

Black Power for Watts?

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“Given a city government that is unconcerned about the problems of the people of South Central Los Angeles, a Mayor who considers these citizens to be hoodlums and a Chief of Police who considers them to be monkeys, the only alternative to violence on both sides is for a separation from that city government and the institution of another one with powers assigned by the people it serves.”

The above statement was made by Cliff Vaughn, Southern California Chairman of the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). His recent proposal for the incorporation of Watts and surrounding areas into a “Freedom City has renewed debate over the value of a separate political structure in areas where Negroes have a predominance in population.

The Freedom City proposal was not new to many of the black nationalist and militant civil rights groups in the area. The idea of a separate black community appeals to those who have worked for the creation of representative government for the people of the area.

Norman Houston, president of the central NAACP branch, is among those who felt that the proposal would increase Negro power rather than dilute it. The Non-Violent Action Committee (N-VAC) reacted favorably to the idea and is asking candidates in the November election to support a plan to make incorporation easier to accomplish.

Billy G. Mills, the only member of the Los Angeles City Council to make a public statement on the venture, said that although he was doubtful about the possibility of success, it was a very exciting proposal.”

The freedom City proposal originated at the May staff meeting of SNCC. At this meeting John Lewis was defeated for the chairmanship by Stokely Carmichael, a Howard University graduate born in Trinidad who had organized the Lowndes County Freedom Organization (Black Panther) in Alabama.

SNCC moved from Lewis’s policy of at least superficial contacts with other civil rights organizations to a go-it-alone policy with the slogan Black Power.” Its local components would become financially self-sufficient and independent. The aim would be the organization of Negroes—especially in areas where they are a majority—into political groups entirely separate from the established political parties.

The new policies were the result of the frustrations experienced by Negroes attempting to work within established political structures. In these political structures, Negroes often find themselves outvoted—their demands are compromised and their power is diluted.

The failure of even moderate Negro candidates to win nomination in the May 3 Alabama election is paralleled by the failure of California Negroes to win support at the polls—the defeat of the hospital bond issue and the poor showing of William Williams in the Secretary of State primary race being only two examples of this.

Carmichael’s position of stressing separatist politics under the Black Panther emblem was also vindicated, he feels, by the continued refusal of the Georgia legislature to seat SNCC press secretary Julian Bond after he had won his seat with 83% of the vote. For Carmichael, the path to Negro power is in organizing on a local, all black basis.

As he said last January, my Job is to organize people to overthrow the governments that are now oppressing them, not to organize them to beg for money from the Federal Government. If they control these county government offices, they won't have to beg for money. They'll just take it."

Carmichael sees political power as the only available means for Negroes to achieve economic power. In Lowndes County if a Negro is elected tax assessor, he will be able to collect and channel funds for the building of better roads and schools—things which determine the quality of daily life."

Freedom City is an attempt to make the ideas behind the Lowndes County organization and the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party work in the Northern ghettos where many of the desires of the Negro community are defeated by indifference rather than violence.

The area to be included in Freedom City (its boundaries are the Harbor Freeway, Vernon Ave., Alameda St. and El Segundo Blvd.) is even more predominantly Negro than Lowndes County. Both areas share many of the same economic hardships.

Most importantly, both areas face a reality that makes integration difficult and often irrelevant to their present problems.

The drive for "Black Power" challenges the emphasis that has been placed on the need for integration. To a large extent, civil rights has meant the right to be integrated into the mainstream of American life. The civil rights bills were designed to enforce this right. Even the voting rights bill was aimed at integrating Negroes into the Democratic-Republican politics that already existed.

The Freedom Rides, sit-ins and practically every demonstration and march until the recent one in Mississippi were part of this emphasis on integration. It was only in the Mississippi march that this emphasis was publicly and emphatically challenged.

The struggle between Carmichael and Martin Luther King over tactics in that march demonstrated the depth of the ideological struggle over the reliance on integration as the solution to the problems of Negroes. For King, the means to change are the use of Negro political power as a decisive force within the Democratic Party and the use of moral pressure to cause the white majority to end their opposition to the goals of the Negroes.

"It is absolutely necessary for the Negro to gain power," King said during the march, but the term 'Black Power' is unfortunate because it tends to give the impression of black nationalism." For King, power is a means to bring the Negro into American society on an equal basis, a means to his dream" of an American interracial brotherhood of love.

His faith in integration is indicative of the middle class Negro's and white liberal's attitudes toward race relations. Their solution is the elimination of the Negro as a separate entity.

They quickly reject any differing solutions offered by the Muslim or black nationalists as racism in reverse. They can not imagine a solution that is not approved by the white majority.

As Charles Silberman wrote in *Crisis in Black and White*:

"Negroes really have no choice, for there is only one house—there is only one United States, and there can be no solution of the Negro problem anywhere but in that United States or in any way other than full integration of the Negro into the mainstream of American life."

Any solution that does not include white leadership is feared almost as much as the policies of the White Citizen's Councils. To politicians like Johnson and Robert Kennedy, whose political success is based on helping the Negro toward integration (and using the resulting votes to further their careers), "black power" is a dangerous threat.

These liberals and the Negro leadership of the moderate civil rights groups fail to recognize the dangerous hoax that results from the attempt to integrate the Negro into the mainstream on the basis of inequality of education, financial resources and self-confidence. They fail to recognize that they speak to the Negro middle class while largely ignoring the pressing problems of the Negroes who live—and will, for a long time, continue to live—in urban slums and rural poverty.

To avoid integration on the basis of inequality requires an effort that seems beyond the capabilities and willingness of this country or this city.

As one Los Angeles Negro said recently in a *Life* interview:

“Equal opportunity, my sweet obscenity!... equality is like Whitey holds you by the belt at the starting line until everyone else is halfway around the track, then gives you a big slap on the rump and says, ‘Go, baby, you’re equal!’ Takes an unusual man to win a race like that. It’s easier to shoot the starter.”

In short, many Negroes are asked to enter a world where they must compete with whites on unequal terms and in which to excel they must accept standards which are not their own. It is a difficult task, even if undertaken willingly.

Civil rights groups should not continue to press for integration of schools and neighborhoods when there are more pressing problems. According to the County Commission on Human Relations, in the period from 1950 to 1960 less than 1% of Los Angeles Negroes found residences outside of South Central Los Angeles and segregated areas of San Pedro, Venice and Pacoima. What can be done about the problems of the other 99%?

In 1960 the average Negro family in South Central Los Angeles had \$400 more to spend during the year than it has today. Twice as many Negroes as whites live in deteriorated, or dilapidated housing in this city.

The NAACP, with its dogmatic belief in progress through legal change obtained through the help of whites (a policy emphasized by the fact that the organization has always had a white president) has fought for Supreme Court decisions and civil rights laws. Yet today more than 99% of Negro students in the deep South remain in all-Negro schools.

CORE’s demonstrations, with the resulting arrests of many thousands of Negroes and whites; have made it possible for a few Negroes to enter into a few more neighborhoods, hotels and jobs. Yet Negro unemployment has decreased only slightly, and has increased in some urban slums.

This is why so many of the Negroes who are poor and see little hope of changing their condition have rejected these civil rights groups in favor of the Muslims or the black nationalists.

The liberals tell the Negro that the only way he can obtain progress is through cooperation with whites and integration into white society. Yet the former is ineffective in dealing with the day-to-day problems of ghetto living and the latter impractical for all but a few.

There is no certainty that Freedom City will bring progress or will even bring black power. It could mean a change from a conservative Mayor Yorty to a conservative black mayor. And, more importantly, black political power does not automatically bring black economic power.

In addition, the legal problems involved in initiating such a city are almost overwhelming. A majority of the voters (as shown by the last municipal elections) in the three cities involved—Los Angeles, Compton and Lynwood—would have to sign petitions favoring the plan. The Local Agency Formation Commission would have to approve.

If the Commission’s approval is obtained, petitions would have to be obtained containing the signatures of 25% of the property owners in the area who would have to own at least 25% of the property, based on assessed valuation.

Then the Board of Supervisors must hold hearings at which the owners of 51% of the property could kill the plan. Only after these steps are taken could an incorporation election be held within the proposed boundaries.

Thus, if incorporation is to come under present legal conditions, it would almost certainly have to be under the control of people with conservative—or at least not anti-business—views. Vaughn probably had this in mind when he stated that Freedom City would offer tax incentives to businesses who would locate themselves there.

But Freedom City, with all the problems involved in incorporation, is at least as realistic an objective as attempting to integrate these residents into the rest of the city. The incorporation would give legal status to what already exists—a group of people separated and alienated.

Freedom City is an idea that can have relevance to the problems of Watts. Because it is closer to the people it would be more able to listen to those who have been ignored. It could provide answers to many problems without the necessity of going through a white-dominated political structure. Self-dependence as a community could replace total reliance on outside help.

The difference between DEMANDING meaningful programs from a Negro mayor and Negro city councilmen and ASKING for help from Mayor Yorty and the Los Angeles City Council is essential in the development of racial self-respect. It is a difference that would make the effort in working for incorporation worthwhile.

Within the larger Los Angeles community, Negroes have neither the political or economic power to make their voices heard. In Freedom City at least some of their future development would be within their own power to direct and control.

The venture would bring more Negroes into the political process than is possible now. Political debate could be substituted for the violence that results from alienation and frustration.

Some of the programs that might result were mentioned in the SNCC statement announcing the plan:

“No resident of Freedom City who has been convicted of a crime and who has paid his debt to society will be denied work because of his past offense. We shall, as a first order of government business, establish a municipal commission to bond ex-convicts...

“A fair-trade commission will be established to protect our citizens from ruthless businessmen and entrepreneurs who would seek to exploit them.

“We shall establish art and cultural centers to give our city pride and to attract visitors and tourists.”

But the most important result would be the feeling that progress could be made without relying on white sympathy and that an individual can succeed without separating himself from his racial culture and social consciousness. That these feelings have not been developed demonstrates some of the results of the civil rights groups' continuing attachment to the goal of Integration. Attendance in white schools is made the standard for a proper education; residence in a white neighborhood the standard for social success.

As the NAACP Convention demonstrated this week, other leaders are much slower in coming to this realization. These leaders have been extremely reluctant to be critical of the society into which they wish the Negro to enter. They ask Negroes to become insignificant parts of a system that has ignored their needs and that shows in a million ways that Negroes are invisible and not wanted. They want Negroes to be a part of a system that finds it infinitely easier to spend billions to fight Communists than to spend a fraction of that amount to fight the violence of segregationists or the evils of poverty.

In terms of pride, they are asking a tremendous price for a dubious objective.

If the white liberal has trouble appreciating the value of a black society run for the benefit of blacks, then perhaps he can begin to understand the basic condition of the American Negro for all the years he has survived in this country.

For whites to place themselves in opposition to the alternative of black nationalism is dangerous and futile. Black nationalism is not necessarily anti-white but it is certainly against white control.

Many whites have always quickly dismissed any solutions to the “Negro problems” that eliminated them. They continue to see themselves as giving something to the Negro, and look upon integration as a means of getting the Negro to become a part of their society.

These whites must begin to realize that they are no more able to solve the Negro problem than they are able to solve the white prejudice that created the problem. They must realize that anything they can give the Negro is not worth the cost in the pride of the recipient.

Black Nationalism is the extension of the philosophy behind the black power slogan. The former seeks black power by complete Independence; the latter aims for black control on the local level. Both were most ably presented in the later speeches of Malcolm X, after he had broken with the Nation of Islam. It was Malcolm who spoke most cogently on the choice between integration or separation:

“Integration is only a method that is used by some groups to obtain freedom, justice, equality and respect as human beings. Separation is only a method that is used by other groups to obtain freedom, justice, equality and human dignity.”

The white American, with the financial and political power he has, can help the American Negro in many ways. If such aid is given without attempting to control the recipient and is based on the mutual benefits that will result, it could speed the progress of the American Negro.

But the best way the white community can help the Negro community is to let that community control itself.

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