

# THE NEGRO MOVEMENT — NEW HEIGHTS

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**T**HERE ARE A NUMBER of myths which someday must be dispelled in order that all of us may understand the world we live in and live in it. In the United States, while myths abound throughout the nation—we are the biggest and the best, we are a government of the people, by the people, etc., *anyone* can grow up to be President, and/or make a million dollars, and many more—myths seem to be most prevalent in the South.

The white South has wrapped around itself a veil of myth within which to hide from itself the truth about its past, its present and its future. When the Ku Klux Klan was formed to re-enslave the Negro, the men who donned masks and killed in the dark, hid the fact of their participation from their wives or from the preacher. Today, the respectable families tell each other that violence cannot be condoned, that law and order must prevail. They hide behind not knowing about the Negroes who are falsely arrested and beaten in the jail-house. As the Germans did not know of the extermination of the Jews.

They have created for themselves numerous defenses. The fantasies range from the gentle "they are like children; we must take care of them" which gives birth to what appears to be the benevolence and love of paternalism, but what is really a highly profitable system of exploitation. They range to the more aggressive belief in the inferiority of the Negro for an expiation of whatever conscious guilt results from that other than benevolent treatment the Negro gets at the hands of the white. There are many ways of expressing the myths: "They like our way of life"; "It is *our* way of life and *we* like it." "Why, Old Joe would cut off his right arm for me. I remember when his boy had appendicitis and I ran out in the middle of the night and got Doc Gray to come and see him. Why . . ."

Or as McComb, Miss., police chief George Guy explained to a Northern white writer: "They know they're niggers; they know their place." The chief might say it loudly, clearly, defiantly, but for how much longer could he believe it? The demonstrations in McComb, largely by high school students, died down after arrests, beatings, fines, jail terms. The chief prevailed, but can he guess for how long he will reign? The myths are being dissipated—no, they are being exploded. They are being exploded because there is a movement bent on destroying, not only the myths, but also the society which has nurtured them.

### *the new movement*

There is much talk of the "New Negro," but the important thing that has come forth is a New Movement. It is a Movement made up primarily of Negroes who have decided that the time is NOW; that they want freedom NOW. Negroes have always wanted freedom. What is new is that it is no longer millions of individual Negroes who want freedom, but a Movement of Negroes who not only want freedom, but who are fighting for it and are willing to die for it. It is a radical movement. Those in it understand, at various levels of understanding, that they are bound and not free because of the nature of the society into which they were born. They understand that this means that the structure of that society must be radically changed. There are several elements of the Movement of crucial importance which define its character. Among these are: 1) *It is a mass movement of Negroes led by Negroes*; 2) *While it may have at various times and in different places different short-term goals its long-term goal (freedom) necessitates a decisive change in the power structure of the South*; 3) *Everything is at stake*.

A spark was ignited during the Montgomery, Ala., bus boycott in 1956 and the flame spread when four Negro students sat down at a Greensboro, N. C., lunch counter in 1960. Then what had formerly been a comparatively quiet struggle for a few changes became a massive, explosive, strident demand for everything. A movement emerged. When predominantly white Northern organizations attempted to bring order out of what seemed to be chaos in the student protest movement, a few determined Southern Negro students said no. You can join us, you can help us, but we will do this in our own way, in our own time. You cannot lead us.

California attorney, Loren Miller, has called it "Farewell to the liberals." In the *Nation* of October 20, 1962, he wrote: ". . . what is

really at play here is a cleavage between the burgeoning Freedom Now thinking of the Negro and the old progress concept to which liberals still cling." As Dick Gregory put it: "[Liberals ask] 'What can we do for you tomorrow?' But the people who are hung up in the minorities struggle want something today. Northern and Southern liberals represent to me the third man in a fist fight."

The Movement is Negro led because Negroes have become impatient. It is Negro led because the leadership springs from the well of discontent—the Negro community. There are some few courageous whites who are in the fight, and there must in time be many more, but now the Movement is a Negro movement. In small towns across the South, in rural counties in the Deep South, there are mass meetings each week, there are local improvement associations or civic leagues with local Negro leadership. Each has its own job to do in its own way, in its own community, yet each is part of the Movement. When I knocked on a door to ask directions in Albany, Ga., the elderly woman who answered first asked: "Are you in the Movement?"

### ***goals of the movement***

Each local group has immediate goals: in "terrible" Terrell county in Georgia where never more than 50 Negroes have been registered to vote at any one time, it is to get Negroes to take that long walk up to the registration office to fill out an application; in Albany, Ga., it is to get Negroes jobs in Sears Roebuck and other downtown businesses; in other places it is to desegregate the public library or the State House cafeteria or the swimming pool. *But everywhere the long-term goals are the same: independence, that is, release from dependence on the man for food for your child, fuel for your tractor, seed for your crop; dignity, the fight of a man to be treated as a man; freedom, the right to vote, to equal treatment before the law.*

Negroes know that to reach these goals the economic stranglehold of whites must be broken. As the struggle intensifies the economic benefits of segregation which accrue to whites become clearer. In Leesburg, Lee County, Georgia, the man who comes to buy the land of Negro leaders of the voter registration drive is Robert E. Lee. He is also the man who as president of the bank controls financial transactions of the county. Negroes put it simply: Lee owns Lee County.

In the rural areas the power lines are clear. It is not only the plantation Negroes who depend on the man; even the Negro who owns his land relies on the whites for cash, supplies, insurance. If the Negro

would end the way of life which permits each Southern town to so order itself that street paving ends where the street changes from white to Negro, where Negro-white contact is over the counter of a retail store, in the kitchen, at the back door or in the back bedroom, then the oligarchic structure of the South must be destroyed.

### ***increase of racist attacks***

To do this the Negro knows that everything is at stake. Each knows that he balances freedom against his life. When the home of Rev. Agnew James, chairman of the Lee county, Georgia, voter registration drive, was riddled with shots in the night it was by accident that no one in his family was killed. When the car of Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee voter registration workers was shot up near Greenwood, Miss., the three SNCC field secretaries in the car miraculously escaped death. The driver, 20-year-old James Travis, missed death by a hairsbreadth when a .45 caliber bullet lodged in the muscle of his neck instead of in the spine.

Some are not so lucky. From time to time a body is found in a field or in a river. These killings, the shootings, the church burnings, are demonstrations to show Negroes that their struggle for equality angers segregationists. They are warnings. Warnings which, coupled with economic pressure, had heretofore successfully kept the Negro in his place. But the decision has been made that Now is the time. That is why the shots, the boycott, didn't stop Rev. James. "They can put every stone in my path. They can put a mountain there and then I'm going to peek around it and still tell you to go and register," he says. Sixty-eight-year-old Mama Dollie went to register last summer and has housed SNCC workers on her farm in Lee County. When the telephone threats of "We're coming up to get you," began she told callers to "come on over." When they came one night some friends waited outside and greeted the callers with gunshots. Another night after a telephone call Mama Dollie got her gun and said to an elderly man who works on the farm: "Come on, Everett; it's just you and me."

A Negro lawyer in the struggle tells this story:

"I went to a trial one day in a rural Alabama county court. The county prosecutor came over and said: 'You better watch your step today. You see those people out there? They're the Adams boys. They got the Klan with them here. I'm just warning you. Be careful.' I told him: 'Listen, I've been scared all of my life. I am no more afraid today than I've been every day of my life. I'm afraid, but not terrorized.'"

The memory of many humiliations, of beatings, jailings, lynchings is a powerful antidote to fear, a forceful impetus to the Movement. There are memories and there is the future. A 25-year-old man who was turned down as a would-be voter because he couldn't read well enough said he was going back to try again "for the sake of the young ones." For the sake of the children like Weldon McSwine, Jr., a fourteen-year-old who was brutally beaten by Mississippi police after he was picked up for questioning about a crime despite his pleas that he "didn't do nothing except go to the cotton fields and back home."

***they know what they want***

Those in the Movement know why they are in it and what is needed to get what they want. And they know the Movement has stretched across the South. They know it has gained worldwide attention. For the most part they do not know what the Movement's significance is to the nation. They accept, but do not seek white allies. They see the doors that will open to them; they may not see that their freedom is linked to the freedom of all, and to the promise of the American Revolution and the "democratic way of life" of which we sometimes speak. They do not yet see that the man who holds them down also holds the poor white down. (Just as the poor white does not see that he is used to keep the Negro in his place and at the same time is himself kept down to maintain the wealthier whites in power.)

Should the white South continue to fight for segregation as now, should the segregationist continue to rely on the well-tried theory that "there is nothing like fear to keep the niggers in line" as a rural Georgia sheriff expressed it, the struggle will sharpen. What is now called revolution will become revolution. The potential is there; because the need is there and the impulse is there. It is quite possible, however, that the "moderates" of the South will offer enough to blur the aims, enough to satisfy immediate, short-term goals. It is possible that the Negro's right to vote will be granted and then that his vote may be bought. The Negro, after all, is no different (except for a history of bondage and the color of his skin) from any other American. It is possible that a better home, a better school, a better car might satisfy him. He can be granted the right to vote; and then he may vote for the man the power structure chooses.

Some Southern whites recognize the possibility of compromise. They recognize that they might not have it quite as easy as in the past, but they would have it nonetheless. These are the moderates who see that outright bestiality can no longer be tolerated and who cry for

law and order (tokenism). As after a bitter struggle the American way of life came to include unionism so it can include racial equality.

There is, for instance, in the Movement today an emphasis on voter registration which is being encouraged by the Kennedy Administration. There is a theory behind registration of the Negroes in the South which holds that the Negro vote can change the character of the Democratic Party in the South to end the Dixiecrat hold over the "liberal" Northern Democrats in Congress. This theory sees as an end the creation of a two-party system—liberals in the Democratic Party and conservatives in the Republican Party. Should the segregationists allow this "victory" the Movement might find its Federal support dissipated; it might find that many Negroes were satisfied and thereby eliminated from the struggle.

I think, however, that "tradition" runs too deep. I think two hundred years is too long for this compromise to work. But the impulse to compromise has much force behind it and the ramifications of the cry of Freedom NOW are still too unclear to guarantee that the dream will not be killed. In five years we may see more Negroes eating in the best restaurants of Birmingham than in the best restaurants of New York. And with that we may find that the promise the Movement now holds out to us has been snuffed out—the promise that it will be the spark of life that frees us from this debilitating conformity which confines criticism within the bounds of bipartisan participation in a Cold War to preserve the freedom, liberty and equality which we have never attained.

There is nowhere in American life today that the cry for freedom exists, except in the Movement. There is nowhere that people are willing to sacrifice everything, including life, for something, except in the Movement. People in the North speak of the fight for peace as a "movement" and as the evidence of political action, but it is a fight which cannot be the spur to change until it itself changes. For the peace "movement" today is unclear in its aims, unsure of its validity, afraid of its potentials. It demands nothing from its partisans except a willingness to picket in the rain. As it is now constituted it has nothing to fight, except the "bomb"; it has no focus, no enemy. The Movement has an enemy on which to train its sights, and it has focused on this enemy. The issues are clear and it is clear to each participant that the stakes are high. To each it is: my life against the system.