

Difficult to Organize the Poorest and the Wealthiest Among Negroes . . .

By John Perdue

In case you should wish to introduce this article you should know that I am 21, a student on leave from Harvard College, a field worker with SNCC. I've spent five months in southwest Georgia, partly in Albany and partly in Americus. I spent 20 days (June 19-July 9) in jail in Albany on charges of disorderly conduct, defacing public property, resisting arrest, and assault with intent to murder. I was released on \$1900 bond (cash). I spent 85 days (August 8-Nov. 1) in Sumter County jail on charges of inciting to insurrection, interfering with a lawful arrest, rioting, unlawful assembly, and assault with intent to murder (state charges) and resisting arrest and disorderly conduct (city charges). I was released by order of a three-judge panel of federal judges on \$2100 bond, which declared the insurrection and unlawful assembly statutes unconstitutional and all eight peace warrants lodged against me invalid. The court is in recess and will convene again after Dec. 1 to decide whether to issue an injunction restraining local officials from depriving people of their civil rights under color of law.

Participants in the civil rights movement today are not given to utopianism, but a theme which lies behind picket lines, mass demonstrations, and arrests is the attempt of American blacks to feel the pain of oppression which they have so long suppressed and find the strength to overcome it.

This became painfully apparent to me during my three month stay in the Sumter County Jail in Americus, Georgia, on charges of inciting to insurrection. One of the black prisoners there, a man in his forties, could not stop calling me "sir", even after I tried for several weeks to break his habit. For him the pain of communicating with me, a white, was so great that he avoided me as much as possible even though he knew I was in jail because of civil rights work. The way to relationships of mutual respect between white and black is blocked by deep counter currents in the personalities of, I would say, the majority of Southern blacks.

Still Jim Crow Despite ICC

Surface events in the racial struggle mean little until one can understand why, in Albany, Georgia, in spite of an ICC ruling which ended segregation in the bus terminal there, few blacks use the formerly "white" waiting rooms. After two years of mass demonstrations, boycotts, and voter registration, Albany blacks have little to show for their suffering in official desegregation, and the balance weighs heavily against even casual integration. The scale of success, however, is the people's state of mind, and there are at least several hundred blacks in the city who can now face a white man without the need to feel servile. These are the ones who have faced beatings, jail and the wrath of the white man with aggressive non-violence and have experienced at least temporary unity in the long-divided Negro community.

There is at least one basic institution through which Southern blacks (I use "black" rather than "colored", which is the euphemistic word attached to segregated facilities) attempt to release and rectify the frustrations which result from inferior status. Country churches in particular have evolved a "language" of music and preaching and patterns of intense emotional possession which are baffling and embarrassing to whites used to more formal and "rational" means of religious expression. The elaborate, shifting chords and embellishments of a "common meter" hymn; the rising cadence of the

We asked one of the Americus Four to write his story for us and we are proud to present in his own words the reactions of John Perdue of Denver to the situation in the South. It breathes an objectivity, a humanity and a selflessness characteristic of SNCC. This article is given new meaning by the news that a grand jury in Americus has reindicted Perdue along with the other three (Ralph W. Allen of Melrose, Mass.; Donald Harris of New York City and Thomas McDaniel of Americus) for assault with intent to murder and rioting. The widest possible public support must be mobilized for these heroic young men if the vindictive authorities of Americus are not to succeed in finding some way to keep them in prison for many years.—IFS

black in the pulpit singing the Word; the shouts of the old bent ladies in the Amen Corner; the pleading prayers of the grimacing deacon—all are media through which, I think, the most oppressed blacks may convince themselves that their afflictions represent the road to that "great gettin'-up mornin'".

The most talented and sensitive SNCC workers enter a country church and speak in the language of black religion but with the message that suffering, while a source of strength, is dehumanizing, that retreat only intensifies it. Black churches, for this reason and for convenience, become the site of mass meetings, the most regular feature of the Movement, and old hymns carry new words, themes such as "We shall not be moved", "We shall overcome", "This little light of mine, I'm gonna let it shine".

A totally different reaction to segregation consists entirely in an attempt to be "white". Students at Negro colleges in the South, many teachers at all levels, some ministers with relatively wealthy congregations, and aspiring politicians and professionals deny their "roots" in black culture. Straightened hair, a flashy car, esoteric cultural tastes and formal, restrained church services become symbols of the escape. The result, in terms of the Movement, is that many, though certainly not all, of the upper classes in the Negro community will not actively identify themselves with the Movement.

In canvassing for voter registration I have found the most response from people in the middle ranges on the Negro income scale. The very poor are frequently afraid of me as a white (sometimes they will not answer the door, other times they will agree to everything the canvasser says in order to get rid of him). Or they are realistically or irrationally afraid that they will suffer eviction, firing, or even "legal" or physical intimidation. Ignorance and apathy as well obscure the connections in their minds between their personal failure to register and the fact that from top to bottom the "government is a white man". At the upper end of the scale, businessmen are threatened with white boycott, revocation of licenses, litigation, and property damage if they take an uncompromising public stand for black interests. Teachers, ideally a powerful force, usually in my experience succumb to subtle pressures from principals and the school board, much as teachers all over the nation willingly or not steer away from "controversial issues". All of these pressures reinforce the tendency to disavow "black roots" in a drive for respectability.

Only the most confident and aggressive leader can counteract the forces which maintain the status quo, for on the level

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of personal contacts all but the most militant need a lot of pushing to rise out of short-term thinking and passivism. It is clear that youth are the most active leaders and followers in this Movement, but the most charismatic leaders are often defeated by their heroic image when, for example, their awed followers ask for autographs and lavish praise rather than risking jail and violence. An everyday principle in SNCC work is: balance between the hardest demands of a militant movement and the compromise necessary to maintain enthusiasm and communication.

Despite endless condemnation of the effects of white domination in propaganda, a basic submission to authority sometimes emerges in the strangest places. A southwest Georgia police chief once entered a mass meeting wearing his gun and was greeted not with a mass exit or cold silence but with uncertain applause. A skillful law officer can blunt the edge of the strongest leadership. Journalists, ministers, parents, and teachers can apply similar pressures in creating an aura of conventionalism — in phrases describing the "well-dressed, middle-class" Movement—which obscure the originality and depth of change. Paternalism as well undermines resentment and determination by a superficially friendly atmosphere.

The Whites, Too, Are Fearful

I think it can be argued that segregation both feeds on and spawns mutual fear between black and white and that this fear interacts with clear economic pressures. If violence may be said to indicate fear in the aggressor, then it becomes clear why it is in the blackest counties and towns of the South that lynchings and beatings are the commonest. One Georgia sheriff revealed his fear of a black SNCC worker when he forgot to lock him up after a conference with lawyers outside the cell block. Another sheriff once caned a SNCC lawyer who came to his jail to see about a white SNCC worker whom the sheriff had ordered beaten by prisoners. The most rabid segregationist propaganda reveals a fear of sexual and cultural pollution.

But the unbelievable intimidation which official and private whites wreak on "uppity niggers" would be impossible to perpetuate without economic support and incentive. The white employers and businessmen rely on the local monopolies which protect them from retaliation. If they antagonize the black population by kicking a customer or firing a black worker, they still in most cases run the area's only grocery or furnish the only source of employment. Only a well-organized and timely boycott can restrain the white who is driven to such behavior. And only massive voter registration and organization can restrain local politicians and law officers from arbitrary intimidation.

Strategy then is complicated when it is unclear whether deep prejudice and fear or expediency are driving a specific aggressor. In any case "justice" in the Black Belt can be accurately symbolized by the token prosecution of the Birmingham bombers and the threat of execution levelled against me and three other civil rights workers in Americus, Georgia.

Will the Movement for racial equality turn to violent tactics, and if it did would this tactic achieve the end of integration? I think the answer to both questions is "no". Or-

ganized violence will not come because the individuals capable of violence in the black population are least ready for sustained discipline. Gang leaders frequently work with SNCC but our insistence on non-violence forces them to choose between discipline within the Movement and violence against each other. The end of one such leader's association with SNCC could be placed at the time when he was wounded in a battle with a rival black gang. If violence were adopted as a tactic, I think, the effect of it would be to confirm and strengthen white fears.

Where is the federal government in all of this? My contact with the most active local representatives of the federal government, agents of the FBI, has been less than enchanting. While perhaps one third of the local agents I have met have been fairly impartial Northerners, the others, natives of the South, have taken statements from me with poorly disguised skepticism and sometimes antagonism. I have also talked with sympathetic Justice Department investigators, but their province is generally strictly limited to the evidence related to intimidation of prospective voters.

Official statements from Washington are usually evasive concerning allegations of police brutality: "there is no evidence", "investigations are underway (after three months!)", or "we have no authority to deal with this issue". But SNCC has submitted hundreds of sworn affidavits specifying cases of police brutality, and the FBI is in possession of photographs showing bruises and welts which we suffered as a result of official violence.

A symptom of the attitude of the federal government toward civil rights is Kennedy's appointment of a judge to the southwest Georgia district court who has consistently rendered unfavorable decisions in cases involving racial issues. His views on race relations were well-known before his appointment.

Where, then, does the Movement stand in southwest Georgia, and where is it going? Voter registration is receiving the greatest emphasis in anticipation of the elections next November. Albany, Georgia, saw a Black run for Mayor in October this year. An inevitable problem is low turnout—in this case roughly 60% of the registered Negroes, 10% of whom apparently voted for one of the two white segregationist candidates. White reaction to the candidate was surprisingly favorable, and he received a few votes in all-white wards. Political pressure has a high potential in towns like Americus, where almost 50% of the population is black, yet only 10% of the eligible blacks are registered.

The history of Albany, I think, has shown that momentary crises are not effective in bringing a change unless they are backed by substantial and visible economic and political power. Where once over 700 people went to jail during demonstrations, now potentially active participation is limited to a few tireless workers.

The Movement is reaching far greater economic sophistication in selective patronage, in a producer's co-operative for farm owners and workers (aimed at combatting price discrimination and seasonal unemployment), and possibly combination with white workers in union activity. Meanwhile, the currents of fear and pain and courage continue to clash in the Black Belt.