

THE
EYES
ON THE
PRIZE

CIVIL RIGHTS READER

DOCUMENTS, SPEECHES, AND
FIRSTHAND ACCOUNTS FROM
THE BLACK FREEDOM STRUGGLE,
1954-1990

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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.