

unrest festered in urban ghettos, businessmen who felt that they had to respond in some way to the race problem looked increasingly to Young and the Urban League for guidance and solutions.²⁹

After 1965, opportunities for significant cooperation in the civil rights movement became increasingly rare. Before that, no matter how much leaders and organizations may have differed over strategy and tactics, they shared a commitment to common, realizable objectives: desegregation of public facilities, equal access to education and employment opportunity, full and free exercise of the right to vote. Moreover, they could identify the specific actions necessary to realize those objectives—persuasion of public officials and private individuals, passage of new legislation, prosecution of suits in state and federal courts—and they knew how to rally adherents and mobilize resources to accomplish their ends.

After 1965, disagreement over fundamental objectives as well as strategy and tactics split the movement asunder. The controversy over black power, the issue of racial violence, and the argument over linking the movement to opposition to American involvement in Vietnam created irreparable divisions within the movement. What was at issue was not which organization or leader would claim the credit or win the limelight, nor the best strategy for realizing shared goals. Leaders and organizations no longer agreed even on such basic objectives as integration; and while they may still have shared some general, overriding concerns, the very nature of those concerns—for instance, what to do about black unemployment and underemployment, or how to improve the living conditions of blacks in urban ghettos—meant that there was no longer a consensus on what needed to be done, nor, for that matter, an understanding of the probable efficacy of specific strategies or actions. At the same time that the goals of black protest became more diffuse, the targets of protest activity became less clearly identifiable. With the desegregation of lunch counters or the passage of civil rights legislation, it was easy to

figure out which individuals and groups had the power to effect change, and to exert pressure accordingly. Objectives such as the improvement of housing or economic conditions in the ghetto were simply less amenable to that kind of analysis and action.³⁰

In such circumstances formal cooperation was unthinkable; without clearly defined, realizable objectives, even the unplanned, informal cooperation by which different organizations and leaders brought to bear their own resources and strengths became much less likely to occur. Only the ability to make creative use of competition persisted into the late 1960s, as the threat of black power and racial violence continued to give more moderate leaders the means to make some headway in their dealings with the white establishment.

Commentary / David J. Garrow

Too often those who write about the civil rights movement employ too narrow and exclusive a concept of "leadership." Implicitly if not explicitly, they presume that leaders are simply those individuals who are organizational chieftains or spokespersons. They thus restrict our definition of leadership to administrators and articulators, without looking as carefully and as thoughtfully as they should for a more meaningful understanding of "leadership."

This overly narrow conception of leadership runs directly parallel to a similar tendency to devote a disproportionate amount of scholarly attention to the national civil rights organizations of the 1950s and 1960s—the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), the National Urban League (NUL) and the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE). While concentrating studies on those organizations and the individuals who headed them—Roy Wilkins, Martin Luther King, Jr., John Lewis and Stokely Car-

michael, Whitney Young, and James Farmer—simultaneously far too little scholarly attention has been devoted to local level civil rights activities and to the grass roots organizers who actually mobilized people to participate actively in the movement.

In the 1950s, the major strategic difference of opinion that existed among black civil rights activists was a division between those who believed that courtroom litigation and judicial decisions were the principal means for advancing black freedom and those who contended that ordinary, grass roots people could take a direct and meaningful hand in pursuing their own freedom. While NAACP Executive Secretary Roy Wilkins and NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund director Thurgood Marshall argued that the lawyerly expansion of the principles articulated by the Supreme Court in *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* was the surest route to further black gains, Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters president A. Philip Randolph and other colleagues maintained that mass action, and not simply elite-sponsored litigation, could bring about substantial racial change.

Those mass action proponents welcomed the Montgomery, Alabama, bus boycott of 1955–1956 as precisely the sort of opening round in a new, mass-based southern freedom struggle they long had hoped for. Similarly, those activists also welcomed the 1957 formation of the ministerially-oriented SCLC and the largely spontaneous black college student sit-in movement that spread like wildfire across the South during the spring and early summer of 1960. On the other hand, NAACP administrators contended that it was only a federal court ruling, not the mass boycott, that actually desegregated Montgomery's buses, and they regretted both the formation of SCLC and the appearance of SNCC, which grew out of the 1960 sit-ins. Within just a few years' time, both SCLC and SNCC, employing different tactical choices, made the mass action strategy the dominant approach of the 1960s black freedom struggle.

That deeply-rooted strategic division is central both to the subsequent history of inter-organizational relations within the

movement and to the malapportionment of scholarly attention over the past two decades. Like the one-time chieftains of the elite-oriented civil rights organizations, many scholars have presumed that the policies, statements and actions of the national civil rights organizations are the most important substance of the movement's history. However, a more discerning look at the movement's actual record of achievement in the south, and in the national political arena, reveals, upon careful examination, that the real accomplishments of the black freedom struggle stemmed not so much from the activities of the administrators and articulators as from the efforts of the grass roots organizers who actually built and directed the movement in the South.

To say that most of the work of the movement was not done by the commonly-identified leaders would seem obvious to all. The basic point, however, is considerably broader than that: what the carefully-scrutinized historical record shows is that the actual human catalysts of the movement, the people who really gave direction to the movement's organizing work, the individuals whose records reflect the greatest substantive accomplishments, were not administrators or spokespersons, and were not those whom most scholarship on the movement identifies as the "leaders." Instead, in any list, long or short, of the activists who had the greatest personal impact upon the course of the southern movement, the vast majority of names will be ones that are unfamiliar to most readers. Allow six brief examples to suffice. In Mississippi, no other individuals did more to give both political direction and emotional sustenance to movement activists than Robert Parris Moses, a SNCC field worker who became the guiding force in COFO, the Council of Federated Organizations, and Fannie Lou Hamer, the relatively unlettered but impressively articulate Sunflower County tenant farmer's wife who in 1964 emerged as an influential grass roots spokeswoman for the thousands of economically poor black citizens who actually comprised the movement's base.

In southwest Georgia, another major scene of movement ac-

tivism, the guiding spirit of much of the effort there, from the time of his initial arrival in Terrell County as the sole paid field secretary of SNCC to the present day, when he serves on the Albany city council, was Charles Sherrod, a little-heralded organizer who deserves much of the credit for sparking and sustaining the entire southwest Georgia movement. Although Sherrod, like Moses, was an "outside agitator" initially sent in by SNCC, in Selma, Alabama, one of the movement's most famous battlegrounds, the key individual figure was a long-time native, Mrs. Amelia P. Boynton, whose impact there was much like Mrs. Hamer's in Mississippi. A crucial figure in organizing the initial indigenous activism, in first bringing SNCC workers to Selma, and in persuading Dr. King and SCLC to make Selma the focal point of their 1965 voting rights protests, Mrs. Boynton had as substantial an impact on civil rights developments in Alabama as anyone, excepting perhaps only Birmingham's Reverend Fred L. Shuttlesworth, another widely-underestimated and underappreciated grass roots leader.

Lastly, inside of SNCC and SCLC, two individuals who had crucial but often-overlooked roles in repeatedly influencing important movement decisions were Diane Nash and James Bevel, both of whom emerged from the Nashville movement of 1959-1961. Nash played a central part in sustaining the 1961 Freedom Rides when white Alabama violence threatened to halt them, and her April, 1962 memo reprimanding movement activists for not always living up in practice to their much-touted slogan of "jail, no bail" had a significant impact on King and dozens of others. Together with Bevel, Nash in September, 1963, originated one of the most important strategic gameplans of the southern struggle. Four months earlier Bevel, a young SCLC staff aide, had been personally responsible for SCLC's crucial tactical decision to send young children into the streets of Birmingham during the height of the protests there, the crucial turning point in convincing white business leaders to grant the movement's demands and an important influence on President John F. Kennedy's decision to

send to Congress the bill that eventually became the 1964 Civil Rights Act. Nash and Bevel, in the immediate aftermath of the Birmingham church bombing that killed four young girls, envisioned a comprehensive mass action campaign to close down the regular functioning of Alabama state government and "GROW"—Get Rid Of [Alabama Governor George C.] Wallace. Though rejected by King and other organization heads at that time, the Nash/Bevel blueprint started King and SCLC on an Alabama Project that eighteen months later, following various changes and refinements, culminated in the landmark Selma-to-Montgomery march and congressional passage of the 1965 Voting Rights Act.

It takes nothing away from King, Wilkins, Whitney Young or James Farmer to acknowledge that Moses, Hamer, Sherrod, Boynton, Nash and Bevel equally merit the designation as civil rights "leaders" if that label is to be applied in its most substantively meaningful way. Indeed, it could be argued further, with considerable justification, that catalytic grass root workers like those six deserve the appellation more than do New York-based bureaucrats such as Wilkins and Young. The real emergence of a sustained and widespread movement in the South can be traced, in many particulars, to the August, 1961, SNCC decision to create a cadre of locally-based, full time grass roots organizers, the first time that indigenous activists in many areas of the rural Deep South had such day-to-day organizational assistance available to them. Those full-time workers, usually affiliated with SNCC, CORE or SCLC, constituted the real backbone of the southern movement during the years of its greatest activism and achievements, 1961-1966. Similarly, the somewhat precipitous decline of the southern freedom struggle between 1966 and 1968 can also largely be traced to the burnout and eventual departure from full time organizing of most of that crucial cadre. Although this is not the place to make the argument in its most extended form, it was the interaction between the existing indigenous activists and these full time field secretaries that generated most of the actual "leadership" of the southern struggle. As many SNCC veterans in

particular can well articulate, it was the firsthand experience of working with people, day in, day out, that educated both local activists and field secretaries to the item-by-item, conversation-by-conversation reality of what "leadership" really amounted to in the civil rights movement.

The best of the national organization chieftains and spokespersons, namely King, Lewis and Farmer, all privately appreciated how their heavy responsibilities for making speeches, raising funds, and stimulating organizational publicity oftentimes excessively drew them away from the real, hands on work of the movement. King and Farmer in particular were troubled by how their administrative tasks and the "organization maintenance" needs of SCLC and CORE often took priority over any opportunities for sustained personal involvement in the activities that constituted the real purpose of their organizations. Thus at least these men, if not all of the other administrators and articulators of movement organizations, realized full well that leadership of the freedom struggle lay in many, many hands other than those of the "Big Six" organization heads often singled out by the news media.

A second centrally important aspect of the movement's history, and particularly of the interplay amongst those nationally visible organizations, was the extremely debilitating competition that developed between most of those groups during the 1957-1967 decade. In general, that competition can be divided into two distinct types, organizational and personal. Organizational rivalry was certainly the more powerful and important of the two, centering again and again on two intimately-related maintenance needs of all the national groups: media publicity and the fund-raising opportunities that stemmed from such visibility.

In the late 1950s, the primary face-off was between the newly-formed SCLC and the well-entrenched NAACP, eager to guard its southern branches' local predominance despite the legal attacks being mounted against the Association by many southern state governments. Afraid that SCLC, with King's Montgomery success fresh in the minds of millions, might take the lead in the southern

struggle, the NAACP's top national bureaucrats instructed their underlings to avoid and oppose SCLC's nascent voter registration efforts. In 1960, when the NAACP worried that the creation of SNCC would badly undercut its own youth council network and shift the movement's initiative to a younger generation with little interest in following the dictates of a national headquarters, SCLC too thought it would be better for the students to operate as an arm of an established organization—namely SCLC—rather than independently. SNCC in turn complained repeatedly that donations intended for the students instead made their way into SCLC's coffers, and when CORE in 1961 initiated the Freedom Ride, the wave of publicity that followed white attacks on the riders led to intense rivalry between CORE, SNCC and SCLC over claiming credit for sustaining the Rides and apportioning the financial costs and benefits stemming from the Rides. Similar disputes over which organization deserved credit, who would pay the bills, and who was reaping the media publicity troubled or followed virtually every other major southern movement effort of the early and mid 1960s.

Unfortunately, organizational competition for publicity and funds was not the only debilitating type of rivalry that troubled the movement. Additionally, and less understandably, there was also, in some instances, intense personal envy and jealousy on the part of some organization heads towards others. Far and away the strongest, most constant and most important example of such petty personal resentment was the intense antipathy that NAACP executive secretary Roy Wilkins developed for SCLC President Martin Luther King, Jr. Already a strong animus as early as 1957-1958, Wilkins' dislike for King and King's public prominence seems to have stemmed principally from a profound unhappiness that someone other than him, the head of the NAACP, would be viewed by almost all Americans as the primary symbol, spokesman and leader of the civil rights struggle and black America.

What most deserves attention is not the often-unpleasant de-

tails of these organizational and personal antipathies, but the extremely debilitating effects these rivalries had in and around the movement. These harmful effects can be categorized under three broad headings: the damage that was done among the national organizations themselves, the harm that was done to local allies and activists, and the impairments these tensions caused the movement with actual and potential "external" supporters such as white church groups, labor chieftains and federal government officials. Within the major civil rights groups, a dismaying amount of time, energy and effort was devoted to fanning, parrying or otherwise coping with these internecine conflicts. Although some civil rights staffers, such as Wilkins and Gloster Current of the NAACP, seem—based on their own surviving office files in the NAACP Papers at the Library of Congress—to have positively enjoyed such private verbal attacks on movement colleagues, even for those activists who loathed and avoided such negative jousting, the petty bickering constituted a regular distraction and wasteful diversion.

Often more dismaying and painful was the effect that these interorganizational conflicts had on indigenous local activists who were at first puzzled and then depressed as the reality of national group rivalries became clear to them. In Albany in 1961–1962, in Jackson in 1963, and in many other locales throughout the early and mid-1960s, local black civic activists learned again and again that some of the national civil rights groups, the NAACP in particular, on occasion expended as much energy in competing with other movement organizations as in combatting segregation.

Perhaps most harmfully for the movement, these internal rivalries had a considerable impact—oftentimes an excessive impact—on allied white organizations, which sometimes seem to have cited these internecine problems as grounds—or as an excuse—for moderating the amount of active support they would offer for movement initiatives. Even more notably, the movement's splits also became a prime topic of discussion and analysis within the uppermost reaches of the federal government. Justice

Department aides and White House staffers repeatedly pondered how to respond to initiatives from King or Wilkins in such a way as to not offend one or the other; at the height of the Birmingham crisis, as President Kennedy and his top Cabinet officers considered what actions to take, Attorney General Robert Kennedy reminded his brother and the others present that they had to take into account the fact that "Roy Wilkins hates Martin Luther King" (White House Tape #88-4, 5/20/63, JFK Library).

Professor Nancy Weiss is correct to emphasize that the multiplicity of civil rights organizations often worked to the strategic political advantage of the movement; white officials at both the local and federal level often dealt more responsively with some black spokesmen, such as King and Wilkins, simply because they were fearful of otherwise having to cope with more "radical" elements in the movement, particularly SNCC. On one occasion, John Kennedy went so far as to tell a visiting delegation of white Birmingham leaders that they ought to be thankful, rather than upset, at having Martin Luther King and SCLC focusing upon their city; otherwise, Kennedy warned, they would be faced with those "sons of bitches" in SNCC who had "an investment in violence" (White House Tape #112-6, 9/23/63, JFK Library).

Professor Weiss also is correct to focus considerable attention on "CUCRL," the Council for United Civil Rights Leadership, an important movement forum whose role has often been misconstrued when not ignored altogether. Nonetheless, it is essential to appreciate the admixture of motives that lay behind the mid-1963 creation of CUCRL: first, a firm desire on the part of wealthy white movement supporters such as Taconic Foundation President Stephen R. Currier to stabilize if not eliminate the increasingly visible and hostile competition between civil rights groups for contributors' dollars; second, a wish to moderate the southern movement's increasingly aggressive and demanding tone by giving NAACP chief Wilkins and National Urban League head Whitney Young, a good friend of Currier's, a regular and intimate forum for propounding their views to the more direct

action-oriented leaders of SNCC, CORE and SCLC; and, third, an intent to exert some amount of control over SNCC's angriest inclinations by centralizing at least a part of movement fundraising and using the resulting allocation process as a carrot-and-stick inducement for SNCC to follow a "responsible" course.

While Professor Weiss may be overestimating the positive value that the CUCRL discussion meetings had for at least a good number of civil rights organization heads, several of whom often sent deputies rather than attend in person, it is more important to recognize and appreciate CUCRL for what it was, a modestly-successful and relatively short-lived response to the centrifugal, competitive tensions within the civil rights movement that even as early as 1963 threatened to rend the black freedom struggle into openly divided camps. Although in large part that public break was postponed until mid-1966, scholars would err if they excessively minimized the deleterious effects that the movement's internal divisions were having even well before that time. Just as they must avoid an overly-narrow conception of leadership and an excessive focus of their research attentions on the nationally-oriented civil rights organizations alone, so must they also, when they do look at those groups and their top executives, do so with an analytically critical eye that allows them to weigh accurately, rather than overstate, the contributions that those organizations made to the black freedom struggle during the 1950s and 1960s.

The Politics of the Mississippi Movement, 1954-1964

JOHN DITTMER

In May of 1963 two Mississippi leaders appeared on local television to discuss race relations in the state's capital city. Jackson was then in the midst of crisis. A black boycott of downtown merchants over the issues of jobs and segregation had led to mass rallies, demonstrations, and picketing. Refusing to negotiate, city officials were trying to break the movement by filling the jails with civil rights activists. For Mayor Allan Thompson, there was simply nothing to negotiate about. In his television appeal to "our Nigra citizens," the mayor reminded blacks of their good fortune in being Jacksonians:

You live in a city, a beautiful city, where you can send your children to modern schools, you live in homes that are clean and neat with all utilities. And [as] I have said, there are no slums [in Jackson] as there are in most other large cities.

Warming to his subject, the mayor could hardly contain his enthusiasm:

You have 24-hour protection by the police department. Just think of being able to call the police any time of the night and say, "Come quick! Someone is trying to get into my house, I need some help". . . . You live in a city where you can work, where you can make a comfortable living. You are treated, no matter what anybody tells you, with dignity, courtesy, and respect. Ah, what a wonderful thing it is to live in this city!¹