

THE LAST WORD

Don't Fall for Media Madness

by David Garrow

In the aftermath of this spring's important anti-apartheid protests, American progressives ought not to forget two important lessons that earlier social protest movements offer us. First, that obtaining news coverage and achieving social change are very different things that ought not to be confused. Second, how often even progressive organizations can become so caught up in "organizational maintenance" activities that they have far less substantive political effect than they might—a tension that civil rights veterans often speak of as a struggle between "movement" and "organization."

The widespread, often implicit assumption that obtaining news coverage is a substantive achievement in and of itself increasingly has led political activists, progressives included, to mold their efforts with more of an eye toward winning the media's short-term attention than toward producing longer range political results. Too often activists celebrate one-shot coverage alone—"Look, we made the *Times*!"—and thereby devalue if not dismiss the often greater worth of political change efforts that seem too mundane to make the evening news.

Perhaps the most important and least appreciated lesson of the 1960s' southern black freedom movement is that the activism that received the least coverage from the national news media—the grassroots, local

level political organizing and voter mobilization that over twenty years propelled committed movement alumni into hundreds of elected offices—has achieved far greater tangible results than the more ephemeral but dramatic demonstrations staged in large part for media consumption. Although highly visible protests contributed greatly to the movement's national legislative achievements, it is erroneous to think that the southern movement's most tangible, long-term goals came largely from winning national coverage rather than from the years of unpublicized grassroots organizing by little heralded local activists. For the American left to become too caught up with political strategies chosen primarily for their newsworthiness would be to forsake one of our most crucial historical lessons.

Similarly, progressive organizations often unwittingly can fall victim to another costly error—an excessive preoccupation with internal affairs and organizational functioning that results in activists devoting far more of their time and energy to "institutional maintenance" than to political outreach and substantive organizing work. The civil rights groups that had the greatest effect during the movement's heyday were those that had the smallest central office staffs and a far higher proportion of field workers; those that made the least contributions were those that maintained top-heavy New York bureaucracies that preoccupied themselves with internal functions. Progressive groups that spend most of their time talking among themselves may find it a satisfying way to

remain busy, but will have little long-term political effect.

Symbolic exercises built around "easy" issues, where there is progressive/liberal unity about the desired goal plus a widespread strategic consensus, may well give participants a feeling that they've "done their part" at minimal personal cost. But if such symbolic efforts actually have little tangible effect, the long-run result may be that activists who have assuaged their consciences through such low-cost involvement are not inclined to consider a more serious commitment that would be likely to produce substantive change.

Any organization that is serious about achieving basic political and economic change in America must commit itself to assembling and sustaining a cadre of field organizers who will pursue tangible political work. Discussion societies and symbolic exercises may have an underlying radical content, but they will pose a militant challenge and begin having a real effect only when they move beyond media-chasing and organizational maintenance to support real organizing for political change. ●

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