

"She Kept Daring Us to Go Further"



Ella Baker

FROM HER APARTMENT IN NEW York, Ella Baker had carried on her own campaign in support of the Montgomery bus boycott. She was fifty-three in 1956, a small, slender woman with a commanding voice and queenly manner, still fiercely devoted to the idea of inspiring other blacks to wage their own battle for equality. During her travels throughout the South in the 1940s, she had risked her life to urge blacks to join the NAACP and band together to fight injustice. But she received little backing from NAACP executives, who were far more interested in increasing the organization's membership and raising money

hope and optimism. Yet the boycott remained an isolated event, with black leaders in other Southern cities initiating no mass protests of their own against segregation on buses—or in the schools. More than two years before, the Supreme Court had struck down school segregation, but white supremacists were making clear to the world, through intimidation and violence, that they still were in firm control of the region, no matter what the Supreme Court said. In 1956, 101 Southern members of Congress signed what came to be known as the Southern Manifesto, defying the court's despised *Brown* decision. After that, school desegregation in the South came to a virtual standstill.

It might have stayed that way had it not been for Arkansas NAACP president Daisy Bates. Like Ella Baker, Bates was a firm believer in mass protest, and she also believed that the NAACP should be doing more to stimulate such activism. Even before the *Brown* decision, Bates had been agitating for desegregation of Little Rock schools. Shortly after *Brown*, the city's school board, under heavy pressure from Bates, announced limited plans to desegregate. In 1957, the school board reported that nine black students would be admitted to Central High. Segregationists, however, were determined to prevent this break in the wall of massive resistance. One of their major targets would be Daisy Bates.

She was no stranger to white terrorism and brutality. When she was eight, she discovered that the couple who had raised her were not her real parents, that her real mother had been raped and murdered by several white men when Daisy was a baby. Her grief-stricken father had handed her over to friends and then vanished. Distraught, Daisy asked her adoptive father who killed her mother. "There was some talk about who they were," he said, "but no one knew for sure, and the sheriff's office did little to find out." From that moment on, the little girl forgot about her dolls and other favorite pastimes and focused her energies on hating whites—and finding her mother's killers.

One day, as she was about to enter the town's general store, she noticed a white man, sitting on a bench on the porch, staring at her. Inside the store, she looked back. His eyes still fixed on her, the man jumped to his feet and walked quickly away. The next day, she returned to the store. The man was on the same porch bench. She advanced slowly toward him, then stopped, never taking her eyes from his. Leaping up, he shouted, "Stop staring at me, you bitch!" and started toward her, then abruptly turned away. Daisy was convinced he was one of her mother's murderers. Day after day, she returned to the store to haunt him, staring at him on his

bench, while he, often drunk, would return the stare, or, sometimes, pretend not to see her. "I had come to enjoy tormenting [him]," she recalled. "I felt as if I were making him pay for his sin . . ." One cold, windy afternoon, he was asleep on the bench. She shook his arm lightly. He opened his eyes and looked at her in panic, then lurched to his feet. "In the name of God, leave me alone," he pleaded, then stumbled down the street. A few days later, she was told he had been found dead in a nearby alley.

Her hatred of whites continued. A few years later, as her adoptive father lay dying, he urged her to channel her anger toward more constructive ends. "Don't hate white people just because they're white," he told her. "If you hate, make it count for something. Hate the humiliations we are living under in the South . . . and then try to do something about it, or your hate won't spell a thing." She took his admonition to heart, "a priceless heritage," she declared later, "that was to sustain me throughout the years to come."

While still in her teens, she married L. C. Bates, a former journalist. In 1941, the couple moved to Little Rock and started a weekly black newspaper, the *State Press*, which they transformed into the city's most outspoken voice for racial justice. When a black soldier was shot and killed by Little Rock police in 1942, the *State Press* mounted a crusade against police brutality, one that continued despite cancellation of all advertising by white-owned stores. The paper took on other targets as well: slum housing, job discrimination, injustice in the legal system. In 1946, Daisy and L. C. Bates were jailed briefly after Daisy criticized a local judge in the paper. They were released on bond, and later the Arkansas Supreme Court ordered the judgment quashed.

But that earlier intimidation paled in comparison with the campaign leveled against Daisy Bates during the school desegregation fight. Less than two weeks before the first day of school, she received a hint of what was to come. A rock crashed through her living-room window as she sat reading the newspaper. Attached was a note, with the scrawled warning: STONE THIS TIME. DYNAMITE NEXT.

Under relentless pressure from white supremacists to prevent Central High's desegregation, Arkansas governor Orval Faubus announced on September 2, 1957, the night before school was to start, that he had called out the National Guard to bar black students from entering Central. It was, he insisted, for their own protection. The next day, a federal judge ordered the city to admit the six girls and three boys. Early the following morning, eight of the students, accompanied by Bates and a couple of local ministers, tried to enter Central but were turned away. The ninth student

had not gotten the message that all the students were to go together, and as a result, fifteen-year-old Elizabeth Eckford, who was barely five feet tall, attempted on her own to push through the hundreds of screaming whites outside the school. Once the mob realized who she was, they surrounded the terrified teenager, their faces contorted with rage, shaking their fists, baseball bats, and other potential weapons. "Get her! Lynch her!" they shouted.

For the next three weeks, the crisis in Little Rock escalated as Faubus defied the federal court, which, in turn, cited the governor for contempt. On September 20, Faubus unexpectedly ordered the National Guard to withdraw, which left the black students in the middle of a war zone. In a frenzy of hatred, a mob of more than five hundred whites swarmed past police barricades and invaded the school, smashing windows, breaking down doors, beating any blacks in their path, and nearly capturing the nine students. The savage brutality of the mob, whose members, once they realized the students had escaped, took out their fury on any African-American they encountered, stunned and appalled the nation and the world. Realizing he could no longer equivocate, that the integrity of the Constitution was at stake, not to mention the integrity of his administration, President Eisenhower ordered paratroopers from the Army's elite 101st Airborne Division to take control of the high school.

Protected by the paratroopers, the nine black teenagers finally became students at Central, and the crisis seemed to be over. But it had not ended for the students, who were subjected to unrelenting intimidation and harassment by white students and their parents. Having helped get the children into Central, Daisy Bates now devoted her energies to nurturing them and helping them make it through the torments of that school year. Time after time, they were beaten, kicked, knocked to the floor. A stinging liquid was thrown in the eyes of one of the girls; another time, she was scalded in the shower after gym class.

Every morning, the nine students would gather at the spacious, elegantly furnished house that Bates and her husband had built just the year before, and go to school together. Every afternoon, they would meet in Bates's basement to talk to her and each other about the day's experiences. Several of the students later said that these sessions, which Bates compared with group therapy, were essential in giving them support and the will to go on. "There were times when the desegregation effort turned on [Bates's] raw courage," declared Harry Ashmore, the liberal white editor of the *Arkansas Gazette*, who would later win a Pulitzer prize for his editorials denouncing the violence. "I doubt that the black students could have

withstood the pressures of that disoriented school year without her undaunted presence."

Ashmore was harassed and threatened by segregationists, but as he noted, it was Bates, with "no assurance of even routine police protection," who was the main target of their terrorism campaign. She was hanged in effigy. A six-foot gasoline-soaked cross was set afire on her lawn, a note at its base proclaiming: GO BACK TO AFRICA! KKK. Not long afterward, her house caught fire from another flaming cross, but the blaze was extinguished before serious damage was done. Night riders fired shots into the house, hurled sticks of dynamite onto the lawn. All the glass in the front of the house was blown out, and steel screens covered the windows. Bates's husband and some of their friends set up a twenty-four-hour guard, shotguns and revolvers at the ready.

One afternoon in the fall of 1957, a white woman came to Bates's house and said she represented a group of "Southern Christian women" who wanted Bates to withdraw her support from the students. If she didn't do so, the woman warned, "you'll be destroyed—you, your newspaper, your reputation, everything." She gave Bates until nine o'clock the next morning to come up with an answer. After a sleepless night, Bates called the woman, said she was "truly sorry for her and all of her ilk—bigots parading behind the standard of 'Christianity'"—and declared she would not back down.

Bates's enemies made good on their threat. Within days, the Bateses' newspaper lost almost all its most important advertisers. Small businessmen who advertised in the *State Press* were warned that if they didn't cancel their ads, they would be bombed or suffer other reprisals themselves. Some of the threats were delivered in person by local thugs. "In a matter of a few weeks, we watched sixteen years of our lives being quickly chopped away," Bates said. She and her husband fought back, just as they had in 1942. This time, they were not successful. The paper was forced to shut down in 1959.

Vital as her role had been in the integration of Central High, Bates herself soon disappeared from view. When the NAACP announced in 1958 that it was bestowing its most prestigious honor, the Spingarn Award, on the nine Little Rock students, there was no mention of Bates. A storm of protest arose, and the students petitioned the NAACP to award the Spingarn medal to their mentor and chief supporter as well. Many NAACP members, including Pauli Murray, were astounded by what they saw as a slight to Bates. Murray wrote to the selection committee: "[J]ust as a baseball fan cannot think of the Dodgers without thinking of Jackie Robin-

son, or the New York Yankees without thinking of their manager, Casey Stengel, it is impossible to think of the Little Rock Nine without thinking of their manager, Daisy Bates." The NAACP finally capitulated and issued a joint award to Bates and the students.

Bates never publicly sought recognition, but years later, during the height of the civil rights movement, she wrote to Murray: "During these hectic times while we are fighting for human dignity, and many times for survival, one forgets the contribution made by women."

The Little Rock crisis made clear what Ella Baker and other black leaders already knew: The federal government could not be counted on to take an active role in implementing the *Brown* decision or the 1957 Civil Rights Act just passed by Congress. If real progress was to be made in the struggle for freedom and equality, blacks were going to have to start making it themselves.

Even though Martin Luther King had initiated no new confrontation after the Montgomery boycott, he was considered by many to be the most important black leader in the South, and any new mass civil rights movement would have to take him into account. Since the Montgomery Improvement Association seemed unable to continue and expand the fight, a new organization would have to be created, with King at its center. Baker and her colleagues Bayard Rustin and Stanley Levison set out to do just that. In late 1956, the three met night after night to design the framework for a new Southern movement, with black ministers as its leaders and Martin Luther King at its head. Less than two months after the end of the Montgomery boycott, some one hundred of the best-known black ministers in the South—"superstars of the black pulpit," one historian later called them—gathered at Atlanta's Ebenezer Baptist Church to form the Southern Christian Leadership Conference.

That August, with great fanfare, SCLC announced its wildly ambitious first program—a voter registration drive, called Crusade for Citizenship, which hoped to register more than one million new black voters before the 1960 presidential election. The Crusade would be launched with rallies in twenty-two Southern cities on February 12, 1958. A little more than a month before the Crusade's kickoff date, however, it appeared that SCLC was heading for disaster. Nothing at all had been done to prepare for the rallies, let alone the voter registration work that supposedly was to follow. SCLC was an organization in name only.

Greatly disturbed, Rustin and Levison met with King and suggested that Ella Baker become SCLC's executive director and pull together the

Crusade. King, who had little use for professional women, did not like the idea, even though Baker had been one of SCLC's creators, had helped devise its structure and formulate its strategy. He preferred Rustin for the job, but he also knew there was no way he could name this homosexual, pacifist ex-Communist to such a position. When Rustin and Levison argued that Baker had more organizing experience than anyone in SCLC, King grudgingly agreed, but only on the condition that Baker be considered "acting" director. He would use her for the Crusade, but had no intention of keeping her around for long.

Rustin and Levison had not consulted Baker before offering her services to King, and she was furious at them for their effrontery. At the same time, she realized that if she didn't get involved, her dream of a mass civil rights movement might never be realized. On January 9, 1958, she left New York for Atlanta. This strong-willed, independent woman, who often referred to ministers as "glory seekers," was about to join forces with the most famous black minister in America, who believed that a woman's place was in the home. The consequences of that tumultuous pairing would have a profound effect on the civil rights movement for years to come.

When Ella Baker was a little girl in North Carolina, her grandmother would tell her stories about growing up in slavery as the daughter of her master. The tale Ella loved most was the one about her grandmother refusing to marry the light-skinned slave picked out for her by her mistress. When the pretty young house slave held out for the dark-skinned man who became Baker's grandfather, she was banished to the life of a field hand. The banishment did not faze her. She simply plowed all day and danced all night, she told her granddaughter. "Grandma had a fighting spirit," Baker said. "She would not be broken."

While her grandmother passed down a legacy of rebellion, Baker's grandfather, a minister and farmer, instilled in her a deep sense of social responsibility and involvement in the community. After the Civil War, he bought the house and land on which he once had worked as a slave, and parceled out plots to relatives. His household was constantly providing food, shelter, and medical care to those who needed them. "Where we lived," Baker later said, "there was no sense of hierarchy, in terms of those who have, having a right to look down upon, or to evaluate as a lesser breed, those who didn't have. . . . There was a deep sense of community that prevailed in this little neck of the woods."

Baker's grandfather, whom she adored, called her Grand Lady. She often accompanied him on long buggy rides, when they would discuss the

state of the world. When he preached, he seated her in the visiting minister's chair near his pulpit, where she could gaze down at the congregation, her little legs not yet touching the floor. Her mother was horrified: In church, whether the congregation was black or white, females belonged in the pews, not on the altar. Although barred from the pulpit because of her sex, Baker still was able to hone her formidable speaking skills through the church; she practiced her oratory at the meetings of the women's missionary societies to which her mother belonged. As an adult, she was known for her deep and resonant voice, her clear, crisp diction, her theatrical flair, her astonishing gift for mimicry.

From her earliest days, she kowtowed to no one. Once, she hit a white boy who called her a nigger. Another time, she threw rocks at a boy for the same offense. A baseball-playing tomboy and a champion debater in high school, Baker was later known as a troublemaker at Shaw University, a black school in Raleigh. She was always protesting something, whether it was the school's strict student dress code, its tradition of students singing black spirituals for white visitors, or its refusal to allow men and women students to walk across campus together. The white president of Shaw grew so tired of Baker's protests that he tried to have her expelled during her senior year. The effort failed when the faculty intervened. For all Baker's agitating, she still managed to graduate first in her class in 1927. That summer, she moved to New York, where the Harlem Renaissance was in full swing; young black writers and activists were focusing on racial identity, injustice, and oppression—and stirring up trouble was the thing to do.

Baker wrote for several black newspapers, helped form black consumer cooperatives, and later got a job with the Roosevelt administration's Works Progress Administration. As the Depression deepened, she was swept up in Harlem's social ferment. "[W]herever there was a discussion, I'd go," she said years later. "It didn't matter if it was all men. I've been in many groups where there were men, and maybe I was the only woman, or the only black. . . . I was open to all kinds of discussions. I'd never heard any discussions about the social revolution . . . New York was the hotbed of radical thinking. You had every spectrum of radical thinking on WPA. We had a lovely time!"

Hired by the NAACP in 1941, Baker began what would become a lifelong dedication to grassroots civil rights organizing. Faultlessly dressed in a suit, gloves, and a hat, a purse stuck firmly under her arm, Baker roamed the South, setting up NAACP adult and youth chapters, meeting and befriending thousands of people, and creating a network of current

and future activists. True to form, she rebelled when personally confronted with the South's Jim Crow practices. Once, when ordered out of the dining car of a train, she refused to budge. A military policeman, asked by the steward to eject her, yanked her up from her seat, bruising her leg. "You are overstepping your bounds!" Baker thundered in a voice that traveled throughout the car. When she got back to New York, she wanted to sue, but the NAACP decided against it.

Adamant about standing up for herself, she also ferociously guarded her independence. In 1940, she married T. J. Robinson, a former college classmate. The marriage lasted until 1959. During that time, many of Baker's friends and acquaintances did not even know she had a husband. She retained her maiden name, a highly unusual step in the 1940s. As she later explained: "I never considered myself a feminist in the sense of championing the rights of women, but I may have felt the need to exercise this right by retaining my name . . . the right of the individual to be an individual." During the early 1960s, she told Mary King, a young civil rights activist: "I have always been very happy that I didn't change my name. I didn't think that I belonged to any man."

No man could dominate her. Not her husband. And certainly not Martin Luther King, Jr.

The world that Baker was about to enter, however, was controlled entirely by men. The Southern Christian Leadership Conference was an organization of black ministers, most of whom shared the predominant view of virtually all American churches, black and white, that God meant women to be subordinate. Black clergymen might be coming to the forefront of the fight against the racism of white society, but, as theologian James Cone pointed out, they "shared much of the typical American male's view of women . . ." Lawrence Guyot, a young civil rights activist in the early 1960s, put it more bluntly. "Equality of women in the Baptist Church was like having a rabbi conduct the Baptist service," he said. "It was openly antithetical." Guyot's observation applied to most other black denominations as well.

Yet women had been the heart of American black churches since their founding in the days of slavery. As historians Darlene Clark Hine and Kathleen Thompson have noted: "Men stood in the pulpit and sat on the church board; women did everything else." Women raised the money. They taught Sunday school. They sang in the choir. They operated the women's missionary societies, youth groups, and other church activities. They cleaned, decorated, and maintained the churches. They also made up

most of the congregation at midweek and Sunday services. "If Baptist women decided to stay away from the church for one month," Guyot declared, "there would be no church." Ministers often referred to women as the backbone of the church, a term meant as a compliment, emphasizing their vital role. But as theologian Jacquelyn Grant wryly observed: "[T]he telling portion of the word 'backbone' is 'back.' It has become apparent to me that most of the ministers who use this term are referring to location rather than function. What they really mean is that women are in the 'background' and they should be kept there: they are merely support workers."

Although black clergymen mirrored American society's attitude toward women at that time, there was another explanation for their insistence on being treated as dominant authority figures by their congregations and others around them. The ministry was one calling in which black men could demonstrate their manhood, could throw off the submissiveness they had been forced to adopt as the result of slavery and post-Civil War terrorism and intimidation. They had been denied dignity and self-respect, had been required to behave like boys, not men. "The dominant mood in the black community emphasized the need for black male assertiveness," James Cone observed. "Black men, most agreed, needed to assert their masculinity . . ."

And many black men viewed the traditional strength and independence of black women as a threat to that masculinity. Martin Luther King expressed a widely held opinion when he said on the CBS program *Face the Nation*: "The Negro man in this country . . . has never been able to be a man. He has been robbed of his manhood because of the legacy of slavery and segregation and discrimination, and we have had in the Negro community a matriarchal family . . . in the midst of a patriarchal society . . ."

King seemed to feel particularly stifled by the strength and assertiveness of his own mother, whose husband, Martin Luther King, Sr., was the pastor of the Ebenezer Baptist Church before their son came to join him in 1960. Andrew Young, who became one of the younger King's key SCLC lieutenants, said that King, among others, "had a hard time with domineering women in SCLC because Martin's mother, quiet as she was, was really a strong, domineering force in that family. She was never publicly saying anything, but she ran Daddy King, and she ran the church and she ran Martin . . ." King certainly was not alone in his feelings about mothers. Other black men, including Andy Young, complained that their mothers dominated not only them but their fathers, too. "My father was the head of our household and my mother ran his life," Young declared. He

acknowledged that his attitude toward his mother influenced his later perceptions of Ella Baker and the younger women, both black and white, who would soon flood the movement. "[T]hey all set off one defense reaction: They were too much like my mother. Strong women were the backbone of the movement, but to young black men seeking their own freedom, dignity and leadership perspective, they were quite a challenge."

When Martin Luther King married Coretta Scott, he made clear to her that her role was to stay in the background, caring for him and their future children. "I want my wife to respect me as the head of the family," he told her. "I *am* the head of the family." She and he both laughed at "that slightly pompous speech," and he retreated, saying, "Of course, I don't really mean that. I think marriage should be a shared relationship." But, in fact, Coretta King wrote later, "he really did mean it." Bernard Lee, another close SCLC associate of King's, declared: "Martin . . . was absolutely a male chauvinist. He believed that the wife should stay home and take care of the babies while he'd be out there in the streets."

When Ella Baker arrived in Atlanta to take over running SCLC, she had to start from scratch. Her "office," she quipped, was her purse and the nearest phone booth. She was allowed to use the mimeograph machine at Ebenezer, but only after 5 P.M., when the church office officially closed. Baker was SCLC's sole staff member, and she had almost no contact with King or the organization's other leaders as she worked virtually around the clock, racing to get ready for the kickoff of the Crusade. When February 12 arrived, she had managed to organize church rallies in twenty-two Southern cities, collect and distribute information about state voter registration laws and the ways blacks could overcome the barriers to registration, and recruit local workers. She looked mainly to women for help: "All of the churches depended, in terms of things taking place, on women, not men. Men didn't do the things that had to be done."

Considering that Baker had few resources and little support from her new ministerial associates, the fact that thirteen thousand people turned out for the rallies was remarkable. But all the enthusiasm and oratory of that day produced few tangible results. After their rousing speeches at the rallies, SCLC's ministers did almost nothing to follow up with the organizational work that was needed. Most of them made no attempt to recruit potential voters, teach them what they needed to know to register, and take them down to the courthouse. The plan for local registration committees never got off the ground.

Baker had planned to stay in Atlanta only six weeks. But she agreed to

extend her stay when SCLC's selection committee still had not come up with a nominee for permanent executive director. Despite Baker's impressive work on the Crusade's kickoff rallies, there was never any thought about giving her the job. On April 30, 1958, the SCLC board named John Tilley, a Baltimore minister, as executive director and Baker as his associate director.

But Tilley, like the other ministers in the organization, had no intention of giving up the pastorship of his church to devote all his time to SCLC. So, once again, Baker was virtually on her own. She traveled widely throughout the South, drawing on her network of personal contacts from her NAACP days to put together voter registration and citizenship training drives, trying desperately to keep the flame of Montgomery burning. As hard as she worked, however, she knew she could not organize or inspire a mass civil rights movement by herself. In the summer of 1958, she warned King that "we are losing the initiative in the Civil Rights struggle in the South mainly because of the absence of a dynamic philosophy or spiritual force." King agreed. Then he took Coretta to Mexico for a two-week vacation.

As the months passed, Baker grew increasingly frustrated, angry, and annoyed. Frustrated that SCLC's ministers refused to get involved in registering voters in their own hometowns. Angry that King spent more time and energy giving speeches and pastoring Ebenezer Baptist and writing his memoirs on the Montgomery bus boycott than he devoted to SCLC. Annoyed that the organization seemed more interested in establishing King as a national icon, a Moses-like savior who would free his people from modern-day slavery, than in working on grassroots organizing.

King ran SCLC in the same authoritarian manner that he and most of the other ministers ran their churches. To them, power meant control over others. Baker had a completely different view of power. She believed that King's job, and SCLC's, should be to nurture people, to help them find the power within themselves to change their own lives and the society in which they lived. No one person could do that for others, no matter how eloquent he was, she was convinced. She was certainly talking about King when she said years later that "because a person is called upon to give public statements and is acclaimed by the establishment, such a person gets to the point of believing that he *is* the movement. Such people get so involved with playing the game of being important that they exhaust themselves and their time and they don't do the work of actually organizing people."

Baker was not the only associate of King's who was critical of him.

After reading the manuscript of *Stride for Freedom*, King's Montgomery memoir, Stanley Levison warned King not to imply that "everything depended on you." Fred Shuttlesworth, a firebrand Birmingham minister, reminded King in a letter that "when the flowery speeches have been made, we still have the hard job of getting down and helping people." SCLC, Shuttlesworth wrote, "must move now, or else [be] hard put in the not too distant future to justify our existence."

King was not fond of any criticism—he "loved to be surrounded by people who said 'yes,'" Bayard Rustin remembered—but Baker's complaints were particularly galling. Old enough to be King's mother, Baker felt no awe for the twenty-nine-year-old SCLC leader and was never as deferential to him as those in his inner circle were. "I was not a person to be enamored of anyone," she later remarked. The two clashed repeatedly, and Baker got a reputation within the organization as "difficult." "I wasn't an easy pushover because I could talk back a lot. Not only could, but did," she said. On at least one occasion, according to Rustin, Baker managed to reduce King to tears. "Ella Baker was very tough on Martin," Rustin said.

For his part, King treated Baker more as a secretary than as SCLC's top organizer. He was often unavailable to take her calls. He would wave aside her advice, ideas, and suggestions. "She always felt persecuted as a woman and I cannot say that she was not justified," recalled Coretta Scott King, who harbored her own share of grievances about being kept in the background. Baker encouraged King's wife to step out of her husband's shadow. "Coretta, you need to be among the councils of the men," Baker declared. "You have a lot to say."

In the spring of 1959, King fired the ineffectual John Tilley as SCLC's executive director and, despite his difficulties with Baker, asked her to become "acting director" again while the SCLC board searched for a permanent replacement. For all their discord, Baker and King remained dependent on each other, at least for the moment. King had no one else on whom to call, and although Baker intensely resented King's treatment of her as well as his autocratic leadership style, his organization was the only one that was working, however falteringly, on voter registration. She agreed, and once again threw herself into work to which only she, among the SCLC hierarchy in Atlanta, seemed truly devoted.

She came up with an idea for a new SCLC campaign that included recruiting black women from across the South to teach basic reading, writing, and political skills to illiterate blacks so they could register to vote. Getting blacks past the fear of reprisals if they tried to register was only the first hurdle in putting them on the voting rolls: They still had to pass

arcane literacy tests in several Southern states. And nobody had bothered to explain to unschooled blacks why they *should* vote or how getting involved in political action could change their lives. Baker had long been intrigued by the work of Septima Clark at Highlander, whose citizenship school program had made impressive strides in giving a basic education to blacks who needed it.

But there was little interest, at least at that point, in Baker's plan. The ministers did not share her enthusiasm for the enlistment of women, nor were these products of the black middle class, who promoted the idea of a well-mannered, cultured "new Negro," all that eager to focus attention on lower-class, unlettered blacks. Baker, Clark, and other women were dealing with reality; many of the men, as Baker perceived, were dealing with image.

Having vetoed Baker's plan, however, the ministers had nothing to put in its place. King acknowledged that the Crusade for Citizenship had been a disappointment. When SCLC leaders gathered in Birmingham in December 1959 to discuss plans for 1960, he put forth a sweeping if unfocused alternative to voter registration. "This is the creative moment for a full-scale assault on the system of segregation," he said. "We must practice open civil disobedience. We must be willing to go to jail en masse . . ."

Less than two months later, the assault that King had envisioned was indeed launched—but not by him or SCLC. Four North Carolina college students were its shock troops, followed by hundreds, then thousands of young people. As spellbinding as King was in his speeches and sermons, neither he nor his organization had managed to rekindle the spirit of the Montgomery boycott. It was college students who had relit the torch, with a seemingly new form of nonviolent confrontation—the sit-in. This was what Ella Baker had been waiting for, what she had worked for, for so many years. And now she would work to make it succeed.

On February 1, 1960, four male freshmen from the North Carolina Agricultural and Technical College walked into the downtown Woolworth's in Greensboro and sat down on stools at the dime store's lunch counter. When the waitresses wouldn't serve them, the students refused to move. Two of them were members of the Greensboro NAACP youth group, which, impatient with the glacial pace of school desegregation and the lack of momentum after the Montgomery boycott, had been agitating to get things moving again. The Youth Council had been founded seventeen years before, after a visit to Greensboro by NAACP official Ella Baker.

After being refused service at Woolworth's, the four returned the next

day, and this time they brought with them more than twenty fellow students. The day after that, sixty-six students from A&T and other colleges and universities throughout the area showed up. By the end of the week, more than a thousand young people were involved in the sit-in, shocking not only the residents of Greensboro but the rest of the South and the nation.

Few realized that this dramatic technique of protesting discrimination, far from being new, had been used by Pauli Murray and her fellow Howard University students, among others, as far back as the early 1940s. None of the early sit-ins, however, had triggered the kind of national press coverage and student interest drawn by the Greensboro sit-ins and those that followed. Soon, students in nearby Winston-Salem and Durham launched their own demonstrations. Hundreds of students staged sit-ins in downtown Nashville. Protests erupted in South Carolina, Florida, and Virginia, igniting each other like a string of firecrackers. By April, more than fifty thousand people throughout the South had taken part in sit-ins in seventy-eight cities and towns, and more than two thousand demonstrators had been arrested.

Although the four students in the first Greensboro sit-in were men, young women joined the ranks of the demonstrators after the first day. Among them were whites—three students from the University of North Carolina Women's College campus in Greensboro, one of the elite schools for white women in the South. North Carolina papers had a field day with this news, and the college's chancellor put pressure on the three not to participate again. By contrast, dozens of female students from Greensboro's all-black Bennett College joined the sit-in movement with the enthusiastic support of Willa Player, their school's president. No stranger to fearlessness when it came to civil rights, Player had offered the use of her school's chapel in 1958 to Martin Luther King when no other black school or church in Greensboro would allow him to speak.

The sit-in movement, in both the North and the South, caught the country completely by surprise. American college students, for the most part, were seen as politically apathetic, interested more in the material trappings of success than in changing the world. That was as true for black students as for white, with most black schools encouraging their students to conform to the values of white society, to aspire to middle-class respectability. Many African-American students in the late 1950s and early 1960s represented the first generation of their families to go to college, and their attendance often came as a result of great sacrifice by their parents. Theirs was a generation with the potential to become doctors and

lawyers and professors, so when they sat in at local lunch counters, when they risked arrest and expulsion from school, they were also putting their futures at risk—the futures in which their parents had invested so much.

By their willingness to take such a gamble, by seizing the initiative and finally igniting a mass civil rights movement, they also had wrested the spotlight away from the older black leadership, who, in their view, had delivered too little, too late. The stage was being set for a power struggle between the old and the new, a struggle in which Ella Baker would prominently figure.

In Atlanta, Baker watched the unfolding of the sit-ins with worry as well as excitement. She had seen the momentum of the Montgomery bus boycott fade away, and despite her best efforts, the promise of SCLC's voter registration campaign had been squandered. Now, she feared, the same thing might happen again with this new student movement. One month after the sit-ins began, there seemed to be no communication among the scattered groups of demonstrators, no idea of joining together and forming one potent source of mass protest. If the potential of this infant movement was to be realized, she felt, it was up to her to provide the stimulus. Baker persuaded Martin Luther King to bring student sit-in leaders together for a conference at Shaw University, her alma mater, and cadged eight hundred dollars from SCLC funds to pay for it.

On a bright, warm weekend in early April, more than three hundred students from all over the South—two hundred more than had been expected—flooded Shaw's small campus, arriving by train and bus, in Volkswagen Beetles and on motorcycles. Some still wore bandages as evidence of their encounters with local police. They had read about each other's exploits, but this was the first time they had had a chance to exchange war stories, to take each other's measure. The Greensboro contingent was given its due for being first in the fray, but the group inspiring the most awe was from Nashville. They were the real battle-scarred veterans—the best trained, the best led, the best known. Their exploits had made front-page headlines around the country, and they would soon become the subject of an NBC television documentary. Receiving much of the attention was the young woman acknowledged as their main leader, a twenty-two-year-old Fisk University student named Diane Nash. Her courage and cool daring were legendary, but it was her delicate beauty that bedazzled many of the male participants at the conference.

As the students got to know one another, they also began realizing the value of what Baker was trying to do. Julian Bond, a handsome, elegant

Morehouse College student and one of the leaders of the Atlanta movement, recalled how the light dawned for him: "As you began to meet these people from all these various different sit-in places and you said, 'Oh yeah, I remember reading about what you all did there,' the idea began to seep in that we might be real hell on wheels in Atlanta, but if we can coordinate what we're doing in Atlanta with what they're doing here, we would really be tough stuff."

As the students worked out plans for an organization to coordinate their activities, Ella Baker worked equally hard to ensure their independence. SCLC, in particular, was casting longing eyes at their youthful daring and vision, with Martin Luther King generously applauding them for doing what he and his organization had only thought about. It was clear to Baker that King and his key lieutenants wanted the students' new group to become SCLC's youth arm. At a meeting of SCLC leaders at the Shaw conference, King and the other ministers discussed how they would influence the students to go along with their plan. "They were most confident that this would be their baby, because I was their functionary and I had called the [student] meeting," Baker said. "Well, I disagreed . . . I was outraged. I walked out." For the rest of the conference, Baker lobbied the students individually and collectively, urging them to decide their own future, independent of already established civil rights organizations. "She didn't say, 'Don't let Martin Luther King tell you what to do,' but you got the real feeling that that's what she meant," Julian Bond said. "You know, 'He's a good man and so on, but don't let him tell you what to do.'"

By the time of the student conference, Ella Baker had begun to sever herself from King and SCLC. The month before, King had offered the job of permanent SCLC executive director to Wyatt Tee Walker, an aggressive, arrogant young pastor from Petersburg, Virginia, who later said, "One big piece of evidence about the greatness of Martin Luther King is that a man as vain as I am is willing to play second fiddle to him." Walker told Baker she could stay on in Atlanta if she wished, so long as she understood she would be working for him. Baker was having none of that. She was tired of all the macho posturing, tired of not having a voice. In years to come, she would tell interviewers that the way she was treated by King and the other SCLC ministers never really bothered her, but in private, she complained angrily to friends about such treatment. "[S]he was concerned about not being recognized in a man-made world," recalled Septima Clark. "She felt that the men wanted all the glory . . . [S]he wanted her just deserts, which would have been right, you know. But they weren't about to give [them] to her, and so she decided that she couldn't take it."

With the students, Baker had finally found a group that valued her wisdom and experience. As the young people agreed to band together in what would become the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, Baker urged them not to limit their sights. She told them they must look beyond lunch counter sit-ins, focus on "more than a Coke and a hamburger," and work to change the entire social structure of the country. At the Raleigh conference and in coming years, "she kept daring us to go further," said John Lewis, who would later become SNCC chairman. Lewis said he considered Baker "our personal Gandhi. The spiritual mother, I guess I would call her, of SNCC."

Baker's ideas on participatory democracy, her unshakable belief that people must fight for their own freedom and not rely on leaders to do it for them, were adopted by SNCC as its own. As the idealistic and inventive organization, which welcomed women, both black and white, to its ranks, began to develop an office, staff, and program, Baker served as its guiding force. Without Ella Baker, said James Forman, who became executive secretary of SNCC, "there would be no story of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee."

Antagonists during most of their relationship, Baker and Martin Luther King never appreciated each other's strengths. Baker discounted King's generosity, his eloquence, his astonishing ability to inspire Mississippi sharecroppers and Manhattan business leaders alike. Blinded by sexism and holding a different view of leadership, King rejected Baker's bold vision, her experience, and her skills at forming a mass movement. When Baker left SCLC, she became one of the most important figures in the civil rights movement, emerging, in a very real way, as the movement's chief rival to King. Indeed, in the eyes of some youthful civil rights leaders like Stokely Carmichael, her influence overshadowed King's. "The most powerful person in the struggle of the sixties," Carmichael said firmly, "was Miss Ella Baker, not Martin Luther King."

Although Baker was never a formal leader of SNCC, her enormous influence on the students would have profound repercussions for the United States—and cause major headaches in the years to come for the young minister from Atlanta, whom most Americans thought of as the man in charge of the movement.