

## **Rebellious to Revolutionary: SNCC and its Transformative Activism**

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### **ABSTRACT**

The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC, pronounced “snik”) was formed in 1960 to give an organizational expression to the unprecedented rise in student activism during the civil rights movement. In its beginning, SNCC sought to use nonviolent tactics to confront and dismantle the Jim Crow segregation that oppressed Black Americans across the country. As SNCC’s focus shifted from dismantling segregation to organizing outside of the political institutions that did not represent them, its members recognized the systemic nature of the oppression and injustice they were fighting. This revolutionary understanding of Black oppression led SNCC members to both realize the limitations of nonviolent tactics and to embrace Black self-determination, self-empowerment, and self-defense. SNCC’s full embodiment of these principles at the height of its activism in the late 1960s coincided with the emergence of the Black Power movement that held these principles and grassroots organizing as some of their major tenets. This article examines SNCC’s activism from its inception in 1960 to its peak in 1966, demonstrating how its grassroots activism in the face of extreme racial violence and lack of government protection and support transformed what its members believed Black liberation should look like and how it could be achieved.

Keywords: SNCC, Black Power movement, civil rights movement, grassroots activism, voter registration

### **Introduction**

When members of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) began chanting “Black Power” at the Meredith March of June 1966, it frightened some but empowered many. “Black Power” had yet to be publicly addressed or defined by any organization or activist, but it resonated deeply with SNCC members. The iconic phrase was giving a name to notions of political empowerment, Black self-determination, and grassroots organizing that SNCC had already been practicing through its demonstrations, voter registration projects, and political organizing. SNCC’s grassroots activism had allowed its members to become intimately familiar with the systemic injustices that severely and violently affected poor Black people in the South. Activists’ experiences with intense racial violence and the failure of the United States government to protect and empower Black people radicalized them and directed their focus to critiquing the systemic nature of racial oppression and finding solutions through the building of alternative political and educational institutions for Black people. This focus on systemic oppression and on building empowering alternatives for Black people would become a major tenet of the Black Power movement. This article will thus demonstrate how SNCC transformed into a Black Power organization by analyzing how its activism caused the organization to

develop and practice principles like Black self-determination, self-empowerment, and self-defense. This study will focus on the organization's programs and major events, showing how the nature and experiences of its work helped shape its development from a rebellious civil rights organization into a revolutionary Black Power one.

### **The Founding of SNCC**

When four Black college students in Greensboro, North Carolina, decided to sit peacefully but defiantly at Woolworth's all-white lunch counter on February 1, 1960, they did not anticipate how much their courageous act would resonate with Black students across the nation. Much like other young people in the South who faced the injustice of segregation daily, North Carolina Agricultural and Technical State University students Ezell Blair Jr., Franklin McCain, Joseph McNeil, and David Richmond had increasingly been feeling angry and frustrated about segregation and its indignities (Gaillard 2001, 13–14). In talking at length about their rage at both segregation and the perceived inaction of their parents' generation, the Greensboro Four came to realize that just talking about their disappointments made them no better than the generation they were criticizing (Gaillard 2001, 13). Deciding to take matters into their own hands and draw the line they wished their parents had drawn, the Greensboro Four demanded to be served at the all-white counter and refused to leave until closing. This act held Black self-determination at its core, and everything that came from it, including SNCC and its activism, was infused with this principle.

This sudden wave of student protest revitalized the civil rights movement that had been losing momentum since the successes of the Montgomery Bus Boycott (Morgan and Davies 2012, 2). But the boldness, youthfulness, and determination were new elements that the students brought to the movement. The success of the students' direct action was impressive. As historian Barbara Ransby notes, "students' direct assaults on Jim Crow had done more to demolish the most ubiquitous and offensive everyday forms of segregation than years of carefully orchestrated national campaigns" (2003, 252). Ella Baker, the executive director of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) at the time, recognized this impact and believed it imperative to the success of the movement that the students be supported and mentored. The SCLC and Martin Luther King Jr. also recognized what the students could do for the movement and supported Ella Baker in organizing a conference for everyone to come together and collaborate (Morgan and Davies 2012, 7). However, the SCLC and Baker had different expectations around how the students would organize.

The SCLC had hoped that the students would organize as a youth wing of their organization, but in direct defiance of its wishes, Baker encouraged the students to organize independently (Ransby 2003, 252). This act of defiance greatly upset the SCLC's leadership, but Baker was uncompromising in her mission to foster the creation of an independent student-led and driven organization. She organized a conference for the students to meet and hear from civil rights movement leaders at her alma mater, Shaw University, in Raleigh, North Carolina. Out of that conference, held in April 1960, the Temporary Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee was created, later renamed the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee. While the committee would embody the radicalism and defiance of the students, the "affirmed philosophical or religious ideal of nonviolence as the foundation of [their] purpose" (SNCC Constitution 1962) in their constitution showed how influential civil rights era ideals were in their formation and early thinking.

Despite having nonviolence as a major tenet in SNCC's constitution, many of the students did not accept nonviolence as a way of life, like other civil rights organizations did and urged them to do. Instead, nonviolence was regarded as primarily an effective tactic to combat segregation (Stoper 1977, 16). It was the students' determination to challenge segregation and injustice directly and in a way that would effect immediate change in their daily lives that motivated them. This distinction marks a fundamental difference between SNCC and the established civil rights organizations. It also alludes to the students' propensity to seek other avenues and tactics that would work for their independent goals and purposes, even if they did not align with already established ones. The defiant and courageous spirit that characterized the birth of the organization would live on to become a defining tenet of the organization and its programs.

### **SNCC's Civil Rights Activism**

As determination, self-empowerment, and defiance had become the founding principles of the organization, SNCC's involvement in the Freedom Rides reflected and strengthened these principles. Diane Nash, James Bevel, and John Lewis of SNCC had been working on a desegregation campaign in Nashville, Tennessee, when they and other students around them learned that the Greyhound bus carrying Freedom Riders had been bombed (Catsam 2008, 1). The Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), the organization behind the Freedom Rides, was prepared to abandon the mission because of the intensity of the violence. SNCC took initiative and independently decided to aid in the continuation of the rides by sending new people to the program. They were emboldened by the violence they knew they would face, and their experiences with it would only contribute to their radicalization and determination. Diane Nash, who had dropped out of college to become a full-time staffer for SNCC, felt that not continuing the rides would give "the impression...that whenever a movement starts all you have to do is attack it with massive violence and the Blacks will stop" (Catsam 2008, 1). In offering unsolicited help, even against the warnings of the movement's leaders, SNCC exercised Black self-determination in a way not typical of the civil rights movement.

While advancing its direct-action strategy through the Freedom Rides and other demonstrations, SNCC began turning its attention to the more pressing issue of voter registration. Initially, SNCC activists were hesitant to divert their energy from direct action to voter registration. They did not want to validate the Kennedy administration's stance that civil rights organizations should work on voter registration efforts rather than direct action (Morgan and Davies 2012, 13). The lack of enforcement of desegregation and the lack of protection for the Freedom Riders from the government made SNCC members distrustful of the institution and its motives. More importantly, they were hesitant because they saw demonstrations like the Freedom Rides, which elicited strong opposition and violence, as more meaningful and impactful than other projects, like registering voters (Morgan and Davies 2012, 13). However, after meeting with Black residents from counties experiencing the most violent voter suppression, SNCC soon began to see "the emerging reality that there...were many more serious evils to be confronted than getting a cup of coffee or hamburger at the Five and Dime" (Brown 2015, 0:41:20 to 0:41:44). The violence that Black people were facing in poor rural communities for trying to vote would convince them that the cause, in fact, would involve direct action. Following Baker's advice, SNCC decided they would take on both approaches. They began going to rural communities in the Mississippi Delta, and the fieldwork would radicalize and transform their thinking.

Bob Moses, a SNCC field secretary, began leading voter registration efforts in the Mississippi Delta in 1962. It was in these rural areas where poor Black people in towns faced life-threatening racial violence for trying to get registered to vote. It was a grassroots effort, as SNCC worked closely with community leaders to establish Freedom Schools where Black residents who only had substandard educational facilities and resources could be educated and politically empowered. Additionally, SNCC would accompany and protect residents as they went to the courthouse to get registered, risking their lives as they were often met with intense racial violence from white residents and plantation owners (Forman 1985, 225). Not long after they began their organizing in the area, Herbert Lee, a resident of McComb who assisted SNCC in voter registration efforts, was murdered. It was devastating to SNCC and the Black residents of McComb, and they were forced to reduce their efforts (Forman 1985, 231). However, SNCC members had already been deeply affected by what they saw and would return to continue educational programs and voter registration efforts in 1964.

From working closely with community leaders, SNCC workers became intimately familiar with the poverty and violence that the Black people in the Mississippi Delta were subjected to. They became firsthand witnesses to the lack of quality in the education given to Black students, and to how sharecroppers worked for very little pay. They were thus able to recognize the systemic nature of the oppression faced by Black residents, as it was the state that refused to provide adequate funding and resources for their education, and the government and law enforcement that allowed and enabled violence against them. This recognition led SNCC workers to be open and harsh with their criticisms of the government and its various policing and economic institutions. These realizations would classify them as radicals, and their calls for a revolution made them militant. Their censorship at the March on Washington of 1963 would only strengthen their desire to make their “radical” critiques known and further their vision of Black political freedom and power.

### **Formative Activism, Conflicts, and Disappointments**

By the time of the 1963 March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom, SNCC activists had already become radicalized by their fieldwork and wanted to draw attention to the systemic poverty and violence that they had witnessed. From its grassroots organizing in the Mississippi Delta, SNCC had begun to turn away from seeking inclusion in the political system that actively worked against them and refused to represent them. They were thus very critical of the March on Washington because it was led and organized by the civil rights leaders and organizations who were still very much committed to working within the law and with the United States government to achieve their goals (Carson 1981, 92). However, SNCC members recognized the significance of the demonstration and the support they could gain if they were present and spoke alongside major civil rights leaders. They joined the event with the intent of making their criticisms of the government, society, and political institutions known. John Lewis, the newly elected SNCC chair, prepared a speech that would announce their rejection of the civil rights bill and express their resentment of the government’s failures in protecting Black people and allowing them to be economically exploited (Carson 1981, 93).

Lewis’s original speech was incendiary, and civil rights leaders were upset at SNCC’s seemingly militant and radical stance, which was not shared by any other organization present. In the original speech, Lewis stated, “in good conscience, we cannot support wholeheartedly the administration’s civil rights bill” (Lewis 1963, 1). This stance greatly offended many civil rights leaders, particularly Archbishop O’Doyle, who refused to give his invocation unless the speech

was edited (Forman 1985, 334). Even though SNCC members felt strongly about what they were saying and how important it was that they express the suffering of poor and working-class Black people on such a large platform, they compromised. In the new speech, Lewis stated “we support [the bill] with great reservation” (1963, 1). He also had written phrases like “we shall pursue our own ‘scorched earth’” and “all of us must get in the revolution” (Lewis 1963, 1), which had to be removed as part of the compromise, as the other speakers saw the statements as harmful to the movement and to their goal of getting the civil rights bill passed. SNCC was not completely censored, however, as the press printed the original speech that they had received before the march. They thus still managed to “[articulate] to the nation a militancy not heard before from civil rights organizations” (Forman 1985, 333). SNCC would only become more emboldened to continue their activism in opposition to compromises and with a focus on generating change through independent channels. This would lead them to delve deeper into their grassroots organizing in the Deep South for voter registration through the Mississippi Freedom Summer Project of 1964.

More determined than ever to continue and to expand their grassroots voter registration work in the Mississippi Delta, SNCC created the Mississippi Summer Project of 1964. They recruited hundreds of college students and volunteers, a vast majority of them being white or from the North, and they sent them to live in the communities they were mobilizing in (Moses 1965, 3–4). During Freedom Summer, as those few months of 1964 came to be known, SNCC sought to establish freedom in many ways, not just through registering Black people to vote.

SNCC knew voter registration efforts in the Mississippi Delta to be dangerous given the racially violent response to the programs they had established in the area back in 1962. However, the increase in volunteers from their recruitment for Freedom Summer gave SNCC the number of staff needed to engage in more activism and to protect themselves and the residents from the constant threat of racial violence. According to county organizer Hollis Watkins, volunteers going into the Mississippi had to be “prepared to go to jail...prepared to be beaten...and ultimately...prepared to be killed” (as quoted in Hogan 2007, 155). This was because white locals were so committed to exterminating the efforts of SNCC and the Black residents because they feared the power they would have if they succeeded in politically mobilizing a large population of Black people (Cobb 2015, 5). Black people were the majority in these counties, and the local government, controlled by local whites, recognized that their power would be severely diminished if Black residents exercised their right to vote. They had been adamantly fighting Black residents’ efforts to register to vote since the 1950s, by enacting laws meant to disenfranchise and monitor the Black population and by killing or driving Black community leaders and activists out of town (Cobb 2015, 5). SNCC entered the area both despite and because of this, as they could not ignore the repression that they had become aware of during their first round of projects in McComb in 1962. SNCC felt compelled to “share their terror with them” (Hogan 2007, 166).

In addition to the voter registration efforts, SNCC built Freedom Schools that exemplified their commitment to building alternative institutions for Black people that encouraged self-determination and self-empowerment. SNCC witnessed firsthand the consequences of the public schools for Black children being severely underfunded. The schools were overcrowded and understaffed, resulting in extremely high illiteracy rates and, consequently, a lack of political understanding and power. This was, of course, intentional. As historian William Sturkey notes, “the curriculum in Mississippi’s Black public schools was specifically designed to discourage resistance to white supremacist structures and practices” (2010, 365). SNCC came to believe, as

Bob Moses said, that the “level of education is the immediate key, not the integration as such” (as quoted in Warren 1965, 40). Moses’ statement demonstrates how SNCC had become distinctly removed from many civil rights goals and ideals, as their goals centered around integration and reforms of existing educational structures and institutions. Freedom Schools became places where Black people were able to educate themselves and young students on various literature and African American history—independent of state control. Doing so independently was the ultimate exercise of ideological resistance to white power structures. Students were given the tools to become more politically aware and involved, with the intent of encouraging them to build alternative political, educational, and economic institutions that served their needs and those of the community. In this, SNCC was also resisting the co-opting of Black people into a two-party system that they believed continually failed them.

The terror SNCC faced revealed to them how essential armed self-defense was when engaging in activism, distancing them further from their civil rights movement roots that practiced and lived nonviolence. In this violent climate, Black residents could not afford to not be armed, and many owned firearms for self-defense. Assaults and attacks were commonplace, leading many to be “haunted” by Malcolm X’s question of “how the black people [can] afford to be nonviolent when our churches [are] being bombed and our little girls murdered” (Brown 2015, 0:47:02 to 0:47:09). Those who had seen nonviolence used as an effective tactic as opposed to a way of life were predisposed to becoming radicalized, which was a large number of SNCC members. James Forman, based on his experience with Freedom Summer as an organizer, came to “[know] that our struggle would eventually take a violent form, and I was ready for the transition whenever it occurred” (1985, 376). Others, however, had accepted nonviolence as a way of life and struggled with the implications of committing to it in the face of terror. Many in SNCC began to understand how essential armed self-defense was, as it was necessary in the face of the death threats and drive-by shootings that had become commonplace in the area (Forman 1985, 376). While SNCC as an organization was ultimately never able to sustainably grow into and assert their stances on armed struggle and self-defense, these foundational Black Power principles were being practiced and thought about by many individuals in SNCC throughout their activism in the Mississippi Delta.

Freedom Summer was a pivotal point for SNCC. Through organizing as adoptive members of the community, SNCC experienced violent and state-sanctioned repression where change was the most desperately needed. SNCC’s expansion of activism into creating Freedom Schools showed that they understood how immediate change needed to come to these areas—and ultimately to the nation as a whole. By the end of Freedom Summer, many had undergone an ideological transformation that departed from civil rights era ideals. SNCC’s engagement in armed self-defense, in criticizing political institutions, and in building tangible alternatives to oppressive institutions led to the development of principles rooted in Black self-determination that would become foundational Black Power movement ideals. Their experiences had made founding Black Power movement principles such as Black self-determination, self-empowerment, and armed self-defense integral to their developing student movement. However, SNCC lacked an established declaration of their beliefs that reflected their growing political awareness and that they would be able to refer to while navigating times of ideological development such as this (Stoper 1977, 15).

Many SNCC leaders would lament how they did not take time to confer and develop a foundational set of beliefs, like the Ten-Point Platform the Black Panther Party would go on to establish. It would have allowed them to work through the questions of nonviolence, armed

struggle, armed self-defense, and radicalism as an organization, rather than allowing individual beliefs and perceptions to come into conflict in the destructive way that they eventually did. It would have also allowed the organization to establish a curriculum or political education program that would have created a sustainable way to integrate the large number of new volunteers who stayed after Freedom Summer. Because SNCC wanted the country to recognize the extent to which Black people suffered from poverty, racial violence, and a lack of political representation, they encouraged white college students from the North to volunteer for Freedom Summer (Forman 1985, 371). They knew from past programs that the involvement of white students, especially from elite institutions like Yale and Stanford, would get them the attention they wanted. Having so many volunteers enabled the program to be so expansive, but SNCC was unprepared for the sudden growth in their organization, and their practices in Black self-empowerment would conflict with the leadership roles that many white people held in the organization (Wallach 1997, 113).

The over one hundred white students who decided to stay and work in Mississippi after the summer transformed the composition of the organization drastically, and SNCC's growing commitment to Black self-empowerment and self-determination complicated their stance on having white members. This massive growth could have led to an expansion of programs and activism. Instead, it led to major disputes about how to deal with the issues that arose from having a large influx of new members who did not share the unifying experience of racism and racial violence (Stoper 1977, 22). As Bob Moses described, "it's very hard for some of the students who have been brought up in Mississippi and are the victims of this kind of race hatred not to begin to let all of that out on the white staff" (as quoted in Warren 1965, 41). Black people in the rural communities were facing violent retaliation from the Klu Klux Klan and police for attempting to register to vote, and they were not eager to trust the white SNCC members and their motives. This would hinder their advances as the trust and confidence that residents put in SNCC members were imperative to making their voter registration efforts successful. The larger problems from the influx of new members arose from SNCC trying to decide the extent to which white people should be organizing Black members. Their decisions would be heavily influenced by their developing principles of Black self-empowerment.

Because the new white members were mostly college students from the North who were more educated than many of the southern members, they began taking on larger roles in SNCC. Their skills in typing and writing had many of them working on the *Student Voice*, the organization's newspaper, creating a path for them to be involved in bigger decisions within the organization (Stoper 1977, 23). This naturally upset many in SNCC who had been working hard for years in the field, where the violence and true challenges were. SNCC's lack of a platform to which they could refer for guidance on this change led to the problem being dealt with through a myriad of individual opinions and beliefs. The presence of white people in SNCC would only become more of a divisive issue as the organization embraced notions of Black self-empowerment and simultaneously tried to manage tensions over white members leading projects. The issue was very delicate from the beginning, as direct conflict often arose between Black and white SNCC members. Moses once recalled witnessing "a tirade...for about fifteen minutes, just letting out what really was a whole series of really racial statements of hatred" (as quoted in Warren 1965, 41). Black SNCC students were defensive of their organization, as they felt a sense of pride and ownership over the movement they were heading (Stoper 1977, 23). Having white students take over leadership roles elicited emotional reactions that would long go unresolved.

The structural problems that having so many new white members caused would follow SNCC for years.

The culminating event of Freedom Summer was a challenge of the all-white delegates of the Mississippi Democratic Party. During their voter registration efforts in the Mississippi Delta, SNCC had witnessed firsthand the voter suppression tactics that excluded Black people from having a political voice and political power. Even with their success in getting some Black people registered, SNCC began to recognize that just being able to vote did not equate to political power when the parties were racist and openly touted white supremacy. This realization transformed the group's thinking about what political empowerment truly meant, and how it could be achieved. With opposition from all directions, SNCC members looked inward, and their self-determination to be heard led them to establish the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party (MFDP) in conjunction with Mississippians from across the state. The party was built to address the Mississippi Democratic Party's failure to adequately represent Black interests. SNCC brought together Black and white people from across the state and chose a racially integrated group of delegates that they wanted to secure seats by contesting the regulars at the Democratic National Convention in Atlantic City, New Jersey (Ransby 2003, 43). The convention, held in August 1964, would allow SNCC to make it known throughout the nation that Black people were more than capable of organizing and building alternative institutions to the ones that had failed them. However, their party's rejection would show SNCC the suffocating limitations of America's two-party system.

The rejection of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party (MFDP) at the Democratic National Convention was a loss for SNCC, but it revealed the necessity of developing political alternatives to the Democratic Party, which they saw as inherently exclusionary toward Black people. Their intentions at the convention were to both address the failures of the Democratic Party to represent Black interests and to establish an avenue for Black political participation. Fannie Lou Hamer, a native of the Mississippi Delta who had organized with SNCC throughout Freedom Summer, delivered a powerful speech that illuminated their goals. Addressing America at the televised event, Hamer described being forced off the plantation her family lived on because their getting registered to vote had infuriated the plantation owner (Brooks and Houck 2010, 64). She talked about drive-by shootings at the homes of people who were involved in the efforts, being physically assaulted while imprisoned, and the racially motivated murders of several Black people. She concluded by stating that the horrific violence she had just described was enacted solely because "we want to register to become first-class citizens" (as quoted in Brooks and Houck 2010, 65). Despite her moving speech, the Democratic Party—including President Johnson himself—rejected the MFDP's challenge, but it offered a compromise (Ransby 2003, 349).

SNCC's rejection of the compromise offered by the Democratic Party sent the message that they would not betray their principles for symbolic representation in the powerful two-party system. For all their arduous grassroots organizing throughout Freedom Summer, the MFDP was offered a mere two open seats, without the removal of any regulars (Hogan 2007, 189). Civil rights organizations like the SCLC and the NAACP saw the compromise as generous, but SNCC was adamant about not accepting anything less than what they had gone for (Stoper 1977, 21). The compromise was an insult to the MFDP, whose formation was the epitome of democratic values. While many considered the rejection a failure, it exemplified Black self-determination in a way not imagined before. The organization of a parallel political party was a success in itself



for grassroots organizing. It politically engaged Black people from throughout the state of Mississippi in a process that was designed specifically to uplift and represent them.

### **Building Black Power in Lowndes County**

More determined than ever to focus their efforts on the construction of alternative political institutions for Black people, SNCC would continue political mobilization where it was needed most. In March 1965, the SCLC had planned a protest march from Selma to Montgomery, Alabama, to protest the murder of Jimmie Lee Jackson, a civil rights activist and deacon killed by an Alabama state trooper (Carmichael 2003, 448). SNCC was hesitant to participate in the march because it would be going directly through Lowndes County, an area notorious for its racial violence and extremely low voter registration for Black people, despite them making up the majority of the population. Stokely Carmichael was one of the SNCC organizers who saw a mission to be conducted in the county. Shortly after the march, SNCC began working closely with the community through meeting with residents individually and building relationships with them, educating the people through workshops and mediums they could understand about politics and literacy (Carmichael 1966). The grassroots element of their organization was essential to SNCC's success in galvanizing the people, as the amount of violence and threats they faced for trying to register to vote made them initially resistant to attempting voter registration. Working so closely with residents meant that SNCC staff endured a lot of the violence and opposition the residents did, and it built between the two groups a mutual trust and sense of community. This facilitated meaningful collaboration between SNCC and the residents that birthed a local political party whose black panther symbol would go on to represent its ideals at the national level.

The formation of the Lowndes County Freedom Organization signaled SNCC's embracing of ideas of Black self-determination and political empowerment that would go on to become their defining characteristics. Lowndes County, nicknamed "bloody Lowndes," was one of the poorest in the nation. It was a notoriously inequitable area, as a handful of powerful white families owned 90 percent of the land (Carmichael 2003, 457). Before SNCC began mobilizing in the area, only one Black person was registered to vote out of a population of about twelve thousand (Carmichael 2003, 473). There was a significant amount of work to be done, and SNCC, with Carmichael as its lead organizer in the area, worked closely with residents to get it accomplished. John Hulett, the only registered Black voter in the county, worked closely with Carmichael to organize the county around voter registration efforts and Freedom Schools. Registering Black people was a slow process, as there were many legal and violent barriers to getting registered. However, the passage of the Voting Rights Act of 1965 was a breakthrough that broke down many of the discriminatory barriers to voting. This enabled many more Black people to register, and Carmichael and Hulett began looking into how to fully leverage the untapped power that Black people had by being the majority in the county. They found their answer in a forgotten law that allowed for the formation of independent political parties at the county level (Carmichael 2003, 462).

Organization for the party soon began in earnest. The Lowndes County Voters League was formed, with Hulett as the chair. SNCC and local organizers began recruiting people to join and support the party. Some were ecstatic to participate in the founding of something that was their own, and others who needed convincing were won over through the dismantling of their internalized white supremacy through education. For the many people suffering from their internalization of the thought that Black people were incapable of working in politics, the

breaking point was being shown the Democratic Party's symbol, which featured a ribbon stating "White Supremacy for the Right" above a white rooster (Carmichael 2003, 463). Not wanting to support the party that had enacted so much violence upon them, the Black residents were more than ready to build their own independent party. In contrast to the Democratic Party, SNCC activists and the residents chose to adopt a black panther as their party's symbol. The organizers identified with the powerful animal and its instinct to fight when attacked or provoked. Hulett described it as "a political symbol that we was here to stay and we were going to do whatever needed to be done to survive" (as quoted in Carmichael 2003, 464). Carmichael would later explain that the black panther "symbolizes the strength and dignity of Black people, an animal that never strikes back until he's backed so far against the wall, he's got nothing to do but spring out" (Carmichael 1966, n.p.). With the help of more organizers, the Lowndes County Voters League turned into the Lowndes County Freedom Organization (LCFO), and they participated in the 1966 county elections.

While the party did not win any races that year, its creation was a transformative process for SNCC. SNCC members and Lowndes County residents mobilized for the county election as much as they could, but they were unable to elect any officials, largely because plantation owners forced their workers to vote for the Democratic Party against the LCFO (Carmichael 2003, 473). However, SNCC recognized how unprecedented and impactful their organizing was. They had instilled confidence in the residents who had previously believed the lie that politics were for educated white people. SNCC and Black residents had resisted working with their oppressors and had instead independently organized in defiance of them. This project was SNCC's most prominent exercise and lesson in Black self-determination, armed self-defense, and political empowerment. The project would go on to inspire many, most notably, one of the founders of the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense, Huey P. Newton. He asked Carmichael for permission to use the black panther as the symbol for the organization, which embraced the principles SNCC had exemplified as its foundation. Carmichael responded to Newton's request by saying that permission was not needed because "[the symbol] really belonged to the people" (2003, 477). SNCC had effectively established "a model of an alternative politics" that Black organizations would follow and build upon throughout the following years, when the Black Power movement would take full effect (Stoper 1977, 31).

## Conclusion

The formation of the LCFO was SNCC's last major successful project. Many factors prevented SNCC from being able to cohesively organize within the Black Power movement, the foundation of which they had contributed to immensely. SNCC's downfall as an organization stemmed largely from its inability to navigate the radical and militant position they had developed throughout their years of grassroots activism (Wallach 1997, 114). The controversy of Stokely Carmichael's election as SNCC chair in 1966 showed how the organization struggled to embrace the shift in their ideology as a whole. Carmichael's exclamation of "Black Power" at the Meredith March of 1966 caught on because many felt it expressed all the principles of Black self-determination, political empowerment, and armed self-defense that SNCC had cultivated. However, it caught many off guard because SNCC had not taken the time to systemically define their new direction. This caused Carmichael to publicly define Black Power as an individual, which led to tensions within the organization over how Black Power should be defined. Unfortunately, SNCC would never be able to collectively define Black Power. The organization was dealing with too many divisive issues at the time, including discipline, unresolved problems

with white people's role in the organization, and heavy surveillance by the Federal Bureau of Investigation (Wallach 1997, 114). By 1966, these and other problems had become too large to overcome, and the organization as it was known before Carmichael's election as chair fell apart.

SNCC's transformation from an organization that embodied prominent civil rights movement ideals to one that developed Black Power principles was made possible by their experiences with grassroots and direct-action activism in the Deep South between 1960 and 1966. The nature of SNCC's activism involved working within communities to build trust with Black residents of rural towns plagued by racial violence and voter suppression. This thrust SNCC workers into the violently oppressive reality that many poor Black people suffered through daily, where they developed principles of Black self-determination and self-empowerment by trying to alleviate that suffering through registering Black voters and creating Freedom Schools. The failure of the government to protect SNCC staff and Black residents, and its enabling of violence toward them, also contributed greatly to their radicalization, as witnessing these failures and inaction contested their civil rights era beliefs that working with the government and through law would bring large-scale improvements to Black American life. SNCC activists rejected civil rights era tactics and looked within themselves for the power and tools to be liberated. In doing so, they found the skills and passion needed to create alternative political and educational institutions that did them justice. SNCC was never able to fully participate in the Black Power movement as a cohesive organization, but they inspired others to find Black Power principles within themselves, with the Black Power movement taking off after SNCC's proclamation of Black Power at the Meredith March as proof.

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