

THE TRAGEDY OF STOKELY CARMICHAEL

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Peniel E. Joseph. *Stokely: A Life*. New York: Basic Civitas Books, 2014. xiv + 399 pp. Notes, sources, bibliography, and index. \$29.99.

Stokely Carmichael burst onto the U.S. political scene in June 1966 as the newly elected chairman of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) when he led SNCC's cry for "Black Power" during the Meredith March Against Fear through the Mississippi Delta. When the March entered Greenwood on June 16, police arrested Carmichael as the marchers tried to pitch their tents in a schoolyard. Quickly released on bail, an angry Carmichael told an evening rally: "This is the 27th time I have been arrested—I ain't going to jail no more." Then, with his SNCC colleague Willie Ricks helping to prompt the crowd, "Five times Mr. Carmichael shouted, 'We want black power!' And each time the younger members of the audience shouted back, 'Black power.' 'Every courthouse in Mississippi ought to be burned down to get rid of the dirt,' Mr. Carmichael added as the audience applauded enthusiastically."¹

An August 5, 1966, *New York Times* profile of Carmichael titled "Black Power Prophet" declared that "some have begun to describe him as a new Malcolm X," the apostate Nation of Islam (NOI) firebrand whom NOI gunmen had murdered eighteen months earlier. Carmichael, who had just turned twenty-four, was an unlikely successor to Malcolm. Born in Trinidad, his family had moved to a virtually all-white section of the Bronx in 1952, and Carmichael attended the Bronx High School of Science. The spring of his senior year witnessed the burgeoning sit-in movement against segregated Southern lunch counters, but Carmichael was unimpressed. "Actually what I said," he told the writer Robert Penn Warren four years later, "was 'Niggers always looking to get themselves in the papers, no matter how they do it.'" As the sit-ins spread, Carmichael's response remained jaundiced. "My reaction then was 'Niggers are just like monkeys: one do, all do.'"² Two months later, however, in Washington, D.C., Carmichael happened to meet some participants and immediately joined them in a northern Virginia sit-in. "I was really impressed by the way they conducted themselves," he told Warren.³

Carmichael's serendipitous civil rights involvement led him to enroll at Howard University, though he confessed to Warren that he "didn't want to

go to an all-Negro school . . . and I wasn't sure that Howard . . . could give me a good education." In December of his freshman year, he traveled to Fayette County, Tennessee, where black citizens' attempts to register to vote had met with intense economic retaliation by local whites. Carmichael was "very impressed with the people" and said "I thought this was way more important than a restaurant . . . the power to vote."⁴

Six months later, Carmichael joined one of the Freedom Rides to Jackson, Mississippi, where the riders were arrested and sent to Parchman state prison. Carmichael served forty-nine days before being released, but he continued his studies at Howard and graduated in June 1964. That spring he told Warren that black separatism was "nonsense" and "no solution," while dismissing the NOI as "full of beans." One great danger for black leadership, Carmichael said, "is that you get an opportunist, and he becomes [a] rhetorician" who "says things" rather than striving to "really look for solutions. . . . I get very afraid if I read the name of one person over and over again, who's saying nothing, essentially nothing, he's got the press following him around, and he's saying actually nothing."⁵

In March 1965, when the Selma-to-Montgomery march was followed by the murder of a Northern white volunteer, Viola Liuzzo, in neighboring Lowndes County, Carmichael and several SNCC colleagues launched a new organizing effort there. One of the best recent civil rights histories, Hasan Kwame Jeffries' *Bloody Lowndes: Civil Rights and Black Power in Alabama's Black Belt* (2009), narrates in vivid detail how Carmichael and his compatriots aided Lowndes' small band of indigenous activists to build their group—the Lowndes County Christian Movement for Human Rights—into an independent political party. Four months into Carmichael's work in Lowndes, a white Episcopalian seminarian who had joined the SNCC effort, Jon Daniels, was shot dead in the county seat by a local racist. Daniels' killing affected Carmichael deeply, in part because Carmichael blamed himself for allowing someone white, whom local segregationists most intensely loathed, to enlist in what all could foresee was a death-defying enterprise.⁶ But the murder did not derail the local activists, and come May 1966, Lowndes' newly registered black voters could cast their ballots for their own new party. Yet by that time, Carmichael was already running a campaign of his own to challenge John Lewis for SNCC's chairmanship.

Carmichael's closest SNCC colleague, Cleveland Sellers, published a 1973 autobiography in which he praised his friend as "a tireless worker" and recounted how Carmichael's chairmanship campaign met "without much success" prior to the time SNCC's entire staff assembled near Nashville.⁷ A seemingly endless late night meeting, which many staff had already left, then ended with Lewis' re-election being overturned and the remaining rump group installing Carmichael as his successor. Clayborne Carson has noted that,

after his election, "Carmichael was faced with the choice of building political institutions such as he had created in Lowndes County or . . . becoming preoccupied with rhetorical appeals for the unification of black people on the basis of separatist ideals." Carmichael's championing of "black power" during the Meredith March answered that question, and in its wake Carmichael's rhetoric grew increasingly explosive. "When you talk of black power, you talk of building a movement that will smash everything Western civilization has created," he told a Cleveland audience.⁸

As Carson rightly observed, there was both a "purposeful ambiguity" and "an element of dissimulation" in Carmichael's public statements about the meaning of "black power."⁹ Yet journalists' obsessive focus on the implications of black power obscured how Carmichael, within the space of barely two months, had transformed from a full-time local organizer in rural Lowndes County to a full-time traveling speech-maker whose unpredictable remarks increasingly angered his SNCC colleagues. A September disturbance in Atlanta, during which Carmichael allegedly threatened to "tear this place up," led to his arrest for inciting to riot.¹⁰ Come winter, Carmichael confessed his distaste for his new role to black photographer Gordon Parks: "I'm an organizer. I want to go back to what I can do best. I'm too young for this job. I don't know enough about the outside world. I need time to read, learn, reflect."¹¹

Early in 1967, Carmichael told colleagues that his one-year term as chairman would be his last, but his May departure from that post brought no end to his speaking schedule. Welcomed to Cuba by Fidel Castro, Carmichael claimed "We are preparing groups of urban guerillas" in U.S. cities and said that if any were killed, "vengeance must be taken against the leaders of the United States."¹²

In late 1967, *Black Power: The Politics of Liberation in America* was published as a coauthored work by Carmichael and the African American political scientist Charles V. Hamilton. Replete with scholarly citations, readers could be forgiven for believing that the book was far more Hamilton's work than Carmichael's. Reviewers of the volume all but yawned. In the *New York Times Book Review*, civil rights journalist Fred Powledge wrote that the book's conclusions "are amazingly brief and startlingly unrevolutionary."¹³ In the *New York Review of Books*, Christopher Lasch called the book "disappointing . . . because it makes so few concrete proposals for action." Decrying "the poverty of Black Power as a political strategy," Lasch lamented that the slogan "contains very few political ideas at all."¹⁴

When Martin Luther King, Jr., was assassinated in Memphis on April 4, 1968, Carmichael was in Washington, D.C., where he took to the streets as fires and looting spread. In the aftermath, blame focused on Carmichael. The *New York Times* editorial board pronounced, in an April 6th editorial called "The Racists," that "The twisted mind of the white criminal who murdered

Dr. King is matched by the psychotic reaction of Stokely Carmichael who publicly urges murder in the streets."

Carmichael's descent into political irrelevance culminated months later when he relocated to the tiny West African country of Guinea. In 1971, a volume edited by Ethel N. Minor that contained a selection of Carmichael's 1966 to 1970 articles and speeches was published under the title *Stokely Speaks: Black Power Back to Pan Africanism*. Carmichael's former SNCC colleague Julius Lester reviewed it jointly with a new volume of speeches by Malcolm X in the *New York Times Book Review*. Rightly terming Malcolm "the most important black political figure of the 1960s" and praising his "diamond-like integrity," Lester noted how five years earlier "the logical successor to Malcolm X was Stokely Carmichael." Their legacies already had diverged radically, as the two volumes revealed. "Though dead, Malcolm is terrifyingly alive in his speeches; Carmichael is alive, but his speeches are depressingly dead." Rueing how "boring, tedious and repetitious" Carmichael's orations were, Lester reported that "his words are a confusing mixture of black nationalism, quasi-Marxism-Leninism and New Left rhetoric, from which no coherent whole emerges." In comparative terms, Lester concluded, "Malcolm X was one of the makers of history. Carmichael was a reflector of it."¹⁵

Carmichael was but thirty years old, yet his political obituary was all but complete. Across the 1970s, '80s, and '90s, he would make speaking forays to scores of U.S. college campuses, drawing curious, sometimes hostile, and sometimes confused youthful audiences. His 1986 declaration at the University of Maryland that "the only good Zionist is a dead Zionist" drew protests;¹⁶ a return visit nine months later featured what the *Washington Post* described as "a rambling, sometimes vituperative 90-minute talk" during which Carmichael "referred to groups ranging from white students on campus to the Democratic Party as 'pigs.'"¹⁷ When an unemployed twenty-three-year-old Columbia graduate "in search of some inspiration" went to hear Kwame Ture—the name Carmichael adopted for himself in 1979—in Morningside Heights in 1985, the audience began leaving while Carmichael was still speaking. "His eyes glowed inward as he spoke, the eyes of a madman or a saint," Barack Obama wrote a decade later. "It was like a bad dream."¹⁸

When Carmichael died in 1998 at age fifty-seven from prostate cancer, *The Economist* commented that "by his dying day he was not much more than a nonentity in Guinea," where he cut "a rather ridiculous figure . . . packing a pistol and dressing up in the green fatigues of a Guinean soldier." It added that "only hagiographers can detect consistency in Mr. Carmichael's politics."¹⁹ Five years later, when Carmichael's 835-page posthumous memoir was published, reviewers greeted it much as they had his 1971 volume of speeches. Dismissing the book as "a hodgepodge of memory and commentary that obscures rather than illuminates," John D'Emilio lamented how Carmichael's

life “took a long, tragic detour away from political effectiveness and social influence.”²⁰ Writing in *The Nation*, black journalist Norman Kelley underscored how Carmichael’s “black power” rhetoric actually represented “a retreat from the kind of pivotal organizing work . . . that SNCC had been carrying out in the bowels of the South.”²¹

In 2006, Peniel Joseph published *Waiting ‘Til the Midnight Hour: A Narrative History of Black Power in America*: a rich, thoughtful and thoroughly researched first book. Four years later, Joseph published *Dark Days, Bright Nights: From Black Power to Barack Obama*, a thinner volume that exhibited significantly less of the careful scholarship that had marked *Waiting*. A lengthy chapter on Stokely Carmichael constituted almost a quarter of the book, with Joseph describing him as “one of the most important political leaders of the postwar era” and twice labeling him an “international icon” because of his 1967 world travels.²²

Those characterizations are now further amplified in the astonishingly disappointing *Stokely: A Life*. Carmichael not only “transformed American democracy and race relations” and “forever changed the course of American history,” he also “transformed local, national, and global race relations.” His “rare combination of personal authenticity and political sincerity made him a historically transcendent figure” (pp. 319, 324, 322, 323). Joseph declares that *Stokely* is “a critical biography” (p. xii), yet until its final chapter, it is anything but. His account of Carmichael’s life up through 1966 adds little to what is already known. Much of what is cited above never appears in *Stokely*, and a knowledgeable reader is repeatedly frustrated and puzzled by the visible skimpiness of Joseph’s research effort: only thirty personal interviews, all conducted by telephone, supplement his work on *Waiting*. A reviewer can jot down a long list of names of important figures with whom Joseph did not speak, ranging from Carmichael’s long-time 1960s girlfriend, Mary Lovelace O’Neal, to his *Black Power* coauthor, Charles V. Hamilton.

Joseph states that Jon Daniels’ August 1965 murder “shattered” and “permanently scarred” Carmichael (pp. 91, 92), but he previously opined that Carmichael had twice been “transformed” by his earlier civil rights involvement (pp. 49, 77). Gordon Parks reported in 1967 that Carmichael had suffered a nervous breakdown in Montgomery in March 1965—“I started screaming and I didn’t stop until they got me to the airport,” he told Parks—an event that Joseph mentioned in *Waiting*,²³ but in *Stokely* he makes no effort to plumb the causes or consequences beyond stating that Carmichael suffered “decompensation . . . or paralytic nervous breakdown” at least twice (p. 157).

Joseph claims that the Meredith March ensured Carmichael “of a kind of enduring longevity that would outlast most of his contemporaries.” He also asserts that a 1966 essay was so “brilliant” that it proved Carmichael “a formidable thinker,” and he contends that *Black Power* was “an intellectually

rigorous and theoretically subtle political treatise whose unexpected breadth and depth surprised critics" (pp. 103, 149, 233). Only following Carmichael's 1969 move to Guinea does Joseph become less than entirely worshipful, admitting that Carmichael sought "political sanctuary in a country with less political freedom than the one he had left behind" and acknowledging that Guinean dictator Sekou Toure's "one-party state ruthlessly dispatched enemies and imprisoned former allies" in a notorious hellhole named Camp Boiro (p. 277). Carmichael never criticized Toure, which Joseph recognizes was "a moral failure as well as a political one" (p. 310), and Carmichael also cultivated close personal friendships with Ugandan mass murderer Idi Amin, Libyan dictator Muammar Gaddafi, and Nation of Islam chieftain Louis Farrakhan. Echoing exactly his own language from *Dark Days*,²⁴ Joseph concedes that Carmichael "lived in a political reality of his own making" (p. 314), but nonetheless castigates Barack Obama's 1985 "inability to comprehend the full meaning" of Carmichael's rhetoric (p. 325).

Stokely richly documents an "inability to comprehend," but the incomprehension it reflects is not on the part of Barack Obama.

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1. Gene Roberts, "Mississippi Reduces Police Protection For Marchers," *New York Times*, 17 June 1966.

2. Stokely Carmichael Interview with Robert Penn Warren, 4 March 1964, Washington, D.C., p. 13, available at <http://whospeaks.library.vanderbilt.edu/interview/stokely-carmichael>.

3. *Ibid.*, 14–15.

4. *Ibid.*, 26.

5. *Ibid.*, 43, 45–46. Carmichael also opined that the "most nonsensical thing I've ever heard in my life is preferential treatment for Negroes" because "the Negroes who are getting preferential treatment are Negroes who don't need it."

6. The impact of Daniels' murder is discussed in Stokely Carmichael with Ekwueme Michael Thelwell, *Ready For Revolution: The Life and Struggles of Stokely Carmichael (Kwame Ture)* (2003), 470, a posthumously published autobiography whose first six chapters are the only portion of the book Carmichael himself completed. See David J. Garrow, "A Revolutionary in the Spotlight and in Exile," *Los Angeles Times Book Review*, 25 January 2004, 6.

7. Cleveland Sellers with Robert Terrell, *The River of No Return: The Autobiography of a Black Militant and the Life and Death of SNCC* (1973), 77, 158.

8. Clayborne Carson, *In Struggle: SNCC and the Black Awakening of the 1960s* (1981), 206, 221.

9. *Ibid.*, 218.

10. *Ibid.*, 225.

11. Gordon Parks, "Whip of Black Power," *Life*, 19 May 1967, reprinted in *Reporting Civil Rights—Part Two: American Journalism 1963–1973* (2003), 555.

12. Carson, *In Struggle*, 274.

13. "A Slogan, A Chant, A Threat," *New York Times Book Review*, 10 December 1967, 3, 66.

14. "The Trouble With Black Power," *New York Review of Books*, 29 February 1968.

15. "A Dead Man Alive in His Speeches, A Live Man Dead in His Speeches," *New York Times Book Review*, 16 May 1971, 4, 22.

16. Zita Arocha, "Ban Extremists, U-Md. Urged, Students Protest Speaker's Remarks About Jews," *Washington Post*, 15 February 1986.
17. Victoria Churchville, "Black Activist's Speech at U-Md. Draws Protest," *Washington Post*, 7 November 1986.
18. Barack Obama, *Dreams From My Father: A Story of Race and Inheritance* (1995), 140.
19. "Stokely Carmichael (later Kwame Ture)," *The Economist*, 21 November 1998, 90.
20. John D'Emilio, "Fighting Words," *Washington Post Book World*, 15 February 2004, 4.
21. Norman Kelley, "Memoirs of a Revolutionist," *The Nation*, 8 December 2003, 18.
22. Peniel Joseph, *Dark Days, Bright Nights: From Black Power to Barack Obama* (2010), 107, 110.
23. Parks, "Whip of Black Power," 557; Joseph, *Waiting*, 128.
24. Joseph, *Dark Days*, 158.