

1. "Message to the Grass Roots"

Malcolm X

A prefatory note in Malcolm X Speaks, edited by George Breitman, explains the context for this speech, delivered shortly before Malcolm X's break with Elijah Muhammad and the Nation of Islam: "In late 1963, the Detroit Council for Human Rights announced a Northern Negro Leadership Conference to be held in Detroit on November 9 and 10. When the council's chairman, Rev. C. L. Franklin, sought to exclude black nationalists and Freedom Now Party advocates from the conference, Rev. Albert B. Cleage, Jr., resigned from the council and, in collaboration with the Group On Advanced Leadership (GOAL), arranged for a Northern Negro Grass Roots Leadership Conference. This was held in Detroit at the same time as the more conservative gathering, which was addressed by Congressman Adam Clayton Powell among others. The two-day Grass Roots conference was climaxed by a large public rally at the King Solomon Baptist Church, with Rev. Cleage, journalist William Worthy, and Malcolm X as the chief speakers. The audience, almost all black and with non-Muslims in the great majority, interrupted Malcolm with applause and laughter so often that he asked it to desist because of the lateness of the hour. A few weeks after the conference, President Kennedy was assassinated and Elijah Muhammad silenced Malcolm X. This is, therefore, one of the last speeches Malcolm gave before leaving Muhammad's organization. . . . But it is not a typical Black Muslim speech. Even though Malcolm continued to preface certain statements with the phrase, 'The Honorable Elijah Muhammad says,' he was increasing, in the period before the split, giving his own special stamp to the Black Muslims' ideas, including the idea of separation."

We want to have just an off-the-cuff chat between you and me, us. We want to talk right down to earth in a language that everybody here can easily understand. We all agree tonight, all of the speakers have agreed, that America has a very serious problem. Not only does America have a very serious problem, but our people have a very serious problem. The only reason she has a problem is she doesn't want us here. And every time you look at yourself, be you black, brown, red or yellow, a so-called Negro, you represent

person who poses such a serious problem for America because you're not wanted. Once you face this as a fact, then you can start plotting a course that will make you appear intelligent, instead of unintelligent.

What you and I need to do is learn to forget our differences. When we come together, we don't come together as Baptists or Methodists. You don't catch hell because you're a Baptist, and you don't catch hell because you're a Methodist. You don't catch hell because you're a Methodist or Baptist, you don't catch hell because you're a Democrat or Republican, you don't catch hell because you're a Mason or an Elk, and you sure don't catch hell because you're an American; because if you were an American, you wouldn't catch hell. You catch hell because you're a black man. You catch hell, all of us catch hell, for the same reason.

So we're all black people, so-called Negroes, second-class citizens, ex-slaves. You're nothing but an ex-slave. You don't like to be told that. But what else are you? You are ex-slaves. You didn't come here on the "Mayflower." You came here on a slave ship. In chains, like a horse, or a cow, or a chicken. And you were brought here by the people who came here on the "Mayflower," you were brought here by the so-called Pilgrims, or Founding Fathers. They were the ones who brought you here.

We have a common enemy. We have this in common: We have a common oppressor, a common exploiter, and a common discriminator. But once we all realize that we have a common enemy, then we unite—on the basis of what we have in common. And what we have foremost in common is that enemy—the white man. He's an enemy to all of us. I know some of you all think that some of them aren't enemies. Time will tell.

In Bandung back in, I think, 1954, was the first unity meeting in centuries of black people. And once you study what happened at the Bandung conference, and the results of the Bandung conference, it actually serves as a model for the same procedure you and I can use to get our problems solved. At Bandung all the nations came together, the dark nations from Africa and Asia. Some of them were Buddhists, some of them were Muslims, some of them were Christians, some were Confucianists, some were atheists. Despite their religious differences, they came together.

Some were communists, some were socialists, some were capitalists—despite their economic and political differences, they came together. All of them were black, brown, red or yellow.

The number-one thing that was not allowed to attend the Bandung conference was the white man. He couldn't come. Once they excluded the white man, they found that they could get together. Once they kept him out, everybody else fell right in and fell in line. This is the thing that you and I have to understand. And these people who came together didn't have nuclear weapons, they didn't have jet planes, they didn't have all of the heavy armaments that the white man has. But they had unity.

They were able to submerge their little petty differences and agree on one thing: That one African came from Kenya and was being colonized by the Englishman, and another African came from the Congo and was being colonized by the Belgian, and another African came from Guinea and was being colonized by the French, and another came from Angola and was being colonized by the Portuguese. When they came to the Bandung conference, they looked at the Portuguese, and at the Frenchman, and at the Englishman, and at the Dutchman, and learned or realized the one thing that all of them had in common—they were all from Europe, they were all Europeans, blond, blue-eyed and white skins. They began to recognize who their enemy was. The same man that was colonizing our people in Kenya was colonizing our people in the Congo. The same one in the Congo was colonizing our people in South Africa, and in Southern Rhodesia, and in Burma, and in India, and in Afghanistan, and in Pakistan. They realized all over the world where the dark man was being oppressed, he was being oppressed by the white man; where the dark man was being exploited, he was being exploited by the white man. So they got together on this basis—that they had a common enemy.

And when you and I here in Detroit and in Michigan and in America who have been awakened today look around us, we too realize here in America we all have a common enemy, whether he's in Georgia or Michigan, whether he's in California or New York. He's the same man—blue eyes and blond hair and pale skin—the same man. So what we have to do is what they did. They agreed to stop quarreling among themselves. Any little spat

that they had, they'd settle it among themselves, go into a huddle—don't let the enemy know that you've got a disagreement.

Instead of airing our differences in public, we have to realize we're all the same family. And when you have a family squabble, you don't get out on the sidewalk. If you do, everybody calls you uncouth, unrefined, uncivilized, savage. If you don't make it at home, you settle it at home; you get in the closet, argue it out behind closed doors, and then when you come out on the street, you pose a common front, a united front. And this is what we need to do in the community, and in the city, and in the state. We need to stop airing our differences in front of the white man, put the white man out of our meetings, and then sit down and talk shop with each other. That's what we've got to do.

I would like to make a few comments concerning the difference between the black revolution and the Negro revolution. Are they both the same? And if they're not, what is the difference? What is the difference between a black revolution and a Negro revolution? First, what is a revolution? Sometimes I'm inclined to believe that many of our people are using this word "revolution" loosely, without taking careful consideration of what this word actually means, and what its historic characteristics are. When you study the historic nature of revolutions, the motive of a revolution, the objective of a revolution, the result of a revolution, and the methods used in a revolution, you may change words. You may devise another program, you may change your goal and you may change your mind.

Look at the American Revolution in 1776. That revolution was for what? For land. Why did they want land? Independence. How was it carried out? Bloodshed. Number one, it was based on land, the basis of independence. And the only way they could get it was bloodshed. The French Revolution—what was it based on? The landless against the landlord. What was it for? Land. How did they get it? Bloodshed. Was no love lost, was no compromise, was no negotiation. I'm telling you—you don't know what a revolution is. Because when you find out what it is, you'll get back in the alley, you'll get out of the way.

The Russian Revolution—what was it based on? Land; the landless against the landlord. How did they bring it about? Bloodshed. You haven't got a revolution that doesn't involve

bloodshed. And you're afraid to bleed. I said, you're afraid to bleed.

As long as the white man sent you to Korea, you bled. He sent you to Germany, you bled. He sent you to the South Pacific to fight the Japanese, you bled. You bled for white people, but when it comes to seeing your own churches being bombed and little black girls murdered, you haven't got any blood. You bleed when the white man says bleed; you bite when the white man says bite; and you bark when the white man says bark. I hate to say this about us, but it's true. How are you going to be nonviolent in Mississippi, as violent as you were in Korea? How can you justify being nonviolent in Mississippi and Alabama, when your churches are being bombed, and your little girls are being murdered, and at the same time you are going to get violent with Hitler, and Tōjō, and somebody else you don't even know?

If violence is wrong in America, violence is wrong abroad. If it is wrong to be violent defending black women and black children and black babies and black men, then it is wrong for America to draft us and make us violent abroad in defense of her. And if it is right for America to draft us, and teach us how to be violent in defense of her, then it is right for you and me to do whatever is necessary to defend our own people right here in this country.

The Chinese Revolution—they wanted land. They threw the British out, along with the Uncle Tom Chinese. Yes, they did. They set a good example. When I was in prison, I read an article—don't be shocked when I say that I was in prison. You're still in prison. That's what America means: prison. When I was in prison, I read an article in *Life* magazine showing a little Chinese girl, nine years old; her father was on his hands and knees and she was pulling the trigger because he was an Uncle Tom Chinaman. When they had the revolution over there, they took a whole generation of Uncle Toms and just wiped them out. And within ten years that little girl became a full-grown woman. No more Toms in China. And today it's one of the toughest, roughest, most feared countries on this earth—by the white man. Because there are no Uncle Toms over there.

Of all our studies, history is best qualified to reward our research. And when you see that you've got problems, all you have to do is examine the historic method used all over the world by others

who have problems similar to yours. Once you see how they got theirs straight, then you know how you can get yours straight. There's been a revolution, a black revolution, going on in Africa. In Kenya, the Mau Mau were revolutionary; they were the ones who brought the word "Uhuru" to the fore. The Mau Mau, they were revolutionary, they believed in scorched earth, they knocked everything aside that got in their way, and their revolution also was based on land, a desire for land. In Algeria, the northern part of Africa, a revolution took place. The Algerians were revolutionists, they wanted land. France offered to let them be integrated into France. They told France, to hell with France, they wanted some land, not some France. And they engaged in a bloody battle.

So I cite these various revolutions, brothers and sisters, to show you that you don't have a peaceful revolution. You don't have a turn-the-other-cheek revolution. There's no such thing as a nonviolent revolution. The only kind of revolution that is nonviolent is the Negro revolution. The only revolution in which the goal is loving your enemy is the Negro revolution. It's the only revolution in which the goal is a desegregated lunch counter, a desegregated theater, a desegregated park, and a desegregated public toilet; you can sit down next to white folks—on the toilet. That's no revolution. Revolution is based on land. Land is the basis of all independence. Land is the basis of freedom, justice, and equality.

The white man knows what a revolution is. He knows that the black revolution is world-wide in scope and in nature. The black revolution is sweeping Asia, is sweeping Africa, is rearing its head in Latin America. The Cuban Revolution—that's a revolution. They overturned the system. Revolution is in Asia, revolution is in Africa, and the white man is screaming because he sees revolution in Latin America. How do you think he'll react to you when you learn what a real revolution is? You don't know what a revolution is. If you did, you wouldn't use that word.

Revolution is bloody, revolution is hostile, revolution knows no compromise, revolution overturns and destroys everything that gets in its way. And you, sitting around here like a knot on the wall, saying, "I'm going to love these folks no matter how much they hate me." No, you need a revolution. Whoever heard of a revolution where they lock arms, as Rev. Cleage was pointing out

beautifully, singing "We Shall Overcome"? You don't do that in a revolution. You don't do any singing, you're too busy swinging. It's based on land. A revolutionary wants land so he can set up his own nation, an independent nation. These Negroes aren't asking for any nation—they're trying to crawl back on the plantation.

When you want a nation, that's called nationalism. When the white man became involved in a revolution in this country against England, what was it for? He wanted this land so he could set up another white nation. That's white nationalism. The American Revolution was white nationalism. The French Revolution was white nationalism. The Russian Revolution too—yes, it was—white nationalism. You don't think so? Why do you think Khrushchev and Mao can't get their heads together? White nationalism. All the revolutions that are going on in Asia and Africa today are based on what?—black nationalism. A revolutionary is a black nationalist. He wants a nation. I was reading some beautiful words by Rev. Cleage, pointing out why he couldn't get together with someone else in the city because all of them were afraid of being identified with black nationalism. If you're afraid of black nationalism, you're afraid of revolution. And if you love revolution, you love black nationalism.

To understand this, you have to go back to what the young brother here referred to as the house Negro and the field Negro back during slavery. There were two kinds of slaves, the house Negro and the field Negro. The house Negroes—they lived in the house with master, they dressed pretty good, they ate good because they ate his food—what he left. They lived in the attic or the basement, but still they lived near the master; and they loved the master more than the master loved himself. They would give their life to save the master's house—quicker than the master would. If the master said, "We got a good house here," the house Negro would say, "Yeah, we got a good house here." Whenever the master said "we," he said "we." That's how you can tell a house Negro.

If the master's house caught on fire, the house Negro would fight harder to put the blaze out than the master would. If the master got sick, the house Negro would say, "What's the matter, boss, *we* sick?" *We* sick! He identified himself with his master,

more than his master identified with himself. And if you came to the house Negro and said, "Let's run away, let's escape, let's separate," the house Negro would look at you and say, "Man, you crazy. What you mean, separate? Where is there a better house than this? Where can I wear better clothes than this? Where can I eat better food than this?" That was that house Negro. In those days he was called a "house nigger." And that's what we call them today, because we've still got some house niggers running around here.

This modern house Negro loves his master. He wants to live near him. He'll pay three times as much as the house is worth just to live near his master, and then brag about "I'm the only Negro out here." "I'm the only one on my job." "I'm the only one in this school." You're nothing but a house Negro. And if someone comes to you right now and says, "Let's separate," you say the same thing that the house Negro said on the plantation. "What you mean, separate? From America, this good white man? Where you going to get a better job than you get here?" I mean, this is what you say. "I ain't left nothing in Africa," that's what you say. Why, you left your mind in Africa.

On that same plantation, there was the field Negro. The field Negroes—those were the masses. There were always more Negroes in the field than there were Negroes in the house. The Negro in the field caught hell. He ate leftovers. In the house they ate high up on the hog. The Negro in the field didn't get anything but what was left of the insides of the hog. They call it "chitt'lings" nowadays. In those days they called them what they were—guts. That's what you were—gut-eaters. And some of you are still gut-eaters.

The field Negro was beaten from morning to night; he lived in a shack, in a hut; he wore old, castoff clothes. He hated his master. I say he hated his master. He was intelligent. That house Negro loved his master, but that field Negro—remember, they were in the majority, and they hated the master. When the house caught on fire, he didn't try to put it out; that field Negro prayed for a wind, for a breeze. When the master got sick, the field Negro prayed that he'd die. If someone came to the field Negro and said, "Let's separate, let's run," he didn't say, "Where we going?" He'd say, "Any place is better than here." You've got field Negroes

in America today. I'm a field Negro. The masses are the field Negroes. When they see this man's house on fire, you don't hear the little Negroes talking about "our government is in trouble." They say, "The government is in trouble." Imagine a Negro: "Our government"! I even heard one say "our astronauts." They won't even let him near the plant—and "our astronauts"! "Our Navy"—that's a Negro that is out of his mind, a Negro that is out of his mind.

Just as the slavemaster of that day used Tom, the house Negro, to keep the field Negroes in check, the same old slavemaster today has Negroes who are nothing but modern Uncle Toms, twentieth-century Uncle Toms, to keep you and me in check, to keep us under control, keep us passive and peaceful and nonviolent. That's Tom making you nonviolent. It's like when you go to the dentist, and the man's going to take your tooth. You're going to fight him when he starts pulling. So he squirts some stuff in your jaw called novocaine, to make you think they're not doing anything to you. So you sit there and because you've got all of that novocaine in your jaw, you suffer—peacefully. Blood running down your jaw, and you don't know what's happening. Because someone has taught you to suffer—peacefully.

The white man does the same thing to you in the street, when he wants to put knots on your head and take advantage of you and not have to be afraid of your fighting back. To keep you from fighting back, he gets these old religious Uncle Toms to teach you and me, just like novocaine, to suffer peacefully. Don't stop suffering—just suffer peacefully. As Rev. Cleage pointed out, they say you should let your blood flow in the streets. This is a shame. You know he's a Christian preacher. If it's a shame to him, you know what it is to me.

There is nothing in our book, the Koran, that teaches us to suffer peacefully. Our religion teaches us to be intelligent. Be peaceful, be courteous, obey the law, respect everyone; but if someone puts his hand on you, send him to the cemetery. That's a good religion. In fact, that's that old-time religion. That's the one that Ma and Pa used to talk about: an eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth, and a head for a head, and a life for a life. That's a good religion. And nobody resents that kind of religion being taught but a wolf, who intends to make you his meal.

This is the way it is with the white man in America. He's a wolf—and you're sheep. Any time a shepherd, a pastor, teaches you and me not to run from the white man and, at the same time, teaches us not to fight the white man, he's a traitor to you and me. Don't lay down a life all by itself. No, preserve your life, it's the best thing you've got. And if you've got to give it up, let it be even-steven.

The slavemaster took Tom and dressed him well, fed him well and even gave him a little education—a *little* education; gave him a long coat and a top hat and made all the other slaves look up to him. Then he used Tom to control them. The same strategy that was used in those days is used today, by the same white man. He takes a Negro, a so-called Negro, and makes him prominent, builds him up, publicizes him, makes him a celebrity. And then he becomes a spokesman for Negroes—and a Negro leader.

I would like to mention just one other thing quickly, and that is the method that the white man uses, how the white man uses the "big guns," or Negro leaders, against the Negro revolution. They are not a part of the Negro revolution. They are used against the Negro revolution.

When Martin Luther King failed to desegregate Albany, Georgia, the civil-rights struggle in America reached its low point. King became bankrupt almost, as a leader. The Southern Christian Leadership Conference was in financial trouble; and it was in trouble, period, with the people when they failed to desegregate Albany, Georgia. Other Negro civil-rights leaders of so-called national stature became fallen idols. As they became fallen idols, began to lose their prestige and influence, local Negro leaders began to stir up the masses. In Cambridge, Maryland, Gloria Richardson; in Danville, Virginia, and other parts of the country, local leaders began to stir up our people at the grass-roots level. This was never done by these Negroes of national stature. They control you, but they have never incited you or excited you. They control you, they contain you, they have kept you on the plantation. As soon as King failed in Birmingham, Negroes took to the streets. King went out to California to a big rally and raised I don't know how many thousands of dollars. He came to Detroit and had a march and raised some more thousands of dollars. And recall, right after that Roy Wilkins attacked King. He accused King and

CORE [Congress of Racial Equality] of starting trouble everywhere and then making the NAACP [National Association for the Advancement of Colored People] get them out of jail and spend a lot of money; they accused King and CORE of raising all the money and not paying it back. This happened; I've got it in documented evidence in the newspaper. Roy started attacking King, and King started attacking Roy, and Farmer started attacking both of them. And as these Negroes of national stature began to attack each other, they began to lose their control of the Negro masses.

The Negroes were out there in the streets. They were talking about how they were going to march on Washington. Right at that time Birmingham had exploded, and the Negroes in Birmingham—remember, they also exploded. They began to stab the crackers in the back and bust them up 'side their head—yes, they did. That's when Kennedy sent in the troops, down in Birmingham. After that, Kennedy got on the television and said "this is a moral issue." That's when he said he was going to put out a civil-rights bill. And when he mentioned civil-rights bill and the Southern crackers started talking about how they were going to boycott or filibuster it, then the Negroes started talking—about what? That they were going to march on Washington, march on the Senate, march on the White House, march on the Congress, and tie it up, bring it to a halt, not let the government proceed. They even said they were going out to the airport and lay down on the runway and not let any airplanes land. I'm telling you what they said. That was revolution. That was revolution. That was the black revolution.

It was the grass roots out there in the street. It scared the white man to death, scared the white power structure in Washington, D.C., to death; I was there. When they found out that this black steamroller was going to come down on the capital, they called in Wilkins, they called in Randolph, they called in these national Negro leaders that you respect and told them, "Call it off." Kennedy said, "Look, you all are letting this thing go too far." And Old Tom said, "Boss, I can't stop it, because I didn't start it." I'm telling you what they said. They said, "I'm not even in it, much less at the head of it." They said, "These Negroes are doing things on their own. They're running ahead of us." And that old

shrewd fox, he said, "If you all aren't in it, I'll put you in it. I'll put you at the head of it. I'll endorse it. I'll welcome it. I'll help it. I'll join it."

A matter of hours went by. They had a meeting at the Carlyle Hotel in New York City. The Carlyle Hotel is owned by the Kennedy family; that's the hotel Kennedy spent the night at, two nights ago; it belongs to his family. A philanthropic society headed by a white man named Stephen Currier called all the top civil-rights leaders together at the Carlyle Hotel. And he told them, "By you all fighting each other, you are destroying the civil-rights movement. And since you're fighting over money from white liberals, let us set up what is known as the Council for United Civil Rights Leadership. Let's form this council, and all the civil-rights organizations will belong to it, and we'll use it for fundraising purposes." Let me show you how tricky the white man is. As soon as they got it formed, they elected Whitney Young as its chairman, and who do you think became the co-chairman? Stephen Currier, the white man, a millionaire. Powell was talking about it down at Cobo Hall today. This is what he was talking about. Powell knows it happened. Randolph knows it happened. Wilkins knows it happened. King knows it happened. Every one of that Big Six—they know it happened.

Once they formed it, with the white man over it, he promised them and gave them \$800,000 to split up among the Big Six; and told them that after the march was over they'd give them \$700,000 more. A million and a half dollars—split up between leaders that you have been following, going to jail for, crying crocodile tears for. And they're nothing but Frank James and Jesse James and the what-do-you-call-'em brothers.

As soon as they got the setup organized, the white man made available to them top public-relations experts; opened the news media across the country at their disposal, which then began to project these Big Six as the leaders of the march. Originally they weren't even in the march. You were talking this march talk on Hastings Street, you were talking march talk on Lenox Avenue, and on Fillmore Street, and on Central Avenue, and 32nd Street and 63rd Street. That's where the march talk was being talked. But the white man put the Big Six at the head of it; made them the march. They became the march. They took it over. And the

first move they made after they took it over, they invited Walter Reuther, a white man; they invited a priest, a rabbi, and an old white preacher, yes, an old white preacher. The same white element that put Kennedy into power—labor, the Catholics, the Jews, and liberal Protestants; the same clique that put Kennedy in power, joined the march on Washington.

It's just like when you've got some coffee that's too black, which means it's too strong. What do you do? You integrate it with cream, you make it weak. But if you pour too much cream in it, you won't even know you ever had coffee. It used to be hot, it becomes cool. It used to be strong; it becomes weak. It used to wake you up, now it puts you to sleep. This is what they did with the march on Washington. They joined it. They didn't integrate it, they infiltrated it. They joined it, became a part of it, took it over. And as they took it over, it lost its militancy. It ceased to be angry, it ceased to be hot, it ceased to be uncompromising. Why, it even ceased to be a march. It became a picnic, a circus. Nothing but a circus, with clowns and all. You had one right here in Detroit—I saw it on television—with clowns leading it, white clowns and black clowns. I know you don't like what I'm saying, but I'm going to tell you anyway. Because I can prove what I'm saying. If you think I'm telling you wrong, you bring me Martin Luther King and A. Philip Randolph and James Farmer and those other three, and see if they'll deny it over a microphone.

No, it was a sellout. It was a takeover. When James Baldwin came in from Paris, they wouldn't let him talk, because they couldn't make him go by the script. Burt Lancaster read the speech that Baldwin was supposed to make; they wouldn't let Baldwin get up there, because they know Baldwin is liable to say anything. They controlled it so tight, they told those Negroes what time to hit town, how to come, where to stop, what signs to carry, what song to sing, what speech they could make, and what speech they couldn't make; and then told them to get out of town by sundown. And every one of those Toms was out of town by sundown. Now I know you don't like my saying this. But I can back it up. It was a circus, a performance that beat anything Hollywood could ever do, the performance of the year. Reuther and those other three devils should get an Academy Award for

the best actors because they acted like they really loved Negroes and fooled a whole lot of Negroes. And the six Negro leaders should get an award too, for the best supporting cast.

2. "Malcolm"

Sonia Sanchez

The poet, playwright, and teacher Sonia Sanchez first encountered Malcolm X in the early 1960s when she was working with the Congress of Racial Equality in New York. She wrote this tribute to him shortly after his assassination in February 1965.

Do not speak to me of martyrdom
of men who die to be remembered
on some parish day.

I don't believe in dying
though I too shall die
and violets like castanets
will echo me.

Yet this man
this dreamer,
thick-lipped with words
will never speak again
and in each winter
when the cold air cracks
with frost, I'll breathe
his breath and mourn
my gun-filled nights.

He was the sun that tagged
the western sky and
melted tiger-scholars
while they searched for stripes.
He said, "Fuck you white
man, we have been
curled too long, nothing
is sacred now, not your

white face nor any
land that separates
until some voices
squat with spasms."

Do not speak to me of living.
life is obscene with crowds
of white on black.
death is my pulse.
what might have been
is not for him/or me
but what could have been
floods the womb until I drown.

3. "Black Belt Election: New Day A'Coming"

Stokely Carmichael and Charles V. Hamilton

In the immediate aftermath of the Selma-to-Montgomery march, several SNCC workers—including future chairman Stokely Carmichael (now Kwame Ture), who had already earned his organizing spurs in the Mississippi Delta in 1963 and 1964, focused their efforts on Lowndes County, Alabama, the hard-core segregationist stronghold lying between Selma and Montgomery and through which the marchers had passed. This is an excerpt from Black Power: The Politics of Liberation in America (1967), by Carmichael and political scientist Charles V. Hamilton.

... In March, 1965, not one black person was even registered to vote; over the next twenty months, close to 3,900 black people had not only registered but also formed a political organization, held a nominating convention and slated seven of their members to run for county public office. . . . If ever the political scientists wanted to study the phenomenon of political development or political modernization in this country, here was the place: in the heart of the "black belt," that range of Southern areas characterized by the predominance of black people and rich black soil.

Most local black people readily admit that the catalyst for change was the appearance in the county in March and April, 1965, of

handful of workers from SNCC. They had gone there almost immediately after the murder of Mrs. Viola Liuzzo, on the final night of the Selma to Montgomery March. Mrs. Liuzzo, a white housewife from Detroit, had been driving marchers home when she was shot down by Klansmen on that same Highway 80 in Lowndes County. For the black people of Lowndes, her murder came as no great surprise: Lowndes had one of the nation's worst records for individual and institutional racism, a reputation for brutality that made white as well as black Alabama shiver. In this county, eighty-one percent black, the whites had ruled the entire area and subjugated black people to that rule unmercifully. Lowndes was a prime area for SNCC to apply certain assumptions learned over the years of work in rural, backwoods counties of the South.

SNCC had long understood that one of the major obstacles to helping black people organize structures which could effectively fight institutional racism was *fear*. The history of the county shows that black people could come together to do only three things: sing, pray, dance. Any time they came together to do anything else, they were threatened or intimidated. For decades, black people had been taught to believe that voting, politics, is "white folks' business." And the white folks had indeed monopolized that business, by methods which ran the gamut from economic intimidation to murder.

The situation in Lowndes was particularly notable inasmuch as civil rights battles had been waged on an extensive scale in two adjoining counties for years: in Dallas County (Selma) and in Montgomery County. The city of Montgomery had seen a powerful movement, led by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., beginning in 1955 with the bus boycott. But Lowndes County did not appear affected by this activity. This is even more striking when one considers that at least seventeen percent of the black people in Lowndes work in Montgomery and at least sixty percent of the black people do their major shopping there. Lowndes was a truly totalitarian society—the epitome of the tight, insulated police state. SNCC people felt that if they could help crack Lowndes, other areas—with less brutal reputations—would be easier to organize. This might be considered a kind of SNCC Domino Theory.

There were several black organizations in Lowndes County, all

centered around the church. . . . Some of the most politically-oriented people who subsequently formed the Lowndes County Freedom Organization were those experienced in the internal politics of the church. The ability and power of these local leaders, however, rested inside the black community and was geared toward religious and social affairs only. Many people who were very political *inside* those organizations were unwilling to enter the *public* political arena. They were afraid.

The black people most respected by the whites in Lowndes County were the school teachers and the two high school principals. But, as in many southern communities, they were at the mercy of the white power structure. They held their positions at the sufferance of the whites; the power they had was delegated to them by the white community. And what the master giveth, the master can take away. The power of the black principals and teachers did not come from the black community, because that community was not organized around public political power. In this sense, they were typical "Negro Establishment" figures.

The question of leadership in the county was crucial. If there was to be a sustained political assault on racism, the black people would have to develop a viable leadership group. The white-established Negro leaders—the teachers, principals—were looked up to by the black community because they could get certain things done. They could intercede with the white man, and they had certain overt credentials of success: a big car, a nice house, good clothes. The black ministers constituted another source of leadership. They have traditionally been the leaders in the black community, but their power lay inside the black community, not with the white power structure. In some cases, they could ask white people to do certain things for black people, but they did not have the relative power possessed by the white-made leaders. The ministers, likewise, could invoke the authority of God; they were, after all, "called to preach the gospel," and, therefore, their word had almost a kind of divine authority in the black community.

There was another set of leaders in the black community of Lowndes County. This was a group of middle-aged ladies, who knew the community well and were well known. They were to

play a very important role in the political organization of the blacks. They had considerable influence in the black community—being staunch church members, for example—but they possessed no power at all with the white community.

Economically, Lowndes County is not noted for its equitable distribution of goods and income. The average income of blacks, most of them sharecroppers and tenant farmers, is about \$985 per year. Eighty-six white families own ninety percent of the land. Inside the black community, there were in 1965 few people who had running water in their houses; only about twenty families had steam heat, and the rest got by with stove burners and wood fireplaces to keep warm. The economic insecurity of the latter is obvious, yet as we have seen, even the "Negro Establishment" faced disaster if they started meddling in "white folks business."

Against these odds, there had somehow been in Lowndes County a long history of black men who started to fight—but were always cut down. Mr. Emory Ross, who later became an active participant in the Lowndes County Freedom Organization, had a father who was a fighter. He was shot at several times; his house riddled with bullets; his home burned down at one time. But he continued to struggle, and he was able to impart his determination to his son.

There were a few more like him. Spurred by the demonstrations and Dr. King's presence in Selma in early 1965, some seventeen brave people rallied around Mr. John Hulett, a lifelong resident of the County, to form the Lowndes County Christian Movement for Human Rights in March of that year. SNCC workers began moving around the county shortly afterward, talking a strange language: "Political power is the first step to independence and freedom." "You can control this county politically." It was exceptionally difficult at first to get black people to go to the courthouse to register—the first step. The fight at that point was waged simply in terms of being able to establish within the black community a sense of the *right* to fight racial oppression and exploitation. This was a battle of no small proportion, because black people in this county—many of them—did not even feel that they had the *right* to fight. In addition, they felt that their fight would be meaningless. They remembered those who had been cut down.

From March to August, 1965, about fifty to sixty black citizens made their way to the courthouse to register and successfully

passed the registration "test." Then, in August, the 1965 Voting Rights Act was passed and federal "examiners" or registrars came into the county. No longer did a black man face literacy tests or absurdly difficult questions about the Constitution or such tactics as rejection because one "t" was not properly crossed or an "i" inadequately dotted. The voting rolls swelled by the hundreds. . . .

The act of registering to vote does several things. It marks the beginning of political modernization by broadening the base of participation. It also does something the existentialists talk about: it gives one a sense of being. The black man who goes to register is saying to the white man, "No." He is saying: "You have said that I cannot vote. You have said that this is my place. This is where I should remain. You have contained me and I am saying 'No' to your containment. I am stepping out of the bounds. I am saying 'No' to you and thereby I am creating a better life for myself. I am resisting someone who has contained me." That is what the first act does. The black person begins to live. He begins to create his *own* existence when he says "No" to someone who contains him.

But obviously this is not enough. Once the black man has knocked back centuries of fear, once he is willing to resist, he then must decide how best to use that vote. To listen to those whites who conspired for so many years to deny him the ballot would be a return to that previous subordinated condition. He must move independently. The development of this awareness is a job as tedious and laborious as inspiring people to register in the first place. In fact, many people who would aspire to the role of an organizer drop off simply because they do not have the energy, the stamina, to knock on doors day after day. That is why one finds many such people sitting in coffee shops talking and theorizing instead of organizing.

The SNCC research staff discovered an unusual Alabama law which permits a group to organize a potential political party on a county-wide basis. . . . The black people of Lowndes County and SNCC then began the hard work of building a legitimate, independent political party with no help from anyone else. Virtually the entire country condemned this decision; it was "separatism"

it was traditionally doomed "third-party politics" and the only way to succeed was through one of the two established parties. Some even said that the black voters of Lowndes County should support the Democratic party out of gratitude for being given the vote. But the Democratic party did not give black people the right to vote; it simply stopped denying black people the right to vote.

In March, 1966, the Lowndes County Freedom Organization was born with the immediate goals of running candidates and becoming a recognized party. In building the LCFO, it was obviously wise to attempt first to recruit those black people who owned land and were therefore somewhat more secure economically than those without property. But there were few of them. Those without property, merely sharecropping on white-owned plantations, were subject to being kicked off the land for their political activity. This is exactly what had happened at the end of December, 1965; some twenty families were evicted and spent the rest of the winter living in tents, with temperatures often below freezing. Their fate, and it was shared by others later, intensified the fear, but it also served to instill a sense of the tremendous need to establish an independent base of group power within the community. That base could lend support, security. Thus, despite the ever-present threat of loss of home and job and even possibly life, the black people of Lowndes County continued to build. Mass meetings were held weekly, each time in a different part of the county. Unity and strength, already developing over the winter, grew.

In May, 1966, the time arrived to put up black candidates in the primary election. . . .

The black people of Lowndes County were ready and made themselves even readier. Workshops were held, with SNCC's assistance, on the duties of the sheriff, the coroner, the tax assessor, tax collector and members of the Board of Education—the offices up for election. Booklets, frequently in the form of picture books, were prepared by SNCC and distributed over the county. People began to see and understand that no college education or special training was needed to perform these functions. They called primarily for determination and common sense, and black people in Lowndes had long since shown that they possessed these qualities.

The campaign which followed was hardly a typical American political campaign. There were no debates (or offers to debate) between the candidates; black candidates certainly did not canvass white voters and no white candidates made open appeals for black votes.

[Despite tremendous LCFO efforts, on election day, Nov. 8, 1966, all of the black candidates lost to their white competitors by margins of roughly 600 votes—2,200 to 1,600. Nonetheless, the LCFO drew clear lessons from the experience.]

The new Lowndes County Freedom Party is also aware that somehow it must counteract the economic dependence which so seriously impedes organizing. It must begin thinking of ways to build a "patronage" system—some sort of mechanism for offering day-to-day, bread-and-butter help to black people immediately in need. A prime example occurred on election day at 1 P.M., when a black family's home was completely destroyed by fire; fourteen children, ranging in age from four to eighteen, and two adults were left homeless and penniless. Immediate assistance in the form of clothes, food, and dollars coming from the Party would have been politically invaluable. It is true that the Party does not have the local resources to help every family burned out of their homes or kicked off the land or in need of a job, but it must begin to move in that direction. Such "patronage" should always be identified as coming from the Party. If necessary (and it undoubtedly will be necessary), drives in selected northern communities could be launched to help until the Party can show more substantial victories. Only so many black people will rush to the banner of "freedom" and "blackness" without seeing some way to make ends meet, to care for their children.

One way or another, the fact is that the John Hulett of the South will participate in political decision-making in their time and in their land. November 8, 1966, made one thing clear: some day black people will control the government of Lowndes County. For Lowndes is not merely a section of land and a group of people, but an idea whose time has come.

4. Lowndes County Freedom Organization Pamphlet

These are excerpts from a pamphlet prepared by the LCFO for use in educating black potential voters in Lowndes County.

VOTING

What Is the Vote?

Voting is the way a citizen chooses people to represent him in his county, state and federal government. When a citizen votes, he speaks for himself about things that concern his own welfare.

Why Vote?

If you don't vote, you give up your right to decide for yourself how you want things to be done in your government. Your voice never gets heard in politics if you don't vote.

How Does Voting Work?

First, you have to be registered. This means you have to go to have your name put on a list along with others who want to vote in elections in your county or state. Then you must pay the poll tax.

Can You Vote?

Yes. Any person can be a qualified voter if he or she is at least 21 years old, has lived in the state at least one year, in the county six months and in the precinct three months.

POLITICS

What Is Politics?

Politics is the coming together of people to make decisions about their lives. For example, who is going to be sheriff, who will be elected to the school board, who will be the mayor of your city.

However, in the past, Negroes have not been permitted to practice politics. A few people, most of them white, have worked in politics to benefit themselves.

How Have We Been Kept Out of Politics?

1. Certain laws and practices have kept Negroes from voting.
2. Negroes have been kept out of political parties.
3. Negroes have been beaten when they tried to register to vote, and told time and time again that politics and voting were "white folks' business."
4. They have told us that we are not "qualified" to practice politics, that we are not "qualified" to run our own lives! Everyone knows if he will think about it that each and every grown man and woman is just as "qualified" as anyone else to decide what he wants his life to be like. There may be some information that some of us need in order to decide how to go about making our lives what we want them to be, but we can get that information and we can learn it just as well as anyone else can.
5. They have told us that Negroes "just can't stick together."

Why Come Together?

When you come together you can determine who from your own community can do the thing you want done. If you don't come together, the people who have been running the show will put their own candidates up and vote for programs that will benefit them only and you will have no say at all.

What Can You Do When You Come Together?

If you are a qualified elector (voter), that is, if you have registered to vote and paid the poll tax for 2 years, you can form your own political organization.

How Can People Work Together in a Political Organization?

First of all, we have to stick together. Then we should decide what are our common needs. We can decide this by asking ourselves, "Will this program or this candidate help us and people like ourselves?" Once you have a political organization you can go out and talk to your neighbors and friends and even to strangers, and find others who are willing to work with you.

Why Form a Political Organization?

When you form a political organization you can nominate for office candidates of your own choosing, and in the general election, you can vote to put your candidate into office.

How Do You Form a Political Organization in Lowndes County, Alabama?

1. Alabama law says you cannot be a member of a political organization if you are not a qualified elector ** that is, you must be registered to vote and must have paid your poll tax.
2. Alabama law says that any organization of qualified electors can nominate candidates. The date for such meetings is May 3, 1966. The candidates must be nominated at this meeting. The general public may attend this mass meeting, but only members of the political organization may participate in the meeting.

In Lowndes County, you can nominate candidates for the offices of county sheriff, county tax assessor, county tax collector, county school board members, and circuit solicitors. Any qualified elector can run for these offices.

3. If they are running for a county office, the names of the candidates you choose at the mass meeting on May 3, 1966 must be sent to the probate judge of your county *at least 60 days before the date of the general election* (November 8, 1966). This certificate must contain the name of each person nominated and the office for which he was nominated, and must be signed by the president and recording secretary of the mass meeting. If the mass meeting of the organization nominates candidates for state or district the names of the candidates must be sent to the secretary of state instead of the probate judge. House District 29 (Lowndes and Autauga counties) can elect 1 representative to the House. Senate District 20 (Lowndes, Butler, Crenshaw and Covington) can elect 1 Senator.

4. If a candidate nominated by the organization at a mass meeting receives 20% or more of the vote cast in the . . . November 8, 1966 election for that office, the organization is declared by Alabama law to be a political party for and within the county.

If a candidate nominated for a state or district office receives 20% or more of the vote cast for that office in the state or district,

the organization is declared by Alabama law to be a party for and within that state or district.

Alabama law says that if you nominate and run your own candidates, you cannot vote in either the Democratic or Republican primaries.

What Are the Rights and Privileges of a Political Organization?
Alabama law states that any political organization having a candidate on the ballot may appoint a person to watch at each polling place. The poll-watcher shall be permitted to be present at the place where the ballots are cast from the time the polls are opened until the ballots are counted and certificates of the result of the election are signed by the inspectors. The watchers shall be permitted to see the ballots as they are called during the count.

NOW IS THE TIME!

If ever we in Lowndes County had a chance to come together to make political decisions about our own lives—now is the time!

If ever there was a time for Negroes to leave the white supremacy Democratic party of Alabama alone—now is the time!

If ever we had a chance to do something about the years of low pay, beatings, burnings of homes, denial of the right to vote, bad education and washed-out roads—now is the time!

Join the
Lowndes County Freedom Organization
Rt.1, Box 191
Hayneville, Alabama

5. "How the Black Panther Party Was Organized"

John Hulett

Following are excerpts from a speech by John Hulett, chairman of the Lowndes County Freedom Organization, given in Los Angeles on May 22, 1966, at a meeting sponsored by a group of anti-Vietnam War committees.

... Some time ago, we organized a political group of our own known as the Lowndes County Freedom Organization, whose emblem is the black panther.

We were criticized, we were called communists, we were called everything else, black nationalists and whatnot, because we did this. Any group which starts at a time like this to speak out for what is right—they are going to be ridiculed. The people of Lowndes County realized this. Today we are moving further...

Too long Negroes have been begging, especially in the South, for things they should be working for. So the people in Lowndes County decided to organize themselves—to go out and work for the things we wanted in life—not only for the people in Lowndes County, but for every county in the state of Alabama, in the Southern states, and even in California.

You cannot become free in California while there are slaves in Lowndes County. And no person can be free while other people are still slaves, nobody.

In Lowndes County, there is a committee in the Democratic Party. This committee not only controls the courthouse, it controls the entire county. When they found out that the Negroes were going to run candidates in the primary of the Democratic Party on May 3, they assembled themselves together and began to talk about what they were going to do. Knowing this is one of the poorest counties in the nation, what they decided to do was change the registration fees in the county.

Two years ago, if a person wanted to run for sheriff, tax collector or tax assessor, all he had to do was pay \$50 and then he qualified

to be the candidate. This year, the entrance fee is about \$900. If a person wants to run, he has to pay \$500 to run for office. In the primary, when they get through cheating and stealing, then the candidate is eliminated. So we decided that we wouldn't get into such a primary because we were tired of being tricked by Southern whites. After forming our own political group today, we feel real strong. We feel that we are doing the right thing in Lowndes County.

We have listened to everybody who wanted to talk, we listened to them speak, but one thing we had to learn for ourselves. As a group of people, we must think for ourselves and act on our own accord. And this we have done.

Through the years, Negroes in the South have been going for the bones while whites have been going for the meat. The Negroes of Lowndes County today are tired of the bones—we are going to have some of the meat too.

At the present time, we have our own candidates which have been nominated by the Lowndes County Freedom Organization. And we fear that this might not be enough to avoid the tricks that are going to be used in Lowndes County against us. . . .

In Lowndes County, the sheriff is the custodian of the courthouse. This is a liberal sheriff, too; who is "integrated," who walks around and pats you on the shoulder, who does not carry a gun. But at the same time, in the county where there are only 800 white men, there are 550 of them who walk around with a gun on them. They are deputies. This is true; it might sound like a fairy tale to most people, but this is true.

After talking to the sheriff about having the use of the courthouse lawn for our mass nominating meeting, not the courthouse but just the lawn, he refused to give the Negroes permission. We reminded him that last year in August, that one of the biggest Klan rallies that has ever been held in the state of Alabama was held on this lawn of this courthouse. And he gave them permission. A few weeks ago an individual who was campaigning for governor—he got permission to use it. He used all types of loudspeakers and anything that he wanted.

But he would not permit Negroes to have the use of the courthouse. For one thing he realized that we would build a party—and if he could keep us from forming our own political

group then we would always stand at the feet of the Southern whites and of the Democratic Party. So we told him that we were going to have this meeting, we were going to have it here, on the courthouse lawn. And we wouldn't let anybody scare us off. We told him, we won't expect you to protect us, and if you don't, Negroes will protect themselves.

Then we asked him a second time to be sure he understood what we were saying. We repeated it to him the second time. And then we said to him, sheriff, if you come out against the people, then we are going to arrest you.

And he said, I will not give you permission to have this meeting here. I can't protect you from the community.

Then we reminded him that according to the law of the state of Alabama, that this mass meeting which was set up to nominate our candidates must be held in or around a voters' polling place. And if we decide to hold it a half a mile away from the courthouse, some individual would come up and protest our mass meeting. And our election would be thrown out.

So we wrote the Justice Department and told them what was going to happen in Lowndes County.

All of a sudden the Justice Department started coming in fast into the county. They said to me, John, what is going to happen next Tuesday at the courthouse?

I said, We are going to have our mass meeting. And he wanted to know where. And I said on the lawn of the courthouse.

He said, I thought the sheriff had told you you couldn't come there. And I said, Yes, but we are going to be there.

Then he wanted to know, if shooting takes place, what are we going to do. And I said, that we are going to stay out here and everybody die together.

And then he began to get worried, and I said, Don't worry. You're going to have to be here to see it out and there's no place to hide, so whatever happens, you can be a part of it.

And then he began to really panic. And he said, There's nothing I can do.

And I said, I'm not asking you to do anything. All I want you to know is we are going to have a mass meeting. If the sheriff cannot protect us, then we are going to protect ourselves. And I said to him, through the years in the South, Negroes have never

had any protection, and today we aren't looking to anybody to protect us. We are going to protect ourselves.

That was on Saturday. On Sunday, at about 2 o'clock, we were having a meeting, and we decided among ourselves that we were going to start collecting petitions for our candidates to be sure that they got on the ballot. The state laws require at least 25 signatures of qualified electors and so we decided to get at least 100 for fear somebody might come up and find fault. And we decided to still have our mass meeting and nominate our candidates.

About 2:30, here comes the Justice Department again, and he was really worried. And he said he wasn't satisfied. He said to me, John, I've done all I can do, and I don't know what else I can do, and now it looks like you'll have to call this meeting off at the courthouse.

And I said, we're going to have it.

He stayed around for a while and then got in his car and drove off, saying, I'll see you tomorrow, maybe. And we stayed at this meeting from 2:30 until about 11:30 that night. About 11:15, the Justice Department came walking up the aisle of the church and said to me, Listen. I've talked to the Attorney General of the state of Alabama, and he said that you can go ahead and have a mass meeting at the church and it will be legal.

Then we asked him, Do you have any papers that say that's true, that are signed by the Governor or the Attorney General? And he said no. And we said to him, Go back and get it legalized, and bring it back here to us and we will accept it.

And sure enough, on Monday at 3 o'clock, I went to the courthouse and there in the sheriff's office were the papers all legalized and fixed up, saying that we could go to the church to have our mass meeting.

To me, this showed strength. When people are together, they can do a lot of things, but when you are alone you cannot do anything....

There are 600 Negroes in the county who did not trust in themselves and who joined the Democratic Party. We warned the entire state of Alabama that running on the Democratic ticket could not do them any good, because this party is controlled by

people like Wallace; and whoever won would have to do what these people said to do....

Now, to me, the Democratic Party primaries and the Democratic Party is something like an integrated gambler who carries a card around in his pocket and every now and then he has to let somebody win to keep the game going. To me, this is what the Democratic Party means to the people in Alabama. It's a gambling game. And somebody's got to win to keep the game going every now and then....

I would like to say here, and this is one thing I'm proud of, the people in Lowndes County stood together, and the 600 people who voted in the Democratic primary have realized one thing, that they were tricked by the Democratic Party. And now they too are ready to join us with the Lowndes County Freedom Organization whose emblem is the black panther.

We have seven people who are running for office this year in our county; namely, the coroner, three members of the board of education—and if we win those three, we will control the board of education—tax collector, tax assessor, and the individual who carries a gun at his side, the sheriff.

Let me say this—that a lot of persons tonight asked me, Do you really think if you win that you will be able to take it all over, and live?

I say to the people here tonight—yes, we're going to do it. If we have to do like the present sheriff, if we have to deputize every man in Lowndes County 21 and over, to protect people, we're going to do it.

There was something in Alabama a few months ago they called fear. Negroes were afraid to move on their own, they waited until the man, the people whose place they lived on, told them they could get registered. They told many people, don't you move until I tell you to move and when I give an order, don't you go down and get registered....

Then all the people were being evicted at the same time and even today in Lowndes County, there are at least 75 families that have been evicted, some now are living in tents while some are living in one-room houses—with 8 or 9 in a family. Others have split their families up and are living together with their relatives

or their friends. But they are determined to stay in Lowndes County, until justice rolls down like water.

Evicting the families wasn't all—there were other people who live on their own places who owe large debts, so they decided to foreclose on these debts to run Negroes off the place. People made threats—but we're going to stay there, we aren't going anywhere.

I would like to let the people here tonight know why we chose this black panther as our emblem. Many people have been asking this question for a long time. Our political group is open to whoever wants to come in, who would like to work with us. But we aren't begging anyone to come in. It's open, you come, at your own free will and accord.

But this black panther is a vicious animal as you know. He never bothers anything, but when you start pushing him, he moves backwards, backwards, and backwards into his corner, and then he comes out to destroy everything that's before him.

Negroes in Lowndes County have been pushed back through the years. We have been deprived of our rights to speak, to move, and to do whatever we want to do at all times. And now we are going to start moving. On November 8 of this year, we plan to take over the courthouse in Hayneville. And whatever it takes to do it, we're going to do it.

We've decided to stop begging. We've decided to stop asking for integration. Once we control the courthouse, once we control the board of education, we can build our school system where our boys and girls can get an education in Lowndes County. There are 89 prominent families in this county who own 90 percent of the land. These people will be taxed. And we will collect these taxes. And if they don't pay them, we'll take their property and sell it to whoever wants to buy it. And we know there will be people who will buy land where at the present time they cannot buy it. This is what it's going to take.

We aren't asking any longer for protection—we won't need it—for anyone to come from the outside to speak for us, because we're going to speak for ourselves now and from now on. And I think not only in Lowndes County, not only in the state of Alabama, not only in the South, but in the North—I hope they too will start thinking for themselves. And that they will move and join us in this fight for freedom. . . .

6. "From Black Consciousness to Black Power"

Cleveland Sellers with Robert Terrell

On June 5, 1966, James Meredith began to walk from Memphis, Tennessee, to Jackson, Mississippi, to serve as an example of individual courage so that other blacks in the state would overcome their fear and actively seek to exercise their right to vote. A shotgun blast abruptly ended Meredith's march, but only provoked in members of SNCC, the SCLC, and CORE a fierce determination to resume the trek from where Meredith had been ambushed. It was during this march that the slogan Black Power, symbolizing a radical new departure in the civil rights movement, was first proclaimed and embraced by young blacks grown weary of the slow pace of legislative and legalistic progress. Cleveland Sellers was program secretary of SNCC during the period of the Meredith march. This is an excerpt from Sellers's 1973 autobiography, The River of No Return.

... What is Black Consciousness? More than anything else, it is an attitude, a way of seeing the world. Those of us who possessed it were involved in a perpetual search for racial meanings . . . the construction of a new, black value system. A value system geared to the unique cultural and political experience of blacks in this country.

Black Consciousness signaled the end of the use of the word *Negro* . . . Black Consciousness permitted us to relate our struggle to the one being waged by Third World revolutionaries in Africa, Asia and Latin America. It helped us understand the imperialistic aspects of domestic racism. It helped us understand that the problems of this nation's oppressed minorities will not be solved without revolution.

We were in Little Rock, Arkansas, talking with Project Director Ben Greenich and some of his staff when a lawyer came up and told us that James Meredith had been killed.

Even though I'd always believed that Meredith's intention to march across Mississippi in order to prove that blacks didn't have to fear white violence any longer was absurd, I was enraged.

We didn't find out until two hours later that Meredith had not actually been murdered. The pellets from the shotgun, which had been fired from about fifty feet, had only knocked him unconscious. . . .

When we arrived at the hospital the next afternoon, Dr. [Martin Luther] King and CORE's new national director, Floyd McKissick, were visiting Meredith. Stanley [Wise], Stokely [Carmichael] and I joined them. . . . Meredith had agreed that the march should be continued without him.

Later that afternoon, a group, which included Stokely, Stanley Wise, Dr. King, McKissick and me, drove out on the highway to the spot where Meredith had been ambushed, and we walked for about three hours. We wanted to advertise that the march would be continued.

Late that night, a planning meeting was held at the Centenary Methodist Church, whose pastor was an ex-SNCC member, the Reverend James Lawson. The meeting was attended by representatives from all those groups interested in participating in the march, including Roy Wilkins and Whitney Young, who had flown in earlier in the day.

Participants in the meeting were almost immediately divided by the position taken by Stokely. He argued that the march should deemphasize white participation, that it should be used to highlight the need for independent, black political units, and that the Deacons for Defense, a black group from Louisiana whose members carried guns, be permitted to join the march.

Roy Wilkins and Whitney Young were adamantly opposed to Stokely. They wanted to send out a nationwide call to whites; they insisted that the Deacons be excluded and they demanded that we issue a statement proclaiming our allegiance to nonviolence.

Despite considerable pressure, Dr. King refused to repudiate Stokely. Wilkins and Young were furious. Realizing that they could not change Stokely's mind, they packed their briefcases and announced that they didn't intend to have anything to do with the march. . . .

The march began in a small way. We had few people, maybe a hundred and fifty. That was okay. We were headed for SNCC territory and we were calling the shots.

The Deacons for Defense served as our bodyguards. Their job was to keep our people alive. . . .

We had our first major trouble with the police on June 17, in Greenwood. It began when a contingent of state troopers arbitrarily decided that we could not put up our sleeping tent on the grounds of a black high school. When Stokely attempted to put the tent up anyway, he was arrested. Within minutes, word of his arrest had spread all over town. The rally that night, which was held in a city park, attracted almost three thousand people—five times the usual number.

Stokely, who'd been released from jail just minutes before the rally began, was the last speaker. He was preceded by McKissick, Dr. King and Willie Ricks. Like the rest of us, they were angry about Stokely's unnecessary arrest. Their speeches were particularly militant. When Stokely moved forward to speak, the crowd greeted him with a huge roar. He acknowledged his reception with a raised arm and clenched fist.

Realizing that he was in his element, with his people, Stokely let it all hang out. "This is the twenty-seventh time, I have been arrested—and I ain't going to jail no more!" The crowd exploded into cheers and clapping.

"The only way we gonna stop them white men from whuppin' us is to take over. We been saying freedom for six years and we ain't got nothin'. What we gonna start saying now is Black Power!"

The crowd was right with him. They picked up his thoughts immediately.

"BLACK POWER!" they roared in unison.

Willie Ricks, who is as good at orchestrating the emotions of a crowd as anyone I have ever seen, sprang into action. Jumping

to the platform with Stokely, he yelled to the crowd, "What do you want?"

"BLACK POWER!"

"What do you want?"

"BLACK POWER!!"

"What do you want?"

"BLACK POWER!! BLACK POWER!!! BLACK POWER!!!!"

Everything that happened afterward was a response to that moment. More than anything, it assured that the Meredith March Against Fear would go down in history as one of the major turning points in the black liberation struggle.

From SNCC's point of view, the march was a huge success. Despite the bitter controversy precipitated by Stokely's introduction of Black Power, we enjoyed several important accomplishments: thousands of voters were registered along the route; Stokely emerged as a national leader; the Mississippi movement acquired new inspiration, and major interest was generated in independent black political organizations.

7. "What We Want"

Stokely Carmichael

Stokely Carmichael had been elected chairman of SNCC in May 1966. These are excerpts from his essay "What We Want" in the New York Review of Books (September 22, 1966).

One of the tragedies of the struggle against racism is that up to now there has been no national organization which could speak to the growing militancy of young black people in the urban ghetto. There has been only a civil rights movement, whose tone of voice was adapted to an audience of liberal whites. It served as a sort of buffer zone between them and angry young blacks. None of its so-called leaders could go into a rioting community and be listened to. In a sense, I blame ourselves—together with the mass media—for what has happened in Watts, Harlem, Chicago, Cleve-

land, Omaha. Each time the people in those cities saw Martin Luther King get slapped, they became angry; when they saw four little black girls bombed to death, they were angrier; and when nothing happened, they were steaming. We had nothing to offer that they could see, except to go out and be beaten again. We helped to build their frustration.

An organization which claims to be working for the needs of a community—as SNCC does—must work to provide that community with a position of strength from which to make its voice heard. This is the significance of black power beyond the slogan.

Black power can be clearly defined for those who do not attach the fears of white America to their questions about it. We should begin with the basic fact that black Americans have two problems: they are poor and they are black. All other problems arise from this two-sided reality: lack of education, the so-called apathy of black men. Any program to end racism must address itself to that double reality.

The concept of "black power" is not a recent or isolated phenomenon: It has grown out of the ferment of agitation and activity by different people and organizations in many black communities over the years. Our last year of work in Alabama added a new concrete possibility. In Lowndes County, for example, black power will mean that if a Negro is elected sheriff, he can end police brutality. If a black man is elected tax assessor, he can collect and channel funds for the building of better roads and schools serving black people—thus advancing the move from political power into the economic arena. In such areas as Lowndes, where black men have a majority, they will attempt to use it to exercise control. This is what they seek: control. Where Negroes lack a majority, black power means proper representation and sharing of control. It means the creation of power bases from which black people can work to change statewide or nationwide patterns of oppression through pressure from strength—instead of weakness. Politically, black power means what it has always meant to SNCC: the coming-together of black people to elect representatives and to force those

representatives to speak to their needs. It does not mean merely putting black faces into office. A man or woman who is black and from the slums cannot be automatically expected to speak to the needs of black people. Most of the black politicians we see around the country today are not what SNCC means by black power. The power must be that of a community, and emanate from there.

Ultimately, the economic foundations of this country must be shaken if black people are to control their lives. The colonies of the United States—and this includes the black ghettos within its borders, north and south—must be liberated. For a century, this nation has been like an octopus of exploitation, its tentacles stretching from Mississippi and Harlem to South America, the Middle East, southern Africa, and Vietnam; the form of exploitation varies from area to area but the essential result has been the same—a powerful few have been maintained and enriched at the expense of the poor and voiceless colored masses. This pattern must be broken. As its grip loosens here and there around the world, the hopes of black Americans become more realistic. For racism to die, a totally different America must be born.

White America will not face the problem of color, the reality of it. The well-intended say: "We're all human, everybody is really decent; we must forget color." But color cannot be "forgotten" until its weight is recognized and dealt with. White America will not acknowledge that the ways in which this country sees itself are contradicted by being black—and always have been. Whereas most of the people who settled this country came here for freedom or for economic opportunity, blacks were brought here to be slaves. When the Lowndes County Freedom Organization chose the black panther as its symbol, it was christened by the press "the Black Panther Party"—but the Alabama Democratic Party, whose symbol is a rooster, has never been called the White Cock Party. No one ever talked about "white power" because power in this country is white. All this adds up to more than merely identifying a group phenomenon by some catchy name or adjective. The furor over that black panther reveals the problems that white

America has with color and sex; the furor over "black power" reveals how deep racism runs and the great fear which is attached to it.

I have said that most liberal whites react to "black power" with the question, What about me?, rather than saying: Tell me what you want me to do and I'll see if I can do it. There are answers to the right question. One of the most disturbing things about almost all white supporters of the movement has been that they are afraid to go into their own communities—which is where the racism exists—and work to get rid of it. They want to run from Berkeley to tell us what to do in Mississippi; let them look instead at Berkeley. They admonish blacks to be nonviolent; let them preach nonviolence in the white community. They come to teach me Negro history; let them go to the suburbs and open up freedom schools for whites. Let them work to stop America's racist foreign policy; let them press this government to cease supporting the economy of South Africa.

There is a vital job to be done among poor whites. We hope to see, eventually, a coalition between poor blacks and poor whites. That is the only coalition which seems acceptable to us, and we see such a coalition as the major internal instrument of change in American society. SNCC has tried several times to organize poor whites; we are trying again now, with an initial training program in Tennessee. It is purely academic today to talk about bringing poor blacks and whites together, but the job of creating a poor-white power bloc must be attempted. The main responsibility for it falls upon whites.

But our vision is not merely of a society in which all black men have enough to buy the good things of life. When we urge that black money go into black pockets, we mean the communal pocket. We want to see money go back into the community and used to benefit it. We want to see the cooperative concept applied in business and banking. We want to see black ghetto residents demand that an exploiting store keeper sell them, at minimal cost, a building or a shop that they will own and improve cooperatively;

they can back their demand with a rent strike, or a boycott, and a community so unified behind them that no one else will move into the building or buy at the store. The society we seek to build among black people, then, is not a capitalist one. It is a society in which the spirit of community and humanistic love prevail. . . .

8. "Black Power: A Voice Within"

Ruth Turner Perot

Ruth Turner Perot was special assistant to the national director of CORE when she wrote the 1967 essay "Black Power: A Voice Within" from which this excerpt is taken.

. . . Black power to CORE means the organization of the black community into a tight and disciplined group, for six purposes:

1. Growth of political power.
2. Building economic power.
3. Improvement of self-image.
4. Development of Negro leadership.
5. Demanding federal law enforcement.
6. Mobilization of Negro consumer power.

Let me give some examples of how CORE programs the concept:

- In Baltimore, MFU, an independent union organized by CORE, raised wages of nearly 100 members, workers regular labor unions did not want to organize, from 35¢ to \$1.50.
- Baltimore, CORE's 1966 Target City, also demonstrated black power in the November elections. As a result of intensive mobilizing and organizing by CORE and other groups, Negroes switched 35 to 1 to vote for Republican [Spiro] Agnew over "Home is your castle" [George P.] Mahoney. Mahoney was defeated. We were so effective, in fact, that the Ku Klux Klan has chosen Baltimore as [its] Target City.
- CORE ran eight Negro candidates for school board elections

in Democratic primaries in Louisiana. All won, first time since Reconstruction.

- Also—Louisiana (Opelousas)—Sweet potato cooperative. 375 farmers, 15 white, growing and marketing their sweet potato crops. This is economic black power.
- Watts, Operation Bootstraps, "Learn, Baby, Learn." 12 teenagers, graduates of [a] computer course, have set up their own business, offering up-to-date skills for pay.
- Freedom School in Baltimore and plans for Black Arts and Afro-American Institute. A place where black people learn of history and contributions to world culture and civilization. Power of self-knowledge. Also in Baltimore, a leadership training [program] for neighborhood people.
- As a result of CORE insistence, federal examiners sent to South Carolina and Mississippi counties. Result: registration climbed.

We believe that these building blocks will become a bulwark that will protect the next Adam Clayton Powell, multiplied many times over. There is no other choice. If power for the powerless is not achieved so that changes within its structure can be made, this nation will not survive.