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THE HAMPTON SIT-INS AND THE SOUTHERN SOCIETY

by

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Oh let it come, the fulfilled peace!
With love that flows and grants increase;
From man to man, through circling lands
Let kindling current link the span;
And nations form o'er all the earth
A BROTHERHOOD, ONE WORLD ITS BIRTH.
Youth of America--
Onward to victory!

--Onward to Victory
Dr. Virginia F. Curry
Texas Southern University

STATEMENT OF PURPOSE

The ideals of a free society have many times demanded of the American people excellence in all areas of endeavor. However, in the past, the performance has fallen short of the concepts. The handling of the problems of race relations is one of many instances in which the excellence in performance has disrupted the continuity of the ideas of the free association and life within an unregimented society.

The clear call for decisive thoughts and actions has never been such an issue as in contemporary institutions. The question of the Southern Negro and white has brought to the American scene a gamut of meanings, concepts, and paths of action. Some of these are in concurrence with the established principles of true Americans. Some are definitely adverse to the system of the government. Regardless, the positive and negative facets of the Southern "way of life" must be understood.

The Negroes in America have remained in parts on the periphery of life. The communication which is so much mentioned has been a one-way activity, from the master to the subservient element. Through this pamphlet, we hope to establish a clear and lucid picture of the South, the system of partial bondage and the nucleus of a new and important Southern moderation and rising Negro middle class. The ultimate objective of any work of this type is to extend the realm of communication to cooperation rather than co-existence or master-servant relationships.

THE HAMPTON SIT-INS AND THE SOUTHERN SOCIETY

EXPLANATION OF FREEDOM

"The discussion of freedom is very complex in many ways; there have been a number of problems considered, a variety of doctrines and theories advanced, and a range of issues to be found."¹ Freedom for many means a clear-cut example of a slave-master relationship. However, it is the tyrant, rather than those he dominates or subjugates, who is really the slave. The classic story of Epictetus who lived his life in bondage is an excellent example of magnanimity of heart transcending the barriers of slavery. By the criteria of Aristotle, Socrates, Locke, Rousseau, or Hobbes, Epictetus was not free. By these standards, Epictetus as a free man should have no master but himself, should have full control over his life, and should be able to dispose of his property or of his labors for his own benefit. But, the slave, Epictetus, was also a Stoic philosopher who could regard himself as a free man, or as able to attain freedom. Imperial Caesar could have been in the same situation. We have reason to believe that Marcus Aurelius strove to attain the same sublimity of life as Epictetus, the one in spite of being an emperor, the other in spite of being a slave. Apparently, the path of freedom is easier for master than for slave.

"How shall I free myself?" Epictetus asks. The answer, he tells himself, is to follow a course in which his only desire is to set himself to do that which is wholly within his power--his duty. "Once you swerve from this path," he writes, "you become a slave." "Only the man who wills to live as a man ought to live as he wills; and since that man is free who lives as he wishes, it follows that no man is free." "If only the good and wise are free," as Cicero says, who brought himself to will 'the things that are right,' "then all can be free

¹Adler, Mortimer, The Idea of Freedom. (New York: Doubleday, 1958).

regardless of their station in life or the circumstances under which they live."

The freedom Epicetetus and Cicero have in mind is described by Whitehead as:

freedom lying beyond circumstance...It is freedom of that virtue directly derived from the source of all harmony. For it is only conditioned only by its adequacy of understanding. And understanding has this quality that, however it be led up to, it issues in the soul freely conforming its nature to the supremacy of insight. It is the reconciliation of freedom with the compulsion of truth. In this sense, the captive can be free, taking as his own the supreme insight, the indwelling persuasion towards the harmony which is the height of existence.²

It is not only Stoic philosophers who are concerned with this type of freedom. Plato also has "freedom beyond circumstance" in mind when he says, "the real tyrant, whatever men may think is the real slave," for "he desires which he is utterly unable to satisfy." This is the same freedom which Christian theologians find in the Gospel injunction to "know the truth, and the truth shall make you free." It is the freedom Spinoza accredits to the wise and happy man "who lives with free consent under the entire guidance of reason;" contrasted with whom, the true slave is "he who is led away by his pleasures and can neither see what is good for him nor act accordingly."

It is apparent that writers such as Plato, Epicetetus, Cicero, and Spinoza, together with Christian theologians like Augustine and Calvin mean by freedom a certain human condition. For them, the removal of environmental restraint is the essence of freedom, not the development of qualities of wisdom, grace, and virtue. According to Rousseau, "the freedom a man gains by becoming a citizen is a consequence of the voice he has in making the laws under which he lives." When the citizens of republics are the authors of the laws under which they labor, "it can no longer be asked," says Rousseau, "how we can be both free and

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Whitehead, Adventures of Ideas, Part I, Chapter 4, p. 86.

subject to the laws, since they are registers of our wills." Locke differs in dialectics, but he describes the amount of freedom in direct proportion to terms of the relation to the laws under which he lives. "When those laws are made with the consent of the governed, freedom replaces the slavery of those who live under despots and are subject to the inconstant, uncertain, unknown, arbitrary will of another man." In this system, we are free to choose to obey the law to which we pledge support.

If we turn from slavery to imprisonment as the symbol of unfreedom, we find Hobbes saying of men, as of other living things and even inanimate bodies, that "they have not liberty whilst they are imprisoned, or restrained with walls or chains." Accordingly, "a freeman is he that, in those things which by his strength and wit he is able to do, is not hindered to do what he has a will to." So, too, Hume says that "liberty is universally allowed to belong to everyone who is not a prisoner and in chains;" for, in the absence of such restraints, "if we choose to remain at rest, we may; if we choose to move, we also may." In a similar vein, J. S. Mill says that, "liberty consists in doing what one desires;" Bertrand Russell speaks of ... "freedom in general... as the absence of obstacles to the realization of desires." John Dewey tells us that "freedom is found in that kind of interaction which maintains an environment in which human desire and choice count for something."

SOUTHERN SOCIETY DISRUPTED BY NEW AND ASSERTING NEGRO

The month February previously had been a period of business drops, some harsh winds, and the usual pertinent but overplayed international and national issues. But February, 1960, was different: the Southern Negro student thought

about his imposed acceptance of a secondary position in America; four A & T freshmen acted by taking seats at an all-white lunch counter in Greensboro; and soon the voice of the Negro student asking for coffee and doughnuts echoed around the world. At the beginning of the demonstrations, papers and politicians declared that they would be ephemeral, sporadic, and essentially were bad for the nation. As soon as the words were uttered, the demonstrations spread with lightning rapidity. The patient which the nation had nursed back to equilibrium since Little Rock had taken a turn for the worse. The tranquilizing statements of senators fell upon closed ears. These sedatives which usually lulled the white South to sleep were not effective. The half-sleepy South was permeated by the ultimate fear--masses of Negroes challenging accepted social patterns.

"It is not psychologically possible, nor morally right that this should happen now," said some whites. Probably, they were justified in their contention for it was only five years ago that Negroes began pressuring states to admit students to all schools regardless of race, color, or creed. Despite the cries of gradualism, the students continue to sit. Some regarded the fight as a petty stone hurled into the pile of much larger and important human woes. Some regarded the "sit-ins" as the most important thing Negroes have done in fifty years. The food at the counters is not particularly good--the tomatoes are sometimes green and the lettuce is usually wilted. But the posture of the South was now under study.

There arose an ominous and large cloud over the South and the nation. Groups of Negro students walking the streets of any city caused great concern. The Negro domestic workers were threatened with losing their jobs. Yet, the same people met on Sunday in churches and pledged their support to the student movement. Negro ministers violated hastily enacted laws and walked humbly

to jail; when offered bond, they refused. Still the people of this nation cannot explain these action; the picture is either too complex or too simple. Yet, there are many elements which can be placed in proper perspective.

There have always been claims that the Negro people in this country are very religious. Daily prayer which is offered in practically every Negro home is as much a part of his life as the imposed second-class citizenship. Through strong religious ties, the Negro is able to equate his position with that of the whites: Negroes plus God equal the social stratification of the Southern whites. The cultist activities of "Daddy Grace" and "Father Divine," regardless of existing opinion, play a very important role in the life of numerous Negroes. The rhythm of the services, the sudden explosion of the church members, and the home-spun philosophy of the clergy cause an exultation in the most "hard boiled." There is always a planned program for services which cannot be followed; the service erupts at times into spontaneous mass singing. An "amen" from a far corner could probably bring rapid approval in the form of sporadic prayers, chants, and songs which depict the struggles of the Negro in America. Everyone leaves church "feeling better," ready for another week of hardship. The forced creed taken by the daughter in Lorraine Hansberry's A Raisin' in the Sun acknowledging the presence of God in the household exemplifies the love which the mass of Negroes have for the Sovereign Creator of our universe. The weapon, Christianity, is the white man's gift, but it has emerged as the most powerful buffer in the life of the contemporary Negro.

Another powerful force is the rising Negro middle class. Many people have held the dollar in the highest esteem for a long time. Meanwhile, the Negro involved his life in a complex system of intangibles because of his

inexperience with tangibles. But the dollar has now received better acceptance by the mass of Negroes, and they are earning more, saving more, and spending more. Many businesses have made their appearance on the American scene recently--many Negro-owned and operated. For the first time in the history of the financial world, Negroes have made important inroads in the broker and stockholder classes. The Negroes in Southern colleges are becoming cognizant of the fact that they are an important segment of the tremendous purchasing group. With this tremendous "dollar growth" Negroes can demand much more of whites in the urban and rural areas of the South. The arsenal of weapons is now taking shape; the armaments are being placed in proper perspective.

The influences that helped form the new and asserting Negro are mosaic in character. If you take out one tile to examine it, you distort the entire picture, and if you examine the entire picture, you overshadow each individual tile. Though we are guilty of attempting the former, we have placed in proper perspective the importance of the Negro economy and the powerful effects of his religion. These forces alone may determine the future of the Negro in America. Through first-hand experiences and printed literature, we have tried to hurl a meteor of light and truth into a universe of darkness.

THE HAMPTON SIT-INS: THE LONGEST CONTINUING PROTESTS

Hampton Institute students joined the Southern fight against discrimination on February 10, 1960, when three Hamptonians took seats at the counter of the local branch of Woolworth's and asked to be served. When the three Hamptonians returned to the campus after sitting at the counter for more than three hours, the student body praised their efforts and pledged themselves to fight discrimination at the lunch counters. The following day more than 200 staged sit-ins at the same counter throughout the day. As the sit-downs continued and included more stores, the proprietors and/or managers attempted to discourage the protesting students. The manager of Woolworth's converted the food counter into a toy counter, but finding that this did not solve the problem, he re-opened the counter on a segregated basis, and the sit-ins were resumed. The proprietor of the Langley Sweet Shop, a local drink and newsstand, increased the price of his items--a hot dog was priced a dollar and fifty cents, and a cup of coffee amounted to a dollar. (Not even at the Brown Derby are prices so high without a tip.) Since then Woolworth's has taken the seats from the counter and instituted the "stand and eat" policy and the Langley Sweet Shop now denies counter service to Negroes.

Hampton students have not limited their activities to the City of Hampton. They have taken their fight to the entire Peninsula. In Newport News the students have protested at the local branches of Woolworth's, Sears, Roebuck and Company, Kresge's, Nachman's, a local chain store, Peoples' Drug Store, and Greyhound's Post House. The New Market Shopping Center, located in the suburbs of Newport News, has been the scene of protests most recently.

The Hampton movement has been complemented by demonstrations.

The first mass demonstration was staged on February 20, 1960. This demonstration included more than 600 students, who marched into the business district of Hampton carrying posters that decried discrimination.

The second, "Operation 26" was the largest demonstration that Hampton students have staged. This movement included three activities: sit-ins, pickets, and a demonstration throughout the Peninsula area. The picketing and sit-ins took place in the morning on March 26, in Newport News and Hampton. At three o'clock that afternoon over 700 students gathered on the campus and proceeded through the business section of Hampton again carrying posters bearing anti-discrimination slogans.

"Operation 26" was intended to be a nation-wide protest. However, due to the time factor the students were unable to actually exert a national effort against discrimination. Nevertheless, the students at Hampton managed to succeed in staging the largest protest that has taken place by similar groups in the nation.

More recently, the Hampton protest has been symbolized by lighting "The Eternal Light for Human Dignity." This light is scheduled to burn until the tenets of discrimination are abolished and every American has complete freedom, said Thurman M. Davis, President of the Student Assembly. On Saturday night, April 9, 1960, the eve of Palm Sunday when the Christian world was praising Jesus' advent into Jerusalem, 500 Hamptonians gathered on Ogden Circle, which is in the center of the campus, lighted candles after paying homage to the nation by singing "The National Anthem" and marched to the entrance of the campus where Davis lighted "The Eternal Light for Human

Dignity."

The Hampton protest has been characterized further by its avoidance of conflict with the law, and there has not been a single arrest because of the sit-ins. The students have been wise to observe always the laws of State and Peninsula governments. As one of the leaders of the Hampton movement said, "We feel that by observing the laws we not only show ~~their~~ ineffectiveness, but we also gain the respect of legislators. In the long run, we may even convince them to reverse their laws of discrimination."

The Hampton student movement is sparked by a student committee, THE COMMITTEE FOR HUMAN DIGNITY, which plans the student protests. The committee is composed of approximately forty persons who volunteered to give their time to the betterment of relations between the races on the Peninsula. The committee is not under the auspices of the Student Assembly.

The community of Negroes and whites have rallied to the protests against discrimination. Community groups have pledged support to the movement. At a mass meeting conducted by the NAACP, representatives of the Citizens' Organizztion (a Negro community group), fraternal societies, Pan-Hellenic Council, Ministerial Alliance, and the League of Women Voters praised the protests of the students and promised support of their efforts. Moreover, community groups have conducted campaigns to discourage citizens from buying in stores which practice discrimination.

The students have appealed to the local officials of the Peninsula by writing letters and most recently they sent palm leaves to twenty churches, white and Negro, on Palm Sunday. That the movement has affected local

business cannot be overlooked. It has been said that the stores that are being picketed have sustained losses that range from 15 to 50 per cent of their previous business. An indication of these losses and the discontentment of local merchants was given when the Mayor of Hampton requested that several Negro community leaders meet with him and a group of businessmen. (Heretofore he has ignored the attempts of Negro leaders to arrange such a meeting and refused to speak at the NAACP mass meeting.) From this conference it was sensed that the Mayor is interested in bringing about an agreement. The Negro leaders assured him that an agreement could be reached, but did not specify the terms that would be considered in such an agreement.