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‘The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC)’

By Katherine J. Ballantyne

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Introduction

The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) was an American national student organisation active during the 1960s. The university students and young people who made up SNCC were instrumental in the civil rights movement.

The Civil Rights Movement

The civil rights movement in the United States spanned most of the twentieth century, but was particularly centred between the passage of *Brown v. Board of Education* in May 1954 that federally mandated desegregated education for all American public schools and the assassination of civil rights leader Martin Luther King, Jr. in April 1968. Unlike in the United Kingdom, ‘public schools’ refers to state-sponsored schools. The movement included a number of initiatives over the time period, but in particular pushed for an end of political policies that dictated where Blacks could live, shop, eat, and work. Blacks and whites lived separate, or ‘segregated’, lives from the 1870s following the U.S. Civil War and the era of Reconstruction, especially in the U.S. South. While it was particularly strident in the South, racial segregation was a national reality. The 1896 Supreme Court decision *Plessy v. Ferguson* established that ‘separate but equal’ accommodations were constitutional; that is, the court found that it was legal for industry and business owners as well as politicians to establish segregated schools, legal restrictions of Blacks’ rights, and restrict access of Blacks to any and all areas of society. This period is referred to by historians as the ‘Jim Crow era’.

Civil rights organisations like the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) were active from the early 1900s, but following World War II, many Blacks seized the opportunity to push for equal rights. The first phase of the movement was a series of legal challenges to Jim Crow laws that reinforced segregation of whites and Blacks. The idea was that once a case was decided in favour of Black rights, it could be used to set precedent (that is, lawyers could then bring other cases to court and point to that decision as a reason for the court to find in their favour). These centred on voting rights and desegregation of public education (like *Brown*).

Nonviolent Direct Action and the Sit-Ins

The Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) and other national civil rights organisations joined the NAACP in fighting against racial segregation. In addition to the legal fight in the courts, civil rights activists of the late 1950s began to organise nonviolent direct action protests. These types of protests focused on causing disruption in segregated public accommodations (businesses such as department stores and restaurants). However, as opposed to protests like marches or rallies where people occupied spaces often chanting or giving speeches, nonviolent direct action protests focused on occupying spaces with a large amount of respect. The most well-known version of this type of protest was the ‘sit-in’, where protestors would sit in seats at a lunch counter where only whites were meant to be served. The emergence

of the 'sit-in' caused a significant shift in the movement's focus from legislative gains to direct action.

Sit-ins were tested across the South in the late 1950s, but they became an incredibly effective and widespread strategy from February 1960. University students in Greensboro, North Carolina and Nashville, Tennessee set off a massive movement within the national civil rights movement that carried on throughout the spring. More than 30 cities across seven states had seen sit-ins by the end of February 1960, and by the end of April, more than 50,000 students had taken part in sit-in demonstrations.¹ By the autumn of 1960, the student-led sit-in movement had changed the course of the civil rights movement.

The Founding of SNCC

At the beginning of the sit-in demonstrations in February 1960, there were young people interested in civil rights and societal change, notably in NAACP youth groups, the National Student Association, and university exchange programmes. There was, however, the opportunity to coordinate the efforts of so many young people across the different cities as sit-ins were organised across the South. Ella Baker, a veteran civil rights activist and executive director of SCLC, invited student leaders of sit-in campaigns from across the South to Raleigh, North Carolina. During this conference at Shaw University in April 1960, these students compared strategies and discussed the movement more broadly. It was at this conference that the idea of SNCC was born.

Students wanted to maintain their autonomy (or control) of their own sit-in campaigns, but also have a way of sharing information and coordinate across the region. SNCC became a permanent organisation from May 1960 with a national presence in the civil rights movement. Its statement of purpose, written by James Lawson, underscored SNCC's moral and religious conviction of nonviolent direct action. It stated, in part, 'We affirm the philosophical or religious ideal of nonviolence as the foundation of our purpose, the presupposition of our faith, and the manner of our action... Through nonviolence, courage displaces fear; love transforms hate... Justice for all overthrows injustice.'² SNCC operated nationally with an elected committee that helped communicate between different community and campus-based chapters. It had its own newspaper, *The Student Voice*, that publicised its activities nationally.

SNCC and the Civil Rights Movement

SNCC became a major national civil rights organisation alongside NAACP, SCLC, and the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) with its leadership during the 1961 Freedom Rides. The Freedom Rides challenged the 1960 ruling that interstate travel conveniences (like toilets and restaurants) were unconstitutional. The riders wanted to take buses south to Mississippi and attempt to use facilities that should be desegregated; such actions would, they believed, bring further publicity to the civil rights movement. After CORE activists were attacked by segregationists (people who wanted Jim Crow segregation to continue) in Alabama in May 1961, SNCC activist Diane Nash (and Nashville sit-in leader) called for the rides to be resumed. SNCC's participation in the campaign brought it national attention.

¹ <https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/encyclopedia/sit-ins>

² Clayborne Carson, *In Struggle: SNCC and the Black Awakening of the 1960s* (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 1995), 23.

The organisation continued to make headlines with its leadership in civil rights campaigns including a voter registration drive in McComb, Mississippi and the Albany Movement in Albany, Georgia (1961-1962). SNCC activists worked hard to achieve civil rights through these two areas: direct action protests targeted at segregated facilities and voter registration drives. Registering Blacks to vote was particularly important because their right to vote had been systematically (and often violently) opposed by the segregated white power structure during the Jim Crow era. At the August 1963 March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom, SNCC chairman John Lewis gave a speech alongside other national civil rights leaders such as Martin Luther King, Jr. SNCC continued local organising efforts throughout the South in Mississippi's Freedom Summer, where Black and white student activists attempted to register Blacks to vote in 1964. The effort became widely known following the murders of three civil rights workers by white segregationists.

The passage of the Civil Rights Act in 1964, which federally assured equal protection under the law for all Americans regardless of their race, marked a significant point for the civil rights movement. It also signalled a moment for SNCC activists to consider their next steps. The anti-war movement against American involvement in the Vietnam War and the women's liberation movement were active social movements by this point, and SNCC activists questioned their future role within these movements as well as the civil rights movement. They also reflected on the potential future success of continued nonviolence and what possibilities existed from working with established national organisations as opposed to creating new organisations within local areas.

'Black Power'

Around 1966, SNCC encouraged white civil rights workers to organise in their own communities; that is, to inspire white Americans to support the movement. This shift towards Black empowerment and articulation of that idea was in line with a similar move within the civil rights movement nationally, but is significant for SNCC's organisational history as it marked the beginning of the organisation's decline. Stokely Carmichael, executive chairman of SNCC, spoke in the media and public speeches about 'Black Power', a slogan for this growing sense that Black Americans needed to seize opportunities for self empowerment. The slogan was seen by many white Americans and Black civil rights leaders alike as calling for violence. For the civil rights movement which had embraced nonviolence as a strategy for many years, this impression that SNCC and by extension younger Black activists were inclined towards violence was shocking. Generational tensions had existed earlier between SNCC and other national organisations as well as within the civil rights movement, but Black Power shone a spotlight on them.

As the late 1960s continued, the tensions within the national civil rights movement similarly strained SNCC. Debates over Black Power, growing frustrations over the Vietnam War, and urban unrest in cities across the country strained civil rights leaders. Within SNCC, these issues added to internal organisational tensions. SNCC grew quickly over its first several years and as the decade waned, its large size and geographical spread contributed to difficulties its members encountered in day-to-day operations. By the end of 1970, SNCC had stopped organising meaningful campaigns and dissolved.

SNCC's Legacy

SNCC as an organisation broke up by the 1970s, but its impact was felt for years to come. Many of its former members went on to lead successful careers in social reform and politics. John Lewis, for example, served as a U.S. Congressman from Georgia from 1987 until his death in 2020. He and Diane Nash were awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom in 2011 and 2022 respectively.

Questions To Consider

1. How did the youth of SNCC members shape the organisation?
2. How central do you think the role of nonviolence was to SNCC?
3. If you were to join a student organisation today, what topics would motivate you to participate?

Suggestions For Further Reading

Clayborne Carson, *In Struggle: SNCC and the Black Awakening of the 1960s* (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 1995).

<https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/encyclopedia/student-nonviolent-coordinating-committee-sccc#:~:text=Biography,Although%20Martin%20Luther%20King%2C%20Jr.>