

# SNCC, BLACK POWER, AND INDEPENDENT POLITICAL PARTY ORGANIZING IN ALABAMA, 1964-1966

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"What do we want?" shouted Stokely Carmichael, the 24-year-old chairman of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). He repeated the question a half dozen times to the crowd of 600 gathered on 16 June 1966 at the Leflore County, Mississippi, schoolyard for a rally in support of James Meredith's "March Against Fear." Each time the crowd roared back, "Black Power! We want Black Power!"<sup>1</sup> The importance of this moment in the summer of 1966 has been well established in the literature on the modern Civil Rights Movement. It was the highpoint of the Meredith March and not only introduced a more radical slogan into the protest lexicon of African Americans, but also ushered in a new phase in the on-going black freedom struggle. Unfortunately, the actual meaning that Carmichael and his fellow SNCC organizers attached to the phrase "Black Power," as well as the political process that led them to embrace the more militant ideology, has become somewhat muddled over time.

The meaning of Black Power was never a mystery to Carmichael and his comrades. In *Black Power: The Politics of Liberation*, published the year after the Meredith March, Carmichael and his co-author, political scientist Charles V. Hamilton, explained that above all else the slogan meant organizing independent, African American power bases, an approach to political change that SNCC activists deemed necessary because existing electoral forms and structures did not permit African Americans to participate in political decision-making. They added that independent political mobilization was the first step toward organizing these power bases. "It is not enough to add more and more people to the voter rolls and then send them into the old 'do-nothing,' compromise-oriented political parties," they wrote. "Those new voters will only become frustrated and alienated."<sup>2</sup> Cleveland Sellers, SNCC's program secretary, pointed out that when SNCC members spoke of Black Power, "it was in a political context of building political . . . and social institutions in the Black community where we worked."<sup>3</sup>

The sequence of events that prompted SNCC's call for Black Power was also no secret to the group's members. They understood that the fieldwork

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that grassroots activists had conducted in some of the most dangerous regions of the South had sparked their interest in the ideology. Writing in the *New York Review of Books* in September 1966, Carmichael explained that Black Power had "grown out of the ferment of agitation and activity by different people and organizers in many black communities over the years." Foremost was SNCC organizers' work with the Lowndes County Freedom Organization (LCFO), an all-black, countywide, third-party that fielded a full slate of African American candidates for local office in 1966 in a bold bid to wrest political control of the county courthouse away from white supremacist Democrats.<sup>4</sup> By demonstrating the viability of independent political parties, the LCFO inspired SNCC's brand of Black Power. Indeed, Ivanhoe Donaldson, the director of SNCC's New York office, maintained that, "SNCC's Alabama experience was the immediate genesis of the concept of Black Power."<sup>5</sup>

Despite the clear vision of the meaning and origin of Black Power that Carmichael and his fellow organizers possessed, a cloud of confusion enveloped the slogan shortly after it surfaced. Popular narratives of the ideology insisted that Black Power had emerged from the flames of the inner city rebellions that had scorched America's urban landscape beginning with the Harlem uprising in 1964. These accounts also claimed that Black Power was the intellectual offspring of impulsive emotionalism—a child of black rage. In addition, they maintained that Black Power meant racial separation and using violence against whites. In the minds of many, Black Power was little more than an illogical "hate whitey" ideology, and those who heralded its coming, especially Carmichael, were race radicals who had hijacked SNCC and transformed it into a "get whitey" organization.<sup>6</sup>

In recent years scholars who have approached the Civil Rights Movement from the bottom up have helped demystify SNCC's approach to Black Power. Clayborne Carson, John Dittmer, and Charles Payne, in their works on SNCC and the black freedom struggle in Mississippi, have made it clear that SNCC's version of the ideology was neither the product of urban uprisings nor the idea that violence should be used to realize impossible dreams.<sup>7</sup> Still, a significant gulf remains between SNCC organizers' understanding of the evolution and meaning of Black Power and explanations of the same phenomenon found in standard narratives. Rather than tying SNCC activists' embrace of Black Power to their work in Alabama, many scholars insist that interest in the ideology resulted from the erosion of bonds of trust between black organizers and white volunteers during Freedom Summer; disillusionment with liberal whites following the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party's (MFDP) failed bid to unseat the all-white Mississippi delegation to the Democratic National Convention in 1964; and the elimination of the need for direct action protest in the wake of the 1964 Civil Rights Act.<sup>8</sup>

The disconnect between scholars' interpretation of the origin and meaning of SNCC's version of Black Power and that of activists stems from the belief that Mississippi, rather than Alabama, was the seedbed from which Black Power sprang. Indeed, the overwhelming majority of studies on SNCC

have focused on Mississippi, initially because of interest in white volunteers during Freedom Summer in 1964, and more recently because of a desire to highlight the central role of African American organizers and residents in campaigns in the Mississippi Delta.<sup>9</sup> Unfortunately, emphasizing SNCC's activity in Mississippi rather than the organizing in Alabama has reduced SNCC work in Alabama, particularly in Lowndes County, almost to an afterthought. Clayborne Carson, for example, treats the Lowndes County project sparingly in his history of SNCC and the "Black Awakening of the 1960s." Others such as sociologist Belinda Robnett overlook SNCC's work in Alabama completely. Only recently have scholars, particularly historians of the Black Power movement, begun to draw attention to the significance of SNCC's Alabama activities.<sup>10</sup>

Misconceptions about SNCC's brand of Black Power have shaped the discourse on the subject. As a result, a consensus has emerged among scholars of the Civil Rights Movement specifically, and of the 1960s generally, that suggests that SNCC's version of Black Power was foremost an emotional response to pent up frustration with whites that failed to transcend militant rhetoric. These writers point to a vitriolic position paper on black consciousness and the role of whites in the organization penned by members of SNCC's Atlanta Project in March 1966. Mistaken beliefs about Black Power have also framed the debate over SNCC's demise, and for many the advent of Black Power increased alienation among white supporters and pushed the organization away from its grassroots organizing tradition.<sup>11</sup>

This essay offers a new framework for understanding SNCC's brand of Black Power by re-examining some of the key experiences of SNCC organizers in Mississippi leading up to and surrounding the MFDP's challenge of the state regulars at the Democratic National Convention in 1964. It will also explain the more important reasons why SNCC activists chose to work in Alabama, and describe how the emergence of the LCFO reflected and affected SNCC's approach to social change. It is important to scrutinize the intellectual influences that pushed SNCC toward Black Power, ranging from the self-determinist cultural values of rural black southerners to the musings of black nationalist theoreticians; and to pinpoint the genesis of the cloud of confusion that came to surround "Black Power" by studying the responses of the mainstream media and civil rights leaders to the ideology. The organizing experiences of SNCC field secretaries in Lowndes County ultimately gave form to their version of Black Power. It becomes clear that SNCC activists connected the slogan to a concrete organizing program of forming all-black, third-parties as a first step toward creating independent power bases. Through Black Power, SNCC activists sought to revive the group's grassroots organizing tradition.

## NONVIOLENT PROTEST AND VOTING RIGHTS CAMPAIGNS

Electoral politics was at the center of SNCC's organizing activities from its earliest days. In August 1961 at a staff meeting at Highlander Folk School in Monteagle, Tennessee, SNCC members decided to organize grassroots voter registration campaigns in Mississippi. Up to that time, they had engaged in nonviolent direct action almost exclusively.<sup>12</sup> A voter registration campaign organized by field secretary Robert Parris (Bob) Moses early in the summer of 1961 in McComb, Mississippi, however, had kindled interest in voting rights by demonstrating that organizing to obtain the ballot would stir African Americans to action. The preference for voter registration expressed by veteran Mississippi activists Amzie Moore, Medgar Evers, C. C. Bryant, and others added to its appeal, as did the work conducted by Septima Clark and Andrew Young for the Southern Christian Leadership Conference's (SCLC) "Crusade for Citizenship." Moreover, liberal philanthropists closely associated with the new Kennedy administration made offers to fund voter registration projects in the South.<sup>13</sup>

The decision to wade into the turbulent waters of electoral politics was far from unanimous. A vocal group of activists, led by Fisk University student Diane Nash, opposed shifting SNCC's organizing focus away from direct action protest. A disciple of Rev. James Lawson, the movement's principal prophet of nonviolence, Nash embraced nonviolence as a way of life and viewed the civil rights struggle as a "moral crusade." Most SNCC members, however, had not studied under Rev. Lawson and consequently did not share her viewpoint.<sup>14</sup> At most, they accepted nonviolence as a useful tactic. Moreover, they tended to analyze the world through a political rather than a moral framework.<sup>15</sup> Thus, the decision to organize around the vote very much reflected the pre-existing political views of most SNCC members.

Although those SNCC activists who accepted nonviolence as a tactic often used frameworks of analysis that differed markedly from those who embraced nonviolence as a way of life, they all supported moral suasion. To varying degrees, everyone believed that highlighting racial injustice would cause the purveyors of white supremacy to change their ways. Thus, as SNCC field secretaries fanned out across Mississippi in the fall of 1961 to organize voter registration campaigns, they did so believing that they could end black disenfranchisement by making clear to southern whites precisely how unfair and unjust it was, and by demonstrating the deep desire of black southerners for the vote. Unfortunately, midday beatings and midnight shootings exposed the futility of appealing to a sense of human decency, and caused many activists, particularly those who did not subscribe to nonviolence as a way of life, to lose faith in tactics that required changing the hearts and minds of white southerners.<sup>16</sup> However, most SNCC workers did not lose faith in the power of moral suasion, and they continued to believe that drawing attention to racial injustice would compel national politicians and their northern white constituents to act on black southerners' behalf.<sup>17</sup>

The belief that appeals to conscience could move liberal white northerners from apathy to action, coupled with an eagerness to put the ballot in black hands, inspired SNCC organizers to launch a new and ambitious organizing program designed to draw national attention to the southern struggle. In the fall of 1963 SNCC activists in Mississippi initiated the voting rights campaign by organizing mock elections.<sup>18</sup> The following summer they invited several hundred students from the nation's premier universities to work in the state. This project came to be known as the "Freedom Summer" campaign.<sup>19</sup> Also in the early months of 1964 SNCC workers helped to establish the MFDP, which sent sixty-eight delegates to the Democratic National Convention in Atlantic City, New Jersey, in August 1964 in a daring attempt to unseat Mississippi's regular delegation.<sup>20</sup> Unfortunately, backroom arm-twisting by President Lyndon B. Johnson prompted Democratic Party decision-makers to reject the MFDP's bid to replace the white delegates.<sup>21</sup> Although tremendously disappointing, the defeat provided SNCC activists with valuable political insights. Foremost, it revealed the Democratic Party's lack of commitment to civil rights. Up to that point, many SNCC workers had assumed that black and white liberals in the Democratic Party had simply been dragging their feet on civil rights. However, Atlantic City demonstrated that the party's liberal leaders were not just slow to move, they were unwilling to change the political status quo.<sup>22</sup> At the same time, SNCC organizers came to see that the social and economic interests of rural working-class African Americans diverged at several critical points from those of the Democratic Party leadership at the national as well as the state and local levels. It became clear to many that appealing to the political interests of white northerners was as futile as appealing to the conscience of white southerners.<sup>23</sup>

Those committed to nonviolence as a way of life found these revelations deeply disturbing. Chief among this group was SNCC chairman John Lewis, who like Nash came to embrace nonviolence through the teachings of Rev. Lawson.<sup>24</sup> These insights, however, did not shake his faith in the morality of most whites, or cause him to doubt the power of moral suasion. But fewer and fewer SNCC members shared the chairman's ideological bent. Over the years, most of the organizers such as Diane Nash who clung to nonviolent tactics eventually defected to Martin Luther King's SCLC. Consequently, the vast majority of SNCC's organizers viewed the movement primarily as a political struggle. The Atlantic City debacle forced the members of this group to reconsider their tactical approaches to social change, beginning with working with Democrats.<sup>25</sup> They also began contemplating ways of organizing African Americans outside of the Democratic Party. What's more, they often turned their backs on moral suasion.<sup>26</sup>

SNCC was at a crossroads. Although veteran organizers' disinterest in the MFDP model left the group without an organizing program, it did not fracture the emerging consensus for mobilizing to obtain the vote, but simply left some SNCC activists unsure of the best way to proceed. While MFDP leaders had not given up on the Democratic Party, many SNCC organizers had. In

Atlantic City, black Mississippians received more support from rank and file convention delegates than many had thought possible, and had generated significant local interest and national media attention. Thus, MFDP leaders decided to keep working under the Democratic umbrella. SNCC organizers continued to assist them, but they had no heart for it and many began slowly withdrawing from the state.<sup>27</sup>

At the same time, SNCC was in the throes of an unsettling membership expansion. After Freedom Summer, the size of SNCC's staff had swelled from about two dozen to more than 150, primarily as a result of white volunteers deciding to stay in the South. The additional numbers of white students strained the bonds of trust since veteran organizers were unsure about the newcomers' commitment to the struggle. Moreover, factions were beginning to develop within SNCC, and there were no structures in place to facilitate effective communication between conflicting groups. Not surprisingly, a number of veteran organizers who had spent extended tours of duty in Mississippi were suffering from a kind of battle fatigue. The shortened tempers and intensified suspicions made the already disconcerting process of organizational growth even more stressful. However, these growing pains neither paralyzed SNCC nor turned black organizers against white volunteers, but these developments did give black activists reason to pause and consider more deeply the cost of increasing white participation in their campaigns.<sup>28</sup>

SNCC activists' preoccupation with the role of whites in the Civil Rights Movement came at a time when increasing numbers of African American organizers were becoming interested in achieving black empowerment and self-determination through black solidarity, institution-building, and community control.<sup>29</sup> SNCC organizers' interest in black nationalist goals and objectives sprang from a variety of sources, but especially from their experiences in the field. Southern white hostility and northern white indifference to their struggles in Mississippi had forced the organizers to rely on the local black communities almost exclusively for support. And without their assistance, the SNCC projects would have failed. Therefore, developing race-based strategies for black empowerment, including the formation of parallel political structures, came to be considered absolutely necessary.

The strong appeal of black nationalism was not simply a reaction to white indifference and intransigence. SNCC organizers drew equal (if not more) inspiration from the self-determinist cultural practices and institutions they had encountered among the local folk with whom they worked. Indeed, these cultural practices stretched back to the antebellum era and the first days of freedom and had given rise to a plethora of long lasting social and economic institutions that had served as the foundation of African American systems and strategies for community survival and advancement. SNCC activists learned a great deal from this core set of black cultural values. In fact, it is safe to say that rural black southerners demonstrated to SNCC activists the true meaning of black nationalism, and made clear to them the

importance of making black self-reliance a central component of SNCC organizing.<sup>30</sup>

SNCC activists' experiences in the field caused them to look anew at the work of black nationalist and Pan-Africanist theoreticians and practitioners, including Marcus Garvey's organizing activities, Kwame Nkrumah's nation-building, and Elijah Muhammad's religious teachings. Psychiatrist and freedom fighter Franz Fanon's dissection of white supremacy provided them with fresh insights into the psychological advantages of race-based solidarity. But it was the rhetoric of Malcolm X that most encouraged their expanding black nationalist consciousness. In defiant tones Malcolm gave voice to the young radicals' hopes and frustrations, and by 1965 his fiery oratory and pointed political analysis had made him an unofficial voice of SNCC. Tragically, Malcolm fell to assassins' bullets before his relationship with the young activists could fully develop.<sup>31</sup>

The independence struggles of people of color enhanced the appeal of black nationalist objectives. For years SNCC organizers had looked to freedom movements in Africa and throughout the African Diaspora for inspiration and direction. For many, interest in these struggles was personal. Several SNCC members hailed from the Caribbean and had learned about anti-colonial struggles from family and friends. Others had mingled with college students from Africa who helped break the chains of colonialism. Moreover, a handful had actually traveled to the continent. Less than one month after the Democratic convention in Atlantic City, about a dozen members toured several independent African nations and met with prominent government leaders, student activists, and African American ex-patriots who delineated the connections between the liberation movements on the continent and the African American struggle in the United States.<sup>32</sup>

## **DEVELOPING NEW BLACK POLITICAL STRATEGIES**

In the wake of the MFDP defeat in August 1964, SNCC workers needed a new organizing program and a new base of operations. At the same time, there was a need to address forthrightly the role of whites in the organization. SNCC staff members decided to hold a retreat in Waveland, Mississippi, in November 1964. Prior to the retreat, they drafted and circulated thirty-seven position papers that examined issues ranging from organizing philosophy and tactics to the role of women in the field. Nothing was sacred. Silas Norman, Jr.'s paper, titled "What is the importance of racial considerations in the SNCC staff?" was one of many that triggered intense debate. In his statement the former sit-in leader at Paine College in Augusta, Georgia, questioned the practicality of integrated projects and argued compellingly that white volunteers, particularly white women, were lightning rods for racial violence.<sup>33</sup> Norman's comments resonated with a number of organizers whose experiences in Mississippi had taught them that working with whites was not only unnecessarily dangerous, but also weakened racial solidarity at the

grassroots level. In true SNCC fashion, there was vociferous dissent. Charlie Cobb, who had spent considerable time working with SNCC's integrated Southwest Georgia Project, argued that bi-racial staffs were essential to SNCC's future. To create an integrated world, they had to work through an interracial organization. Despite considerable discussion, the staff failed to reach a consensus on the presence of whites in the field, or on the organizing goals. At the end of the retreat, SNCC's future remained clouded.<sup>34</sup>

The absence of specific organizing objectives led several few battle-weary veterans to drift away. Robert Parris Moses, the driving force behind SNCC's work in Mississippi, stopped participating in SNCC decision-making soon after the convention in Atlantic City, and eventually resigned. James Forman, Cleveland Sellers, and Ruby Doris Smith Robinson were among those who filled the void created by Moses's withdrawal and that of other veteran organizers. Their management skills also brought order to SNCC's day-to-day operations, and they were able to rein in some of the undisciplined behavior that had begun to splinter the growing staff. The three were also willing to make the tough decisions about the allocation of resources that others had shied away from. Thus, the decision by Moses and other veterans to walk away from SNCC did not leave the organization bereft of skilled leadership or expert organizers.<sup>35</sup> Indeed, SNCC retained a core group of experienced field secretaries who had been baptized in the bloody waters of the Mississippi, not the least of whom was Stokely Carmichael.

A native of Trinidad, Carmichael had attended high school in New York City and college at Howard University in Washington, DC. A gifted orator, Carmichael's rhetorical style drew upon the rhythmic cadences of Mississippi's black Baptist preachers and the fiery exhortations of Harlem's street-corner proselytizers. His facility as a public speaker was surpassed only by his deftness as a grassroots organizer. During the summers of 1962 and 1963, the former Freedom Rider had worked in Greenwood, Mississippi, and in the summer of 1964 he had served as SNCC's project director for the MFDP's Second Congressional District, which covered most of the Delta. By his own account, he learned how to organize in Mississippi, and perfected his craft in Alabama.<sup>36</sup>

The stability that the new management team brought to SNCC enabled veteran field workers such as Carmichael to explore new organizational possibilities, including creating an independent, black political party. The attraction to independent politics stemmed directly from lessons learned from the MFDP's defeat, in which African American interests were subordinated to those of the Democratic party. Thus, Carmichael and others envisioned new organizations that would operate completely independently. The new party would concentrate exclusively on local politics, which not only affected people's lives most directly and immediately, but also offered the residents of majority black counties the best chance to win public office without having to enter into coalitions with unreliable whites. Therefore, the new independent



politics would focus on winning control of county courthouses—the loci of local political power.<sup>37</sup>

The MFDP's organizational infrastructure made Mississippi a logical place to begin organizing county-based political parties. However, MFDP leaders remained steadfast in their decision to work with Democrats, forcing SNCC activists to look outside the Magnolia State to develop grassroots parties. Immediately, they turned to Alabama. In the fall of 1964 Silas Norman, SNCC's newly appointed Alabama project director, had taken up residence in Selma, the proverbial capital of Alabama's black belt region. His opposition to interracial projects, which he had made clear at the Waveland retreat, appealed to those with pragmatic or philosophical objections to working with white volunteers, and who were interested in the new independent politics. Also, there was the distinct possibility that Selma's black residents would be less committed to working with Democrats because no MFDP-like organization existed locally.

In the opening months of 1965 several veteran Mississippi organizers, including Carmichael, moved to Alabama where they joined a contingent of SCLC field secretaries who had been helping Selma residents organize a voter registration campaign.<sup>38</sup> At first, the personal relationships that existed between SNCC and SCLC workers, several of whom were former SNCC organizers, mitigated the possible inter-organizational conflict. Within weeks, however, a slew of irreconcilable tactical and philosophical differences surfaced over SCLC's insistence that the black residents of Selma needed Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. and his lieutenants to lead them. The SNCC workers also objected to SCLC's support for a federal plan to have voter registration applicants sign an appearance book in lieu of actually registering. There were also questions about SCLC's commitment to working in the rural counties surrounding Selma. When SCLC leaders proposed the march from Selma to Montgomery in March 1965, SNCC workers objected because they believed the dangers outweighed the potential achievements. This proved to be the case when unarmed marchers were attacked on "Bloody Sunday" at the Pettus Bridge by local police and state troopers. On the following Tuesday, 17 March 1965, SNCC organizers were outraged by Dr. King's decision to take the marchers to the bridge, but to turn them around and return to the church when confronted by the state police. Although Dr. King had brokered the deal with the U.S. Justice Department that led to the turnaround, Silas Norman exclaimed, "I felt that we had been betrayed, and I no longer wanted to participate in that."<sup>39</sup>

SNCC and SCLC's conflicting views over the management and direction of the Selma campaign caused the inter-organizational alliance to falter. "We decided that it was not productive for us to fight with SCLC," recalled Norman. Consequently, SNCC withdrew from Selma, but it did not pull its field secretaries out of the Black Belt entirely. Instead, it dispatched organizers to the rural counties surrounding the city. Norman explained that SNCC simply decided to "move to places where they [SCLC] would not

come." At the top of this list was Lowndes County, located just east of Selma.<sup>40</sup>

### THE LOWNDES COUNTY FREEDOM ORGANIZATION

SNCC's interest in working in Lowndes County, Alabama, was born out of several factors. The county's proximity to Selma meant that it was accessible. Organizers could get in, and more importantly, get out with relative ease. Lowndes County shared many of the same social and economic characteristics as places SNCC had organized previously, such as Leflore County, Mississippi, and Terrell County, Georgia. Thus, SNCC workers had some idea about whom to look for in the African American community for local leadership, and they knew what to expect from the white community in terms of counter-insurgency. In addition, neither SCLC nor any other civil rights organization had established a permanent presence there. SCLC had made overtures to local activists, but had failed to send full-time field workers to Lowndes. SNCC could thus avoid the inter-organizational disagreements that led to the withdrawal from Selma. Lowndes County was well known as an extremely violent place, which meant that competition from other civil rights groups was unlikely. According to Norman, "The decision was that Lowndes County was so bad that nobody would come in there showcasing, that it was only going to be serious work there, and so we would not be bothered and would not be in conflict." The county's sinister mystique also meant that if SNCC succeeded, it would be considerably easier to organize African Americans in neighboring counties. In other words, the extreme nature of racial oppression in Lowndes made organizing there the key to reform in that section of Alabama. In late March 1965 when the Selma to Montgomery march finally took place, it offered SNCC organizers an excellent entry point because the marchers had to cross two-thirds of the county. This gave SNCC an opportunity to generate a list of local contacts by talking to those residents who turned out to meet the marchers. By organizing in the wake of the march, SNCC could lay the foundation for a countywide project.<sup>41</sup>

Less than forty-eight hours after the march ended, Carmichael returned quietly to Lowndes with a team of four organizers. The group quickly located the people they had met during the march and soon discovered that a number of black residents had already started organizing to obtain the vote. On 1 March 1965, for example, thirty-nine African Americans had attempted unsuccessfully to register to vote. Two weeks later an even larger group had tried to register, and the county's white registrars also turned them away. Undeterred, about two dozen black residents had met on 19 March and formed the Lowndes County Christian Movement for Human Rights (LCCMHR) to coordinate future attempts at voter registration.<sup>42</sup>

Of course, local activism came as no surprise to the team of SNCC organizers. In seemingly every black community that they had entered some black folk were already on the move. In McComb, Mississippi, for example,

C.C. Bryant and others had kept the local branch of the NAACP alive despite state repression.<sup>43</sup> Nevertheless, in Lowndes County the discovery excited SNCC organizers because it indicated that independent politics had a strong chance of taking root. But they decided to wait until the end of summer to introduce the idea of creating a third party. SNCC workers delayed for a number of reasons. Initially, they felt they had to earn the trust of the people. This required showing the county's black residents that neither the slow pace of progress nor white violence would chase them away. The SNCC workers also had to identify and help local black leaders build a critical mass of supporters; a third party had to have an active and sizable constituency. Throughout the spring and summer of 1965, SNCC successfully built this constituency by canvassing the county and promoting voter registration. The organizers also wanted the local black residents to generate a body of experiences capable of elevating political awareness to the point where organizing outside of the two-party framework became an acceptable option. Local African Americans began accumulating these politicizing experiences in the spring and summer as they organized to improve black public schools, desegregate all-white schools, win control of county farm committees, bring antipoverty programs to the county, and to defend themselves against reprisals that ranged from mass evictions to murder. Moreover, by the middle of August 1965 federal registrars arrived in the county and began registering African Americans under the terms of the new Voting Rights Act. By October 1965, nearly half of the county's eligible black residents had registered to vote.<sup>44</sup>

When the necessary pieces were almost in place, Carmichael suggested to local black leaders that they take advantage of an obscure Alabama statute that would allow them to form a countywide third party.<sup>45</sup> This suggestion piqued their interest, while their personal experiences had taught them to distrust Democrats. "It didn't make sense for us to join the Democratic Party when they were the people who had done the killing in the county and had beat our heads," explained local leader Frank Miles, Jr.<sup>46</sup> Thus late in September 1965, local black leaders asked Carmichael and his fellow organizers to teach them everything they needed to know about forming a third party. By December 1965, after attending a series of political education workshops led by SNCC organizers, Miles and other local activists announced the formation of the politically independent Lowndes County Freedom Organization (LCFO), with the snarling black panther as its symbol; and their intention to run black candidates for various county offices in November 1966.<sup>47</sup>

Carmichael and more than a dozen field secretaries spent January through April 1966 canvassing Lowndes and hosting biweekly political education workshops in an effort to build support for the LCFO. Their immediate goal was to generate a high voter turnout for the nominating convention scheduled for 3 May, the same day as the Democratic primary. They knew that a strong showing would validate the independent party approach.<sup>48</sup> Meanwhile, SNCC's

executive committee and field staff paid very close attention to the ongoing project in Lowndes. Almost two years had passed since the MFDP's defeat in Atlantic City, and SNCC as an organization still lacked an action plan. The Voting Rights Act had breathed new life into SNCC's voter registration campaigns by strengthening the consensus for using the ballot to help black southerners overcome the twin evils of poverty and powerlessness. Passage of the act, however, merely provided a political opportunity, not an organizing program; and now that African Americans had access to the ballot, SNCC faced the challenge of devising a program that would give the greatest meaning to black votes. "What would it profit a man to have the vote and not be able to control it?" asked SNCC political strategist Courtland Cox in a widely circulated memo.<sup>49</sup> SNCC activists recognized that African Americans, particularly those in majority black counties, could either register as Democrats or develop independent political parties. Those organizers who favored the independent approach joined Carmichael in Lowndes, transforming the county into a laboratory for testing the feasibility of mobilizing local black residents into truly independent political organizations. Of course, most SNCC activists did not relocate to Alabama; however, this did not mean that they opposed the independent approach. Indeed, most recognized the logic behind the new independent politics and applauded the efforts of those working toward this end. As a result, the executive committee committed a disproportionate amount of SNCC's finite resources to the Lowndes project.<sup>50</sup> SNCC's operational culture, which dictated that actual programs, not theories (no matter how logical) determine SNCC policy, prevented the organization from rushing headlong into uncharted waters. Many SNCC members waited to see what happened in Lowndes before deciding whether or not to organize grassroots political parties elsewhere. Therefore, the LCFO nominating convention became a referendum for deciding if developing independent political parties ought to become SNCC's new organizing program.<sup>51</sup>

On 3 May 1966, SNCC members trained their eyes on Lowndes County. To their delight, nearly one thousand black residents, representing more than half of the county's registered black voters, participated in the LCFO convention.<sup>52</sup> Black voters rallied to the banner of the "black panther" because truly independent politics reflected their long-held belief in self-reliance. Indeed, parallel structures designed to promote black self-determination were very familiar to local black folk. When the local and state government failed to provide adequate public schooling, they supported their own schools, most notably the Calhoun Colored School, founded in 1892. To secure land, they pooled their meager savings and formed the Calhoun Land Trust, which helped hundreds of black farmers escape debt-based farm tenancy early in the 20th century. To improve the conditions under which sharecroppers labored, they tapped into church and fraternal networks and organized a sharecroppers' strike in 1935. To help meet the material needs of impoverished black residents, they formed benevolent societies such as the

Daylight Savings Club, whose dozen or so members purchased essential household items for the elderly and indigent in the Gordonsville community in the 1950s and early 1960s. Thus SNCC's independent program struck a responsive chord with black residents because it resonated with their core cultural values and social experiences. It was no surprise that SNCC's version of Black Power first took root in Alabama's black belt.<sup>53</sup>

The strong convention turnout, coupled with the poor showing by black candidates running in Democratic primaries in neighboring counties, confirmed the feasibility and practicality of the organizing program developed by Carmichael and his staff.<sup>54</sup> Moreover, it demonstrated that countywide politics offered African Americans their best opportunity to secure political power, that the county's black residents had a better chance of winning public office as independents than as Democrats, and that black voters would support an all-black party. On 8 May 1966, some 150 SNCC members met in Kingston Springs, Tennessee, to map out the organization's future. Given that less than a week had passed since the LCFO convention, it was no surprise that Lowndes County was a main topic of conversation among the participants, and enthusiasm ran high for making the new political program developed in Lowndes the basis of future SNCC organizing. "We were convinced that we had found *the* lever we had been searching for," recalled Cleveland Sellers.<sup>55</sup>

SNCC members made three major policy decisions during the gathering. First, they voted to make independent third parties the central aim of SNCC organizing. SNCC members believed strongly that "such organizations working together could end racial oppression once and for all," explained Sellers.<sup>56</sup> They also decided to aggressively promote black consciousness, which they defined as ideas and behaviors that affirmed "the beauty of blackness" and dispelled white supremacist constructions of race.<sup>57</sup> "It seemed to us a major contradiction to ask white secretaries to go among black sharecroppers and convince them of their power to be self-determining and independent," explained veteran Lowndes organizer Gloria Larry.<sup>58</sup> Moreover, the decision to limit organizing to black voters had its roots in the success in Lowndes County. Many black organizers there objected to working with whites partly because they believed that it retarded the advancement of black consciousness, solidarity, and self-reliance. At the same time, it was often too dangerous for whites working there. As evidence, SNCC workers pointed to the senseless murder of white volunteer Jonathan Daniels in August 1965 by a Lowndes County deputy sheriff. Thus the decision to prohibit white volunteers from organizing in southern black communities merely formalized an existing trend within SNCC for which Lowndes County was the most immediate example.<sup>59</sup>

The Kingston Springs decisions formed the basis of the new SNCC organizing program, which staff members dubbed "Black Power." This was a shortened version of the slogan "Black Power for Black People" that had been popularized by the SNCC field secretaries operating in Alabama. This

new slogan spoke explicitly to SNCC organizers' desire to help black voters acquire political power and reflected their interest in developing black consciousness. "It was a more specific way of saying what we mean," explained field secretary Willie Ricks.<sup>60</sup> Therefore, SNCC's brand of Black Power drew its essential meaning from Kingston Springs, and the decisions made there had been shaped by the political organizing in Lowndes County. SNCC activists came to define "Black Power" as developing grassroots, independent political parties and promoting black consciousness. "Essential in the process of organizing Negroes to win power . . . is the development of 'black consciousness,'" explained Carmichael. "We have to stop being ashamed of being black. They oppress us because we are black and we are going to use that blackness to get out of the trick bag they put us in." Clearly, SNCC activists defined Black Power in very specific political and cultural terms, and they did so because concrete experiences served as the foundation of their definition. Black Power was not what anyone had said or written, but what SNCC field secretaries had accomplished in Lowndes County, Alabama.<sup>61</sup>

### BLACK POWER AND BLACK POLITICS

The success of the Lowndes County project provided SNCC organizers with a blueprint for implementing Black Power elsewhere. Quite simply, SNCC activists planned to carry out Carmichael's organizing approach in other rural southern counties, before expanding into the urban North.<sup>62</sup> To oversee implementation of this new plan of action, they looked once again to Lowndes County. At the Kingston Springs meeting, they elected Carmichael as SNCC's chairman, replacing John Lewis who had fallen out of step with the group's more political approach to social change. Some historians have suggested that Carmichael's election was a coup by a radical fringe element, but it was not. Rather, it was veteran organizers acting on their belief that it made more sense to have the architect of the Lowndes County organizing program spearhead that program's broader implementation.<sup>63</sup>

As chairman, Carmichael moved quickly to put SNCC's new organizing program in effect, and began by encouraging the expansion of existing projects in Alabama. To this end, SNCC's executive committee decided to send field secretaries into the counties surrounding Lowndes where local LCFO members had already begun to rally support for the new independent politics. Carmichael also took the initiative to introduce Mississippi's black residents to SNCC's new program by convincing the executive committee to allow SNCC to take part in James Meredith's March against Fear.<sup>64</sup> Carmichael planned to organize black voters in Mississippi in the wake of the Meredith March, just as he had done in Alabama during the Selma to Montgomery March. In the tradition of SNCC, he wanted to transform this mobilizing event into an organizing opportunity. "We wouldn't just talk about empowerment, about black communities controlling their political destiny, and overcoming fear. We would demonstrate it," he later explained.<sup>65</sup> This

they did. In every town SNCC workers entered, they registered black voters, urged them to form independent parties, and to run black candidates for county offices.<sup>66</sup> Carmichael's insistence that SNCC participate in the Meredith March, therefore, was an honest attempt to return SNCC to its organizing roots by reestablishing the organization's presence in the state that had helped give rise to the new program.

The response of civil rights leaders to Carmichael's call for "Black Power" varied widely. Floyd McKissick of the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) applauded it, while Dr. King called it an unfortunate choice of words.<sup>67</sup> Roy Wilkins, the Executive Secretary for the NAACP, however, denounced Carmichael's declaration vociferously. In fact, Wilkins led the charge against it, attacking it and its advocates in much the same way that his predecessor, Walter White, condemned African Americans such as singer and actor Paul Robeson who spoke out in favor of the communist movement in the late 1940s and early 1950s.<sup>68</sup> Wilkins and other civil rights moderates viewed Black Power advocates' indictment of interracial coalitions as irrelevant and misguided as the major problem. The older leaders were especially concerned about white perceptions of this critique and the impact it would have on fundraising by their organizations. Their fears were not without merit. In short order, liberal whites began using Black Power as a litmus test for determining black moderation or militancy, and stopped funding those black groups, most notably SNCC and CORE, that failed this test.<sup>69</sup>

Initially, media coverage of Black Power was surprisingly fair, especially given the criticism that the mainstream press had leveled at SNCC for encouraging third party movements and replacing John Lewis as chairman.<sup>70</sup> Unfortunately, responsible press coverage was short-lived, and some journalists quickly became skeptical of the meaning that SNCC attached to Black Power. Many assumed that the black freedom struggle must be inherently nonviolent, and that black political interests were fundamentally aligned with those of liberal whites. Accordingly, the press dismissed Carmichael's explanations of the ideology as ambiguous at best, and unfathomable at worst. "There clearly seems to be more involved here than simple bloc voting in order to achieve equality of treatment," read a *New York Times* editorial.<sup>71</sup> Condemnation of Black Power by civil rights moderates only added to the media's bewilderment. "Nobody knows what the phrase 'black power' really means, neither those who oppose it nor those who have given it currency," wrote *Times* editors.<sup>72</sup> But the initial confusion surrounding Black Power's meaning had less to do with what Carmichael actually said or failed to say, and more to do with how skeptics and critics interpreted what he said. In fact, Carmichael's explanations of Black Power, especially as it applied to the rural South, were absolutely clear; and using Lowndes County as an example helped tremendously.<sup>73</sup> And although his early explanations of Black Power in the urban North suffered from some ambiguity, by the time the book *Black Power* appeared in print in 1967, he had clarified and complicated its northern applicability significantly.<sup>74</sup>

Any doubts the press harbored about the meaning of Black Power evaporated later that summer when the position paper written in March 1966 by members of SNCC's Atlanta Project surfaced. On 5 August 1966, the *New York Times* published excerpts from the statement that discussed ousting whites from SNCC, increasing black consciousness among organizers and the black southerners, and building independent, economic and political structures.<sup>75</sup> The *Times* presented the paper as SNCC's definitive statement on Black Power, and mistakenly (or perhaps purposefully) credited Carmichael with co-authorship. Thus the *Times* editors concluded that SNCC's brand of Black Power was no longer ambiguous, but meant exactly what Wilkins and other black moderates had alleged. "Regardless of other interpretations that could reasonably be offered of the term 'black power,' Mr. Carmichael and his SNCC associates clearly intended to mean Negro nationalism and separatism along racial lines – a hopeless, futile, destructive course expressive merely of a sense of black importance," declared the editors at the *Times*. "As a practical program, it has nothing more to recommend it than the wretched violence that some Chicago whites have been using in recent days against the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King and his Negro followers."<sup>76</sup> Black moderates reinforced these claims by eulogizing SNCC. Veteran activist Bayard Rustin, for example, predicted that, "Nothing creative can come out of SNCC."<sup>77</sup>

In later years scholars accepted the press's claim that the Atlanta Project position paper was SNCC's final word on Black Power. Unfortunately, it was not. The members of the Atlanta Project did not speak for SNCC; in fact, most were organizational outsiders, having joined the group only recently.<sup>78</sup> Moreover, their political beliefs reflected their earlier affiliations with more radically nationalistic, northern-based groups, specifically the Revolutionary Action Movement (RAM) and the Nation of Islam (NOI), rather than their time with SNCC. Indeed, at least one of the authors of the position paper, Rolland Snellings, was an agent provocateur for RAM assigned to infiltrate SNCC to make it more militant and nationalistic.<sup>79</sup> Since the Atlanta Project activists had spent relatively little time in SNCC, they knew little about grassroots organizing. Thus their recommendations about future SNCC projects incorporating explicit appeals to black pride and concentrating on building black economic and political institutions were made without offering a viable organizing program. The lack of an organizing plan kept SNCC's executive committee from endorsing the paper as policy. Veteran Lowndes organizer Willie Ricks explained: "We would always say, 'Mr. Say ain't the man, Mr. Do is the man.' They talked about nationalism and that kind of thing inside SNCC, but they did not have an organization in the community."<sup>80</sup> Programs rather than rhetoric had always carried the day within SNCC, and when given the choice between the pontifications of the Atlanta activists and the political program of the Lowndes County organizers, they chose the latter.



## CONCLUSION

The Black Power controversy increased SNCC activists' enthusiasm for building a national network of black-controlled third parties, and expanded their interest in grassroots organizing. Despite the imbroglio, they remained fully committed to implementing the third party program, and succeeded in launching freedom parties in select northern cities, most notably Philadelphia.<sup>81</sup> Unfortunately, SNCC did not have enough experienced field secretaries to shepherd multiple communities through the long process of party building. Moreover, the rapid evaporation of its meager resources in the wake of the Black Power controversy, coupled with efforts by the FBI and state police agencies to destroy the organization, stripped it of its capacity to grow. These factors conspired to rob SNCC activists of their ability, rather than their desire, to organize.<sup>82</sup>

SNCC's efforts were enough, however, to inspire some civil rights activists to organize third parties on their own. John Cashin, an African American dentist and political activist in Huntsville, Alabama, founded a statewide third party in 1968 patterned after the LCFO.<sup>83</sup> In its first year, the National Democratic Party of Alabama (NDPA) ran ninety-one candidates for county, state, and federal offices, but achieved few victories. The party met with greater success starting in 1970 after merging with the LCFO.<sup>84</sup> Much like the Lowndes party, the NDPA drew its strength from the black poor of rural Alabama who understood exactly what SNCC meant by Black Power. Their passion for Black Power stemmed partly from the resonance of the slogan, which captured their frustration and anger with the status quo in non-deferential tones that few had ever heard expressed publicly. More importantly, though, the political program behind Black Power complemented their cultural values emphasizing black self-determination, which helped them see that winning control of county courthouses could lead to significant social and economic change. "These people did not have to argue Black Power," observed Carmichael, "they understood Black Power."<sup>85</sup>

African Americans remained interested in independent politics through the early 1970s, culminating in the convening of black political conventions in Gary, Indiana, in 1972, and in Little Rock, Arkansas, in 1974.<sup>86</sup> But by the mid-1970s, interest in independent black political parties had waned considerably, and by that time SNCC was no longer around to organize third parties. More importantly, African Americans had found room to operate within the Democratic Party, especially after the defection of many southern white politicians to the Republican Party. Indeed, by the middle of the decade, some 1,500 African Americans had been elected to public office across the country at all levels of government.<sup>87</sup> Unfortunately, it was difficult for individual black elected officials to bring about the social and economic changes that African Americans sought because wealthy and influential whites still controlled the Democratic and Republican parties at the state and national levels. Even in the early 1980s, when black officeholders in the rural

South and in urban centers gained control of local governments, they were unable to radically improve the lived conditions for their poor and black constituents due to the growing deindustrialization, decreased federal spending, and the migration of jobs and high income taxpayers to the suburbs. In the ensuing years these trends accelerated, further limiting the effectiveness of the new black elected officials.<sup>88</sup> Although it is unlikely that black third parties could have reversed these developments, it is possible that they could have lessened their impact by making the needs of poor and working-class African Americans a national priority.

SNCC's brand of Black Power emerged as a direct result of organizing successes in Lowndes County. It was a product of specific field experiences in Alabama, rather than disillusionment induced by the MFDP defeat, Freedom Summer, or militant rhetoric. This is not to say that it was unaffected by events in Mississippi or even black nationalist ideologies. On the contrary, SNCC organizers first encountered rural black traditions of self-reliance and self-determination in the Magnolia State. Mississippi is also where they first became interested in independent politics. Similarly, they gained valuable political insights from studying the work of black nationalist theoreticians and practitioners. However, SNCC's version of black nationalist ideology cannot be fully understood without studying the work of its organizers in Lowndes County, Alabama. Clearly, the success of the LCFO is why SNCC activists defined Black Power as organizing African American political parties. It also reveals that SNCC's brand of Black Power transcended simple rabble-rousing rhetoric and rested on an appeal to African Americans to rally around a pragmatic program for black political empowerment. At the same time, it shows that SNCC's embrace of Black Power was not a break with the past, but rather a return to it. It was a genuine attempt to provide the organization with a viable organizing program following the MFDP's defeat. The decisions made at Kingston Springs sought to reconnect SNCC to its organizing roots, not push the organization in an entirely new direction. Unfortunately, the web of misinformation spun by civil rights moderates and accepted as gospel in the mainstream media led contemporaries to lose sight of Lowndes County's influence on the decisions reached at Kingston Springs. Earlier scholars looked for the origins of SNCC's version of Black Power primarily in Mississippi, dissecting the Atlanta Project position paper for its meaning. However, placing SNCC's Alabama fieldwork in its proper context, and linking it to the demands for black political empowerment, allows us to begin to reevaluate the origins of the Black Power movement. It was the reality of SNCC's organizing campaign in Alabama that laid the basis for the rhetoric of Black Power.

## NOTES

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<sup>1</sup>Gene Roberts, "Mississippi Reduces Police Protection for Marchers," *New York Times*, 17 June 1966; and Henry Hampton and Steve Fayer, with Sarah Flynn, *Voices of Freedom: An Oral History of the Civil Rights Movement from the 1950s through the 1980s* (New York, 1990), 289, 479–81.

<sup>2</sup>Stokely Carmichael and Charles Hamilton, *Black Power: The Politics of Liberation* (1967, reprinted New York, 1992), 44, 166, 176–77, 181.

<sup>3</sup>Cleveland Sellers in Cheryl Lynn Greenberg, ed., *A Circle of Trust: Remembering SNCC* (New Brunswick, NJ, 1998), 66.

<sup>4</sup>Stokely Carmichael, "What We Want," *New York Review of Books*, 22 September 1966.

<sup>5</sup>Ivanhoe Donaldson to the Editors of the *New York Times*, October 1966, Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee Papers, Martin Luther King, Jr., Archives, Atlanta, Georgia (hereafter SNCC Papers).

<sup>6</sup>For examples of the popular narrative in the mainstream press, see "Black Power," *New York Times*, 12 July 1966; and "Wrong Path to Rights," *Chicago Daily News*, 30 July 1966.

<sup>7</sup>Clayborne Carson, *In Struggle: SNCC and the Black Awakening of the 1960s* (Cambridge, MA, 1981); John Dittmer, *Local People: The Struggle for Civil Rights in Mississippi* (Urbana, IL, 1994); and Charles Payne, *I've Got the Light of Freedom: The Organizing Tradition and the Mississippi Freedom Struggle* (Berkeley, CA, 1995).

<sup>8</sup>Sociologist Belinda Robnett, for example, makes several of these points in her essay entitled "External Political Change, Collective Identities, and Participation in Social Movement Organization" in *Social Movements: Identity, Culture, and the State*, ed. David S. Meyer, et al. (New York, 2002), 266–85.

<sup>9</sup>Excellent recent studies of the movement in Mississippi include Emilye Crosby, *A Little Taste of Freedom: The Black Freedom Struggle in Claiborne County, Mississippi* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2005); and J. Todd Moye, *Let the People Decide: Black Freedom and White Resistance Movements in Sunflower County, Mississippi, 1945–1986* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2004).

<sup>10</sup>Jeffrey O. G. Ogbar, for instance, acknowledges the influence of the Lowndes County project on SNCC ideology in his book, *Black Power: Radical Politics and African American Identity* (Baltimore, MD, 2005), 75–76; see also, Taylor Branch, *At Canebrake's Edge: America in the King Years, 1965–68* (New York, 2006).

<sup>11</sup>Robnett argues that SNCC's embrace of Black Power had a deleterious effect on SNCC organizing. Belinda Robnett, *How Long? How Long? African-American Women in the Struggle for Civil Rights* (New York, 1997), 173–89. Examples of civil rights studies that articulate one or more of these perspectives include Lynn Olson, *Freedom's Daughters: The Unsung Heroines of the Civil Rights Movement from 1830 to 1970* (New York, 2001), 346–47; Robert Weisbrot, *Freedom Bound: A History of America's Civil Rights Movement* (New York, 1990), 193–221; and David Halberstam, *The Children* (New York, 1998), 521–30. An example of a study of the 1960s that puts forth these arguments is David Burner, *Making Peace with the 60s* (Princeton, NJ, 1996).

<sup>12</sup>In fall 1960, SNCC coordinated sit-ins to desegregate public accommodations. In May 1961, SNCC jumpstarted the Freedom Rides after Ku Klux Klan members beat Freedom Riders in Anniston and Birmingham, Alabama. For more on SNCC's involvement in the sit-ins and the Freedom Rides, see Carson, *In Struggle*, 19–44; and Halberstam, *The Children*, 237–367.

<sup>13</sup>Payne, *I've Got the Light of Freedom*, 111–18; Barbara Ransby, *Ella Baker and the Black Freedom Movement: A Radical Democratic Vision* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2003), 267–71; Olson, *Freedom's Daughters*, 194–99; Jacqueline A. Rouse, "We Seek to Know . . . in Order to Speak the Truth": Nurturing the Seeds of Discontent—Septima P. Clark and Participatory Leadership," in *Sisters in the Struggle: African American Women in the Civil Rights-Black Power Movement*, ed. Bettye Collier-Thomas and V. P. Franklin (New York, 2001), 95–120.

<sup>14</sup>Halberstam, *The Children*, 62–63.

<sup>15</sup>Stokely Carmichael with Ekwueme Michael Thelwell, *Ready for Revolution: The Life and Struggles of Stokely Carmichael (Kwame Ture)* (New York, 2003), 172.

<sup>16</sup>Dittmer, *Local People*, 109–10, 147, 165–66, 170–73.

<sup>17</sup>Carson, *In Struggle*, 83–95.

<sup>18</sup>*Ibid.*, 70, 96–98; and Dittmer, *Local People*, 202–05.

<sup>19</sup>Doug McAdam, *Freedom Summer* (New York, 1988); and Dittmer, *Local People*, 242–71.

<sup>20</sup>Dittmer, *Local People*, 272–303.

<sup>21</sup>Cleveland Sellers with Robert Terrell, *The River of No Return: The Autobiography of a Black Militant and the Life and Death of SNCC* (1973; reprinted Jackson, MS, 1990), 107–10; James Forman, *The Making of Black Revolutionaries: A Personal Account* (1972; reprinted New York, 1985), 386–96; and John Lewis with Michael D'Orso, *Walking with the Wind: A Memoir of the Movement* (New York, 1998), 275–84.

<sup>22</sup>"SNCC's Path? Carmichael Answers," *National Guardian*, 4 June 1966.

<sup>23</sup>Stokely Carmichael—"Integration Is Completely Irrelevant to Us: What We Want Is Power for People Who Don't Have It," *The Student Voice*, June 1966, in *The Movement: 1964–1970*, ed. Clayborne Carson (Westport, CT, 1993), 127; and Charlie Cobb, "Ready for the Revolution: From Stokely Carmichael to Kwame Ture," *Emerge Magazine*, June 1997, 43.

<sup>24</sup>Lewis, *Walking with the Wind*, 84–97.

<sup>25</sup>Halberstam, *The Children*, 431; Dittmer, *Local People*, 302.

<sup>26</sup>Sellers, *River of No Return*, 111; and John Benson, "Interview with New SNCC Chairman," *The Militant*, 23 May 1966.

<sup>27</sup>Dittmer, *Local People*, 320–21, 340.

<sup>28</sup>Carson, *In Struggle*, 136–57.

<sup>29</sup>Stokely Carmichael discusses the value and importance of community control in *Black Power*. See also Wilson Jeremiah Moses, *The Golden Age of Black Nationalism, 1850–1925* (New York, 1978); and William L. Van DeBurg, *New Day in Babylon: The Black Power Movement and American Culture, 1965–1975* (Chicago, 1992).

<sup>30</sup>For an historical overview of the African American tradition of self-determination and self-reliance, see V. P. Franklin, *Black Self-Determination: A Cultural History of African American Resistance* (Brooklyn, NY, 1992). For a regional look at this tradition as practiced in the first half of the 20th century that helps make clear the ways it served as a foundation for 1960s activism in the rural South, see Nan Elizabeth Woodruff, *American Congo: The African American Freedom Struggle in the Delta* (Cambridge, MA, 2003); and Paul Ortiz, *Emancipation Betrayed: The Hidden History of Black Organizing and White Violence in Florida from Reconstruction to the Bloody Election of 1920* (Berkeley, CA, 2005). For the mechanics of how local people supported SNCC activists, see Payne, *I've Got the Light of Freedom*.

<sup>31</sup>Silas Norman, Jr., interview with the author, 30 June 2000, Detroit, Michigan; SNCC WATS Report, 4 February 1965, box 39, folder 2, SNCC Papers; John Lewis telegram, 21 February 1965, box 2, folder 7, SNCC Papers; Bruce Perry, ed., *Malcolm X: The Last Speeches* (New York, 1989), 145; Joyce Ladner, "What 'Black Power' Means to Negroes in Mississippi: The New Negro Ideology," *Trans-Action* 5 (November 1967), 8–11; and Carson, *In Struggle*, 135.

<sup>32</sup>"Assumptions made by SNCC," notes from SNCC staff conference at Kingston Springs, Tennessee, 11 May 1966, 3, box 7, folder "Staff meetings, Jan.–Dec., 1966, SNCC Papers; Forman, *The Making of Black Revolutionaries*, 408; Cobb, "Ready for the Revolution," *Emerge Magazine*, June 1997, 46; and Carson, *In Struggle*, 134.

<sup>33</sup>Norman interview; and Carson, *In Struggle*, 144. See also Silas Norman, Jr., "What Is the Importance of Racial Considerations in the SNCC Staff?" n.d., folder 23, *Charles Sherrod Papers*, Civil Rights Collection, State Historical Society of Wisconsin, Madison.

<sup>34</sup>Minutes of General Body meeting at Waveland, Mississippi, 7 November 1964, and Minutes of reports submitted by workshops at Waveland, Mississippi, 7 November 1964, box 26, folder 21, SNCC Papers; and Carson, *In Struggle*, 144.

<sup>35</sup>Sellers, *River of No Return*, 130–47; and Cynthia Griggs Fleming, *Soon We Will Not Cry: The Liberation of Ruby Doris Smith Robinson* (Lanham, MD, 1998).

<sup>36</sup>Carmichael, *Ready for Revolution*, 210, 338.

<sup>37</sup>Jack [Minnis] to Bill Strickland, 21 October 1965, box 45, folder 1, SNCC Papers; "It's Very Simple: We Intend to Take Over Lowndes County: Interview with the Alabama Black Panther Party Organizer," *The Student Voice* (February 1966), in *The Movement*, ed. Carson, 107.

<sup>38</sup>SNCC, "Special Report," (February 1962), box 35, folder 5, SNCC Papers; Silas Norman and John Love, "Selma, Alabama," (March 1965), box 149, folder 18, SNCC Papers; Walter Stafford, "Selma Workshop Report," (13–16 December 1963), box 20, folder 5, SNCC Papers; and "SNICK' in Alabama," (1966), box 47, folder 73, SNCC Papers.

- <sup>39</sup>Atlanta SNCC office, "Report on Selma," (7 March 1965), box 39, folder 3, SNCC Papers; John Lewis to Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., 7 March 1965, box 2, folder 7, SNCC Papers; Norman interview; Minutes of Alabama staffs of SNCC and SCLC, 10 February 1965, box 7, folder "Staff Meetings, Jan-Mar, 1965," SNCC Papers; Garrow, *Bearing the Cross: Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference* (New York, 1986), 387; and Norman quoted in Greenberg, ed., *A Circle of Trust*, 97.
- <sup>40</sup>Norman in Greenberg, ed., *A Circle of Trust*, 97.
- <sup>41</sup>Norman interview and Norman quoted in Greenberg, ed., *A Circle of Trust*, 97; Garrow, *Bearing the Cross*, 387; Cobb, "Ready for the Revolution, 43.
- <sup>42</sup>SNCC, "Special Report," (February 1965), box 35, folder 5, SNCC Papers.
- <sup>43</sup>Payne, *I've Got the Light of Freedom*, 111-13.
- <sup>44</sup>SNCC WATS Report, 26 July 1965, and 13 August 1965, box 40, folder 7, SNCC Papers; SNCC WATS Report, 24 October 1965, box 41, folder 2, SNCC Papers; Gene Roberts, "Voting Officials Sign 1,444 Negroes First Day of Drive," *New York Times*, 11 August 1965; U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, *The Voting Rights Act . . . The First Months* (Washington, DC, 1965), 16, 35; Gail Falk, "New Federal Examiners Register Negro Voters in Hale, Dallas, Marengo, Lowndes Counties," *Southern Courier*, 13 August 1965; and Charles W. Eagles, *Outside Agitator: Jon Daniels and the Civil Rights Movement in Alabama* (Chapel Hill, NC, 1993), 197.
- <sup>45</sup>John Benson, "Interview with New SNCC Chairman," *The Militant*, 23 May 1966, 6.
- <sup>46</sup>Frank Miles, Jr. in "Lowndes County Freedom Organization leaders talk about their party: Frank Miles," *The Student Voice* (June 1966), in Carson, *The Movement*, 126.
- <sup>47</sup>John Hulett, *The Black Panther Party. Speech by John Hulett. Interview with Stokely Carmichael. Report from Lowndes County* (New York, 1966), 8; SNCC Research Department, "Background on the development of political strategy and political education in Lowndes County, Alabama," box 46, folder 11, SNCC Papers; Edward Rudd, "New Political Group in Lowndes to Name Own Negro Candidates," *Southern Courier*, 1-2 January 1966; "Lowndes County Freedom Organization leaders talk about their party," *The Student Voice* (June 1966), in Carson, *The Movement*, 126; and interview with Mathew Jackson, Sr., 4 August 1968, *Civil Rights Documentation Project*, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University, Washington, DC, (hereafter CRDP).
- <sup>48</sup>"Lowndes County forms local political group," *The Student Voice*, 20 December 1965, 2, box 51, folder 3, SNCC Papers; and Gene Roberts, "Student Rights Group Lacks Money and Help But Not Projects," *New York Times*, 10 December 1965.
- <sup>49</sup>Courtland Cox, "What would it profit a man . . . A Report on Alabama," (1966), box 46, folder 14, SNCC Papers.
- <sup>50</sup>Roy Reed, "Voter Drive Is Spurred in Alabama," *New York Times*, 23 August 1965; SNCC press release, 27 August 1965, box 35, folder 7, SNCC Papers; and SNCC, "Background information on freedom elections in Alabama," (1966), box 45, folder 12, SNCC Papers.
- <sup>51</sup>Larry Freudiger, "Hopefuls Seek 'Panther' Nods," *Southern Courier*, 23-24 April 1966; Memo from Selma office to Bill Mahoney, et. al., April 1966, box 45, folder 14, SNCC Papers; SNCC, News of the field # 4, April 1966, box 35, folder 9, SNCC Papers; and Memo from Tina Harris to staff, 21 April 1966, box 35, folder 9, SNCC Papers.
- <sup>52</sup>Larry Freudiger, "Lowndes Third Party Attracts 900, Nominates Logan to Face Sheriff," *Southern Courier*, 7-8 May 1966; William Price, "Racists Sweep Alabama Primaries," *National Guardian*, 14 May 1966; Benson, "Interview with New SNCC chairman," 6; and Viola Bradford, "Samson Crum Withdraws from Dallas Sheriff Race," *Southern Courier*, 8-9 October 1966.
- <sup>53</sup>"5th Annual Report of the Principals of the Calhoun Colored School," (1897), 6-7, Alabama Education File-LPR 139, Box 8, Alabama Department of Archives and History, Montgomery; Joseph P. Loud to [Calhoun] Land Trust Subscribers, (31 January 1931), Phelps-Stokes Collection, File-MG 162, box 25, Folder 16, Schomburg Center for Research on Black Culture, New York, New York; and interview with John Hulett, 30 May 1968, CRDP.
- <sup>54</sup>Benson, "Interview with New SNCC chairman," 6-8.
- <sup>55</sup>Sellers, *River of No Return*, 155.
- <sup>56</sup>*Ibid.*, 155.
- <sup>57</sup>For one of the earliest interpretations of SNCC's understanding of black consciousness, see Joyce Ladner, "What 'Black Power' Means to Negroes in Mississippi," *Trans-Action* 5 (November 1967): 7-15.
- <sup>58</sup>Gloria Larry quoted in Greenberg, ed., *A Circle of Trust*, 161.

- <sup>59</sup>SNCC New York Office, "What's Happening in SNCC?" (3 June 1966), box 126, folder 11, SNCC Papers; and Dorothy Dewberry, "Freedom Voice [Detroit Area SNCC Newsletter]" (May 1966), box 84, folder 15, SNCC Papers. Ivanhoe Donaldson, the director of SNCC's New York office, correctly pointed out in his unpublished letter to the editors of the *New York Times* that as early as 1964 SNCC began sending "an increasing number of black workers and [a] diminishing number of white workers into black communities." Ivanhoe Donaldson to the Editors of the *New York Times* (October 1966), in SNCC Papers. For more on the life and death of Jonathan Daniels, see Eagles *Outside Agiator*, 1–22; 163–84.
- <sup>60</sup>Willie Ricks in David R. Underhill, "When They Ask, 'What Do You Want?' The Cry Changes to 'Black Power'," *Southern Courier*, 25–26 June 1966.
- <sup>61</sup>SNCC press release, "Comments by Stokely Carmichael, Chairman Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee," (1966), 1, box 150, folder 4, SNCC Papers.
- <sup>62</sup>Sellers in Greenberg, ed., *A Circle of Trust*, 159.
- <sup>63</sup>For an example of the coup thesis, see Halberstam, *The Children*, 521–542; "New Top Officers Elected by SNCC," *The Militant*, 23 May 1966; Gene Roberts, "Militants Take Over Student Coordinating Committee," *New York Times*, 17 May 1966; SNCC New York office, "What's Happening in SNCC?" (3 June 1966), 1; "Lewis Quits SNCC; Shuns 'Black Power,'" *New York Times*, 1 July 1966; Carson, *In Struggle*, 200–203; Forman, *The Making of Black Revolutionaries*, 452; Gloria Larry, interview with the author and Taylor Branch, 28 June 2000, Detroit, Michigan; Paul Good, "Odyssey of a Man—and a Movement," *New York Times*, 25 June 1967, VI; and Cobb, "Ready for the Revolution," *Emerge Magazine*, June 1997, 46.
- <sup>64</sup>SNCC, "What's Happening in SNCC?", 4, 5; and Sellers, *River of No Return*, 159–63.
- <sup>65</sup>Carmichael, *Ready for Revolution*, 490.
- <sup>66</sup>Gene Roberts, "Troopers Shove Group Resuming Meredith March," *New York Times*, 8 June 1966; and Gene Roberts, "Marchers Stage Mississippi Rally," *ibid.*, 18 July 1966.
- <sup>67</sup>"Dr. King deplores 'Black Power' Bid," *ibid.*, 21 June 1966.
- <sup>68</sup>See, for example, the keynote address delivered by Roy Wilkins at the NAACP's annual convention on 5 July 1966. M. S. Handler, "Wilkins Says Black Power Leads Only to Black Death," *New York Times*, 6 July 1966. For more on anticommunism and the NAACP, see Martha Biondi, *To Stand and Fight: The Struggle for Civil Rights in Postwar New York City* (Cambridge, MA, 2003), 137–63.
- <sup>69</sup>Edward C. Burks, "Militant Rights Groups Feel Pinch as Gifts Drop," *New York Times*, 25 July 1966.
- <sup>70</sup>See Editors, "Sabotage in Alabama," 21 April 1966; Gene Roberts, "Militants Take Over Student Coordinating Committee," 17 May 1966; "Why the Cry for 'Black Power,'" 3 July 1966, and "Rights March Disunity," *ibid.*, 28 June 1966.
- <sup>71</sup>"Black Power," *ibid.*, 12 July 1966.
- <sup>72</sup>*Ibid.*
- <sup>73</sup>SNCC, "What's Happening in SNCC?", 3; and Carmichael, *Ready for Revolution*, 541–47.
- <sup>74</sup>M. S. Handler, "Wilkins Assails CORE and SNCC and Hints Full Break," *New York Times*, 8 July 1966; Fred Powlledge, "A Slogan, a Chant, a Threat," *ibid.*, 10 December 1966; and Carmichael and Hamilton, *Black Power*, 164–77.
- <sup>75</sup>Gene Roberts, "Black Power Idea Long in Planning," *New York Times*, 5 August 1966; and "Black Power Prophet," *ibid.*, 5 August 1966.
- <sup>76</sup>"The Politics of Frustration," *ibid.*, 7 August 1966.
- <sup>77</sup>"All But Destroyed," *ibid.*, 27 August 1966.
- <sup>78</sup>Carson, *In Struggle*, 192–96.
- <sup>79</sup>Ogbar, *Black Power*, 72–81; Willie Mukassa Ricks, interview with the author, 14 November 2003, Storrs, Connecticut; and Lance Hill, *The Deacons for Defense and Justice: Armed Resistance and the Civil Rights Movement* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2004), 220–23.
- <sup>80</sup>The closest thing to a plan of action that the Atlanta activists proposed was the demand that SNCC remove whites from the field and from leadership positions. SNCC Vine City Project, *Black Power* (Nashville: Southern Student Organizing Committee, 1966), 1–7; Carson, *In Struggle*, 192–96; and Ricks as quoted in Carson, *In Struggle*, 129.
- <sup>81</sup>For more on SNCC political organizing in Philadelphia, see Matthew Countryman, *Up South: Civil Rights and Black Power in Philadelphia* (Philadelphia, PA, 2005).
- <sup>82</sup>Richard Hoffman, "Slogan Alienates White Liberals," *Chicago American*, 29 July 1966; Burks, "Militant Rights Groups Feel Pinch as Gifts Drop," 25 July 1966, and Gene Roberts, "Fund Lag Plagues Rights

Movement," 10 January 1966, and "Black Power Idea Long in Planning," *New York Times*, 5 August 1966; Carmichael, *Ready for Revolution*, 540–60; Carson, *In Struggle*, 225; and Greenberg, *A Circle of Trust*, 12.

<sup>83</sup>Hardy T. Frye, *Black Parties and Political Power: A Case Study* (Boston, MA, 1980), 62; and Hardy Frye interview with Alma Miller (1972), Hardy T. Frye Oral History Collection, Auburn University Archives, Auburn, Alabama.

<sup>84</sup>Frye, *Black Parties and Political Power*, 34, 87.

<sup>85</sup>Carmichael and Hamilton, *Black Power*, 115.

<sup>86</sup>Hampton and Fayer, *Voices of Freedom*, 565–86; Hanes Walton, Jr., *Black Politics: A Theoretical and Structural Analysis* (Philadelphia, PA, 1972), 121–40; Katherine Tate, *From Protest to Politics: The New Black Voters in American Elections* (Cambridge, MA, 1994), 151–80.

<sup>87</sup>Steven F. Lawson, *In Pursuit of Power: Southern Blacks and Electoral Politics, 1965–1982* (New York, 1985), 264–66.

<sup>88</sup>*Ibid.*, 254–82