

Interview with Courtland Cox

Black Panther Party

Courtland Cox

1966

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FS: What is your reaction to the *New York Times* quote that “SNCC officials insist that they would prefer segregationist officials because their presence would keep Negroes aroused and militant?”

Courtland Cox: I think the facade—that if you vote for Wilson Baker as opposed to Jim Clark you have improved something—is really something people have to look at as not being true. I would feel much better if Negroes would stop thinking in terms of which is the lesser of two evils and start thinking of how I can get somebody that benefits me. The Democratic Party in the South is still racist

FS: The *Times* implied that you reject reforms and improvements.

Cox: The *New York Times* has a hell of a nerve to be so presumptuous as to tell us what to do. It’s like the whole thing in Vietnam, where they are not only trying to define freedom as free elections for the people of Vietnam, but they are now taking it to the South. I mean that whole attitude that we have the freedom, the freedom capsule or the freedom pill, and we are the doctors and we prescribe what is necessary for freedom.

FS: what has been the effect so far, both among the people of Lowndes and Dallas, and the organizers, in building the Black Panther Party?

Cox: Everybody is excited. Everybody has a sort of new energy because what they feel inside themselves is something that they know, something they can do, and that they’re working with their friends. This is something that they’ve been wanting to do for some time.

FS: Is the building of a base something which will remain and grow independently?

Cox: If we left Lowndes County tomorrow morning it wouldn’t make a difference.

FS: What’s your view of independent political activity in other parts of the country, for example, black areas of the north, as well as anti-war candidates from independent committees against the war?

Cox: Well, I don’t know if the Scheer campaign is important, from the little I know about working in the North. But I think, in terms of the Negro community, that they have to begin to consider themselves a unit within the city and not part of the city, that they ask for separate and independent school boards elected from Harlem or Watts, and that they begin to deal with the question of poor education and trying to get the money for Watts, Southside Chicago, Roxbury, Mass., etc.

FS: Given that the Party is predominately black, what outlook is there for organizing poor whites?

Cox: Well, I think that what has to happen is the same type of organizing that is going on in the Negro community, that the organizers go in there helping the poor white community and not just to “uplift” these poor white communities, as a lot of these people do. It can be done with Indians, and Mexicans in California. These people should begin to feel in terms of power and not get lost

FS: What role do you see for the vote in the overall struggle for black liberation and how does it lead to more fundamental changes?

Cox: I think that at this point if it were used to gain control of the Negro community, then okay. On May 3 when we exercise the vote, if they try to expel us with guns, you know...we intend to do our part. We aim to develop organizations and to develop an intelligent electorate and to educate people to what their responsibilities are, and to get them in a direction where they benefit themselves to gain political power.

FS: What do you think will be the federal government's reaction to the tremendous potential of your organizing?

Cox: I think that the voting rights bill passed because they wanted to give Negroes the vote with no political power. Federal registrars were sent in essentially to stagger the Negro entry into politics. They wanted to give Negroes the vote without fundamentally changing the political pattern throughout the South. So, what you have is the image of Democracy or the image of everybody included but the reality of a few people controlling as they always have. What you have is more Negroes saying "Amen" to the bad situation going on. What we did was move to get the political power and I think they don't like that at all.

FS: What can be done through the summer?

Cox: If students want to help from the North they can raise money to get us a thousand reams of paper, so we could send information out to people, like to every porter wherever he lives. We want by the summer to organize the county in such a way that everyone knows precisely what's going on.

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