

The Question of SNCC Jack Newfield

*The real and exact job of a cop: STOP
STOP*

*that is also true
of executive committees
and every government and
organization in the whole world
except
small quick ones
and plain people
who love.*

— Jane Stembridge
SNCC staff

More than five years have now passed since the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) was formed during an Easter weekend conference on the campus of Shaw University in Raleigh, N.C. Since then, this battered brother-

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hood of organizers, poets, hipsters and visionaries has grown up to have a staff of 200 full-time paid workers in the field, plus 250 full-time volunteers; an annual budget of \$800,000, and an evolving philosophy unburdened by obsolete blueprints for utopia from other generations or other countries. SNCC is simply the sum of its experiences inside the eye of the American Dilemma.

SNCC is more a chaotic movement than a conventional civil rights organization; the best image for it is that of an amoeba with pseudopods reaching out in many directions. Compared to the well-organized and disciplined Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), SNCC is a happening.

Recoiling from the "cult of personality" that surrounds Martin Lu-

ther King, the young anti-heroes of SNCC have adopted a rotating or egalitarian style of leadership that baffles the rest of the movement. Whenever there is a summit conference of the civil rights leadership, Dr. King, James Farmer, Roy Wilkins and Whitney Young never know which of a dozen possible representatives of SNCC will show up. Ask a SNCC worker, "Who is the head of SNCC?" and he'll reply, "Man, we don't have any leaders" or "The people lead SNCC because they tell us what to do. We don't tell them."

The two most visible personalities in SNCC are Chairman John Lewis; introverted, the veteran of thirty-nine arrests and an ordained minister; and 37-year-old Executive Secretary James Forman. While Lewis' title is largely ceremonial,

Forman, with great organizational skills and the instincts of a Marine sergeant, has become the most powerful individual in SNCC. But his troops' passion for spontaneity, individualism and freedom is so marked that he is still far from being a "leader" in the conventional sense.

Although he has relinquished all formal titles, 30-year-old Robert Parris is SNCC's other center of gravity. He seems to combine the



qualities of the saintly revolutionist Kropotkin with the existentialist philosopher Camus. Parris, who was the first SNCC field secretary to penetrate Mississippi in 1961, has now, despite his flight from leadership, become the ideologue for a major current of thinking within the whole student activist movement; it is the group whose values seem rooted in the humanist and anarchist tradition, rather than in Marxist dogma; those who put the emphasis on freedom rather than movement.

Among the staff of more than 200, there flourishes a staggering diversity that is probably SNCC's greatest resource. There are field workers with masters' degrees and those with only public school education; there are blacks and whites (about sixty), boys and girls; Northerners and Southerners; there are rambunctious teen-agers and stooped adults in their 60s; there are gifted poets like Jane Stembridge, complex Negro intellectuals

like Stokley Carmichael, white Southerners like Robert Zellner and former sharecroppers like Mrs. Fannie Lou Hamer.

Some of the whites are trying to act black—"clappin' to Ray Charles records on the wrong beat," says Stokley Carmichael; some of the blacks are trying to atone for once acting white. Embryonic black nationalists find a few white masochists to prey on, and the West Indian Negroes feel guilty because their grandfathers weren't plantation slaves.

Because of this pluralism within a framework of individualism, only a few generalizations fit all of the animal called SNCC. It is nonviolent and profoundly democratic. Its strength derives from grass-roots involvement with the very poor. Strongly anarchic in spirit (but not in program), SNCC instills in its workers skepticism of all bureaucracy and all centralized authority—including its own. And SNCC preaches and practices participatory democracy—the concept that everyone should take part in all the decisions that affect his life. With this goes an almost mystical faith in the ability of "the little people"—the lumpen proletariat—to change their condition and govern themselves democratically; a vision which seems to be the antithesis of Communist elitism and authoritarianism.

To watch a SNCC worker function in the rural South is to see democracy in its purest and rawest form. He doesn't manipulate, control or direct discussions at mass meetings. Instead, he devotes his attention to encouraging the least articulate sympathizers with the movement to express themselves without embarrassment. The best of the SNCC workers sound more like teachers or therapists than like organizers or agitators.

SNCC's mood—as its troops depart from Washington after the lobby for the Freedom Democratic Party's (FDP) Congressional challenge—is dominated by memories of wounds recently inflicted by liberal friends. A year ago, before the Democratic convention fight over seating the FDP delegation, the consensus image of SNCC among middle-class liberals was one of idealized sacrifice and purity. But after the convention there began a venomous flow of redbaiting, beatnik-baiting attacks from syndicated

columnists Rowland Evans and Robert Novack (there have been eighteen so far). This hostility has been extended by similarly acid criticisms from liberals with solid civil rights credentials—Joseph Rauh of the ADA, Roy Wilkins of the NAACP and others. And last May, during a public debate in New York City, Socialist Irving Howe described SNCC as "bureaucratically deformed, manipulative and undemocratic," which must rank as the least informed and most condescending description since Tony Galento called Joe Louis a bum.

These attacks are now beginning to take cumulative effect. Foundations are starting to withhold funds, as are most international unions. A HUAC investigation of SNCC is being talked of for this fall. Such portents have led a sizable segment of SNCC to predict "a new wave of McCarthyism," aimed not only against them but also against the professors, students and clergy who have energized opposition to the war in Vietnam.

It is in this newly embittered frame of mind that SNCC is now ending a period of introspection and consolidation to begin the simultaneous exploration of three new areas: the urban centers of the South, Democratic Party politics, and an attempt to build a national protest movement that would "use morality" to synthesize civil rights with peace, civil liberties and anti-poverty movements.

Throughout its history, SNCC has worked almost exclusively in rural counties—the Mississippi delta, southwest Georgia and the black belt of Arkansas and Alabama. But during the last two months, projects have been opened up in Montgomery, Birmingham and Atlanta. Last May, Fred Meely, a 23-year-old veteran of the Mississippi campaigns, sat in the deserted SNCC store-front headquarters in Montgomery and talked about the difficulties of urban organizing:

All summer we just might sit here and build a base in the community. It doesn't mean anything that we don't have an active program going yet. We're not concerned with time. We're just going to let the people in the community know we're here, become involved in their daily lives, and find out what it is they want us to do.

The cities are a whole new experience for us. Size is something new to us. So is the problem of dealing with an existing Negro leader-

ship that is conservative and corrupt like the ministers and lawyers here in Montgomery. This middle class doesn't exist in places like Greenwood or Holly Springs. Another reason the cities are so hard to crack is that Negroes here are much less open to the idea of nonviolence. And they are more apathetic. They have a whole different set of values from rural farmers. There is a hard core of hate and violence in every black man in this city. Dozens of Negroes get cut up in fights every Saturday night. Even those people who come into the office looking for help are filled with hostility and looking for a fight.

In exploring the cities, SNCC's strategy has been to give priority to organizing "those people most damaged by the society" — junkies, winoes, prostitutes, dropouts, petty criminals and the mentally disturbed; a tactic that is based more on Genet's existential conception of the under class than on the economic one of Marx. Right now, SNCC in Montgomery seems to be beating its head bloody trying to organize the most brutalized proletariat in America. Some day it will have to start organizing the middle-class Negroes, despite their Johnny Mathis albums and green stamps, as well as the white liberals.

In Atlanta, a SNCC pseudopod is exploring a different road into the urban dilemma. Julian Bond, communications director, poet and one of SNCC's founders, last May entered the Democratic primary for the Georgia state legislature in an all-Negro district created as a result of the recent Supreme Court decision on reapportionment. Bond's candidacy ignited a fierce debate within the SNCC staff. He was attacked by those visionary staff members who oppose electoral action and by those who prefer third-party movements patterned after the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party. Bond campaigned — in a shirt and tie — for a \$2 minimum wage law, abolition of the death penalty, and the removal of all voting requirements except age and residence. On May 5, he defeated Negro minister William Creacy by a 3-to-1 margin, and won the general election on June 16 against a Republican by a 4-to-1 plurality.

SNCC Field Secretary Charley Cobb, Bond's campaign manager, said in Washington recently: "Julian will function as a SNCC legis-



lator. He will organize people's conferences throughout his district and ask people what they want him to do. He will get people in the community talking to one another directly, rather than to him. He will seek to develop indigenous leadership that can replace him in the legislature. And he will use his salary to finance organizers all over the state of Georgia." He added:

We don't know what it means to function as a Democrat in the Georgia House. But we think it is vital that we explore this area to see if you really have to get co-opted and sell out, or whether it is possible to use that position to organize people and release energy.

I think that with the passage of the voting rights bill and future reapportionment decisions, the rest of the South will begin to resemble Atlanta. And we have to be ready to exploit that environment the best we can. Julian's campaign was an experiment, that's all.

SNCC is also looking in a third direction—foreign policy. Although plans are still tentative, several of SNCC's veterans, including Bob Parris, Courtland Cox and Stokely Carmichael, along with Yale history professor Staughton Lynd, and pacifists Dave Dellinger and Eric Weinberger, have opened up an office in Washington to organize "students, poor people and intellectuals" around the war in Vietnam.

This mobilization is not conceived as the traditional and mechanical coalition of peace and civil rights "leaders." Rather, as Cox explains it: "We have to convince the country that civil rights workers get

killed in the South because the government has a certain attitude toward killing in Vietnam. The concept that it is all right to kill an 'enemy' affects the morality of the country so that people can be murdered here."

Parris adds: "Most liberals think of Mississippi as a cancer, as a distortion of America. But we think Mississippi is an accurate reflection of America's values and morality. Why else can't the people who killed Andrew, James and Mickey be brought to justice, unless a majority of the community condones murder. Sheriff Rainey is not a freak; he reflects the majority. And what he did is related to the napalm bombings of 'objects' in Vietnam."

This group of SNCC workers and pacifists plans "continuous activity in Washington through the summer to end the war in Vietnam." Massive civil disobedience is planned for Hiroshima Day, August 6, and a march of "unrepresented poor people" on Nagasaki Day, August 9.

SNCC is not perfect. It is a chaotic movement of people, and it reflects the small frailties of people. For a few in the movement, there seems no vision of a reconciliation beyond the present conflict. And for some others, pointless antagonism to Martin Luther King's SCLC has become a posture of easily purchased militancy. Drinking and pot smoking have turned a couple of Freedom Houses into replicas of East Village bars. Nevertheless, SNCC remains the cutting edge of history; it contains the prophets and pioneers who give a whole movement the urgency that William James once called "the moral equivalent of war."