

WAVELAND, MISSISSIPPI, NOVEMBER 1964:
DEATH OF SNCC, BIRTH OF RADICALISM

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Abstract:

The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC, pronounced Snick) was a nonviolent direct action organization that participated in the civil rights movement in the 1960s. After the Freedom Summer, where hundreds of northern volunteers came to participate in voter registration drives among rural blacks, SNCC underwent internal upheaval. The upheaval was centered on the future direction of SNCC. Several staff meetings occurred in the fall of 1964, none more important than the staff retreat in Waveland, Mississippi, in November. Thirty-seven position papers were written before the retreat in order to reflect upon the question of future direction of the organization; however, along with answers about the future direction, these papers also outlined and foreshadowed future trends in radical thought. Most specifically, these trends include race relations within SNCC, which resulted in the emergence of black self-consciousness and an exodus of hundreds of white activists from SNCC.

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Historiography

Research can both answer questions and create them. Initially I discovered SNCC through Taylor Branch's epic volumes on the Civil Right Movements in the 1960s. Further reading revealed the role of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC, pronounced Snick) in the Civil Right Movement and opened the doors into an effective and controversial organization. The confusing shift from SNCC's peaceful roots of nonviolent direct action to its fiery conclusion and its involvement with Black Power quickly became the basis of my general research. SNCC's involvement in the sit-ins and the marches, including the famous one on Washington in March of 1963, are only a small chapter in the identity of this group. The leadership of SNCC of that time did not seem to have a firm grasp on why the shift occurred even until this day. Therefore, I intend to use my subsequent time to try to explain what happened in the fall of 1964 that made SNCC turn in the direction of Black Power and its impact on radicalism on the 1960s.

There are certain statements that are so profound and insightful that they are capable to stimulate one's enthusiasm in regards to a specific topic. Months ago, I encountered a sentence in Clayborne Carson's book entitled, *In Struggle: SNCC and the Black Awakening of the 1960s* that made me believe that this topic was vastly under-appreciated. "Although providing no solutions to SNCC's dilemmas, the [Waveland Papers] suggested the general outlines of the subsequent development of American radicalism in the 1960s."¹ It blew me away; I wondered

¹ Clayborne Carson, *In Struggle: SNCC and the Black Awakening of the 1960s* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981), 141.

how an event so important in the grand scheme of the 1960s, arguably the most dynamic decade in American history, could remain virtually unknown by society. As I conducted research I discovered that SNCC held a staff retreat in Waveland, Mississippi in the fall of 1964 which shook SNCC changed its positions and racial mix up. As a result of discovering, the SNCC Waveland Retreat, and the thirty seven position papers presented there in the fall of 1964, it became the focus of my research.

I discovered relatively little has been written about SNCC compared with more mainstream Civil Rights Organizations and their individuals and the research that has been focused on SNCC either ignores the Waveland Retreat or mitigates its importance. The focus of the Waveland Retreat scholarship, Carson and Hogan specifically, has been on the structural debate or the beginnings of feminism that occurred there.² However the more importantly was the racial relationship issue as seen in several Waveland position papers. Recently, several new sources shined a spotlight on SNCC's role in 1960s radicalism discourse, but very few on the Waveland retreat itself as a foundation for radical thought. The utmost authority on SNCC history is Clayborne Carson's, *In Struggle: SNCC and the Black Awakening of the 1960s*, which has become a constant reference among later sources in the field and even within the memoirs of SNCC members. In 2007, Wesley Hogan added to the historic dialogue with his book, *Many Minds, One Heart: SNCC's Dream for a New America*, by agreeing with Carson about the importance of the Waveland Retreat in the broader historical context of the 1960s.³

² Further explained in later chapter.

³ Wesley C. Hogan, *Many Minds, One Heart: SNCC's dream for a New America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007).

In my eyes, some sources did not give enough attention to the Waveland Retreat in terms of its importance in the foundation of 1960s radical ideas. This was due to two reasons: the monographs were either written too shortly after the Waveland retreat and the completion of the radical phase of the 1960s, or second, because the author did not find enough evidence from the Waveland retreat to make such a claim. The reason for Waveland's complete absence in some sources was because at the time, SNCC itself did not realize how momentous the Waveland retreat really was. This is evident in SNCC advisor Howard Zinn's book, *The New Abolitionists*. Zinn failed to reference it at all in his 1965 book. The position papers, discussions, and workshops at this event in the fall of 1964 not only changed the Civil Rights Movement, but also American social history. Historians, such as Doug McAdam, have speculated that the current landscape of America would differ if SNCC had not pushed whites out of the movement. He writes, "How different the New Left and the 1960s might have looked had SNCC been in a position to use the momentum of the Summer Project to expand its already strong links to Northern colleges and universities. Instead, their exclusion from SNCC and the civil rights movement forced students to search elsewhere for activist alternatives. The eventual 'shape' of the New Left would owe much to this process."⁴

By examining the background of SNCC including its origin and subsequent events leading up to the crucial Waveland retreat, I can study the potential causes of the ideas within the position papers. By highlighting the Waveland Retreat Position Papers as the beginning of radical thoughts of the 1960s, specifically the papers that introduce the notion of race relations within SNCC, I can examine the extent of their impact and effect on resulting events. I assert

⁴Doug McAdam, *Freedom Summer* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 126.

that it is the beginning of radical thought because the whites who ultimately left SNCC after the racially charged Waveland Retreat used skills that they learned and honed in SNCC, especially the Freedom Summer, to lead and influence other movements such as student activism, anti-war protests, labor movements, and economic relief programs. The implications in the broad scope of SNCC, Black Power, and the 1960s will be made obvious. Additionally, the position papers written for the Waveland retreat deserve to be reexamined and be seen as critically important documents of the 1960s and American History. The Waveland Retreat and the movement of whites out of SNCC symbolized the death of SNCC because as a result SNCC lost some of its ideological cohesion and it lost the national spotlight thus becoming less effective as a civil rights organization.

Introduction to Civil Rights and SNCC

Prior to the Civil Rights movement, the United States was in an age of paternalistic consensus in which people were not allowed to challenge the status quo and were expected to accept their roles. As people began to reject this notion, it caused one of the most turbulent times in American History—the 1960s. One of the first accepted notions to be questioned on a large scale was the treatment of blacks. The resulting challenge and ensuing civil rights movement helped to jump start other social movements within American society.

The civil rights movement of the sixties has been explored and investigated in a great number of studies, although many of the questions raised during the sixties have not been answered. The civil rights movement was a starting point for many reform-minded individuals, similar to the abolitionist movement and the resulting reforms of the mid 19th century such as education, women's rights, prison reform, and the temperance movement. The ideas present in the Civil Rights movement spurred change in other areas as well, providing inspiration for ideas such as Pan-Africanism, Women's Liberation, and Vietnam War protests.

In December of 1955, Rosa Parks' refusal to give up her seat on the bus to a white man spurred the year long Montgomery Bus Boycott in Alabama which proved to be the first major victory in the Civil Rights movement and vaulted Martin Luther King Jr. into the national spotlight. A few months after the Montgomery buses were desegregated, Martin Luther King Jr., along with other veterans from the bus boycott, gathered in Atlanta to form the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC). SCLC was committed to using nonviolence to gain

equal rights for African-Americans. SCLC, along with the already established NAACP, became the most publicized civil right organizations. Martin Luther King's ability to articulate the sentiments of the African American community allowed him to become the figurehead of the movement, and as a result he gathered substantial notoriety both at home and abroad.

During the emergence of the Civil Rights movement in the United States, one organization stood apart from the others because its style, approach, and membership were in contrast to the typical civil rights mold. SNCC was founded as a student group that protested segregation and advocated for the desegregation of public places through a direct nonviolent method. SNCC only lasted a short ten years; however, SNCC always seemed to challenge its own identity and direction, resulting in it being an outlet for radical ideas for its members. In its limited existence, SNCC went through three distinct and profound phases. The first was the direct action nonviolence approach which lasted from the organizations beginnings in 1960 until 1962. The second was the voter registration phase which lasted from 1962 until the fall of 1964. Lastly, the third was the Black Nationalist phase which lasted from 1965 until its end in the 1970s.

The style of SNCC made them original. Its members made situations tense by not backing down in the face of adversity. They were not afraid to die for the cause in which they believed. One was not considered a full member unless he or she had spent a night in jail. From its meek beginnings, the configuration of the SNCC was very humble. It utilized grassroots programming and recruiting. Unlike most civil rights organizations, SNCC worked within rural black communities to teach the average rural black citizen the possibilities if his or her voice was heard. Quite frankly, SNCC was a free mix of young people who shared an unquenchable

and fierce passion for racial justice. SNCC became known as an organization where idealistic young people could have a “unique outlet for expressing their resentment of racial injustice.”⁵

The first phase started when SNCC was formed in April, 1960. The Southern Christian Leadership Conference, SCLC, held a conference from April 16-18, 1960 in Raleigh, North Carolina. Ella Baker, a civil rights veteran and executive director of SCLC, called for the formation of a student-based organization that would change sit-in and desegregation protests into a “broad and sustained movement.”⁶ In a letter she sent to local protest groups, she explained that the reason for the meeting of the students was to achieve, “a more unified sense of direction for training and action in Nonviolent Resistance.”⁷ Over 200 people heeded this call; of those, over 160 were students who came from fifty-eight different groups in twelve states. From the beginning of the conference, nonviolence was the major theme; workshops and discussions were centered on its theory and practice. Although founded at a SCLC conference, the students voted to create a temporary organization that was independent of SCLC. The autonomy for other civil rights groups led by adults impacted the mood and atmosphere of SNCC from the beginning.⁸ At the first official meeting held in May of 1960, a philosophy statement was adopted. It stated that SNCC was committed to nonviolence in order to achieve a new social order.⁹

The first method of nonviolent direct action was the sit-in. A sit-in was when a person would non-violently occupy a public place in order to send a message of protest. At this point in SNCC’s development, it was still a loose collection of individuals who saw SNCC as “merely a

⁵ Carson, 1.

⁶ Ibid., 19.

⁷ As cited in Carson, 20.

⁸ Howard Zinn, *SNCC: The New Abolitionists*. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1965), 34.

⁹ Ibid.

clearinghouse for the exchange of information about localized protest movements.”¹⁰ The desegregation of public places though the method of sit-ins were a start; although, numbers were down since the organization’s conception in the spring of 1960. However, by the end of 1960 and early 1961, SNCC had gained strength by improving their membership numbers and for the first time presented a unified front.

In the late spring of 1961, SNCC members joined the CORE sponsored freedom ride.¹¹ The SNCC freedom riders, who included John Lewis, the man who would later become the SNCC chairman, and Hank Thomas, started in Washington DC and rode public buses through the Deep South in order to battle against racial segregation. Along the way they were met with violence, which at first took the form of resistance such as minor assault and trespassing. However, as the riders moved farther into the Deep South, the buses were attacked by mobs that broke windows, slashed tires and severely beat black occupants. The original freedom ride ended in Birmingham because no bus driver could be found to take the riders to Montgomery. As a result of this violence, CORE stopped the freedom ride; however, other individual student activists rose to the opportunity. These violent actions caused the federal government to get involved in the situation. Unlike the sit-in movements which were numerically larger than the limited number of freedom riders; the freedom riders had an unarguably more profound effect on society, thus giving SNCC members a vivid example of direct action that they could model.

In June of 1961, civil rights leaders met with the United States Attorney General, Robert F. Kennedy, who asked them if they would turn their focus and energy towards voter

¹⁰ Carson, 27.

¹¹ CORE was a Civil Right Organization in the 1960s. CORE worked along side with SNCC. In the early days of the organization CORE pushed for desegregation of public transportation. In the mid 1960s CORE also did Voter Registration Drives in the South.

registration. Some in SNCC saw this request as an abandonment of direct action tactics that had proved very effective. They felt that the national government was “anxious to channel students into a form of activism less disruptive than the recent freedom rides and eager to register democratic voters”¹² Yet others saw voter registration as an opportunity to awake the immense black voter base. SNCC agreed to shift its focus towards the registration of black voters and began its second phase.

By end of the summer Bob Moses, who later become a legendary SNCC member, started a voter registration project in McComb, Mississippi. He attempted to “train black McComb residents to take Mississippi’s literacy test for voters.”¹³ After only a few months in McComb, Moses and others experienced the same type of violence and intimidation that the freedom riders experienced. Moses, along with several others, was jailed for four months in the end of 1961, which resulted in the momentary stoppage of registration attempts in McComb. During the first several years of SNCC’s existence it changed to an organization where ideas and policies were created by individual field staff members rather than a central location.¹⁴

Over the next two years (1962-1963), SNCC continued to sponsor voter registration drives in communities across the Deep South such as Albany, Georgia, and Greenwood, Mississippi. Spending the summers in these places allowed SNCC workers to get to know the rural blacks. By working so closely with those individuals, “[SNCC workers] learned what issues

¹² Francesca Polletta, “The Structural Contest of Novel Rights Claims: Southern Civil Right Organizing, 1961-1966,” *Journal of Law and Society Review* 34, (2000): 383.

¹³ Carson, 46.

¹⁴ Carson, 50.

animated local people”¹⁵ However, without national attention to the plight of those people, nothing would be done. In the summer of 1963, Bob Moses with others came up with the idea of a Freedom Vote in which blacks who were fearful of white violence at the polls could let their voice be heard through their own ballot. The Freedom Vote was designed to show outsiders that, “rural southern blacks were in no way satisfied with their condition.”¹⁶ The success of this Freedom Vote encouraged SNCC to try this state-wide in Mississippi during the next summer, 1964. SNCC named their newest and largest project to date the Mississippi Summer Project, later re-named Freedom Summer. Freedom Summer would include voter registration activities, as well as freedom schools, which were places to educate black children to become activists of change.

In preparation for the Mississippi Freedom Summer, SNCC hosted two training sessions for new volunteers at Western College for Women in Oxford, Ohio, which started on June 13th. The first session was for volunteers who would work on voter registration; the second session was for people who teach at the freedom schools. Most of the new volunteers were college students, who were screened by SNCC to ensure that they were fully committed to the movements and its ideals. The volunteers also had to be affluent because they had to provide their own transportation and bond money if they went to jail. These college students were mostly white and had worked on civil rights campaigns in the north. “They’re from good schools and their parents are influential. The interest of the country is awakened, and when that happens, the Government responds to that interest.”¹⁷

¹⁵Hogan, 86.

¹⁶Hogan, 145.

¹⁷From Bill Hodes memo, “to Folks” June 16, 1964 as cited in Carson, 112.

SNCC was very optimistic about the success of the Freedom Summer. While optimistic, some experienced black Mississippians were leery about working with relatively inexperienced, educated, rich, white, and urban students. As a result of this optimism, SNCC focused the vast majority of its resources in the Mississippi Freedom Summer. At these training sessions, new volunteers quickly had to look at themselves in the mirror and determine if they were even aware of their predetermined prejudices. In other words, did they and could they refuse to accept what white society had been telling them about blacks, because those deep-seeded attitudes would have killed the Freedom Summer. Even as the summer began, radical tensions were an obvious issue for the volunteers as the trust that had been present in the SNCC ranks began to break down. Although racial tensions were present among SNCC members, no one would know to the extent of these racial reservations until the Waveland Retreat.

On June 21, 1964, three recently trained civil rights workers were killed in Meridian, Mississippi; they were, Andrew Goodman, Michael Schwerner, who were white New Yorkers, and James Chaney, a local black civil rights activist. This was just a few days after SNCC had loaded volunteers from the first session in Oxford, Ohio onto buses headed for Mississippi. Since two of the killed civil rights workers were white, the response from the federal government was immediate. However the response was misdirected, because the vast majority of the federal marshals and FBI that were sent were used to find the bodies while a very few were used to protect the civil rights workers.¹⁸ The event attracted national attention for the Freedom Summer although this was not the way SNCC wanted to receive the attention.

¹⁸ Hogan, 163.

One of the major goals of the Freedom Summer was to give black Mississippians the skills to be involved in the democratic process. SNCC used the slogan, 'One Man, One Vote' to embody their stance on this matter. Rules of conduct were placed on the volunteers in terms of logistics and behavior as well as what jobs they could do. The volunteers lived within the black community, staying with black families who would provide them shelter, food and protection at risk of white violence. The close personal interaction between these community members and the volunteers helped foster growth and laid a positive foundation for the Freedom Summer as it had in earlier registration efforts throughout the South.

SNCC workers tried to convince blacks to participate in voter registration drives. Workers would go from house to house and persuade them to make their voices heard. The result however was that out of 17,000 blacks who tried to register at their county's courthouse only 1600 were allowed to register.¹⁹ Therefore because of this discrimination another Freedom Vote occurred just like it had the year before. The Freedom Vote included a slate of integrated candidates and tickets which featured the newly formed Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party. The Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party, better known as MFDP, was created to challenge the established segregationist Democratic Party in Mississippi as well to seat black delegates at the 1964 Democratic National Convention. The Democratic Party in Mississippi, which only sent whites as their delegates, was supposed to speak for the entire state's Democratic voters at the National Convention. As a result of the Freedom Summer and SNCC, the issue of segregation violence was kept in the news for the entire summer.

¹⁹ Carson, 117.

The Freedom Schools, the other aspect of the Freedom Summer, were widely successful. They attracted twice as many students as originally predicted. The schools were innovative and provided students with an outlet to express ideas. In traditional Mississippi schools black students were instructed to agree with what the teachers said and thought. The Freedom Schools wanted young blacks to think on their own, and therefore provided them with a safe environment to articulate what they thought or believed. By the end of the summer, the students were able to communicate self-confidence through the conveyance of political messages such as a resolution to ask the federal government to enforce the Civil Rights Act of 1964 among other things. Freedom Schools were congruent with what the SNCC was trying to accomplish in Mississippi; they wanted to replace existing institutions with ones that would include blacks and would allow for more participation.²⁰

The MFDP felt that since blacks were denied the right to vote by the Democratic Party in Mississippi that the all white delegations did not accurately represent the state's democratic voters which was the reason for their attempt to be seated in place of the 'regular delegation' at the Democratic National Convention in Atlantic City, New Jersey. Strongly supported by SNCC, the MFDP met resistance to this proposal once they got to Atlantic City. The Johnson administration offered compromises to the MFDP delegation including two 'at-large' seats while all the other MFDP delegates would be 'guests' of the convention, and "the convention in 1968 would bar any state delegation that discriminated against blacks."²¹ Although high level democrats such as Hubert Humphrey and other civil rights leaders such as Martin Luther King Jr. and Bayard Rustin advised them to take the compromise, SNCC and MFDP refused.

²⁰ Carson, 119-121.

²¹ Carson, 125.

Consequently SNCC workers questioned how successful the entire Freedom Summer was since a major tenant in their plan had seemingly failed.

Seeing the disappointment of the Atlantic City experience, civil rights veteran and SNCC supporter Harry Belafonte invited the SNCC leadership on a tour of Africa. This trip was a nice break for SNCC to enjoy after a grueling Freedom Summer as well as an opportunity to see young black leaders of the newly independent African countries. The trip began on September 11th, 1964 and included most of the top SNCC officials. While in Africa SNCC leaders attended meetings with African leaders which encouraged SNCC to establish connections with these leaders.²² What SNCC had witnessed in Africa showed them a glimpse of daily life in a country dominated by blacks, something that they had never seen before. Most of the original eleven SNCC travelers returned to the United States after thoroughly enjoying the experience in Africa, although executive secretary, James Forman said that it was, “a serious mistake.”²³ He felt that it was a serious mistake because of the internal arguments within the SNCC ranks that they had missed while in Africa.

The experience of the Freedom Summer persuaded over 80 volunteers to stay on in Mississippi and become permanent staff members; the volunteers were predominantly white.²⁴ SNCC Programming Director and acting leader Courtland Cox called a general staff meeting for October 10th, 1964 in Atlanta to discuss SNCC’s, “racial composition...decision-making structure and future direction.”²⁵ Most of the travelers had returned by this time including James Forman and Bob Moses. These two men took the staff meeting as an opportunity to introduce

²² Carson, 135.

²³ James Forman, *The Making of Black Revolutionaries*, (New York: Macmillan, 1972), 427.

²⁴ Carson, 137.

²⁵ Ibid.

the Black Belt Project, which aimed at using the same tactics for voter registration that SNCC did in Mississippi but on a larger scale throughout the Deep South. However the meeting took “a disastrous turn” when Frank Smith, argued that the rest of the staffers were not involved in the development on the Black Belt project; Smith questioned where Forman and Moses’ power had come from.²⁶ This defeat of his proposal led Forman to believe that a centralized structure was necessary to accomplish goals and to have a functional operational system. Nothing dramatic was decided at the October meeting, which ended in a stalemate; therefore a staff retreat was set up in November at Gulfside Methodist Church in Waveland, Mississippi.

The goal for the Waveland retreat was to solve issues that were threatening to tear SNCC apart. John Lewis, upon his return to the United States in November from Africa, felt that “SNCC was shaking at its very roots, fragmenting and threatening to fall apart under its own weight.”²⁷ Issues about the internal structure of SNCC, the racial composition, and the future direction of SNCC were at the heart of the discussion. The retreat was planned for a week in order to reach deliberated decision on the direction, structure, and purpose of SNCC. Over 160 SNCC staff members were invited to write position papers before the retreat in order to have a chance to articulate their ideas and concerns autonomously if they wished; thirty-seven position papers were written.

²⁶ Forman, 417.

²⁷ John Lewis with Michael D’Orso, *Walking with the Wind: A Memoir of the Movement*, (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1998), 291.

Waveland Retreat

As SNCC members began to descend on Waveland, tensions rose among the 140 people that attended the retreat.²⁸ Exhausted from the pressure of the Freedom Summer, some SNCC members who were at Waveland simply, “lacked the energy to fight this internal battle” as noted by SNCC member Ruby Doris Smith.²⁹ Forman was the first to speak as he opened the retreat with a speech that argued his ideas that the only way to preserve the internal freedoms among the individual staff members was for SNCC to have a centralized structure.³⁰ This speech was met with the same reaction as the Black Belt Project was at the October meeting; some people were confused by Forman’s formal approach, while others questioned who had given Forman the right to preach to them. This reaction and subsequent discussion highlighted the how far SNCC had split, “and it was divided into many, many factions.”³¹

At the retreat there was a stalemate about the issue of structure and group organization. However several other issues were discussed and it is debatable whether true progress was made on those fronts either, because practically no issue reached a consensus. The discussion did however make everyone aware of the concerns of other SNCC members as well as amplify tensions among members. The position papers were not a central focus of the retreat; however, some did arouse intense debate. The most crucial topic mentioned in the papers that foreshadowed the rest of the Civil Rights Movement was race relationships within SNCC. Historian Nicolaus Mills wrote that the position papers showed, “skepticism towards

²⁸ Hogan, 198.

²⁹ Cynthia Griggs Fleming, *Soon We Will Not Cry: The Liberation of Ruby Doris Smith Robinson*. (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 1998), 149.

³⁰ Forman’s Speech as found in Hogan, Appendix E, 273.

³¹ John Lewis Interview as found in Stoper, 240.

black –white alliances and a turning away from outsiders that foreshadowed SNCC’s future.”³²

Several papers, such as ones written by both black and white members acknowledge the racial tensions and seem to predict the withdrawal and ultimately elimination of whites from the civil rights movement.

During the Freedom Summer, when SNCC had a big influx of whites come into their ranks, internal racial tensions began to creep into the membership’s minds. Near the end of the summer there were several cases of racially charged fights at SNCC field stations in Mississippi. Black field staff members had only experienced a white-dominated world and were still adjusting to working with whites who saw blacks as equals. Whites were in an equally tough situation. Having only experienced leadership roles over blacks they now had to act differently. By the fall of 1964 SNCC was questioning the nonverbal message that white field workers would be sending to rural blacks as they were helping during voter registration. The message was that even to register to vote blacks needed whites to guide them because they could not do it on their own. Although whites were not official kicked out of SNCC until 1966, it was after Waveland that many started to slowly leave. Scholars look to the position papers to see how this notion came about.

³² Nicolaus Mills, *Like a Holy Crusade: Mississippi 1964 - The Turning of Civil Rights Movement in America*, (Chicago: I.R. Dee, 1992), 170.

Position Papers – Racial Tensions³³

Before Waveland SNCC had an overall good opinion concerning whites because they attracted national attention and SNCC saw this as good. However through the experience at Atlantic City, SNCC clearly saw that the white political establishment was not ready to fully accept blacks. Therefore new political identities and black political structure needed to be developed in their minds. The Waveland Retreat Position Papers articulated a need to find a new identity in order for SNCC to maintain its impression as an idealistic organization, and confront the opinions of members concerning the role of white volunteers in future SNCC endeavors.

Silas Norman, a black program director, offered his opinion in a position paper in which he addressed the black-white issue.³⁴ He entitled his position paper, “What is the importance of racial considerations among the staff?” Norman admitted that whites gained “wider publicity and thus wider support” for the movement.³⁵ However Norman, who ran the project in Selma, Alabama, also noticed that besides the national attention, the whites in SNCC also attracted local violence. Some felt this violence negated progress that had been made. Local whites who saw black men and white women together saw it as a “declaration of war.”³⁶ As a result of these feelings Norman suggested that whites and blacks should “be used according to

³³ As found in Wesley Hogan, 364. “These documents are one of the few records of the retreat available to the public. All of the records are incomplete, highly abbreviated, and were never voted on by the staff as official minutes of the meeting; they were simply one person’s best shot at capturing events during the week-long retreat. Furthermore, no known public archive contains the entire body of position papers from Waveland, but most of them can be found in the Stewart Ewen and Mary King Papers at the Wisconsin Historical Society.”

³⁴ Hogan, 205.

³⁵ Silas Norman Position Paper, “What is the importance of racial considerations among the staff?” as found in Box 1, Mary King Papers, Wisconsin Historical Society (WHS).

³⁶ Silas Norman Position Paper.

the functions which they best serve.”³⁷ The self segregation of SNCC into black and white factions as Norman seemingly advocated, would have delegated whites to office work and fundraising in the North. Norman viewed using whites as field workers as ineffective because there was no way that white workers can enter ‘ethnic relationships’ with the rural blacks. Since the result of working with whites is not beneficial, Norman asked, “I do not know if I am willing to work in an integrated project simply to prove a point.”³⁸ In Norman’s mind the use of white staff members may not be the best method or tactic that could be used in order to achieve SNCC’s goals.

Black regional leader, Charles Sherrod submitted a position paper that addressed the race issue as well. It was entitled, “From Sherrod.” For Sherrod, any racial tension within SNCC would make “slaves of us all.”³⁹ Racial hatred would only handcuff SNCC because its struggles were not limited to blacks; “the needs of the whites are not so different from our own” wrote Sherrod.⁴⁰ This paper tried to prevent other black members from getting hung up on the race issue. The primary question that Sherrod asked was if SNCC was “born to die, or to live in the new society, or to be the new society.”⁴¹ This idealistic statement shows that some members saw SNCC as a model in which whites and blacks could work side by side in this ‘new society’. Other felt that SNCC would do what others had done and fold under the societal pressures of integration. Silas Norman’s statement in a different position paper also noticed that SNCC was at a crossroads, it was SNCC’s life or death which was at stake. He writes, “It would be ironic

³⁷ Silas Norman Position Paper.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Charles Sherrod Position Paper, “From Sherrod”, in Box 1, Mary King Papers, Wisconsin Historical Society (WHS).

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid.

and tragic [if] SNCC were able to survive outside pressures – beatings, killings terrorism – and choke and strangle on its own size and affluence.”⁴²

In addition, Elaine DeLott Baker, a white staff worker, addressed the race issue from a white perspective in her position paper entitled, “Introduction: Semi-Introspective.” She directly confronts stereotypes and suggestions that were circulating among SNCC staff. The first idea addressed by her was that white membership in SNCC should be limited. Baker refers to this practice as “reversal of social order,” where the idea is that SNCC would limit the staff to only 10 percent white.⁴³ The other suggestion to solve racial problems was to “kick [whites] out of SNCC.”⁴⁴ Baker says that you cannot ban whites from the movement. She suggested that both of these ‘solutions’ did not address the problem at its heart. Baker writes, “We should not be fooled into thinking that by eliminating the symptoms we have eliminated the disease. We should not fool ourselves into feeling that if we eliminate the symptoms we can forget about the disease.”⁴⁵ According to her, whites joined SNCC because it was the most idealistic organization available, but their exclusion from SNCC wouldn’t stop their activism.

Mike Miller, a representative at the San Francisco SNCC office, raised questions about SNCC’s ‘ideal community,’ the black identity issue and SNCC’s role in African Affairs. Miller’s Position Paper entitled “RE: Question Raised for National Staff Meeting” mirrored Sherrod’s thoughts when it asked, “if we are building in our own movement that beloved community then race cannot be used to automatically disqualify the argument of a white field secretary when

⁴² Silas Norman Position Paper, “Some Basic Considerations for the Staff Retreat”, as found in Box 1, Mary King Papers, Wisconsin Historical Society (WHS).

⁴³ Elaine DeLott Baker Position Paper, “Introduction: Semi-Introspective” – Name Withheld by Request, as found in Box 1, Mary King Papers, Wisconsin Historical Society (WHS).

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

policy matters are being discussed.”⁴⁶ Miller also saw SNCC as a potential model for society. He was aware that SNCC members saw the connection with the struggles of the newly formed African nations; the issues in Africa resonate with SNCC staff members. Miller suggested that the reason for this interest in African affairs was “black nationalism and the direction of the civil rights movement.”⁴⁷ Miller pointed to the Freedom Schools as a place to start with this idea; he saw them as an instrument that can build “Negro leadership, black dignity, a sense of African History, a recognition of the importance of black role models for the ghetto youth.”⁴⁸ Later in the 1960s the black power movement would try to address the need for positive black role models in the ghetto as evident in the Black Panther Party.

In Reverend Tom Brown’s position paper he wants staff members to get past the petty prejudices that he views were represented by the internal race issue, but it was obvious to him that quite frankly some people couldn’t get past them. Brown’s position paper is a more idealistic approach to the Pan-African thought. The Pan-African version that Brown introduces is the idea that addresses struggles for freedom in different places which link SNCC with all other revolution quest for freedom. Brown voiced the opinion of many members when he asserted that SNCC had a “responsibility to the cause of Freedom and to every human being, not only to the Negro in the South, but to every human being that is in slavery.”⁴⁹ This idea can be linked with Mike Miller’s in order to forecast the direction of SNCC’s identity.

⁴⁶ Mike Miller Position Paper, “RE: Questions Raised for National Staff Meeting”, as found in Box 1 Mary King Papers, Wisconsin Historical Society (WHS)

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Reverend Tom Brown Position Paper, “Position Paper”, as found in Box 1 Mary King Papers, Wisconsin Historical Society (WHS).

Mike Miller and Reverend Tom Brown both highlighted the need and the importance of a Pan-African agenda which expressed the purpose for Black Nationalism which came to shape the direction of SNCC. This Black Nationalism that SNCC was searching for after Waveland attempted to get at the question of what it meant to be black. Since SNCC's identity was in crisis, new organizations, namely Black Power groups, also tried to answer the question posed in the Black Nationalism discussion.

Elaine DeLott Baker was correct when she said if whites were kicked out of SNCC they would continue their activism. No formal decision concerning whites was issued until 1966 when they were ultimately kicked out. Whites who left before then either were turned off by the attitudes that they were doing more harm than good, or because they agreed with the discussion of black self-consciousness and felt that it was important for blacks to create black political structures completely on their own.

Whites that left SNCC after Waveland did so because they realized, according to Cleveland Seller, a black program director, that, "they were out of step with the organization's new cadence."⁵⁰ The lives of whites in SNCC, especially those involved in the Freedom Summer, were dramatically changed because of it. These whites used the skills they developed to advocate for different groups later on in the 1960s.

⁵⁰ Cleveland Sellers, *The River of No Return: The Autobiography of a Black Militant and the Life and Death of SNCC*, (New York: William Morrow and Company, 1973), 145.

The women's liberation movement, which arguably began in the position papers as well, was a popular choice for former female SNCC members.⁵¹ In addition many joined the ranks of the Students for a Democratic Society, which advocated against the war as well as far other issues that refuted the 'old left' establishments views. Former SNCC members used their grassroots organizing skills set to bolster SDS membership. In the North, SNCC-style community organization could be seen in ERAP (an Economic program in the Northern Urban areas as part of LBJ's War on Poverty), when ERAP challenged the city government to organize political parties in order to take part in local decision making which was similar to what MFDP had attempted only years earlier.⁵² SNCC's fallout that began at Waveland was felt in other movements such as: the counterculture, labor movement, and Chicano movement as well.

Waveland did foreshadow and influence the future, however SNCC and the future were not changed overnight. Nothing was uniformly agreed upon during the retreat and the structure remained essential unchanged. In reality SNCC remained the same organization that had gone into the meeting. The retreat did not introduce new project ideas for SNCC; therefore it did not help the already lost field staff who still did not know what to do next. The statements and sentiments that pushed whites from the movement as found in the position papers were not intended to be hurtful. In fact blacks and whites had created friendships within the SNCC family. They were a tight knit group; however some skeptical black members became uncertain if working within the perceived 'white' political system would led them

⁵¹ The Waveland Retreat is famously seen as one of the major events that began the Women's movement. At Waveland two women wrote a position that discussed the role of women in the movement. The paper was critical of gender stereotyping within SNCC. During a break in the discussion, Stokely Carmichael, future SNCC leader made a infamous comment about the proper position of women in the SNCC, when he said that the proper position of women in the movement was prone.

⁵² Hogan, 226.

anywhere. Black political awareness was growing and nationalist ideas supported the notion of blacks helping blacks. After Waveland SNCC tried to create new political systems within Black communities rather than work within the existing one.⁵³

The retreat was a pressure filled week and most people viewed Waveland as generally unproductive. Mary King talked about how debate became volatile and wrote in her memoir that there was, “little reasoned dialogue.”⁵⁴ Executive secretary James Forman, who believed in the absolute need for change in SNCC’s organization, commented that the retreat was “a staggering waste of time, thought and effort by many people”⁵⁵ In contrast Cleveland Sellers, future Program Director, commented that, “After Waveland, my mandate was clear: shake out the deadwood and get the organization moving.”⁵⁶ The differing opinion come as no surprised, since each individual came into the meeting expecting something. After all the events that fall, including most specifically the presentation of position papers dealing with race, some SNCC members began to resign. In a 1966 interview Jane Stembridge said, “it was after the summer project that I learned that I could not help develop Negro leadership because I was white. There was no other reason.”⁵⁷ In his epic civil right volume Taylor Branch included this poem by Dov Green, a SNCC member, about the Waveland Retreat which emphasizes all of the factors that were pulling and pushing during the Waveland Retreat.

⁵³ Stephen F. Lawson. “From Boycotts to Ballots: The Reshaping of National Politics.” as found in *New Directions in Civil Rights Studies*. Armstead L Robinson. and Patricia Sullivan, ed., (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 199) , 192.

⁵⁴ Mary King, *Freedom Song: A Personal Story of the 1960s Civil Right Movement*, (New York: William Morrow and Company, 1987), 449.

⁵⁵ Forman, 435.

⁵⁶ Sellers, 145.

⁵⁷ Interview with Jane Stembridge as found in Emily Stoper, *The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee: The Growth of Radicalism in a Civil Rights Organization*. (New York: Carlson Publishing, 1989), 262.

Moses is drinking
And Forman's in bed
Now the whole world is thinking
That SNCC has gone red
Well, we've lost our picket lines,
MFDP has gone right
We're all showing signs
Of losing this fight
N double A's a gambling
That our next breath will be our last
Now the whole world is crumbling
And I'm sitting on mah ass⁵⁸

⁵⁸ Taylor Branch. *Pillar of Fire: America in the King Years 1963-1965*. (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1998), 507.

Time after Waveland – SNCC’s New Identity

SNCC members, especially whites, if they lasted through the days of debates, discussions, and workshops were even more exhausted and confused about the direction of SNCC. One former member years later while working with Vietnam veterans took a workshop, “on post-traumatic stress disorder, found the anxieties of Vietnam veterans very much like those she experienced after Mississippi”⁵⁹ SNCC did hold another freedom vote in November that year for the general election where a slate of MFDP candidates won, however they received limited interest from the public partly because of the failure at Atlantic City earlier in the fall. The MFDP began to distance itself from SNCC because SNCC was leery of getting involved within the liberal establishment structure while MFDP was still trying to break into the liberal power system. Since a consensus wasn’t reached about any new programs, the field staff found it difficult to gather new support from the community immediately. As a result of this SNCC progress was retreating because of lower level of enthusiasm and rejection of authority.⁶⁰ It wasn’t until the beginning of 1965 that SNCC found its new direction and truly began its third phase.

The situation was getting dicey and field staffers all over the South who would rely on direction and resources from the Jackson (Mississippi) and Atlanta offices were becoming obviously frustrated. The leadership of SNCC once again called a staff meeting in February of 1965. The SNCC chairman, John Lewis, made SNCC’s future extremely clear; he stated that the organization’s “primary concern must be the liberation of black people.”⁶¹ During this meeting,

⁵⁹ As cited in Mills, 177.

⁶⁰ Carson, 149.

⁶¹ Ibid., 151.

Lewis makes it clear that he was leery and distrustful of whites in the 'old left' and political establishment because he resented their deceitful behavior at Atlantic City. The most powerful message and a clear statement of the new direction was Lewis' statement, that "If the movement and SNCC are going to be effective in attempting to liberate the black masses, the civil rights movement must be black-controlled, dominated, and led."⁶² Two agreements in particular were reached at this meeting, SNCC for now supported MFDP again, and the field workers would allow locals to influence direction of new programming which help form the basis of its future identity.⁶³ Original tactics of SNCC begin to lose ground and during the next two years they transformed into "an organization of leaders who tell people what to think, rather than developing individuals' capacities to think."⁶⁴ After Waveland, SNCC reassessed their own identity, developed a new identity and altered the culture within the civil right movement thus giving birth and creditability to other movements that supported these new concepts.

The Black Power Movement now had a public face and it was SNCC. There were several Black Power groups including the Republic of New Africa and most famously the Black Panther Party. The Black Panther Party become a symbol of the counterculture as well as a home for former SNCC leaders such as James Forman and Stokely Carmichael. The Panthers saw that "they could benefit from SNCC's extensive support network and learn from SNCC's years of community organizing experience"⁶⁵ Stokely Carmichael, James Forman were among other

⁶² John Lewis- Statement Feb. 12 1965, in Mary King Papers Box 1, Wisconsin Historical Society.

⁶³ Carson, 151.

⁶⁴ Hogan, 221.

⁶⁵ Clayborne Carson as found in Philip S. Foner, *The Black Panthers Speak*, (New York: DaCapo Press, 1995) xii.

former SNCC members that joined the Black Panther Party after their time in SNCC was done. Obvious parallels can be seen between SNCC and the Panthers as a result of SNCC influence, for example grassroots community organization and liberation schools in the black ghettos.

The turbulence of the sixties did not diminish at all after Waveland. Many marginalized groups who had been suppressed through institutionalized discrimination began to advocate for equal treatment under the law as well. By the end of the sixties protests seem to be commonplace among major college campuses as well as major urban centers. The United States was amidst three wars, the Vietnam War, the Cold War and the War on Poverty (part of Lyndon Johnson's Great Society Legislation). In 1968 when the Democrats held another National Convention, this time in Chicago, it was an even more confrontational event than the now seemingly calm MFDP attempt to gain seats at the National Convention four year earlier. During the sixties, counterculture movements were more popular than ever because their message appealed to the white middle class youths who openly challenged paternalistic social norms of the 1950s. Many see the Democratic National Convention in 1968 as the peak of 1960s radicalism; if so SNCC has to be seen as the place that nurtured many talents and the organization that delivered radicalism to mainstream America.

Conclusion

SNCC started as a network of likeminded individuals who shared and coordinated experiences of sit-ins at southern lunch counters, but throughout the 1960s SNCC reinvented themselves. Strongly based in the teachings of nonviolence, SNCC pushed boundaries and declared that nonviolence was only a tactic, not necessary a philosophy. Over its existence SNCC had three distinct phases, and those shifts happened gradually. Many events and experiences influenced the phases and the arrival of new membership. At its beginning SNCC was small enough that there was a true decision-making consensus about how things were done. However once it grew the time consuming nature of the process began taking its toll, therefore original members became disillusioned with the organization's direction and lack of purpose. By 1966 SNCC had secured a new identity as an organization that supported black power and all things associated with that.

Reflecting on the motives of SNCC throughout their existence shines light on a collection of individuals in pursuit of a common goal, to destroy institutionalized injustice and ultimately create equality. It is unclear, though, whether they shared a common identity. At Waveland SNCC attempted to find a common identity rather than fight a common enemy. The Position Papers brought to life what methods SNCC members viewed as appropriate and would accomplish SNCC's aim to make blacks advocates for themselves. Before Waveland, SNCC was content using existing liberal power structure however after Waveland SNCC seemed to be unified temporarily but saw that working within the system of the liberal establishment was not in their best interest. John Lewis clearly stated during the meeting in February of 1965 about who was directing SNCC; it was going to be blacks. The common identity that was beginning to

form sent a message to whites that they were perhaps helping to perpetuate black reliance on whites for everything including establishing new political assemblies. Since this new identity was emerging, SNCC was able to address and promote the growing black consciousness.⁶⁶

The position papers submitted before the SNCC Waveland Retreat articulated ideas that had developed from the Freedom Summer. These ideas fermented throughout the fall of 1964 until February 1965 when Chairman John Lewis made it clear where SNCC was heading. Whites who left before they were kicked out of SNCC in 1966 seem to be either turned off by the attitudes that said that they were doing more harm than good, or because they agreed with the discussion of black self-consciousness and felt that it was important for blacks to create black political structures completely on their own. Those who left SNCC did not leave their experience behind them; they used what they had learned and applied it to several social movements in the subsequent years after Waveland.

It is easier to claim the birth of radical ideas, especially involving white and black relationships and black self-awareness started at Waveland, then it is to claim that it was the death of SNCC. SNCC in form and structure lasted into the 1970s but its effectiveness without a doubt began to diminish after Waveland as well as its ideological cohesiveness. The position papers brought to light issues that were impending and developing among SNCC members that would cause more conflict and decimate their ranks. In addition, Waveland marked the death for SNCC because northern white liberals saw these new views concerning white and black relations as a sign to look towards different avenues in which to flex their growing activist enthusiasm.

⁶⁶ Carson, Chapter 14.

The depth of knowledge that is virtually unknown to the public about SNCC and specifically Waveland is troublesome. A deeper understanding of the foundations the radical ideas presented in the thirty-seven position papers should guide future research because to understand those ideas is to understand the direction of the 1960s, the most interesting decade in history. SNCC's own brand of democracy is interesting enough and has become a model for future grassroots type organizations. Discovering the birth of the 'New Left' among the activities and achievements of SNCC would provide explanations to current political platforms. Carson does provide a basis from which explanation can occur regarding the 'New Left' however any understanding of the 'new left' platform as seen in the Waveland position papers would benefit the dialogue. The subject of SNCC is still relatively yet to be scrutinized and many of their stories have yet to be told. This only adds to the understanding of the racial aspect of SNCC demise.

Bibliography

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Civil Right Collection in Madison

Stuart Ewen Papers

Mary King Papers

Charles Sherrod Papers

Benjamin E. Smith Papers

Samuel Walker Papers

Howard Zinn Papers

Each of these papers contains SNCC files of various years. The most helpful in my search were the King and Ewen Papers.

As found in Wesley Hogan, page 364:

These documents are one of the few records of the retreat available to the public. All of the records are incomplete, highly abbreviated, and were never voted on by the staff as official minutes of the meeting; they were simply one person's best shot at capturing events during the week-long retreat. Furthermore, no known public archive contains the entire body of position papers from Waveland, but most of them can be found in the Stewart Ewen and Mary King Papers at the WHS.

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Fleming, Cynthia Griggs. *Soon We Will Not Cry: The Liberation of Ruby Doris Smith Robinson*. Lanham, Maryland: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 1998.

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Foner, Philip S. *The Black Panthers Speak*. New York: DaCapo Press, 1995.

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Sellers, Cleveland. *The River of No Return: The Autobiography of a Black Militant and the Life and Death of SNCC*. New York: William Morrow and Company, 1973.

A quality source of Cleveland Sellers' accounts. He was a SNCC member who becomes Program Director in 1965. It provides a good account of general SNCC events as well as personal emotions. However this source does not discuss the Waveland Retreat or position papers in too much detail.

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