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**Leadership, Accountability, and the Lessons of SNCC  
and the 1960s Black Freedom Movement**

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As the title of my talk suggests, I want to situate our discussion of Leadership and Accountability within the historical context of the 1960s civil rights movement. My fellow presenters on the panel and I hope that we will touch on some of the things that citizens can do to make ourselves “accountable,” and to encourage others, particularly young people, to think seriously about public service. As we consider the question of accountability, it would be useful reflect on Martin Luther King’s call in

1967 for a “revolution of values.” What might such a revolution in values mean for us, today?

When we think of the civil rights movement, we often think of great men giving speeches or leading historic marches. We shouldn't forget, however, that it was a mass movement, with a multitude of leaders, organizers, and activists, both famous and unsung. Today I want to emphasize a less iconic image of the movement, at least where popular memory is concerned. During the early 1960s, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, or SNCC, did the difficult and dangerous work of organizing voter registration campaigns in Mississippi and Georgia, where Jim Crow and white supremacy were aggressively defended by local authorities. SNCC took an alternative approach to leadership and activism in the civil rights

movement. Where Martin Luther King and other Baptist ministers in the Southern Christian Leadership conference relied on oratory, charismatic leadership, and garnering extensive press coverage, activists in SNCC organized the southern black masses, sharecroppers and maids, often in rural areas far from the media spotlight. SNCC's grass-roots organizers encouraged local people to demand the voting rights that had been denied to them for decades under the system of Jim Crow segregation.

SNCC's origin was the result of the spontaneous revolt of thousands of students at historically-black colleges throughout the South. On January 31, 1960, Ezell Blair, a North Carolina teenager, told his mother that "we are going to do something tomorrow that may change history, that might change the world." The next day, February 1, Blair and three of his classmates at North

Carolina Agricultural and Technical University in Greensboro, went downtown to the Woolworth's department store and sat themselves at the lunch counter, demanding service. Although blacks could shop at Woolworth's, service at lunch counters there and at other department stores throughout the south was for whites only. At the Greensboro sit-in, the store was closed early and the young men were refused service, but within a week, hundreds had joined the protest. Within two months, seemingly from out of nowhere, thousands of black college students all over the South had staged nonviolent direct action protests in 125 cities in nine states, and hundreds had been arrested and jailed.

These lunch counter protests came to be known as sit-ins and they re-vitalized the movement. Prominent civil rights organizations like the NAACP and Martin Luther

King's Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) sought to capitalize on the energy of the students. Here is where the veteran civil rights activist Ella Baker enters the story. Baker was born in North Carolina, and moved to Harlem during the 1920s. She had been active in the NAACP; she was also an official in the SCLC. At a conference in Raleigh, Baker advised student leaders of the sit-ins to form their own organization. Of course, King hoped the students would become a youth-arm of the SCLC. Baker, however, believed that SCLC relied too heavily on King's leadership. With her encouragement, the students founded SNCC, an organization that would struggle for total equality, going for "more than a hamburger," as the students liked to say.

Baker strongly influenced SNCC's alternative approach to leadership. She encouraged the students to adopt a group-centered approach to leadership, in which no one person was in charge. Decisions on strategy and objectives were made democratically. The point was to train and empower local people to gain experience, exercise leadership, and ultimately, to act on their own behalf. As one of SNCC's organizers, Bob Moses explained, the Movement "expos[ed] people to all different kinds of people who were coming in and out of Mississippi," which created an environment in which local people were expected to take ownership over what they doing, and to grow as leaders. For SNCC organizers, the measure of success was not the number of folks who registered to vote, but the emergence of leaders among the local people they had recruited. As Ella Baker remarked, **"SNCC demonstrated the**

**possibility of taking uninitiated people and working with them to the point that they began to understand where their interest really was and the relationship to their own capacity to do something about it.”**

As you can see from these images, SNCC was made up of primarily African American college and high school students, but included white students as well. Its young leaders, like Bob Moses, John Lewis, James Forman, Diane Nash, Anne Moody, Ruby Doris Smith Robinson, and many others, were deeply committed to achieving social change through nonviolent methods. However, SNCC's organizing in the Deep South was a lonely and dangerous struggle. Those who challenged the system were constant targets of repression. Arson, drive-by-shootings, bombings, beatings, arrests, and economic reprisals were a

fact of life. SNCC activists mourned the murder of their ally, the NAACP official Medgar Evers in June of 1963.

After a spate of terror killings, SNCC organizers realized that only an influx of white volunteers from college campuses would focus the national media on the plight of blacks in the Deep South, and force the federal government to intervene against the violence. This was a self-conscious strategy to exploit the nation's racism, its indifference to black suffering. Despite the constant threat of violence, SNCC organizers and volunteers, black and white, were warmly embraced by the local community, as this volunteer in Meridian observed:

**“There are the old men and women in old clothing whom you know have little money and none to spare who stop you as you are leaving the church and press a**

**dollar into your hand and say, ‘I’ve waited 80 years for you to come and I just have to give you this little bit to let you know how much we appreciate your coming. I pray for your safety every night, son. God bless you all.’”**

## EDUCATION

We all know that equality in education, through the desegregation of public schools, was a major goal of the civil rights movement. In keeping with the importance of education in the struggle, SNCC organizers set up Freedom Schools in Mississippi during the summer of 1964. The Freedom Schools were meant to, according to Charles Cobb, “fill an intellectual and creative vacuum in the lives of young Negro Mississippians,” and “make it possible for them to challenge the myths of our society, to perceive more clearly its realities, and to find alternatives and

ultimately, new directions for action.” The schools were inspiring for teachers and pupils alike; between 2500 and 3000 students, between the ages of seven to seventy, attended the Freedom schools over the summer. The Schools taught traditional academic subjects, but its classes in voter education and the Citizenship curriculum implied a total analysis of society, as these discussion questions suggest:

1. What does the majority culture have that we want?
2. What does the majority culture have that we don't want?
3. What do we have that we want to keep?

Such questions provided opportunities for students to criticize the status quo and craft their own vision of social justice.

Education was central to SNCC's political organizing, as well. SNCC established the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party in 1963 as an alternative to the all-white, segregationist Democratic Party in the state. That year, the Freedom Democratic Party or FDP staged its own convention and held a mock election to prove to the nation that blacks were eager to demand and exercise voting rights. The Freedom Vote was a success, with 80,000 votes cast statewide. It laid the foundation for SNCC's and the Freedom Democratic Party's attempt to unseat the Jim Crow Mississippi delegation at the National Democratic Convention in 1964. There, one of SNCC's emergent leaders, a sharecropper named Fannie Lou Hamer, riveted a national television audience with her testimony before the Convention on the tyrannical

conditions facing blacks in Mississippi. President Lyndon Johnson and the Democratic Party maneuvered to defeat SNCC's challenge. SNCC was offered a compromise of two seats in the state delegation. SNCC rejected the compromise.

SNCC's goal of empowering the disadvantaged to serve as leaders in their own right, and the organization's commitment to educating poor and disenfranchised people to exercise full citizenship, are powerful lessons for our society today. If you consider President Obama's background as a community organizer, and the massive national voter registration effort that led to his election in 2008, one can trace a direct line between the nation's first African American president and the organizing tradition established by SNCC. Some of us can only hope that the excitement of Obama's election will translate into greater

numbers of young people preparing themselves for careers in public service and electoral politics.

## **GENDER**

SNCC offers another important lesson for us, on the issue of gender. Not only was SNCC unique in terms of its high concentration of young people in positions of authority. In addition, women played a prominent role in SNCC as organizers. In the Mississippi Delta, and in the rural South generally, women were usually much more politically active than men. Women canvassed in the black community, attended mass meetings, and attempted to register to vote more frequently than men. The reasons for women's high participation are complex. Black women were already active in the church, and were often employed outside the home. SNCC was always seeking to nurture new leadership and women of course represented a major

untapped resource. Though not free of sexism, SNCC was more committed to women's active participation and leadership than any other civil rights organization.

Remember that women civil rights leaders were denied the opportunity to address the March on Washington from the podium in 1963, provoking outraged protests among some prominent women leaders. Also, arguably, whites considered black women less threatening. Women seemed less vulnerable to reprisals than men were.

SNCC's commitment to promoting women leaders is an important lesson today when many young people, including women, fall prey to negative stereotypes of women as sex objects. In 1967, Martin Luther King called a revolution of values; for us, such a revolution in values might well mean the importance of rejecting popular

stereotypes of masculinity and femininity that sow confusion and warp our humanity.

With the momentous passage of federal Civil Rights and Voting Rights legislation, the movement's attention shifted Northward, to discrimination in employment and housing in Northern cities, including Chicago, Detroit, and Cleveland. Martin Luther King visited Cleveland several times in 1967, telling school children to "learn, not burn," perhaps alluding to the six days of violence that took place in Hough in July of 1966, in which the National Guard was sent in to restore order. In May 1967, King returned to Cleveland to launch a campaign to oppose "the evils of racial injustice and economic exploitation" in a city that he called "a seething cauldron of hostility." Later that year, King announced "Operation Breadbasket," a project

exposing discrimination in employment and housing, and police brutality. King had already declared his opposition to the costly U.S. war in Vietnam, which was squandering billions of dollars that might have been put to better use in fighting poverty.

In his final months, King called for “a revolution in values.” For King, this meant a rejection of racism, materialism, and militarism. King returned to Cleveland again in the summer and fall of 1967 to lead voter registration drives in support of Carl Stokes’s victorious campaign for mayor. At the time of his death, King’s uncompromising condemnations of racism, poverty, and war as immoral led him to be considered a pariah in much of the mainstream press.

After this brief sketch of the history of the civil rights movement, what about this question of accountability? For

all the progress that was achieved during the 1960s, many of the problems that the movement tried to solve, including, inequality in education, residential segregation, and equality before the law, persist today.

In major cities like Cleveland, the challenges today include how to strengthen public schools, rebuild communities, nurture future leaders, and ensure equal justice and economic opportunity. Today, Bob Moses, formerly of SNCC, is director of the Algebra Project, devoted to promoting national education reform through math and science instruction. Moses believes that failing public schools are pipelines to prison and mass incarceration for black and brown youth, akin to the plantation system that warped the lives of sharecroppers in the Mississippi Delta. Moses contends that a quality public education for every child is the paramount civil rights issue of our time.

Citizens must demand accountability from public education systems, government, and elected officials. At the same time, we citizens have obligations of our own. Given the sacrifices of many during the civil rights movement, and the precarious nature of the social progress achieved through decades of struggle, we have an obligation as citizens and parents to take an active role in our own children's education, and to support the education of all children, instead of simply scape-goating teachers and giving up on public education. And we owe it to those who gave their lives in the struggle for equality to educate ourselves on the political issues of our time, and to vote in all elections, from the local to the national level.

Following Dr. King, and the Freedom Schools of SNCC, it remains essential for us to effect a revolution of values that rejects racism, selfishness, materialism, violence and

cruelty, and other forms of self-destructive thought and behavior. To begin the democratic conversation we desperately need, we might recall the timeless words of Dr. King: “We must rapidly begin the shift from a “thing”-oriented society to a “person”-oriented society. When machines and computers, profit motive and property rights are considered more important than people, the giant triplets of racism, materialism and militarism are incapable of being conquered. A civilization can flounder as readily in the face of moral and spiritual bankruptcy as it can through financial bankruptcy.”