

TEXT OF SPEECH GIVEN FEBRUARY 1, 1964, AT THE 26th ANNIVERSARY MEETING
OF THE PEOPLES WORLD BY MIKE MILLER, REPRESENTATIVE, STUDENT NONVIOLENT
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February 1, 1960 -- the place is Greensboro, North Carolina -- four young Negroes demand to be served at a local fountain and refuse to leave when the service is denied. What in retrospect is named the sit-in movement has begun. Word returns to the college campus and is spread from there to other Negro schools throughout the South. In the next two months dozens of campuses become involved. Four years later, February 1, 1964, the Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee is known to all who are interested in the civil rights movement. It is generally acknowledged as the most militant of the civil rights organizations.

I think it would be fruitful for us today to consider the origins of this movement, the source of its strength, its direction, and its meaning for us. If a single source of inspiration had to be named, it would probably be found in the Montgomery bus boycott and the inspiration of Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. Others point to the long history of sit-ins staged by CORE. But neither of these led to a full movement in the South -- the Montgomery Improvement Association was unsuccessfully copied in a few other Southern cities and the work of CORE remained in the hands of a dedicated minority, indeed, a handful, who were a valuable moral witness but never at the center of a mass movement.

CORE and King were, in fact, distant models for the students who began the sit-ins -- almost as distant as the works of Gandhi and Thoreau. Indeed, Walden Pond and the march to the sea may have been as relevant to these undergraduates as the earlier experience of their black brethren in the South. Paradoxically, it may be the very isolation created by the McCarthy period and the institutionalization of its premises during the '50's that provided the climate for new ideas in the South. I am told by some of the old timers in SNCC that circles developed on the Southern Negro campuses in the mid and late '50's and that discussion in these circles, especially among Negro seminarians, was deep and intense. Here were debated the ways to freedom. The Greensboro Four were the first to publicly proclaim what had been privately discussed.

I was struck by the sense of isolation in which this movement grew while I was in Mississippi this past summer. There was a universal feeling in SNCC that we were the first to grab the tiger by the tail -- and he wasn't a paper one either -- and that before us there had been nothing. I was disabused of these notions by a wise middle

aged Negro in Cleveland, Mississippi who told me of what must have been a very real movement until it was squashed by the fear and black exodus that followed the brutal killing of Emmet Till.

Let me elaborate for a moment the importance I place on this period of isolation. If McCarthyism disrupted the continuity of political generations, it also allowed the new generation to think in its own terms without using a language foreign to its experience. If McCarthyism devastated existing movements in its time, it also made possible the growth of a movement whose internal dialogue was not hampered by the narrowed perceptions and hardened style that is personified in the ideological disputes I was to hear in New York among those of the older generation who were trying to understand how SNCC had happened and interpret what it is doing. What I am suggesting is that this movement owes its health and vitality, at least in part, to the sickness that was the McCarthy era. These isolated conditions produced a core of dedicated militants who are building a new, non-violent American revolution. The character of that revolution is what I would like to discuss next.

If SNCC's uniqueness stems from the period of isolation in which it developed, its continued strength reflects the rapid way in which it broke out of that isolation. I suppose that it is difficult to recall that SNCC's first demands were not very different from the demands of the most moderate of the forces in the civil rights movement: the integration of lunch counters and theaters, libraries and swimming pools, and so forth. We should also remember that the militant manner of protest for these rights was one that required little support in Southern black communities. All it required was a few students sick and tired of signs that said "white only" or "Negroes on Tuesday" and who were willing to challenge with their bodies the structure of power and myth that stood behind those signs. In its beginnings, SNCC continued the tradition begun by CORE of protest by moral witness and added an ingredient of spontaneity but didn't really change the nature of the enterprise.

Because the sit-in can be staged from isolation, continued involvement in it is difficult to sustain. It was no accident that CORE until very recently was a tiny organization. If the risks were high, the rewards very distant. Except for those who make witness to save their own souls, without concern for the consequences of what they do, it is difficult to sustain the desire to act when there are not too many others around to act with you. And SNCC was having difficulty over this problem. SNCC was formally organized at a conference in Raleigh, North Carolina, on April 1, 1960. The summer saw sit-ins continue throughout the South, but as the Fall semester moved along, it became apparent that the sit-in movement would be a dead-end movement if it were not accompanied by something else. Nor was that something else found in the Freedom Rides of Summer '61. While an extremely important injection of life into the Southern movement, the Freedom Ride,

like the sit-in, was here today and gone tomorrow. The Freedom Rides did, however, accomplish something else -- they came at a time when isolation was no longer healthy, when the exposure to new ideas was needed and helpful to young Negro militants in the South. Jails, like Parchman penitentiary, became the setting for new schools in the South. Negro students from the South, whose community was identified in the still loose-knit SNCC, were now to be exposed to the ideas and disputes of northern radicals and liberals, churchmen and atheists, pacifists and tactical practitioners of non-violence.

The Freedom Rides also pushed a new Administration to act. The international implications of Southern Negroes and their white allies being beaten, jailed and terrorized were too much for the Kennedys not to act. (I might say here that the tragic assassination of the President is only compounded by a reluctance to analyze what in fact happened under his leadership. That he was a personal friend of the civil rights movement is undoubtedly true; that he understood the magnitude of the problem or moved to meet it is as clearly untrue.) The Administration's first approach was to get the demonstrations off the streets, out of the public accommodations, into some more manageable arena of politics. Thus in the Fall of 1961, the Justice Department approached SNCC to interest it in a program of voter registration in the South. There was a fortunate coincidence of interest. For SNCC, here was a program that could begin to mobilize the energies that no longer found satisfaction in the sit-in; for the Administration, here was a way, or so it appeared then, to get civil rights politics off the streets and into the Courts with, perhaps, the possibility of a new base for the Democratic Party. With Administration aid, funds were made available for voter education campaigns in the South. SNCC provided most of the manpower and got the least money, but it was enough to cover irregular \$10 per week salaries. The Justice Department also promised to provide protection and legal support to voter registration efforts.

Voter registration proved to be all important in changing the direction of SNCC. The isolation of campus and community was radically changed. If anything, the new SNCC was in danger of losing its ties to the campus as its field secretaries became parts of the poverty stricken black communities in Mississippi, Alabama, southwest Georgia, Arkansas, and elsewhere in the South. And it is at this point in its history that something else happened in SNCC. And this I say with hesitation because it is a phrase that I think has been greatly abused. There emerged in SNCC a new man. The summer soldiers dropped from the battle, and there remained a core of dedicated field secretaries whose lives were inextricably bound to the future of millions of black tenant farmers, domestics, sharecroppers, unemployed, day laborers.

And here I would like just to mention what I am sure is well known to all of you here. Conditions in the Deep South, for the vast majority of Negroes, are little different from what they were in slavery. The rural Negro is totally dependent on the plantation --

he has no rights before the owner, he owes his soul to the company store, his children at an early age begin to drag the cotton sack behind them, he is close by being illiterate and, because of the unique character of his enslavement, he has been robbed of his identity. The poor blacks of the South represented, until only yesterday, a tragic combination of the Sicilian communities made famous by Dolci, and the victims of Nazi concentration camps. Politics was, for the majority, white folks business. To some, it was only colored folks business if you were a minister, a doctor, a teacher or a lawyer. It took a month for some of the people I met in Greenwood to be able to call me "Mike" rather than "Sir" or "Mr. Mike."

It was the experience of this enslavement, I think almost as shocking to some of the border state Negro SNCC workers as it was to me, that shaped the beginnings of a fundamental examination of American society by the more thoughtful activists inside SNCC. They met two classic problems: poverty and alienation. Their ability to deal with them in a fresh way owes, at least in part, something to the days of isolation which surrounded the beginnings of SNCC. It is as a group with its own identity, though weakly defined, with a common history of experience, with the mechanisms of internal dialogue, with the strength of character to resist various northern youth who sought to give it leadership from on high, it is with all this that SNCC now examines the meaning of its experience in the South. I still hear, at different times, talk among northern students of going South to give ideological perspective to the southern movement. I can only say that we should have learned that there is no place for this kind of arrogance in a democratic movement.

What is happening in the South is the development of a style and a mode of analysis that is closely wedded to the experience in the South of the SNCC field secretaries who are so deeply involved in the lives of their black brothers and sisters.

I think now, having said this much, I ought to try to outline what is the SNCC point of view. I do this with hesitation and with the warning that no single statement like this exists, and, indeed, no single view exists within SNCC. In fact, you may be learning more about what I think ought to be SNCC's point of view than what it in fact is. That, I suppose, is the risk of all theorizing.

Fundamental to the SNCC view is the desire to free -- politically, economically, socially and psychologically -- the millions of enslaved Negroes in the South today.

Politically, SNCC sees voter registration as the key to freedom. Where the Negro, once enfranchised, is to go with his vote is certainly in doubt. Until very recently, there was little question of the two-party system in SNCC. However, at the recent Washington conference, SNCC leader Robert Moses openly questioned whether freedom could come to the South through either of the political parties there. The building of an electoral apparatus around the Mississippi mock election suggests the possibility of state or regional parties that operate

outside the framework of the Democratic and Republican Parties in the South, with the possibility of independent movement in this direction nationally or the formation of direct ties to northern sections of the Democratic or Republican parties.

Only recently, the voter registration approach has begun to be seriously re-examined. The total absence of Federal protection for the right to register and to vote suggests the dimension of the problem. It is clear that Negro voters could change the whole complexion of the South and of the nation; it is not so clear how to get them registered. It is in this connection that SNCC Chariman, John Lewis, speaks of a massive drive to register Negroes in Mississippi this summer. Lewis suggests that only by getting tens of thousands of Negroes into the streets seeking to register to vote will it be possible to force the federal government to enter the situation. But, it is unclear whether the troops will do anything more than preserve law and order. That, as far as I know, is always the role of outside troops. They do not bring justice; they preserve the status quo. It will, I think, require more than a crisis in Mississippi to bring justice to Mississippi. It will take a national movement near the proportion of the March on Washington to force the federal government to move to bring justice to the South.

SNCC has begun to make the allies necessary for such a national thrust. In Hattiesburg, only last week, 50 ministers, representing Presbyterian and Episcopal congregations across the country, joined with SNCC field secretaries to bring hundreds of local Negroes to the Court House to encounter Registrar, Theron Lynd. At the SNCC national conference, leaders of UAW, Packinghouse and other unions played an important role -- though I fear that most of them fail to grasp what is happening in the South.

I might add that SNCC's concern for political freedom is not limited to the Deep South. It is our commitment to political freedom that is the basis of a policy that brings SNCC speakers before political groups of all persuasions, from conservative to radical. At the root of this is a faith in the democratic process even if it is continually abused and if its premises are ignored by the practice of local, state and federal government.

Economically, SNCC knows it faces deep and serious problems whose solution cannot be found on a regional basis. Unfortunately the Mississippi police have my files with facts and figures on the Mississippi economy, so I cannot be as precise as I would like to be. The Holmes County Sheriff also has a tape I made of Bob Moses addressing himself to this question. If I had it, I would stop talking right now and play it for you. To the already existing problem of poverty is now added the mechanization of cotton picking and the use of chemical sprays to kill weeds once chopped by hand. Both of these have been self-consciously introduced into the Mississippi Delta area to force Negroes to leave the areas in which they form a potential

majority vote. Add to this firings, evictions, withholding of credit and other economic sanctions against Negroes who become involved in the movement. Add, finally, the total discrimination in new industrial employment, little enough as it is to begin with, and in various federal programs you have a crisis in Mississippi. As Mrs. Fanny Lou Hamer put it one day in Ruleville, "I hear people talking about the panic of the '30's -- well we've been in a panic all our lives."

SNCC workers are attempting desperately to cope with this. At the policy level, they have urged a massive program of federal spending to meet social needs -- spending for schools, hospitals, homes, and so forth. They are also seeking ways to work within existing programs such as ARA and MDTA, meager as they are. Self-help programs are being investigated and co-ops are now in operation in Selma, Alabama, and Ruleville, Mississippi. Finally, national campaigns for food and clothing are organized to meet actual starvation conditions that exist for too many Negro families in the South. And, as a sideline, SNCC workers in Atlanta have served as union organizers when the AFL-CIO and Teamsters didn't want to get involved.

None of this is extraordinary. I think the uniqueness of SNCC is to be found in its program to deal with problems of identity and motivation in the Black Belt of the South. Here I feel on less steady ground; the problems are certainly not as clear -- and the solutions are more remote. I think there is a belief widespread in SNCC that every man must be reached; there is a belief in the dignity and worth of every individual; there is a commitment to the creation of those institutions in which each person can express that which is in him. This is the Beloved Community of which John Lewis speaks. SNCC is really concerned with the development of new men -- not in the future, not the product of a transitional period, not the result of the work of a self-conscious apparatus creating conditions for this kind of freedom after other problems are solved, but new men who are developed and who develop themselves in the process of the struggle for freedom. Thus the first priority in every SNCC project is the development of local leadership; thus in SNCC is there the consciousness of racial history, the understanding of the needs to eliminate from black consciousness the desire to be white. But, and equally important, especially for most of us here, is the view that this consciousness does not depend on the exclusion of whites from those to be saved. Borrowing from the nationalists, then rising above them, SNCC is creating in its community center program in the South, the institutions in which the fullness of free men will be explored and in which the needs of men fighting for freedom -- literacy, history, health, child care, and so on -- will be met.

I was struck, when John Lewis was here, by the ease with which he discussed the need for an integrated America and the need for a black identity -- the two were not exclusive, rather each the necessary counterpart of the other. And in his discussion with local Afro-Americans, he was not outflanked in a commitment to the black

revolutions of Africa. These Lewis sees as part of what he is building, to be studied and to be a part of, but not to mechanically apply to the conditions he faces.

As the break with the past was a necessary condition for the emergence of this fresh movement in the South, so is the new international situation part of what will be its success. The world is a more complicated place today than many thought it to be. I was in an informal gathering with some of the recent visitors from the Soviet Peace Committee and we were discussing the Sino-Soviet dispute. The discussion triggered a series of thoughts: China trades on nationalism in its dealings with the third world; Spain trades with Cubes; France affords recognition to China and accepts the Oder-Nisse Line; the U.S. and the U.S.S.R. move hesitatingly toward detente. This setting is part of the world which makes SNCC possible as something new in America.

I would like, in concluding, to return to an earlier statement I made and here modify it. I guess I haven't lost the academic habit of the footnote. I said that SNCC's early isolation was valuable and traced it to the period of McCarthyism. I think it also must be said that a price is paid for that isolation. The price is the loss of a continuity with the past and, with that, the danger of refusing to learn from history. In part, we in SNCC try to resolve this by discussing what we are and where we're going with as many people and groups as will give us a platform. No two SNCC workers will sound alike -- I hope I've made that clear -- but there is also a core of shared values, and I hope I've made that clear too. I think a phrase used by Chuck McDew is apt to conclude: "We who have fought to make the world safe for democracy must now fight to make democracy safe for the world."