day before, Ezell Blair, Jr., Franklin McClain, Joseph McNeill, and David Richmond, freshmen at North Carolina Agricultural and Technical College, a local all-black school, had begun the sit-down, or sit-in. They had acted out of disgust with the racist policy at the five-and-dime store, but also out of anger that segregation remained entrenched throughout much of the South—despite several rulings by the Supreme Court, and the efforts of Martin Luther King, Jr., and others to secure civil rights.

The four young protesters stayed at the lunch counter until it closed, one hour later. They returned the next day, along with 27 other students; on day three, the number increased to 63; on day four, to 100; and by week’s end some 1,000 protesters were descending on Woolworth’s and the nearby S. H. Kress store. Over the next two weeks, African-Americans repeated the Greensboro strategy in 15 cities across five southern states.

As the protests spread, Ella Baker (1903–86), the 57-year-old executive director of King’s Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), saw an opportunity to mobilize youths for the civil rights movement and to encourage aggressive tactics. According to Joanne Grant in Ella Baker: Freedom Bound (1998), “To Ella Baker it was a dream come true. Here was the beginning of the civil rights revolution which she had looked forward to.”

Baker convinced the SCLC to sponsor a meeting of the protest leaders, and she arranged for her alma mater, Shaw University in Raleigh, North Carolina, to provide the facilities. The meeting began in April 1960; Baker expected about 100 students, but more than 200 attended. The students expressed impatience with the leading civil rights groups for having relied too heavily on legal proceedings; they wanted quicker results through civil disobedience, and they wanted more than token gains. They respected King, but feared that he would manipulate them.

At Baker’s suggestion, they formed a Temporary Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee with a structure separate from the SCLC. Here began what Grant calls “a new phase of the civil rights movement.” She writes: “It was no longer to be controlled by a stodgy ministerial or bureaucratic presence. It was to be led by a new force.”

In October, the students declared SNCC a permanent organization. While they voiced nonviolent ideas similar to those held by King, they distrusted strong leadership by any one individual and relied on their youthful enthusiasm for motivation along with an almost romantic faith in their ability to change
society. SNCC thought King too stodgy, and, according to Terry Anderson in *The Movement and the Sixties* (1995), “The organization . . . aimed to revolutionize the [civil rights] struggle by inciting so many demonstrations across the South that America would realize that inequality was not just a southern problem, but a national one.” SNCC’s chairman, Charles McDew, expressed the group’s confidence—even bravado—and its intent to proceed when he said, “Instead of sitting idly by, taking the leavings of a sick and decadent society, we have seized the initiative, and already the walls have begun to crumble.”

At that time, few African-Americans in the South could vote, so in August 1961, SNCC opened its first voter registration school in McComb, Mississippi. Whites in the state reacted violently, beating blacks and their white supporters. In 1964, SNCC began a bigger campaign to register blacks, called Mississippi Freedom Summer. Many in the civil rights movement believed the effort would produce a white backlash and damage the reelection chances of President Lyndon Johnson, a man they liked because he had convinced Congress to pass strong civil rights legislation.

SNCC rejected that argument; instead, its more radical members made clear that they would challenge racism without regard for how it might affect traditional politics. During the Mississippi Freedom Summer, more than 1,000 volunteers worked on voter registration and established the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party (MFDP) to challenge the existing, lily-white Democratic Party.

The volunteers included white college students from the North, and many blacks in SNCC soon resented them for trying to dominate the voter campaign. Within SNCC a struggle erupted between those who saw the whites as valuable, and those who believed SNCC programs should be exclusively in black hands.

The voter drive took a tragic turn when racists killed three volunteers outside Philadelphia, Mississippi—Michael Schwerner and Andrew Goodman, two white youths from New York, and James Chaney, a black youth from Mississippi—all of whom were working for another civil rights group, the Congress of Racial Equality. That the FBI only investigated the crime primarily because whites had been murdered infuriated SNCC, as did the FBI’s refusal to protect civil rights workers. The failure of the summer project to register a large number of black voters added to the anger among SNCC members.

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**The Generation Gap and Counterculture Radicalism**

Radicalism is often thought of as the province of the young; it reflects a youthful discontent with society and a drive to change that which is unjust. To a great extent, this generalization holds true for people when they first become activists—the initial foray usually occurs early in a person’s life, before middle age. Numerous examples can be found in these pages, such as the working women who walked out of the textile mills in Lowell, Massachusetts (see entry, 1834); the suffragists who picketed outside the White House (see entry, 1917); and the workers who staged the Great Flint Sit-down (see entry, 1934). (There are of course numerous exceptions, as when Betty Friedan published *The Feminine Mystique* [see entry, 1963] at 42 years of age.)

The countercultural radicalism of the 1960s especially owed its development to young people, for its foundation was the enormous population of young people—the baby boom that began in 1946 and continued through 1964. In 1946 alone, 3.4 million babies were born, or one every nine seconds. The live birthrate per 1,000 women aged 15 to 44 jumped from 82.2 in 1945 to 110.1 in 1947, when total births reached a record 3,817,000. More people were born between 1947 and 1953 than in the previous 30 years, and in 1954, the number of births topped four million for the first time.

Many of the counterculture’s radical leaders were born before the boom—Al Haber, the founder of SDS (see entry, 1960); Bobby Seale, cofounder of the Black Panthers (see entry, 1966); Abbie Hoffman, cofounder of the Yippies (see entry, 1967)—but they ultimately drew on the tremendous pool of young people for support. The counterculture itself was grounded in the country’s infatuation with youth that extended from fashion, to rock music, to protests in the streets.
Soon, SNCC began recommending that blacks working in the voter drive arm themselves for protection. The failure of King and other civil rights leaders to back more strongly the MFDP when it tried to unseat white delegates from Mississippi at the 1964 Democratic National Convention, along with riots in the Watts ghetto of Los Angeles in 1964, the 1965 assassination of Malcolm X (see entries, 1948 and 1964), and the widening war in Vietnam, produced a sense of urgency and crisis.

In January 1966, SNCC condemned the Vietnam War; the U.S. government, SNCC claimed, was protecting an illegitimate regime in South Vietnam while doing nothing to protect blacks in America. The following year SNCC declared itself dedicated to protecting human rights throughout the world. As such, it pledged to support struggles against colonialism, racism, and economic exploitation.

By that time, SNCC had rejected its earlier commitment to nonviolence and had kicked out its white members. The group’s leader, Stokely Carmichael, talked about killing police, or “offing pigs,” and his successor, H. Rap Brown, talked about going to war against whites. SNCC promoted black power, an amorphous but militant movement that African-American leader Floyd McKissick defined as “putting power in black people’s hands.” He said, “We don’t have any, and we want some.”

When SNCC radicalized, mainstream civil rights groups and white financial backers deserted it. At the same time, the U.S. government infiltrated and harassed it, with undercover agents stirring it to more extreme measures. In the early 1970s, SNCC collapsed. One member recalled that the group had nurtured “a vision of a revolution beyond race, against other forms of injustice, challenging the value-system of the nation and of smug middle-class society everywhere.”

Further Reading

1960 Students for a Democratic Society Forms as the Vanguard of the New Left

Centered on college campuses, Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) challenged conservatives and liberals alike in attacking social injustices and the Vietnam War. SDS developed such an intensive revolutionary consciousness that Life magazine proclaimed: “Never in the history of this country has a small group, standing outside the pale of conventional power, made such an impact or created such havoc.”

SDS emerged in 1960 from the League for Industrial Democracy, an old liberal organization that had done battle in the 1930s on behalf of labor unions. Led by Al Haber, a student at the University of Michigan (UM), younger activists within the League founded SDS as part of a resurgent college Left. Nationally, the expanding student population provided a recruiting base for SDS, and the civil rights movement stirred social consciousness. The oppression faced by blacks and their white supporters convinced many liberal students that American society had fallen far short of the patriotic ideals that they had learned in elementary and high school.

Into 1962, the organization remained largely a two-person operation run by Haber (its first president) and Tom Hayden, editor of the student newspaper at UM. To expand its reach, SDS decided to more forcefully support the civil rights drive in the South, thus earning recognition on college campuses as a group concerned with social injustice. SDS gained additional members when President John Kennedy hesitated in his support of a black voting rights drive, causing some college students to distrust the gov-