

SNCC: COLLEGIANS VS THE KLAN

It's a strange country: the people, the police, the courts, and even the F.B.I. conspire to punish you for believing all men are created equal / article by Jerry DeMuth

IT'S A SOCIOLOGICAL David and Goliath. On the one hand you have the massed might of the South, represented by ready-for-violence rednecks, club-toting police and their dogs, and a prejudiced court system, all marshalled under the streaming banners of "white supremacy." On the other hand is a tiny band of dedicated collegians and ex-collegians who

abhor violence but bleed just as easily as you and I when shot, stabbed, kicked, slugged or bitten. (Theoretically, there should be a giant in David's corner labeled Federal Government. Lots of people think there is, but then they're the kind who'd believe any sort of fairy tale.)

David, in this case, is a tough little group titled

Bob Moses, (below, left) SNCC's Mississippi Project director, speaks to a mass meeting in Jackson, Miss. Klan members (below, right) counter-picket against SNCC members and students protesting the segregation policies of several Atlanta restaurants.



the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC, pronounced "snick") which has as its goal such pie-in-the-sky notions as equality in voting, eating, and going to the john. It should surprise nobody who reads the daily newspapers that in some parts of this country such equal rights are just a little difficult to come by.

Though SNCC is seldom mentioned, you read about them every day. Every time there's a boycott down South, or open voter's registration is forced upon a reluctant community, chances are there were SNCC workers present. Chances are also that a

SNCC worker was clubbed, carted off to jail, or literally carried out of town.

On the surface of it, it's an unequal struggle—particularly since Federal help exists more in the abstract than in the concrete (and frequently on the wrong side). Much to everybody's surprise, SNCC is winning, though it's a hard fight and a slow one. This year, for the first time, Southern whites have almost abandoned obvious, outward, daylight violence. (There are still midnight bombings, telephone threats, and that sort of thing.) And SNCC workers estimate that, *Despite It All*, something like 25,000

A White Citizens Council sign (below, left) near Selma, Alabama. One of Dallas County Alabama's deputy sheriffs (below, center). Taylor Washington, (below, right) a SNCC worker, is arrested while demonstrating. Registration workers (bottom, left) in Selma.



Negroes are now registered voters in the state of Mississippi, by far the largest number since the early days of Reconstruction.

My first contact with SNCC was somewhat dramatic. I was a counselor at a high school camp in southeast Missouri, the "Bootheel" area. While our camp was working to clear a drainage canal in this once swampy area near the Mississippi River, a small band of SNCC workers was trying to help integrate the public facilities in Cairo, Illinois ("public facilities" means swimming pools, restrooms, restaurants, theaters, and other establishments usually considered

open to the "public"). Only 40 miles of concrete highway, plus a few miles of county road, separated us. Students working for SNCC, as well as high school students from Cairo, had visited us twice, to relax and to hash over their activities. This particular day we were looking forward to another visit from two of the SNCC workers—James Peake, a white paraplegic who was majoring in English at Southern Illinois University in Carbondale (where I had first met him), some 50 miles north of Cairo, and Charles Dunlap, a large, stockily-built Negro who was a SNCC field worker.

A free-lance writer (below, left) being beaten in McComb, Miss. Rev. Ed King and Dr. Aaron Henry (below, right) at a Freedom rally in Jackson, Miss. SNCC workers (bottom, left) singing at the rally. A student (bottom, right) after an Alabama beating.



Not much had happened during their first two visits, but now there had been rumors of impending violence from whites in the community. We decided to phone the SNCC people and tell them to call off their pleasure trip.

I lifted the phone receiver and gave the operator the number. Then I heard a series of tiny clicks as other receivers on the line were raised, and the tight, faint breathing of people listening, waiting to hear what we were going to do. I started to sweat but there was nothing for them to hear—there was no answer in Cairo.

I called every hour all morning. Still no answer. Afternoon came and I placed my call more often. Then I started phoning other numbers in Cairo—the church where SNCC met, the minister's home, the home of the local SNCC leader. No answer anywhere. The other campers and I thought of as many local people as possible who were active in the movement and tried to call them. Most of them didn't have telephones.

It was getting late. I was afraid that Peake and Dunlap had already left and were driving along US 60 toward our camp—and toward certain violence. I hung up the phone and told Steve, one of the campers, to wait in his car up at the highway, that Debby, another camper, and I would try to catch them. We pulled out of the small community we were staying in and drove down the dusty, dirt road to the narrow, black-topped county road, and then to the smooth concrete of the highway, shimmering in the sun. Steve parked his car at the intersection and waited. Debby and I drove east, toward the Mississippi. Fifteen minutes out, we saw a huge, black DeSoto driving toward us. It was Peake and Dunlap in the car that racists near our camp had dubbed the "nigger car." I hit my brakes and horn and struck my arm out the window to wave at them. They pulled off the road and we turned around and parked behind them. I ran over and explained what had happened and how we tried to reach them by phone. Peake and Dunlap suddenly looked very sober and a little later we found out why.

We decided that all four of us would head back east, stopping somewhere along the way to have coffee and talk. A simple enough idea—but not a simple thing to do. You can travel 275 miles along US 60 between Cairo and Springfield, Missouri, and not run across a single restaurant that will serve Negroes. We finally turned off onto a county road which led through small towns, hoping to find a Negro community and a restaurant where we could all sit down for a cup of coffee.

Suddenly Dunlap honked his horn and the DeSoto pulled up alongside us. Peake leaned out. "Follow us!"

The black DeSoto shot past us and in the rear view mirror I could see the reason why the SNCC workers had looked grim a moment before. A light blue pick-up truck was following us, the same truck I had seen a number of times around our camp. Usually there had been only the driver in it; now four or five men were crammed in the cab. Beatings, of course, are one thing. A shotgun blast in your car window is another.

A Negro community suddenly was no longer a place where we could simply have coffee together—it was an island of safety. I remember one time when I was in Fayette County, Tennessee. Whites were stopping Negroes on the highway and shooting into their homes—except on the back roads where small Negro communities were located. Racists wouldn't venture there; they would be deep in "enemy" territory.

We came to one small town and circled through it. No Negroes—only whites shuffling along the dirt roads or sitting on front porches.

We left the town and raced further north. The truck was still chasing us, easily visible on the straight, flat road which cut through fields of corn and beans and cotton. I had to admit it was a picturesque chase. White puffs of cotton bolls scattered along the road would be caught in the wind from our passing cars and tossed about in the air. Every half mile or so we passed tenant farmer shacks, unpainted one and two-room frame buildings, holes and cracks covered with fragments of siding and rusty tin signs, the command to drink this or drink that cola still faintly visible. We roared past an old, beat-up truck parked by the road, the paint long worn off its square body. Negroes were sitting along the ditch, caps and handkerchiefs on their heads to protect them from the hot sun, empty cloth sacks (the badge of the cotton picker) laying on the ground next to them.

Another truck of day workers was bouncing along in front of us and we zoomed around them, swerved around a curve, and then turned off on a dirt cross road. We followed it a way, then found ourselves back on the highway just outside a fair-sized town.

The truck was gone.

We parked on a side street and talked briefly, then Peake and Dunlap headed on to Cairo and we turned around and went back to camp. I felt like I had been playing the lead in "Perils of Pauline" and had just managed to make it over to the start of the next installment. Nothing had happened, after all.

BUT IT DOESN'T always end so fortunately. The chase sequence—only with a beating or a shooting as the climax—has been played again and again since SNCC

began four years ago, an out-growth of the sit-in movement.

The sit-ins had erupted across the South early in 1960, and that Easter a meeting of the leaders was held in Raleigh, North Carolina. A temporary committee to serve as liaison between different protest groups was set up with an office in Atlanta. A second conference was held in Atlanta in October, and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee was formally organized. One representative from each Southern state and the District of Columbia made up SNCC.

Among the original members of SNCC was 25-year-old Charles McDew who was majoring in sociology at South Carolina State College at the time. McDew, a short, heavily muscled, rapid-talker type is still working for his BS in sociology—now at Roosevelt University in Chicago. His account of the early days of SNCC emphasizes the practical.

"At the start," he explains, "we only had one man, Ed King, in Atlanta. But we knew what we wanted to do. We wanted to build community movements to attack problems by having guys go into the community to live and work. We also wanted to get more white students from southern colleges involved. We wanted to have a Negro and a white travel together—the Negro would talk to Negro students and the white would talk to white students who were concerned. White participation was good. There was Bob Zellner from Huntingdon College in Montgomery, Alabama, and he brought some friends. Then there were some from the University of Alabama and a few from Loyola in New Orleans.

"Bob was a typical Southern white student. He was doing a paper on Negroes for a sociology course. He read a lot in books and then went into the Negro community. He went to some meetings of the Montgomery movement—the authorities found out and he was threatened with expulsion. After this, he had to consider that he wasn't free, either—and he got concerned. He spent two years with SNCC and now he's at Brandeis University."

McDew grew thoughtful now and the words slowed down. "We also wanted to get people more actively involved in politics—get them to register to vote. But there was a lot of fear. A man would explain to us: 'I don't want my daughter whipped. I don't want my son castrated. I don't want to die.'

"No one who came down from the North was going to be able to get them to register. Some one was going to have to go and live with them first. It was then we realized we had to give our bodies to SNCC."

McDew shrugged. "Intellectual com-
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mitment is fine, but your body's got to be on the line. So we dropped out of school. The five of us were getting forty dollars a week. We needed more staff so we cut the salary in half and doubled the staff. We did that again to get more staff till we were getting \$10 a week each. I figure as long as you can survive, you don't need anything else.

"I worked out of the Atlanta office, traveling around as sort of a general field supervisor, and also raising funds and spreading the word."

McDew did a fairly good job of spreading the word. From the original twenty students, SNCC has grown till it now has 150 former students working full-time all year round, all of them receiving only subsistence pay, when they get paid at all. (The present Executive Secretary of SNCC is a former Chicago grade school teacher named Jim Forman. In Chicago, Forman and his wife had a combined income of a thousand dollars a month. As Executive Secretary of SNCC, he's paid \$60 a week.) Last summer, when vacationing students temporarily joined the ranks, there were 200 working with SNCC in 13 Southern and border states. This summer several times that number are expected. Most of them will work in voter registration programs, community centers, and "Freedom Schools" in Mississippi. They will be assisted by hundreds of adults in the professions—doctors, nurses, teachers, and so on.

One thing is for certain: working for SNCC will be exhausting—and dangerous. SNCC has dozens of small offices scattered across the South. It may be a room in a Negro family's home where a lone SNCC field worker lives, or a small house which several SNCC workers share and where local leaders can always be found, sitting and talking and planning in the front room or manning an old, dilapidated mimeograph machine.

But while on the inside, there may be talk, on the outside, there will be trouble.

At 1 P.M. on February 28th of last year, Randolph T. Blackwell, Director of the Voter Education Project, drove up to the SNCC office in Greenwood, Mississippi. He noticed three whites sitting in a car without plates parked nearby. When Blackwell left at 9:15, they were still there. Blackwell noted this with dismay. As he drove away, the car pulled out behind him. Blackwell thought better of it and returned to the office for reinforcements, picking up SNCC workers James Travis and Bob Moses. They stopped to eat sandwiches and get gas at a gas station.

When they left the station and drove toward the main highway, they were followed by the unmarked car. When traffic thinned out, the car behind them suddenly shot forward and pulled alongside. One of the whites shoved a gun out an open window. Seven shots rang out and the car sped away.

The bullets smashed all the front windows and the rear window of the car. One of the bullets hit Travis in the neck, near the spine. He recovered, but the SNCC office itself was later burned down.

"At night," claims McDew, "you have to stop and think where's the best place to sleep—someplace where a bullet or a bomb won't hit you."

VIOLENCE sometimes sneaks up on you, as harassment. The friendly cop who cheerfully gives directions to motorists and helps little old ladies across the street is usually neither cheerful nor friendly with SNCC workers. If a SNCC worker owns a car, he'll be ticketed a dozen times a day—for speeding, loud mufflers, faulty headlights, you name it. Or he may be taken to jail, fingerprinted, questioned, and eventually turned loose. No charges. If he's actually thrown in the lockup overnight, then it might get a little rugged. Other prisoners may be prodded by their keepers to beat up on the workers, a variation of the situation where the local peacekeepers do not lay a finger on SNCC workers themselves but will pay a quick visit to a nearby bar and sic some easily-inflamed redneck onto the "niggah lovah."

In SNCC's work, violence is not a sometime thing but almost a way of life.

Jack Heyman, a thin, black-haired student from Penn State tells of taking off a quarter to work with SNCC and hitch-hiking to Atlanta from his home in New Jersey. He stopped off in North Carolina where sit-ins were going on in Chapel Hill, home of the state university. "In one place the waitress lifted her skirt and urinated on the demonstrators. Another time in North Carolina, I got picked up by two guys in a car. They looked at me and said, 'If there's one thing we hate more than niggers, it's integrationists.' And there we were—driving over back country roads. I was really scared." Nothing happened—only because they never found out who he was.

I met and talked to Jack the day after a demonstration. "I was scared as hell last night," he told me. "I was part of the first wave in a sit-in. We were supposed to see to it that the other group got in. But they locked the door and wouldn't let them in. Then the waitress pulled out a knife"—he held out his hands in front of him, about 15 inches apart—"this big, a butcher knife.

I'd never seen a blade like that before, it was huge. She threatened to slit any 'nigger or nigger-lovers' throat.' And she meant it, too. She would've used that knife."

Larry Rubin, like Jack Heyman, also came face to face with violence while hitch-hiking. Rubin, a student from Antioch College in Yellow Springs, Ohio, spent some time in southwest Georgia, working with SNCC in the four-county area around Albany. He had meant to work for only one quarter, then got a special extension from the college and stayed for two.

"I was hitchhiking into town," he said, smiling (he can smile about it now), "and got a lift from some guy in a pick-up truck. All the while we were riding along he kept telling me how he hated these racial agitators who were stirring up all this trouble. He said if he ever caught one he'd slash 'im up and showed me this large knife he carried in his pocket. 'I'm ready for 'im if I ever meet one,' he told me. I just kept nodding my head and waiting for that ride to end."

"Finally we got into town and I saw two of the other SNCC workers in the area walking down the street. He saw them, too. 'There's two of 'em now,' he told me, and started playing with that knife in his hand. 'Let's you and I get 'em.'"

"I told him to do what he wanted, but to count me out. I kept hoping that those two wouldn't see me and wave or something. That would've been it. So I looked around the inside of that truck for some way to hide my face. Finally I pulled out a road map, unfolded it, and held it up so they couldn't see me. I got out of that one okay."

WHEN THE SIT-IN movement began in the South, the violence that SNCC workers had to face came from the white mobs. But now, since voter registration has become a major goal of the movement and the basic Southern political structure is threatened, the police themselves frequently take a hand in the violence—often while Justice Department and FBI officials watch (as in Birmingham, does it get publicity).

Last fall, in Selma, Alabama, SNCC held a "Freedom Day," a day of intensive voter registration activity. When SNCC workers "Chico" Neblett and Alvery Williams tried to bring sandwiches to a line of Negroes at the courthouse who were trying to register, state troopers attacked them with clubs and cattle prods and then arrested them. The FBI watched, Justice Department officials stood by, largely indifferent.

Howard Zinn, former Chairman of the History Department at Spelman Col-
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lege in Atlanta, commented: "Through all that happened on that Monday, while Federal law was broken again and again, these law enforcement officials of the Federal Government stood by and watched. By the time 'Freedom Day' was over in Selma, the Constitution had been violated in a number of its provisions, several statutes of the U. S. Congress had been ignored, the Civil Rights Acts of 1957 and 1960 had been turned face down on the sidewalk. For all the good the Federal officials did, George Wallace might as well have been President of the United States."

SNCC itself takes a pretty gloomy view of the FBI in general. Julian Bond, Communications Director of SNCC, smiles somewhat wryly when he discusses the FBI man in Greenwood, Mississippi, who resigned from the FBI to run for county prosecutor—and won. "Now, to get elected in Greenwood, what kind of political views do you think he had?" FBI men down South, for the most part, are Southerners, since they usually have to cooperate with local law enforcement agencies. Under such circumstances will the FBI men involved put the law above local loyalties? It's a good question.

The Feds not only stand by and watch (the FBI maintains it's an information gathering agency only and not able to make arrests—which should surprise some of the inmates of Leavenworth and other such spas), in SNCC's eyes sometimes they're even on the other side. Recently, a Federal grand jury returned an indictment against eight Negroes and one white girl charged with conspiring to injure a Federal juror. The juror was a white man who had been on a jury which failed to convict another white man accused of shooting a Negro. Subsequently the juror's grocery store was picketed during a general boycott against all stores in the area which had discriminatory policies. A short time later the juror closed down his grocery and complained to the Justice Department that Negro leaders in the community had held a meeting and decided to boycott his store because of his previous jury activity. Eight of the accused were convicted (a mistrial was declared in the case of the ninth) and sentenced to jail terms running as high as five years. The case is now under appeal. (The accused thoughtfully sought a change of venue to Westchester County, New York, but they were turned down).

It's interesting to note that 35 FBI men were assigned to this case to smoke out the possible injustice done to one white man's civil rights (at the same time, only 30 FBI were assigned to what

J. Edgar Hoover termed the FBI's most serious case—the Jacksonville, Florida, railroad bombings). It's also interesting to note that one of the judges in the case, Judge Robert Elliott, was among the first judges appointed by the late President Kennedy. All judges, incidentally, are nominated by the Senate Judiciary Committee, chairmanned by Mississippi's Eastland.

In another case, a Southern Federal judge, hearing a case against a white voting registrar, referred to the complaining Negroes as a "bunch of niggers," "a dark cloud on the horizon" and said they were "acting like a bunch of chimpanzees."

Did President Kennedy play politics with integration? "Of course he did," retorts Julian Bond. "In my opinion this action was brought by the Kennedy people to convince the people of the South that they weren't as bad as they appeared to be." And what does he expect of the Johnson Administration? "Hopefully, the Johnson Administration might be better. He's a Southerner, but an educated and enlightened one. So far, he's been neither better nor worse."

Always short on funds (SNCC lives on donations and the fund raising activities of performers such as Dick Gregory, Joan Baez, Pete Seeger, and others) and workers, SNCC is nevertheless winning its war on more fronts than one. Not only has it helped open up lunch counters, restaurants, and other facilities to Negroes, and gotten tens of thousands of Negroes registered and trying to vote, the committee has also created local leadership. "It's not like it used to be," McDew explains confidently. "Before, the racists could kill a leader and that would end the civil rights movement in a community. But now, no matter what happens, there's always someone to take over."

The committee has encouraged, educated, and trained Negroes within the community. As a result, local community service and civil rights organizations have sprung up and qualified Negroes are beginning to run for political office—an occurrence that would have been unthinkable two years ago and is still hard to believe. Negroes are currently running for Federal Representative from all five of Mississippi's congressional districts and a sixth Negro is running for senator against John Stennis. In Selma, Alabama, home of Alabama's White Citizen's Council, a Negro woman is running for representative. Their chances for victory are slim, but the candidacies will strengthen and encourage Negro communities and may lead to new activities. This was what happened in McComb, the first city in Mississippi in which SNCC worked.

McComb is about 60 miles northeast of Baton Rouge and 90 miles north of

New Orleans. It's part of an area where, the first months of this year, half a dozen Negro stores and homes were shot up, several Negroes killed, and dozens of crosses burned. My first visit there didn't last more than an hour. The police chief "suggested" I leave and saw to it that I did.

"In McComb, two Negroes were registered in 1892 and one was supposed to have been registered in 1950," McDew remarks.

"We took one Negro down to the registrar's office to register. The registrar refused to register him and told him to leave. When he turned to go, the registrar clubbed him several times over the head with the butt of a gun. So the guy went down to the sheriff's office to file a complaint. But the sheriff met him halfway there and arrested him, charging him with a breach of the peace and inciting to riot. The sheriff's argument was that if the guy had never taken his black body into the office, he wouldn't have incited the registrar's passions.

"This was one of the first cases where the Justice Department moved in and filed an injunction. That was in 1962." Unfortunately, it didn't change things.

McComb, however, was the most satisfying experience McDew had.

"When the administration wouldn't let Brenda Travis back in high school because of her civil rights activities, over 100 students walked out in protest. Out of these students, we got ten to fifteen who became really active in voter registration. The people who led the Jackson, Mississippi, project before Medgar Evers was murdered, were from McComb. So were those who helped in Gadsden, Alabama, and Albany, Ga."

It's obvious, by now, that it takes a pretty durable and strong personality to become a worker for SNCC. Just what types become interested in SNCC? McDew has a ready answer.

"All these students are generally outside of society's value structure. They're not concerned with making lots of money, building a big home, and living in Winnetka or Westchester. They're concerned with human dignity. Many are of the type who have been going with the Peace Corps—but they feel there's a job to do here first.

"These students know you can't just espouse a liberal line and pay your dues that way. It takes more than lip service.

"Too many students have been living in Plato's cave. They've only been seeing shadows and think that's the world. Once they get out and find out what the world is like, they can never return to the world of shadows."

And because of these students' work with SNCC, ten million Negroes in the South can never return to their old world of shadows, either.