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“WE WANT WHAT PEOPLE GENERALLY REFER TO AS BLACK POWER”:
YOUTH AND STUDENT ACTIVISM AND THE IMPACT OF THE BLACK POWER
MOVEMENT IN MEMPHIS, TENNESSEE, 1965-1975

by

Shirletta Jeanette Kinchen

A Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree of
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Major: History

The University of Memphis

May 2011

To the University Council:

The Dissertation Committee for Shirletta Jeanette Kinchen certifies that this is the final approved version of the following electronic dissertation: “We want what people generally refer to as Black Power”: Youth and Student Activism and the Impact of the Black Power Movement in Memphis, Tennessee, 1965-1975.

Aram Goudsouzian, Ph.D.
Major Professor

We have read this dissertation and recommend its acceptance:

Janann Sherman, Ph.D.

Sarah Potter, Ph.D.

Beverly Bond, Ph.D.

Accepted for the Graduate Council:

Karen D. Weddle-West, Ph.D.
Vice Provost for Graduate Programs

Dedication

**Dedicated to the memory of my Grandmother, Mrs. Bertha Kinchen Graham, and
freedom fighter, Charles Laverne Cabbage**

Acknowledgements

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ABSTRACT

Kinchen, Shirletta Jeanette. Ph.D. The University of Memphis. May 2011. "We want what people generally refer to as Black Power": Youth and Student Activism and the Impact of the Black Power Movement in Memphis, Tennessee, 1965-1975. Major Professor: Aram Goudsouzian, Ph.D.

This study examines the impact and influence of the modern, or classical Black Power Movement (1966-1975) on African American youth and student activism in Memphis, Tennessee from 1965-1975. This period represented a political reawakening of sorts for African American youth and students in the city after the desegregation campaign of the early 1960s. After being so integral in the campaign to abolish segregation in the city's public facilities and venues in the early 1960s, a lull in overt youth and student activism developed. However, by the mid-to-late 1960s a new, indigenous youth and student movement developed in the community and on the city's college campuses. This movement emerged simultaneously as the Black Power Movement began to command the nation's attention.

Influenced by the national Black Power Movement, but informed by local politics and local circumstances, some of Memphis's African American youth and students evoked the tenets of the Black Power Movement. The Black Power Movement promoted racial and cultural pride, self-determination, racial autonomy, and independent economic, political, and cultural institutions in black communities. Both challenging and embracing the conventional understanding of Black Power and the Black Power Movement, youth and students agitated in the community and campuses, presenting an alternative political voice to Memphis's more moderate African American political outlets, such as the Memphis branch of the National Association for the Advance of Colored People

(NAACP). However, civil rights and Black Power were not mutually exclusive ideologies. On the contrary, youth and students were informed by both movements, and on many levels, their political organizing reflected that idea.

This study is also an example of how Black Power operated on the local level. Histories of the Black Power Movement have tended to focus more on the Movement's more fiery and outspoken proponents, ignoring its impact on organizing in local communities. Recent historiography has shifted its focus from simply documenting the Movement on a national scale. Black Power studies now include more works that examine Black Power organizing over a sustained period of time in areas not considered hotbeds of the Movement. This study provides a glimpse into the ways that youth and students in Memphis, Tennessee who came of age during the height of the modern Black Power Movement localized the Movement by both explicitly and implicitly using Black Power in their struggle to alter the city's racial dynamics.

Shirletta Jeanette Kinchen, **“We want what people generally refer to as Black Power”:
Youth and Student Activism and the Impact of the Black Power Movement in
Memphis, Tennessee, 1965-1975**

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Introduction

“We want what people generally refer to as Black Power”: Youth and Student Activism and the Impact of the Black Power Movement in Memphis, Tennessee, 1965-1975

*“We’re no different from any others actually, even though some operate on different levels from where we are operating now. Some say that they operate on the grass-roots level. Some say they deal with the problem on a legal level, etc. We would like to right now confine more of our activities in terms of organizations to the grassroots level because this is where the people really are.”*¹ – **Charles Cabbage, Co-Founder, the Black Organizing Project and the Invaders**

Martin Luther King, Jr. rarely appeared rattled. For many Americans, the civil rights leader had come to epitomize grace under pressure. Though King had moments of doubt, the public rarely caught a glimpse of that side of him. Yet on March 28, 1968, while leading a march in downtown Memphis, Tennessee, in support of striking African American sanitation workers, the panicked look on King’s face told the story. Before the march could reach the intended destination, violence and looting erupted among the protestors near the back of the crowd.² The unidentified rabble-rousers pushed and shoved other protesters, threw bricks at windows, and turned protest signs into weapons.³ For King, unrest during marches was not an uncommon occurrence. In other instances, marchers felt the sting of water spraying from hoses, bites from dogs, and blows from police billy clubs. However, it was unusual for the violence to emanate from within the march. King had not initially intended to come to Memphis.

¹Charles Cabbage, interview by James Mosby, July 13, 1968, The Ralph J. Bunche Oral History Collection, The Civil Rights Documentation Project, Washington, DC.

²Taylor Branch, *At Canaan’s Edge: America in the King Years 1965-1968* (New York: Simon and Schuster Publishing, 2006), 733.

³Ibid.

King and his Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) staff's focus remained on preparing for the upcoming Poor People's Campaign. Yet the sanitation workers strike provided an optimal opportunity to launch his campaign. The workers struggle for union recognition and better financial compensation and working conditions made Memphis the perfect prologue for King's Poor People's Campaign.

In the aftermath of the botched march, a frustrated King realized that neither he nor his staff were fully aware of all the organizing elements in Memphis's black community – especially those espousing Black Power rhetoric. King had visited Memphis on several occasions prior to 1968 for various events, and was familiar with the city's leadership structure. The middle-class, NAACP-affiliated distanced themselves from the chaos. Without much debate, the blame for the chaos fell squarely on Memphis's young Black Power ideologues, the Invaders.

Beyond the fracas, King had cause to worry. In the years following the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965, Watts, Detroit, and Newark exploded. The Black Panther Party had taken the Black Power banner in the wake of Malcolm X's death to become the vanguard of the Movement. What many considered a departure in philosophy was actually more of a public unveiling of a deeply rooted belief in Black Power.⁴ This ideology existed within the Movement before the Watts riot, before the popularization of the Black Power call, and before the formation of the Black Panther Party in Oakland, California in 1966. King and young Black Power advocates privately and publicly debated their differences in philosophy, ideology, and

⁴Peniel E. Joseph, *Waiting 'Til the Midnight Hour: A Narrative History of Black Power Movement in America* (New York: Henry Holt Publishing, 2006), 135-137.

approach.⁵ But King did not consider that those same divergent viewpoints would get exposed during the sanitation strike in Memphis, which had shifted from a labor issue between the black sanitation workers and the city government into a full-fledged civil rights push for the entire black community. When his good friend and fellow nonviolent practitioner Reverend James Lawson asked King to detour to Memphis to help the sanitation workers, the SCLC leader did not consider the possibility that he would have to deal with the Black Power debate. However, the march placed King back in the middle of the controversy.

Surprised and angry at the march's outcome, King searched for answers. Invader Calvin Taylor remembered that King blamed Lawson for the oversight. Taylor recalled King saying, "Lawson didn't tell me about the Black Power elements in the city...he led me to believe there were none."⁶

King's revelation and Lawson's oversight are both telling. King's assumption that Memphis did not have any "Black Power elements," and Lawson's neglect to inform King about Memphis's most vocal proponents of the Black Power Movement – the city's youth – illuminate some elements of the two leaders' perception of Black Power. Although Black Power, in comparison to other political and social movements in Memphis, was a fringe movement, Memphians felt the impact of Black Power. That political current ran through segments of Memphis's African American students and

⁵Andrew B. Lewis, *The Shadow of Youth: The Remarkable Journey of the Civil Rights Generation* (New York: Hill and Wang Publishing, 2009), 223-224.

⁶Calvin Taylor, interview by Bill Thomas, August 17, 1968, Container 24, Folder 116, Sanitation Strike Archival Project, Mississippi Valley Collection at the University of Memphis, Memphis, TN.

youth who had been influenced by the impact of the national movement for Black Power, while informed by local politics and local circumstances. African American college students and youth organizations in Memphis subscribed to, borrowed from, and amended Black Power ideology to suit their local struggles. In essence, they localized the Movement. Students and radical youth community activists protested and organized using an array of moderate and radical approaches, infusing elements of Black Power ideology to confront and change local conditions on campuses and in the community.

This study uses student and youth activism in Memphis as a way to examine the impact of Black Power politics at the local level. The labels “student” and “youth” underscore the fact that in regards to this particular effort, not all youth were students, and conversely, not all students were adolescents. Several student leaders discussed in this study were veterans of the Armed Forces, and consequently, older than some of their counterparts. Yet the center of Memphis’s Black Power activity lay in these two groups. It was the city’s youth and students, on campuses and in the community, that adopted the language, embraced elements of the philosophy, and promoted Black Power throughout the city.

The period from 1965 to 1975 represents a political reawakening of sorts for youth and student activism. In the aftermath of the successes of the city’s sit-in movement in the early 1960s, a lull in student and youth organizing occurred. “The [student] movement came [to Memphis] late,” explained Coby Smith, co-founder of the Black Organizing Project and the Invaders.⁷ Smith also suggests that Memphis was

⁷Coby Smith, interview by Shirletta Kinchen, Memphis, TN, July 1, 2010.

unlike other Southern cities that were centers of major civil rights movement activity because they housed students on local college campuses from a variety of backgrounds and areas of the nation, some of whom became integrally involved in the movement during their college experience. Major Memphis institutions, by contrast, either lacked on campus housing provisions, or African Americans lacked access to the facilities. As a result, local leaders did not consider Memphis ripe for a student-initiated movement such as those that developed in Nashville, Atlanta, Tallahassee, and Greensboro.⁸ So there was no Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), only a small local chapter of the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), and an NAACP branch that fluctuated between periods of lethargy and intense activism before becoming one of the strongest branches in the South.⁹ An indigenous student and youth movement developed in the early 1960s, declined in the middle of the decade, and reemerged toward the end of the decade.¹⁰ With little to no assistance from outsiders, the Black Freedom Movement in Memphis was genuinely a local movement, but primarily spearheaded, led, and shaped by adults. However, while influenced by the activism of the NAACP and neighborhood civic clubs, youth attempted to place their own imprint on the Movement, on high school and college campuses and through community organizing.

⁸Ibid.

⁹Elizabeth Gritter, "Local Leaders and Community Soldiers: The Memphis Desegregation Movement, 1955-1961" (Senior Honors Thesis, American University, 2001), 47. Gritter suggests that the NAACP, Shelby County Democratic Club, and the Bluff City and Shelby County Council of Civic Clubs "were so strong that the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, Congress of Racial Equality, and Southern Christian Leadership Conference either did not develop in Memphis or did not have nearly as significant influence."

¹⁰Laurie B. Green, *Battling the Plantation Mentality: Memphis and the Black Freedom Struggle* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008), 9-10.

This study further provides an opportunity to explore how Black Power operated outside of the spaces generally considered the hotbeds of the movement. Using Black Power politics to agitate for issues that they considered important, students and youth responded to local conditions, struggles, and issues. Far from being a cauldron of Black Power, Memphis, as “the urban center of the tri-state Delta region,” represented progress for the many African Americans who migrated from the rural Mississippi and Arkansas Delta to make a better life for themselves and their children.¹¹ The children in turn became the catalyst of Memphis’s movement to desegregate public facilities in the early 1960s, a period which represented the apex of student activism and until the onset of the sanitation strike in 1968, of black activism in general in the city.¹² Operating in what Coby Smith called “the spirit of Ida B. Wells,” Memphis’s youth had always sought some form of power, some form of autonomy.¹³ Smith’s evocation of Wells instead of a more contemporary activist such as Malcolm X is telling.¹⁴ Wells’s outspokenness was rare for both the time period and for her gender. Her ties to Memphis appealed to Smith’s sense of homegrown revolution and desire to continue Wells’s legacy of militancy. The experience and ideology of Coby Smith and other young Memphians suggests how Black

¹¹Ibid, 7.

¹²Ibid. For example, Marion Barry’s family moved to Memphis from Itta Bena, Mississippi and Laurie B. Green considers Barry apart of the “Postplantation Generation.” Memphis provided more economic and social opportunities for his family than did Mississippi, but while Barry experienced more freedom, he became acutely aware that his options were still limited by Memphis’s system of segregation.

¹³Coby Smith, interview.

¹⁴Harvard Sitkoff, *The Struggle for Black Equality, 1954-1992* (New York: Hill and Wang Publishing, 1993), 591.

Power philosophy could be applied in a particular political and geographical circumstance.

How did students and youth in Memphis conceive of, define, interpret, and ultimately, navigate Black Power? At the most basic level, what did the Movement mean? When probed by an interviewer about his organization's platform, Charles Cabbage, co-founder of the Black Organizing Project (BOP) and the Invaders, answered, "We want what people generally refer to as Black Power."¹⁵ His organization may have been far removed from the national spotlight, and it may have employed different tactics and approaches, but he believed that the BOP shared goals with other prominent Black Power and radical organizations and individuals who received more national press and publicity.

Like Black Power radicals around the nation, BOP espoused self-determination and argued that blacks should have more control of their communities. They railed against police brutality and poverty, and they challenged inadequacies in housing, education, and employment opportunities. They also advocated black empowerment through economic and political channels, and on several levels they promoted race pride and race consciousness. Other black Memphis college students agitated for more control and influence in campus decision-making, engaging more moderate Black Power politics in order to change campus dynamics. Black students at Memphis State University in the late 1960s, many of whom did not explicitly refer to themselves as Black Power advocates, in particular eschewed separatism, a tenet of the Movement that many Black

¹⁵Charles Cabbage, interview.

Power advocates embraced, in favor of integration – but integration on their terms. Some of Memphis’s more radical young activists advanced a more aggressive agenda, threatening to use force if necessary to accomplish their ultimate goal of “black liberation.”¹⁶ The youth and students in Memphis show the diversity of the Black Power experience, both embracing and challenging the conventional understanding of “what people generally refer to as Black Power.”¹⁷

Students and youth in Memphis grappled to define Black Power and make the ideology applicable to their local circumstances. What did it mean? Ideologically, Black Power was a political, cultural, and economic call to arms for black people. Black Power promoted racial and cultural pride, self-determination, racial autonomy, as well as the nurturing of independent economic, political, and cultural institutions in black communities. To some advocates of the ideology, blacks had to extricate themselves completely from white society. Only through this purge would blacks achieve any form of true power.¹⁸ In the case of Memphis, certain tenets of the modern Movement were rooted in the figures such as Robert Church, Jr. whose wealth and political organizing within the Republican Party gave him some measure of autonomy for an African American during Jim Crow. In creating their own Black Power framework, youth and students saw Black Power as the means to gain “liberation,” and for others simply a way

¹⁶Ibid.

¹⁷Charles Cabbage, interview.

¹⁸Jeffrey O.G. Ogbar, *Black Power: Radical Politics and African American Identity* (Baltimore: John Hopkins Press, 2004), 2-3.

to show people that they “meant business.”¹⁹ For students, Black Power represented more of a change in consciousness and identity than a call for armed revolution; in their minds, the direct action protests closely associated with the civil rights movement could also serve as instruments of Black Power protest. Charles Cabbage’s proclamation of solidarity with other revolutionary organizations, by contrast, tied the activist and his organization to the Movement’s more extreme elements.

Scholars have broadened our understanding of the Black Power Movement by exploring its effect in local communities, on college campuses, in unions, in poverty programs, among black feminists, and in welfare rights struggles. By casting a wider net, historians have not only uncovered the movement’s depth and effectiveness, but also provided insightful analyses of its limitations and ineffectiveness. These works have helped historians move beyond presenting the movement as simply a “destructive, short-lived, and politically ineffective movement.”²⁰ Instead, “Black Power Studies” now encompass a more nuanced assessment of the successes, failures, and the legacy of the movement.²¹ Instead of juxtaposing the civil rights movement and Black Power Movement against each other, scholars now embrace the “long Black Power movement”

¹⁹Charles Cabbage, interview; “Black Power And What It Means,” *Tiger Rag*, February 16, 1968.

²⁰Peniel E. Joseph, “Reinterpreting the Black Power Movement,” *Organization of American History Magazine of History*, Volume 22, Number 3, (July, 2008): 4-6.

²¹Peniel E. Joseph, ed., *The Black Power Movement: Rethinking the Civil Rights-Black Power Era*, (New York: Routledge Publishing, 2006), 8-9; Joseph coined the term, “Black Power Studies,” which he uses to describe the emerging works that reexamine the Movement. “Black Power Studies,” Joseph suggests, “highlights connections between two historical periods, characterizing the civil rights and Black Power era as a complex mosaic rather than mutually exclusive and antagonistic movements.”

that traces the roots of the classical Black Power period (1966-1975) to postwar era activism and examines Black Power radicalism “side-by-side with nonviolent moderates.”²²

Published in 1992, William Van DeBurg’s *New Day in Babylon: The Black Power Movement and American Culture, 1965-1975* is one of the first works that fully attempted to “explore the rise, maturation, and ultimate decline of the Black Power Movement.”²³ Exploring its manifestations in such areas as style, sports, and film, Van DeBurg argues that culture “broadened the appeal and facilitated the acceptance of Black Power tenets.” Although not ignoring the Movement’s political impact, he suggests, culture, made the Movement “malleable.”²⁴

William Chafe’s *Civilities and Civil Rights: Greensboro, North Carolina and the Black Struggle for Freedom* shows how Greensboro’s African American community battled against the city’s “progressive mystique.”²⁵ In his chapter on Black Power in Greensboro, Chafe argues that activists who came of age during the sit-in Movement used community organizing to achieve power and destroy the progressive mystique by “operating outside of it.” Using alliances between community and campus, Black Power activists worked to build an independent Black Power base to challenge the structure of

²²Ibid.

²³William Van DeBurg, *New Day in Babylon: The Black Power Movement and American Culture, 1965-1975* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 9.

²⁴Ibid.

²⁵William Chafe, *Civilities and Civil Rights: Greensboro, North Carolina and the Black Struggle for Freedom* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980), 173. White business and civic leaders in Greensboro operated under the guise of what Chafe refers to as the “progressive mystique” which he defines as an illusion of progressive attitudes toward racial issues and racial progress.

white racism in Greensboro. Chafe's groundbreaking study is important not only in how it examines Black Power on the local level, but also in how it presents Black Power as an extension of the black community's earlier struggles for civil rights. In Chafe's work Black Power is not reactionary; the sit-ins represent a "starting point" of agitation and Black Power an extension.²⁶

Several recent studies further by highlighted the influence of Black Power in local communities.²⁷ Peniel Joseph argues, "Black Power's reverberations, although national and international in scope, were felt most practically at the local level."²⁸ He suggests that despite the iconography – the clinched fists, the leather jackets and berets, the aggressive posturing – that symbolized and ultimately shaped the public's perception of the Movement, Black Power at the community level still worked toward fulfilling "concrete objectives at the neighborhood level" even if it was "less glamorous."²⁹ Komozi Woodard, Robert Self, Donna March, and Devin Fergus among others, have enhanced our understanding of how Black Power operated on the local level.³⁰

²⁶Ibid, 173.

²⁷Jeanne Theoharis and Komozi Woodard, ed., *Groundwork: Local Black Freedom Movements in America* (New York: New York University Press, 2005), 2; Jeanne Theoharis and Komozi Woodard, ed., *Freedom North: Black Freedom Struggles Outside the South, 1940-1980* (New York: Palgrave and MacMillian Publishing, 2003), 1-13.

²⁸Peniel E. Joseph, ed., *Neighborhood Rebels: Black Power at the Local Level*, (New York: Palgrave MacMillian, 2010), 5.

²⁹Ibid; Peniel E. Joseph, "Rethinking the Black Power Era," *The Journal of Southern History*, Volume LXXV, Number 3, (August, 2009): 707-716.

³⁰For more on these authors please refer to: Komozi Woodward, *A Nation Within A Nation: Amari Baraka (Leroi Jones) and Black Power Politics* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 1999); Robert Self, *American Babylon: The Struggle for Postwar Oakland* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003); Donna Jean Murch, *Living for the City: Migration, Education, and the Rise of the Black Panther Party in Oakland, California* (Chapel Hill: University of North

As Peniel Joseph suggests, pitting Black Power as the civil rights movement's "evil twin" obscures the "parallels" and "intersections" between the two movements.³¹ Although early studies may be guilty of this interpretation, they create a starting point for more inquiry and analysis in future studies. For example, Hasan Jeffries's examination of civil rights and Black Power in Lowndes County, Alabama, shows the continuation of SNCC's grassroots mobilization efforts after SNCC's so-called abandonment of grassroots organizing. Building upon works by Clayborne Carson and Charles Payne, Jeffries's study helps to increase our understanding of SNCC and Black Power.³²

Joseph's characterization of Black Power at the local level as less glamorous but concrete aptly describes the tenor of the Memphis Movement. If it lacked the theatrics of Black Power organizations like Oakland's Black Panther Party, or Los Angeles's US organization, it nevertheless shaped the city's black politics. For example, black students on the campuses of predominately white Memphis State University and historically black LeMoyne-Owen College experimented with Black Power politics in efforts to reform their campuses. In contrast to some other campuses around the country, students on these respective campuses hailed primarily from the city. They understood the city's dynamics more than outsiders, and as such, were immersed in the day-to-day realities of life not

Carolina Press, 2010); Devin Fergus, *Liberalism, Black Power, and the Making of American Politics, 1965-1975* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2009).

³¹Peniel E. Joseph, ed., *Neighborhood Rebels: Black Power at the Local Level* (New York: Palgrave MacMillian, 2010), 1; Peniel E. Joseph, ed., *The Black Power Movement: Rethinking the Civil Rights-Black Power Era*, (New York: Routledge Publishing, 2006), 10.

³²Hasan Kwame Jeffries, *Bloody Lowndes: Civil Rights and Black Power in Alabama's Black Belt* (New York: New York University Press); Clayborne Carson, *In Struggle: SNCC and the Black Awakening of the 1960s* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1980); Charles Payne, *I've Got the Light of Freedom: The Organizing Tradition and the Mississippi Freedom Struggle* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995).

only as college students, but as black Memphians. At these institutions, changing the campus politics by default altered the community dynamics.

Where Memphis and the national Black Freedom Movement intersect is often hard to determine. The city's movement was primarily self-contained. The national NAACP boasted that at times the Memphis branch was among the strongest branches in the South; the chapter rivaled the membership numbers of branches around the country. Branch leaders along with the black community's civic leadership usually determined the mode, scope, and target of protest and often times lagged behind the pace of the national movement. Memphis's cultural currency also tends to obscure the city's more politicized history of protest. The story of Memphis then becomes neatly packaged into accounts of Beale Street, blues music, Sam Phillips' Sun Records, Elvis Presley, and Stax Records' and the Memphis sound. While those entities were sometimes politicized, black activism in the city had, until recent years, received relatively scant scholarly attention.

Some new studies offer insights into the black community's organizing tradition, extending the Memphis narrative beyond the city's cultural relevance. Works from Michael K. Honey, Laurie B. Green, G. Wayne Dowdy, and Sharon D. Wright focus on Memphis's black activism in the realm of labor, politics, and identity. Central to their analyses, however, are adult activists – youth and students remain peripheral. Honey's *Going Down Jericho Road: The Memphis Strike, Martin Luther King's Last Campaign*; Dowdy's *Crusades of Freedom: Memphis and the Political Transformation of the American South*; and Wright's *Race, Power, and Political Emergence in Memphis* all discuss youth activism within the context of the city's sit-in movement during the civil

rights movement in the 1960s.³³ Still, despite crediting the heroics of the youth for breaking Jim Crow's hold on the city's public facilities, they focus on elder activists and labor, political, and civic leadership. Laurie B. Green's *Battling the Plantation Mentality: Memphis and the Black Freedom Struggle* weaves the activism of youth and students into her thematic examination of "how African Americans in Memphis from the postplantation generation struggled to imagine, articulate, and realize ideas of racial justice, equality, and freedom from the eve of the Second World War through the 1968 Sanitation Strike."³⁴ As part of the "postplantation generation," students' articulation of freedom and "the activism that emanated from that" receive intense scrutiny in Green's study. This work continues where Green's analysis of Memphis's students and youth activism ends, while expanding the analysis to engage the emergence, impact, and influence of Black Power and the larger Black Power Movement.

The pages that follow are not a strict chronological account; rather they present several ways that youth and students explicitly and implicitly localized, adopted, adapted, and tailored Black Power philosophy to suit their specific conditions. This is not a story of a city engulfed in a Black Power revolution, nor is it a story of how Black Power triumphed over the moderate politics of the city's white and black establishment. Instead, it does show how Memphis youth and students presented an alternative view of Black Power politics, suggesting not only how an emerging generation defined the black

³³G. Wayne Dowdy, *Crusades for Freedom: Memphis and the Political Transformation of the American South* (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2010); Laurie B. Green, *Battling the Plantation Mentality: Memphis and the Black Freedom Struggle* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007); Michael K. Honey, *Going Down Jericho Road: The Memphis Strike, Martin Luther King's Last Campaign* (New York: W. W. Norton Publishing, 2008); Sharon D. Wright, *Race, Power, and Political Emergence in Memphis* (New York: Routledge Publishing, 1999).

³⁴Green, *Battling the Plantation Mentality*, 13.

freedom struggle, but also how they applied Black Power to subtly shape the broader community.

Chapter One

“The City Was on Fire”: The Beginnings of a Movement

*“How long, how long will the Negro citizens of Memphis have to wait to gain the rights which the Constitution of the United States grants them?”*¹ – **Reverend Benjamin L. Hooks**

*“It became my position even more than ever that organizers going into strange communities and being treated like outsiders needed to go back to their home communities where you can get some protection around yourself, where you can have some support”*² – **Charles Cabbage, Co-Founder, the Black Organizing Project and the Invaders**

“Will 1960 be different?” asked the opinion section of the *Tri-State Defender’s* first publication of the new year. The article included a wish list of different outcomes for racial progress and uplift for 1960. “We wish for a nation,” it read, “in which skin color is not the standard of measurement or the final test by which to judge one’s ability and performance.” The newspaper suggested that the nation use 1960 as a measure of how close it could come to making that a reality, but the author also reflected on past and continuing transgressions. Citing the example of a lynching of an African American man from Mississippi, the writer cautioned that such actions not only reflected horribly on the state of Mississippi, but “smeared America’s conscience,” and by ignoring Mississippi’s racial problem, as well as racial injustices in other Southern states, America was complicit in a “conspiracy of silence.” While the Cold War and the threat of the atomic

¹“Jails Fail to Stop Sit-Ins,” *Tri-State Defender*, March 26, 1960.

²Charles Cabbage, interview by Michael Honey, Memphis, TN, August 4, 2004.

warfare were causes for concern, in the end, freedom, justice, and dignity were not only the rights afforded to whites, but to the “brotherhood of men.”³

If some of Memphis’s African American leadership had their way, indeed 1960 would be different. The beginning of the decade marked a significant period of change for the city of Memphis and the African American community in particular. That year saw an increase in political power and representation for blacks whose votes were once controlled through machine politics. Black Memphians were encouraged by the promises of the events that happened before the new decade even began, particularly the 1959 desegregation of the city’s only public institution of higher learning, Memphis State University (MSU), as well as the emergence of a new group of black middle-class leaders in the mid-1950s.⁴

By 1960 the national spotlight was shifting to the nation’s black youth, who through sit-ins and other direct action protests had begun to place their own stamp on the black freedom struggle. In Memphis black students responded to those protests by initiating their own, becoming integral actors in the local freedom movement. When the sit-ins stopped, and public accommodations, venues, and other facilities were desegregated and the students returned to their campuses, a lull in overt student activism developed, unlike in many instances around the country where the students took the protest back to their respective campuses. However, from that inactivity came the seeds of a local Black Power Movement. It sprung from students and youth, some of whom

³“Will 1960 Be Different,” *Tri-State Defender*, January 9, 1960.

⁴Elizabeth Gritter, “Local Leaders and Community Soldiers,” 6.

were new arrivals, others who had left the city to pursue educational opportunities elsewhere, to serve in the military, or to work in areas of the country with more civil rights movement activity. They returned to Memphis more politicized, more conscious of society's injustices, and more determined to reignite a student movement in Memphis.

In the mid-to-late 1950s a cadre of young African American professionals, some of whom had been denied the opportunity to attend institutions in their own state, arrived or in some cases returned to Memphis armed with degrees from some of the country's most elite institutions "to challenge the white system of oppression."⁵ Attorneys formed a segment of the new black leadership and employed the more moderate approach of pursuing racial justice through litigation, while also challenging the racial status quo via the political arena. In 1959, running for local office on the all-black "Volunteer Ticket," Attorneys Archie Walter (A.W.) Willis, Jr., Benjamin L. Hooks, Jr., and Russell Sugarmon, and ministers Henry Bunton and Roy Love believed that Memphians were ready for black representation in local politics. Despite a large voter turnout, no one on the Volunteer Ticket won election. However, G. Wayne Dowdy suggests that the campaign "electrified the black community" and also "integrated Memphis into a larger, national movement that was battling on many fronts to crush segregation and secure full citizenship for black Americans."⁶ Though defeated, the Volunteer Ticket represented an early glimpse of the city's new black political leadership, as well as the black

⁵Sherry L. Hoppe and Bruce W. Speck, *Maxine's Unwilling Pupils: Lessons Learned in Memphis's Civil Rights Classroom, An Authorized Biography of Maxine Atkins Smith* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2007), 18.

⁶Dowdy, *Crusades For Freedom*, 66-72.

community's resolve to break white domination over local politics.⁷ The 1959 political maneuverings of Sugarmon, Willis, Hooks, and other black candidates served as a prelude to the changing political and social fortunes forthcoming to black Memphians in 1960.

Someone might look at the Volunteer Ticket and mistake it for a partial roster of the Executive Committee of the Memphis Branch of the NAACP. Representing the primary vehicle that promoted and protected the interest of Memphis's African Americans community, the branch's leadership consisted of the more "prominent blacks in the city," and left those outside of the inner circle distant from the organization's political maneuvering.⁸ The chapter organized in June 1917, and officially chartered in 1918 in response to the brutal lynching of Ell Persons, whom whites falsely accused of raping a white woman. Despite an official investigation from James Weldon Johnson that yielded no evidence of Persons's guilt, a white mob burned the victim alive in a public spectacle. Robert Church, Jr., the son of Robert Church Sr., the nation's first black millionaire took the lead in organizing the branch. Under Church's watchful eye, the Memphis chapter began to thrive, while Church became a leading black voice in the Republican Party.⁹

⁷Ibid. In the aftermath of the election, Sugarmon, Willis, and Hooks along with A. Maceo Walker, H. A. Gilliam, and Jesse Turner formed the Shelby County Democratic Club, which Dowdy argues was the leaders' attempt to "expand black political power in Memphis."

⁸James D. Conway, Jr. "Beyond 1968: The 1969 Black Monday Protest in Memphis, Tennessee" (Seminar Paper, University of Memphis, 2006), 9.

⁹Gloria Melton Brown, "Blacks in Memphis, Tennessee: A Historical Study" (PhD diss., Memphis State University, 1982), 58; Church took the lead in organizing the local branch because of his political influence, but Bert Roddy served as the first head of the branch.

The branch represented Memphis's version of W.E.B. DuBois's Talented Tenth philosophy – Memphis's black elite attempted to uplift the city's black masses.¹⁰ When the branch experienced a period of inactivity after Church's influence with the Republican Party ended in the late 1920s and early 1930s, the chapter's reorganization in the 1940s and 1950s ushered the chapter back to a place of prominence among the nation's local branches. The constellation of young black professionals –Vasco and Maxine Smith, Russell and Laurie Sugarmon, A.W. and Anne Willis, Ben and Frances Hooks, Jesse and Allegra Turner, and H.T. Lockard – changed the direction of the branch and the city's black freedom struggle.¹¹ However, other organizers took note of the city's "sophisticated leadership" and those readily recognized as leaders in the community. "You had to have degrees to have any power here...This made Memphis different than some cities," noted Memphis union organizer Alzada Clark.¹²

Maxine Smith recalled the excitement that she and her husband Vasco felt about returning to Memphis. "What are we so excited about? Memphis was completely segregated," Smith remembered. "We didn't have jobs. We didn't have a home...[But] you know it's home."¹³ The Smiths made the return home on the heels of the *Brown v. Board* decision, which outlawed the separate but equal doctrine in public schools, hopeful that its impact would change the racial dynamics of the completely segregated city. "We

¹⁰Ibid.

¹¹Roger Biles, *Memphis In the Great Depression* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1986), 106.

¹²Honey, *Going Down Jericho Road*, 38.

¹³Gritter, "Local Leaders and Community Soldiers," 9.

came back to Memphis looking for a civil rights organization in the community to identify ourselves with and the NAACP was the one here,” recalled Maxine.¹⁴ Although *Brown* made Smith and other African Americans optimistic about the possibility that the segregated barriers in other social and political arenas would also tumble, the failure of the Supreme Court to provide any guidelines for enforcement and the reluctance and refusal of the states to comply dampened their hopes.

But Lockard, who Russell Sugarmon described as a “very determined person” and Vasco Smith, credited for laying the “foundation for a lot of things that happened early on” before their arrival did not allow *Brown* or the ambiguity of *Brown II*’s “all deliberate speed” ruling to deter the movement.¹⁵ Instead of beginning the desegregation efforts with the grade schools, in 1955 Lockard, the NAACP branch, and five students targeted the city’s only public institution of higher education, Memphis State College and its five-year gradual plan for desegregation. The Tennessee State Board of Education’s proposed plan recommended that desegregation begin at the graduate school level in an attempt to “avoid friction.” While unsatisfied with the school’s gradual plan, Atty. Willis called the Board’s recommendation “unique” because it was the first case in the country that offered any solution for integration.¹⁶ After four years and attempts by Maxine Smith and Laurie Sugarmon in 1957 to attend Memphis State, in 1959 the first eight African

¹⁴Maxine Smith, interview by James Mosby, July 11, 1968, The Ralph J. Bunche Oral History Collection, The Civil Rights Documentation Project, Howard University, Washington, DC.

¹⁵Ibid.

¹⁶“Negroes Tell Bias of MSC Lawsuit,” *Memphis Press-Scimitar*, October 12, 1955.

Americans enrolled at Memphis State University, setting the stage for the next level of activism.¹⁷

While celebrating the 103rd anniversary of President Abraham Lincoln's signing of the Emancipation Proclamation, sponsored by the Emancipation Association of Shelby County at a ceremony at Ellis Auditorium, Lieutenant George W. Lee, an influential African American political and business leader in the city, suggested that blacks would flex their political muscle in the upcoming year in an "emancipation campaign" of their own. He was speaking to the newly elected City Commission as well as his audience. Judge Hobson R. Reynolds, an assistant to the Commissioner of Federal Housing Administration, also spoke at the ceremony and echoed Lee. Reynolds advocated the use of black political power in the same manner that Black Power activists such as Stokely Carmichael would promote years later. "When we get enough Negroes voting in all cities and precincts, when we can vote a mayor in and vote him out, when we can elect a sheriff and vote him out, it won't be long before we have all our civil rights and become first class citizens wherever we live," Reynolds proclaimed. Comparing the struggle of African Americans to that of the biblical story of Moses and the children of Israel, Reynolds told the crowd that that like Moses, "we have been on top of the mountaintop. We have viewed freedom...it looks good to us...with the help of God we are going to

¹⁷"Eight Negroes enrolled at Memphis State, 'No Doors Barred,'" Says Dean Robison, *Memphis Press-Scimitar*, September 11, 1959; Hope and Speck, *Maxine Smith's Unwilling Pupils*, 12. Smith credits Memphis State's refusal to admit her and Sugarmon with fueling her activism. A year later she became the Executive Secretary of the Memphis branch.

have it in this generation.” The meeting culminated when leadership adopted a program to eradicate discrimination in the city.¹⁸

Shortly after the Emancipation Proclamation celebration, two African American men were refused entry into an automobile show at the same Ellis Auditorium where Lee and Reynolds promised to attack racism head-on. The two men, Burleigh Hines, Jr. and George Hardin, worked for the *Tri-State Defender* and decided to spend their lunch break and their money at the event. Police officers turned the two men away from the auto show, which in addition to showcasing the latest automobiles was also a fundraiser for St. Jude Children’s Hospital.¹⁹ Star of the television show *Make Room for Daddy* Danny Thomas began plans to bring the hospital to Memphis in 1955 and the city pledged to help raise money for the project.²⁰ Hines questioned the city’s motives for bringing the hospital to Memphis. Would the hospital simply be another “landmark”? Would it be segregated?²¹ After the incident the men contacted Downing Pryor, president of the Memphis Auto Dealers Association, the event’s sponsor. Pryor explained to the men that the association only followed the city’s segregation policy. “You can’t negotiate the law,” Pryor explained. By keeping out African Americans “we will probably lose \$30,000 to \$40,000 in ticket sales. This is a matter for the city – don’t single out the automobile dealers.”²²

¹⁸“Puts New City Fathers On Guard: Negroes Tired of Local Abuses,” *Tri-State Defender*, January 9, 1960.

¹⁹“Bar Negroes From Auto Show: City is Blamed,” *Tri-State Defender*, January 16, 1960.

²⁰Dowdy, *Crusades For Freedom*, 41.

²¹“Bar Negroes from Auto Show,” *Tri-State Defender*, January 16, 1960. In 1968 Downing was elected to the City Council under the reorganized Mayor-City Council government.

Memphis's African American community nevertheless pledged to purchase cars from dealerships outside of the city. On January 15 over three hundred angry and frustrated African Americans attended a meeting at Pentecostal Temple to protest the ban of African Americans from the auto show.²³ The crowd agreed not to buy cars from Memphis dealers for at least twelve months. However, in a larger display of their contempt and frustration with the city's discriminatory policies, black Memphians also decided to protest the "biased methods employed by the zoo, the stupid manner in which the buses maintain their seating arrangement, the library nonsense, the eating situation at the railroad stations, bus terminals, and airports, segregation in public schools, and segregation in Ellis Auditorium," the issue that brought the crowd together in the first place. A who's who of the city's black leadership including Benjamin L. Hooks, Jr., Jesse Turner, Reverend J. W. Golden, W. W. Walker, A. Maceo Walker, James T. Walker, and O. Z. Evers took turns addressing the audience. "The Negro is the lowest paid, the last hired and the first fired. They are frequent victims of malicious police brutality," said Turner, vice-president and treasurer of Tri-State Bank. While James T. Walker suggested that progress would come a lot faster if blacks joined civic clubs and the NAACP. The leaders elected Ben Hooks to lead the temporary organization to address the community's concern.²⁴

Vowing to go the limit, A. W. Willis, Jr. told the *Tri-State Defender* that at least two individuals inquired about the possibility of bringing a suit against the city to open

²²Ibid.

²³Green, *Battling the Plantation Mentality*, 225-226.

²⁴"Crowd Protests Meeting: Organize to Fight Bias," *Tri-State Defender*, January 23, 1960.

Ellis Auditorium on a “non-segregated basis.”²⁵ The temporary organization that formed out of the fervor of the January 15 meeting officially became the Memphis and Shelby County Improvement Association (MSCIA) with Hooks continuing as head of the organization. MSCIA leadership immediately drafted a resolution to all Memphis area automotive dealers demanding a public apology by February 1 for the embarrassing exclusion of blacks from the auto show.²⁶ Although Pryor and the Memphis Auto Dealers Association issued an apology by the deadline, MSCIA remained unmoved by the auto dealers’ “weak” apology.²⁷ The leadership did, however, derive some satisfaction in discovering that the auto show netted a loss of \$21,000.²⁸

According to the *Tri-State Defender*, “gears in the freedom fight” had shifted. After the auto show snub the paper estimated that it had received more letters to the editor in one month than it normally did in one year. However, according to the paper, some black Memphians caught up in the excitement of the meeting at Pentecostal Temple failed to follow through with the pledge to avoid the city’s car dealerships. The paper told to black Memphians to “put up or shut up,” and realize their collective buying power and join forces with the MSCIA and the NAACP. “Why don’t we stop playing cat and mouse

²⁵“May Sue to End Auditorium Bias,” *Tri-State Defender*, January 23, 1960.

²⁶“Shift Gears in Freedom Fight,” *Tri-State Defender*, January 30, 1960.

²⁷“Dealers Apologize But Letter From Auto Association Called ‘Weak,’” *Tri-State Defender*, January 20, 1960.

²⁸“Rap Auto Show For Red Ink,” *Tri-State Defender*, January 27, 1960.

with this business of segregation and discrimination and why don't we decide to put our money where our mouth is and get some real action," the article asked.²⁹

"The Negro youth have just about lost patience with their adults. They want their constitutional rights...we have got to accept the challenge or stand condemned before our youth," proclaimed Ruby Hurley, Secretary for the Southeast Regional NAACP. Hurley, speaking at the NAACP's Southeast Regional Conference in Memphis, referenced the explosion of sit-ins that began on February 1, 1960 in Greensboro, North Carolina when four students at historically black North Carolina A&T College quietly sat at a Woolworth's lunch counter and asked for service.³⁰ Students in neighboring Nashville had already been carefully planning to move on the capital's segregated facilities before the spontaneous protest of the four A&T freshmen.³¹ As "an important locale for Southern student activism," students from the city's historically black institutions – Tennessee A&I, Fisk, Meharry Medical College, and American Baptist Theological Seminary – constituted the majority of the movement's participants, but some white students from Vanderbilt also became involved in the sit-ins. A tightly organized movement, the early efforts of the young Nashville activists were led by Vanderbilt Theology School student James Lawson, who later became a central figure in the Memphis civil rights struggle. As an "admirer of Gandhi," Lawson instituted workshops in nonviolent direct action techniques that made the participants in the Nashville Student

²⁹"Put Up Or Shut Up," *Tri-State Defender*, February 27, 1960.

³⁰"NAACP Youth Resolve to Extend Sit-Ins All Over Southeast Area," *Tri-State Defender*, February 27, 1960.

Movement “the best schooled in the theory and practice of nonviolent direct action.” The local Nashville movement spawned national leaders in Diane Nash, John Lewis, James Bevel, and LeMoyne College alumnus, Marion Barry.³² The Nashville contingent would provide the initial phase of the new student movement with its character.³³

Both the Nashville and A&T students utilized direct action protest, an old but effective tactic. In *The Origins of the Civil Rights Movement*, Aldon Morris argues that it was direct action protest in such places as Baton Rouge, Louisiana; Montgomery, Alabama; and Tallahassee, Florida that “set the modern civil rights movement in motion.”³⁴ Direct action proved to be extremely effective because it resonated with young people around the country. Sit-ins were “democratic and egalitarian,” as well as “easy to replicate.” It was not necessary for students to belong to any organization to start or participate in a sit-in. “Each person became the leader of his or her protest,” Andrew B. Lewis suggests. The students’ use of direct action in the sit-ins “revived the movement” when it stagnated after the *Brown v Board* decision and the Montgomery Bus Boycott.³⁵

The sit-ins eventually sparked the beginning of a new phase of the student-initiated movement that led to the formation of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), arguably the most influential civil rights organization of the 1960s. SNCC was more radical, more assertive, and more grassroots-oriented than the other

³²Ibid.

³³Turner, *Sitting In And Speaking Out*, 51, 55. The Atlanta student movement was also well organized and benefited from the support from some of the city’s black elite.

³⁴Aldon D. Morris, *The Origins of the Civil Rights Movement: Black Communities Organizing for Change* (New York: Free Press, 1984), 174.

³⁵Young, *The Shadows of Youth*, 4.

major civil rights organizations of its day. At the organizing meeting on the campus of Shaw University, SCLC Director of Programs Ella Baker, reminded the students that there was more at stake than just winning the right to enjoy a hamburger at a lunch counter. She suggested that the students form SNCC and work together, independent of the adult organizations, to create a mass movement to challenge the entire Jim Crow system.³⁶

The 1960 sit-in at the Greensboro Woolworth spawned similar responses across the country. And with adults reneging on their promises to boycott the auto dealerships, it became imperative for students in Memphis to act. “We had talked about conducting a sit-in before Greensboro,” recalled Edgar Young, a student at the historically black institution LeMoyne College. “No one thought it would work because protest movements were played down and didn’t get much publicity, so we didn’t.”³⁷ Laurie Green argues in *Battling the Plantation Mentality* that many of the students involved in the sit-in movement were already familiar with grassroots activism through their participation with neighborhood civic clubs, but this new, more direct protest method invigorated the students and infused a new sense of race pride and freedom.³⁸ As a student at the all black Owen Junior College in 1960, Gwen Glover felt encouraged by the groundswell of student activism in other places. Glover recalled, “One Friday, the kids were talking

³⁶Clayborne Carson, *In Struggle: SNCC and the Black Awakening of the 1960s* (Cambridge: Harvard Press, 1995), 9.

³⁷“The Group Will Talk About Old Days and the Dawn of Some Brighter Ones,” *Memphis Press-Scimitar*, March 19, 1980.

³⁸Green, *Battling the Plantation Mentality*, 232.

about it [the Greensboro sit-in] in the newspaper and on TV. It was frightening and scary, but it inspired me to do something in Memphis.”³⁹

While the sit-in movement around the country gained more and more momentum, Memphis’s African American leadership battled internally with the speed and intensity of the movement. The *Tri-State Defender* reported on a “conflict brewing between two of the most potent Negro groups in Memphis – the NAACP and the Binghamton Civic Club.” O. Z. Evers, who filed a lawsuit against the bus company and the city in 1956 that then-NAACP President H.T. Lockard argued on his behalf, attacked the NAACP and its leadership for its “state of complacency.”⁴⁰ Evers, the president of the Binghamton Civic Club, a neighborhood grassroots organization, suggested that the NAACP lacked “social responsibility.” Evers asked, “why haven’t we joined hands with the rest of the Southern Negroes in the sit-downs?”⁴¹ NAACP Counsel, Russell B. Sugarmon, Jr. felt no need to defend the organization, but took a shot at Evers and his accusation. “Our record stands for itself... anyone criticizing the NAACP should first join it and then make his disapprovals known,” said Sugarmon. But Sugarmon also suggested that the civic club membership included a number of youth and instead of waiting for the NAACP,

³⁹“African-American College Students Used Sit-Ins to Tear Down Walls of Segregation,” *Tri-State Defender*, March 12-18, 2009.

⁴⁰Gritter, “Local Leaders and Community Soldiers,” 11-12; Gritter quotes Lockard as saying that the Evers suit, *Evers v. Dwyer* was the “first suit that struck the nerve of the power structure,” in Memphis; “Civic Club and NAACP In Hot Exchange,” *Tri-State Defender*, March 12, 1960. Evers also ran for office in 1959. However, he was not a part of the Volunteer Ticket, which possibly explains the divide between Evers and Sugarmon.

⁴¹“Civic Club and NAACP In Hot Exchange,” *Tri-State Defender*, March 12, 1960. Evers also ran for office in 1959. However, he was not a part of the Volunteer Ticket, which possibly explains the divide between Evers and Sugarmon.

which remained committed to fighting racial injustice through the court system, they should act.⁴²

Evers assumed that adults needed to dispatch the students to move. To a large degree the students worked closely with the adults in planning protest and targets. However, some students, acting independently of the NAACP, had already begun formulating ways to attack the city's segregated venues. While the NAACP was planning how and when to begin a sit-in campaign, according to Maxine Smith, the students "jumped the gun."⁴³ Marion Barry, president of SNCC, provided the students with a spark. A local product and graduate of Booker T. Washington High School and LeMoyne College, Barry, Memphis's most famous student activist, returned to the city where his activist career began. He would "carry the gospel to the students," encouraging his alma mater to get involved.⁴⁴

If anyone could connect Memphis's local struggle to the national movement emerging across the nation, Barry could. During Barry's matriculation at LeMoyne he served as the Vice-President of the campus chapter of Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity, joined the student council, and led the school's chapter of the NAACP. As a youth growing up in his South Memphis neighborhood, Barry despised the inequalities that Memphis's African American community endured. Aside from the day-to-day indignities that blacks faced on a personal level, segregation remained a way of life. The reality that places

⁴²Ibid.

⁴³Elizabeth Gritter, "Local Leaders and Community Soldiers," 52.

⁴⁴"Profiles in Courage: African-American College Students Used Sit-Ins to Tear Down Walls of Segregation," *Tri-State Defender*, March 12-18, 2009; Russell Sugarmon, interview by James Mosby, May 25, 1968, The Ralph J. Bunche Oral History Collection, The Civil Rights Documentation Project, Howard University Howard University, Washington, DC.

generally reserved for children and family enjoyment and educational enrichment were either off-limits or only open to blacks on specific days of the week was especially hard for youth to understand. On “Black Thursday” they could visit the zoo, Brooks Memorial Art Gallery, and the main branches of the library, and during the summer the city hosted the Negro Tri-State Fair. For one day African Americans could visit the fairgrounds.⁴⁵ “We had no power and no previous cases to look at,” remarked Barry. “In the segregated Negro libraries there were no books or anything about race or Negroes. Still, I felt I should be doing something about the race problem,” Barry continued.⁴⁶

While at LeMoyne, Barry put his thoughts into action and confronted the race problem as the head of the college’s NAACP chapter. As a senior in 1959, Barry wrote a strongly worded letter encouraging Dr. Hollis F. Price, the President of LeMoyne College, to remove former Memphis Mayor Walter Chandler from the college’s board of trustees. Chandler, who served as mayor of the city from 1940 to 1946, and then again in 1955, acted on behalf of the city as special counsel in a city transit bus desegregation suit.⁴⁷ Barry and the students expressed discontent with Chandler’s role, taking particular exception to the disparaging statements attributed to the former Mayor during the trial. Barry wrote on behalf of the student body:

We feel that it is humiliating and embarrassing that such an obvious demagogue should have direct connection with our college, especially when this institution stressed to its students the importance of fighting for equal rights. We feel that to permit such deplorable antics to go unanswered, in view of this alleged emphasis and to allow their performer to remain on the board constitutes and [sic] insult to

⁴⁵Wright, *Race, Power, and Political Emergence in Memphis*, 56.

⁴⁶Jonathan I. Z. Agronsky, *Marion Barry: The Politics of Race* (New York: British American Publishing, 1991), 89.

⁴⁷“Remove Chandler-NAACP,” *LeMoyne College Magician*, March 13, 1959, LeMoyne-Owen College Archives, Memphis, Tennessee.

intelligence of the students and the integrity of all that our college allegedly stands for.⁴⁸

Barry's admonishment of Mayor Chandler placed Dr. Price in a precarious situation. Jeffrey Turner argues in *Sitting In and Speaking Out: Student Movements in the American South, 1960-1970* that "public colleges, more vulnerable to external pressures because of state control, were less likely than private institutions to produce demonstrations." Yet as Memphis's primary vehicle for higher education for African Americans, LeMoyne itself could only insulate so much from scrutiny and reprisals.⁴⁹ Furthermore, Price's tenure marked the first time in the school's history that an African American served as president. Therefore, he had an obligation to answer not only to the students and the community, but also to the school's board of trustees.

On one hand, Chandler held a position as a trustee of the historically black college. On the other hand, as special counsel for the city, he argued in favor of the segregationist transit policy. Barry urged the administration to confront that contradiction and support the students' fight to destroy the system that Chandler was working to continue. In spite of their efforts, Chandler stayed on as a member of the board of trustees. The incident, however, cemented Barry's status among the LeMoyne student body. When he returned a year later and addressed the student body in the wake of the sit-ins, Dr. Price asked Barry to leave LeMoyne's campus. Instead, LeMoyne students

⁴⁸Ibid.

⁴⁹Turner, *Sitting In And Speaking Out*, 49.

followed Barry to Owen Junior College, where he continued to encourage student protest.⁵⁰

As in Greensboro and Nashville, it was the students at the city's historically black college led the sit-in charge. "Everybody was saying we would get put out of school if we participated...President Price told us that our parents could lose their jobs," recalled Grace Austin-Meacham forty years after her participation in the sit-in movement in Memphis.⁵¹ As a LeMoyne College student in 1960, Austin, like others her age, decided that risking their education, parents' jobs, and future career opportunities to change the status quo was a risk worth taking. Former LeMoyne student Charles Diggs suggested that students risked any financial supplement awarded by the school for participating in the movement. "In a roundabout way the administration said, 'well if you got arrested for participating in civil functions you could lose your student aid...you could lose your scholarship,'" Diggs recalled.⁵²

A week after the *Tri-State Defender* reported on the rift between the Binghampton Civic Club and the NAACP, students from Owen staged the city's first sit-in. On March 18, 1960, seven Owen students quietly walked into a downtown store and sat at the whites-only lunch counter. They were refused service and not arrested, but another group, this time from Owen and LeMoyne, "frustrated by the lack of progress in desegregating

⁵⁰Profiles in Courage: African-American College Students Used Sit-Ins to Tear Down Walls of Segregation," *Tri-State Defender*, March 12-18, 2009.

⁵¹Ibid.

⁵²Charles Diggs, interview by Author, Memphis, TN, October 16, 2009.

the libraries,” followed their actions the very next day.⁵³ In contrast to sit-ins in other cities where protestors focused on integrating lunch counters, students in Memphis targeted the city’s public libraries in a move that clearly prioritized their desire for equal access to the city’s educational resources.⁵⁴ Blacks could patronize the Vance Avenue and Cossitt Branch libraries, but not other libraries with more resources.⁵⁵ “Fiction, biographies, and some reference works were off limits,” recalled Edgar Young, “I had a library card, but I couldn’t check out the books I wanted.” Young argued that his parents’ tax dollars entitled him to equal access to the libraries. In an effort to break the barrier that restricted their right to use the library, the students targeted the Cossitt and main library branches. Shortly after the students’ arrival, library employees called the police, who subsequently arrested the students.⁵⁶

Despite any earlier conflict between the Binghamton Civic Club and the NAACP, black leadership and the black community rallied around the students. In the immediate aftermath of the students’ arrest, the NAACP called a meeting with black ministers and “leading black citizens of Memphis.” The NAACP issued a statement of support for the students, even though the organization did not initiate the movement. And although students attended the meeting, the ministers dominated the platform. “We will go to jail and we are willing to suffer. If we are not willing we do not need to be free,” said a minister. The ministers, community leaders, students, and their parents left the

⁵³Dowdy, *Crusade For Freedom*, 78.

⁵⁴Green, *Battling the Plantation Mentality*, 233

⁵⁵Dowdy, *Crusade For Freedom*, 78. The Cossitt Library opened up its reference section to African Americans in 1959, but the other departments remained off-limits.

⁵⁶“The Group Will Talk About Old Days and the Dawn of Some Brighter Ones,” *Memphis Press-Scimitar*, March 19, 1980.

meeting and proceeded directly to the jail to greet the arrested students as they were released.⁵⁷

Black community leaders urged the adults to support the students by attending their court trial, but when more people arrived than the room could hold, the 2,000 supporters filled the Mt. Olive CME Cathedral sanctuary.⁵⁸ After the ministers led the group in prayer, they proposed what essentially amounted to a boycott of downtown stores for the Easter holiday. Leaders stopped short of calling the protest a boycott; instead, they asked the audience to sacrifice their usual Easter shopping for the greater good of the growing movement. Any black person who chose Easter fashions over the black community's stance should "hang their head in shame," said one minister. "We would rather be dressed like paupers than to be dressed like princes and be treated like a slave," said Reverend D. W. Browning.⁵⁹

The *Tri-State Defender* dubbed the arrested students the "New Negroes," referencing Harlem Renaissance writer Alain Locke's volume of the same name. Beyond simply a title of a literary work, the New Negro movement of the 1920s advanced a new militancy and the transformation of the image of African Americans as subservient and passive to assertive, independent, and racially conscious.⁶⁰ The paper's reference to the students as "New Negroes" contextualized their protest by placing the students' activism

⁵⁷"Memphians Rally; Help Arrested in Sit-Downs," *Tri-State Defender*, March 26, 1960.

⁵⁸"Jails Fail to Stop Sit-Ins: Negroes at Fever Pitch, Vow All Out Support of Students," *Tri-State Defender*, March 26, 1960. The arrested were charged with disorderly conducted, fined \$26, and the loitering, which was eventually dismissed.

⁵⁹Ibid.

⁶⁰David Levering Lewis, *When Harlem Was In Vogue* (New York, Penguin Books, 1997), 117-118.

in the same category as Harlem Renaissance era cultural and political figures. The students' refusal to capitulate to standards set by whites captured the ethos of the New Negro movement.⁶¹

In response to their growing protest activity, LeMoyne students, some of whom held membership in the college's chapter of the NAACP, the branch's youth councils, or in neighborhood civic clubs organizing, formed the Student Movement Organization (SMO).⁶² Although SMO did not affiliate with SNCC in an official capacity, the group operated in a similar fashion to the local student movement groups that eventually formed SNCC. Instead of continuing to operate through the civic clubs or the NAACP, the students chose to form an autonomous, student-centered organization to coordinate sit-ins. Adults remained central to the movement in terms of financial and legal support. However, "student protestors brought a spirit of urgency to the movement that transformed previous civil rights approaches."⁶³ While they welcomed the support of the adult community, the sit-ins represented protest on their terms.

The intensity and frequency of the protests increased into the spring. The black community strengthened their support for the "darlings of democracy."⁶⁴ After initially

⁶¹Ibid; "All Library Branches are Desegregated; Student Group Launches 'Operation 500'," *LeMoyne College Magician* October 1960, LeMoyne-Owen College Archives, Memphis, Tennessee.

⁶²Green, *Battling the Plantation Mentality*, 233.

⁶³Ibid, 237.

⁶⁴"It is up to the City," *Tri-State Defender*, April 2, 1960. The editorial referred to the student protestors as the new "darlings of democracy."

targeting the libraries, the protestors blitzed the city's segregated business and public facilities.⁶⁵ Students expanded their protest to golf courses, park and recreational facilities, museums, and restaurants throughout the city.⁶⁶ Their strategy of sitting-in at lunch counters during the lunch hour caught proprietors and policemen off-guard.⁶⁷ In late March, the Memphis Committee on Community Relations (MCCR), a moderate, interracial coalition of some of the city's more prominent African American and white civic and community leaders, appealed to Mayor Henry Loeb and the City Commission to finally end segregation in public facilities.⁶⁸ The attorneys representing the sit-inners asked the students to stop demonstrations for two weeks as they negotiated with city officials.⁶⁹ The attorneys cautioned the city officials that although they appealed to the students for a "cooling off period," they ultimately had "no control over the actions of the city's young people."⁷⁰ The students resumed protest two weeks later when city officials refused to desegregate public facilities.⁷¹

⁶⁵"3 Arrested for Sit-in," *Memphis Press-Scimitar*, September 3, 1960; "All Library Branches are Desegregated; Student Group Launches 'Operation 500'," *LeMoyne College Magician* October 1960, LeMoyne-Owen College Archives, Memphis, Tennessee. The city desegregated the libraries by October.

⁶⁶"7 Desegregation Suits in Court, Involve Use of Memphis' Public Facilities – More Are Planned," *Memphis Press Scimitar*, April 2, 1960; There were several attempts to desegregate public facilities and accommodations in Memphis prior to the formal beginnings of the sit-in movement in 1960. There were several suits in court alleging discriminatory practices in such places as the city zoo, public transportation, and several restaurants.

⁶⁷"Students Hit Churches and Lunch Counters," *Tri-State Defender*, August 27, 1960.

⁶⁸Wright, *Race, Power, and Political Emergence in Memphis*, 57.

⁶⁹"It is up to the City" *Tri-State Defender*, April 2, 1960.

⁷⁰Ibid.

⁷¹"9 Sit-Ins Resume," *Tri-State Defender*, May 21, 1960; Wright, *Race, Power, and Political Emergence in Memphis*, 57.

The city's rebuff of the attorneys' proposal reaffirmed the students' belief that change would only come through continued protest. As they placed white-owned and white-controlled public facilities, business, and community institutions under attack, students also picketed the Cotton Makers Jubilee, the African American counterpart to the white-only Cotton Carnival celebration. The event, which celebrated all things cotton, followed Memphis's usual segregated pattern. This time, however, students not only criticized the Cotton Carnival, but also argued that the Cotton Makers Jubilee helped to "further the cause of segregation."⁷² A LeMoyne student explained the students' position:

We feel that cotton does nothing for Negroes to cause them to celebrate. The Cotton Makers Jubilee represents the Negro version of the Cotton Carnival and does represent the thinking of the Negroes who are aware of the critical issues we are facing in Memphis. By condoning a cotton celebration, Negroes are paying tribute to the system that undergirded the entire slavery period. The Cotton Jubilee is another segregated institution just like the library, zoo, and other facilities here, and just like the lunch counters.⁷³

The student further suggested that the event's sponsors were "brainwashed" into thinking that having a segregated event was better than no celebration at all.⁷⁴ The sit-ins transformed their consciousness. No longer did they accept segregation as the status quo. By boycotting the event, the students exposed the hypocrisy of the celebrated community festival. They also challenged the adults, urging them to reexamine their role in perpetuating segregation.

The activism of the students, however, excited and inspired the black community. Russell Sugarmon described it as a "shot of adrenaline" to the community, but students

⁷²"Why Students Picket Cotton Jubilee: Call For End of Celebration, *Tri-State Defender*, May 14, 1960.

⁷³Ibid.

⁷⁴Ibid.

felt the most empowered. They could open the newspaper, turn on the radio, or if fortunate enough, the television and read, hear, or see students around the country engaging in same fight to crush segregation. Protest united the students from different locations, with different economic backgrounds, and with different levels of political engagement, together working toward the same goal.⁷⁵

With the “inevitability of court-ordered desegregation” looming, the city stopped the practice of segregation in libraries, buses, restaurants, the city zoo and parks in the fall of 1960. An eighteen-month “Freedom Movement, which included daily picketing and sit-ins, weekly Freedom Marches, a boycott of Main Street stores and their branches, weekly Neighborhood Freedom Rallies, and Pickets and Sit-in Schools” sparked in part by the students’ sit-ins applied the pressure that forced the city and merchants to open up facilities to blacks.

In October 1961 the first African American students entered public elementary schools, and by 1962 the movies and restaurants and intrastate transportation facilities were ordered to end their segregated practices. “The official end of legalized segregation” in Memphis finally came in 1963 when the Memphis City and Park Commission finally outlawed segregation in recreational facilities. City government officials ended segregationists’ practice ahead of the 1964 Civil Rights Act.⁷⁶ The city, however, did not make the changes out of an overriding sense of fairness and equity to its black citizenry. Employing a more moderate and prudent approach, members of the MCCR negotiated

⁷⁵Elizabeth Gritter, “Local Leaders and Community Soldiers,” 51.

⁷⁶Wright, *Race, Power, and Political Emergence in Memphis*, 59.

with the city to end segregated practice in public facilities and businesses. In doing so the city avoided most of the extremism that other city's experienced during this time.

However, the pressure from the NAACP and students from LeMoyne College and Owen Junior College began the movement that helped to transform the city's racial dynamics.⁷⁷

The barriers of segregation began to tumble in 1960 as a result of several developments. First, the sit-ins, boycotts, pickets, and protests initiated by the students and supported by the NAACP and the black community pressured city officials and segregated businesses to seriously reconsider their policies. Second, early desegregation efforts by African American leadership prior to 1960 laid the groundwork for the young activists. Although students demanded immediate redress instead of the negotiating and litigious strategies used by organizations like the NAACP, the early efforts of the NAACP and civic clubs to dismantle Jim Crow made the students' campaign that much more effective. Third, during this period there was very little dissension among the black community. The moral and financial support from the black community helped keep the movement going. Last, but most important, the resolve of the students to crush the city's system of segregation reinvigorated the entire black community. Despite years of fighting and protests, very little had changed for blacks in the city. Not only did the protests bring about the desegregation of public facilities, but it also helped increase the membership of the local NAACP, and as a result, the branch became the largest in the South.⁷⁸

⁷⁷Ibid, 53.

⁷⁸Green, *Battling the Plantation Mentality*, 235

An April 1964 *New York Times* article suggested that Memphis had “made more progress toward desegregation with less strife than any other majority city in the Deep South.” Still, many in the black community, and even in the black leadership were not satisfied with what they called only “token” gains. While the NAACP and the Shelby County Democratic Club continued to battle in court and in the political arena, in the shadows frustrated students looked around Memphis and saw desegregated facilities, but they still encountered police brutality and lived in impoverished communities. At Memphis State University, the students continued to face hostility and incidents of discrimination on campus. The Freedom Movement, while successful in many ways, did not address the other inequities of their day-to-day realities. Though the campaign pushed the city further to eliminate discrimination in public facilities, businesses, and other venues than any other effort in the city’s history, the slow progress and moderate approach of the black leadership frustrated some students. The frustration was most apparent in some youth and students who would later become active on campuses and in the community as voices in the call for Black Power.⁷⁹

When David Acey returned home to Memphis after his stint in the Army, he realized that not much had changed in the city or on the campus of Memphis State. He enlisted in the Army in 1960, a year after the school was integrated, and during the period of the sit-ins. Yet when he returned home four years later, his homecoming was bittersweet. Like many soldiers that returned home, Acey looked to transition smoothly into civilian life. He enrolled in Memphis State under the Serviceman Readjustment Act,

⁷⁹Gritter, “Local Leaders and Community Soldiers,” 95-96.

or the G.I. Bill. In 1944 Franklin Roosevelt signed the G.I. Bill into law, providing veteran's assistance in pursuing education, opening small businesses, and affordable home loans to aid in the American dream of homeownership. However, Acey's smooth transition clashed with the harsh reality of Memphis State's racial landscape. Acey already had a year of college experience at LeMoyne College prior to his enlistment. "When I enrolled, we had no black teachers, no black secretary, no policemen, no nothing African American or black but the people picking up the garbage and cutting the yard. We didn't have sororities; we couldn't participate in any homecoming activities. We couldn't do anything but go to class...I felt cheated," Acey recalled forty years later.⁸⁰

Acey, James Pope, and Ester Hurt, all future leaders of the Memphis State Black Student Association (BSA), were military veterans. Their time serving in the military and traveling around the world had exposed them to life outside of the Jim Crow South. Historically, black men have viewed military service as a "rite of passage into manhood." After World War II Black GI's, embittered by the discrimination they faced, but emboldened by their service in the military, returned ready to confront the racism at home. These veterans became important catalysts for the modern civil rights movement.⁸¹ Through their military service Acey, Pope, and Hurt arrived at Memphis State ready to start a movement of their own. "Us veterans...thought that things could be better here at the university," said Pope.⁸²

⁸⁰David Acey, interview by author, Memphis, TN, June 9, 2009; "The Memphis State 109 were the Catalyst for Racial Change at the University," *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, April 1, 2008. In the article Acey elaborates on his experiences and describes the atmosphere as isolated and the faculty as "racist."

⁸¹Steve Estes, *I Am A Man: Race, Manhood, and the Civil Rights Movement* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005), 12, 36.

Charles Cabbage and Coby Smith believed things could be better not only at Memphis State, but in Memphis in general. Both men were high school students during the sit-in movements, but that experience impacted them both differently, altering their path to activism. In the mid-1960s, both young men, Cabbage from South Memphis and Smith from North Memphis, left the city to pursue other interests. The two men did not know each until they left Memphis, but what they found outside of the city informed their more radical political orientation, which eventually sparked a movement that impacted many of Memphis's black youth.

It was sports, not the civil rights movement that took Charles Cabbage away from Memphis and to Atlanta in 1966. When Charles Cabbage arrived at historically black Morehouse College as a promising basketball talent, he admitted to his political naïveté. Despite the flurry of sit-ins, boycotts, and demonstrations happening in Memphis during his high school days at Carver High, Cab, as his friends called him, did not participate, underscoring the varying levels of political consciousness among the city's youth. Cabbage starred in basketball and track at Carver and his focus on athletics, combined with what he perceived as a lack of youth organizing in Memphis, did not leave time or generate much interest in participating in the local movement in the early 1960s. "There wasn't that kind of free thought going around down here [in Memphis]...I wasn't involved because there wasn't no structure, they weren't organizing or anything."⁸³ But once in Atlanta, Cab found his political and movement sea legs.

⁸²40th Anniversary Commemoration of Martin Luther King, Jr.: The Man, The Mission, The Movement," The University of Memphis, (Audio Recording in the Possession of the Author) April 2, 2008.

Fascinated by the faster pace of the Atlanta movement and the depth of the movement activity, as home to SNCC, SCLC, and the Atlanta University Center, Cab soon began to flow in and out of different political circles, organizing anti-war protests on Morehouse's campus, and soaking up knowledge from more experienced activists.⁸⁴ "They talked revolution. They were always talking about politics. I found that fascinating because I didn't have a background in those things. I had transferred from LeMoyne College...And I just wanted to belong, you know, because they [politically active students] were talking about things that I didn't know anything about."⁸⁵ The opportunity to join Atlanta's movement landscape enticed Cab away from his athletic pursuits, and he retired from the hardwood to focus his full attention on helping the black community.⁸⁶ "He really thought he was going to become a basketball phenomenon. He didn't because of the social ills," said activist Calvin Taylor, "Something told him that something needed to be done more about what was facing American society in the '60s than basketball."⁸⁷

Unlike Cab, Coby Smith had participated in the city's civil rights campaigns. Smith traced his roots in organizing back to his grade school days in Memphis. As a Battalion Commander in National Defense Cadet Corps at Manassas High School, Smith

⁸³Charles Cabbage, interview.

⁸⁴"The Invaders: 'Real Story Never Told,'" *Tri-State Defender*, April 4, 2008.

⁸⁵Charles Cabbage, interview.

⁸⁶The Atlanta University Center is a consortium of several historically black colleges and universities in Atlanta, Georgia. Presently, the AUC consortium includes: Morehouse College, Spelman College, Clark Atlanta University, Morris Brown, and Morehouse School of Medicine

⁸⁷"Activist Charles Cabbage a Voice for Reason," *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, June 29, 2010.

won the Legion of Valor award in 1963 during his senior year and became not only the first African American Memphis Cadet Corps member to win the award, but also the first Cadet Corps member from Memphis to ever win the honor.⁸⁸ Where Cabbage excelled athletically, Smith did so academically. Regarded as one of the city's best and brightest young students, black or white, in 1963 Smith became one of the first two Africans Americans accepted to Southwestern College at Memphis.⁸⁹ Smith's parents fueled his early political inclinations and ties to the civil rights movement. They were both politically active and involved in the NAACP and the Shelby County Democratic Club. In his senior year, Smith helped organize a boycott at Manassas High School at the urging of James Lawson.⁹⁰

Smith also participated in the James Meredith March Against Fear in 1966. His involvement in the Meredith March became a catalyst for his life of activism, pushing Smith out of Memphis and to Atlanta where he felt he could become more active in the movement. In 1966, James Meredith, the first African American to enroll at the University of Mississippi (Ole Miss), set out to march from Memphis to the state capitol in Jackson, Mississippi in order to show African Americans that they "could exercise freedom now even in Mississippi."⁹¹ Although ideological differences always existed

⁸⁸"Memphis Cadet is First to Win Legion of Valor," *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, October 24, 1964.

⁸⁹Rhodes College Website, "About Rhodes: History of Rhodes College," <http://www.rhodes.edu/about/default/asp> [accessed May 10, 2010]. Southwestern began as a small private college founded by Freemasons in Clarksville, Tennessee in 1848. The college relocated to Memphis in 1925.

⁹⁰Reverend James Lawson, interview by Joan Beifuss and David Yellin, September 23, 1969, Container 24, Folder 115, Sanitation Strike Archival Project, Mississippi Valley Collection, University of Memphis, Memphis, TN.

between individuals and organizations during the Black Freedom Movement, the march exposed a shift in the philosophies between some civil rights activists.

Akinyele Umoja's study of armed resistance during the civil rights movement suggests that the Meredith March characterized a change in the temperament of the Southern civil rights movement.⁹² Even while participating in the march, Smith clearly disagreed with the nonviolent tactics and the tacticians that dominated its leadership. Smith credited the Meredith March with providing an opportunity to meet nationally recognized civil rights leaders. He also remembered local leaders discouraging him from speaking at one of the march's strategy sessions – an early indicator of the divide between the older and younger generation. Smith remembered that the elders only offered him the chance to speak when his mother intervened on his behalf. During the march to Mississippi, Smith recalled engaging in debates with Dr. King about the use of nonviolent direct action as a tool for change. "I would walk along everyday talking to Martin King about stuff like that [non-violence] down in Mississippi. He had befriended me in the Meredith March."⁹³

Although Richard Wright, Paul Roberson, and U.S. Congressman Adam Clayton Powell, Jr., had used some incarnation of the phrase "Black Power," Carmichael's use of it during the Meredith March represented the national debut for the Black Power slogan.⁹⁴ Carmichael's famous speech popularizing the call for Black Power, and it had a

⁹¹Branch, *At Caanan's Edge*, 475.

⁹²Akinyele O. Umoja, "The Ballot and The Bullet: A Comparative Analysis of Armed Resistance in the Civil Rights Movement," *Journal of Black Studies* 29, no. 4 (March 1999): 558-578; Lewis, *The Shadows of Youth*, 207-209.

⁹³Coby Smith, interview by Author, Memphis, TN, March 30, 2006.

profound impact on the development of Smith's political consciousness. He also used his time in Mississippi to make connections with other civil rights activists. "I was just hooking up with other organizers," he said including SNCC members Carmichael and Cleveland Sellers.⁹⁵

Once active in the Atlanta scene, Cab and Smith connected with members of SNCC. Since its inception, SNCC had taken a more radical approach than other civil rights organizations. The Mississippi Freedom Summer campaign of 1964 marked a noticeable shift in the makeup of SNCC, and after 1964 whites began to, if not outnumber blacks, at least make up an increasingly larger percentage of the organization. According to Clayborne Carson, "A group of SNCC activists began to see racial separatism as an ideal that would awaken the consciousness of black people and begin a new phase in the black struggle."⁹⁶ By 1966 SNCC had taken a more radical turn with Carmichael at the helm. When Cabbage and Smith arrived in Atlanta, SNCC had lost youthful optimism. The organization's embrace of Black Power coincided with the two young activists arrival in Atlanta.

Like many in SNCC, both men expressed resentment with white attempts to organize in black communities. Their attitudes reflected many of the feelings that pervaded SNCC at that time. "SNCC had become very frustrated with the white youngsters," Smith said. "Most of them were friends of SDS (Students for a Democratic Society) and they – we wanted them to go organize in the white community. We can take care of our community ourselves, you all are just in the way...down here getting your

⁹⁴Joseph, *Waiting 'Til the Midnight Hour*, xiii.

⁹⁵Coby Smith, interview.

⁹⁶Clayborne Carson, *In Struggle: SNCC and the Black Awakening of the 1960s* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981), 81.

jollies off on black folks, work on your mamas and your daddies – they’re the ones that killing us.”⁹⁷ Taylor recalled Cabbage and Smith’s frustration with the pacifist approach employed by some members of SNCC. The two men no longer took pride in the restraint it took to remain nonviolent and both Cabbage and Smith began to reject nonviolence.⁹⁸

The shift in attitude became even more apparent when Clifford Karchmer, a student at Princeton University, profiled Smith in a paper entitled “American Radicalism” *in the 1960s*. Karchmer had spoken with Smith in 1964 while Smith was still a student at Manassas High School. According to Karchmer, during their first meeting Smith exuded pride at his appointment as one of only three African Americans on the Juvenile Court Jury. From that experience, Karchmer believed that Smith felt confident that the “American political system could assure racial equality.” Three years later Karchmer returned to Memphis and found a much different Coby Smith. No longer an optimistic high school student, Smith’s Atlanta transformation and his frustration with the slow racial progress now informed his political viewpoint. Angry, Smith spoke openly about revolution and overthrowing the system that “never intended access to the black man.” Karchmer suggested that Smith’s nihilistic musings were partly due to the “vacuum left by the moderate leadership’s failure to involve the youth of the community in its projects.”⁹⁹

Despite Smith’s critique and loss of faith in the moderate leadership, the Memphis NAACP provided inspiration to the future Black Power activist in his early days of high

⁹⁷Coby Smith, interview.

⁹⁸Calvin Taylor, interview.

⁹⁹“Black Students’ Militancy and Organizations, Memphis,” Clifford Karchmer, *American Radicalism in the 1960s*, Princeton University May 7, 1968, Sanitation Strike Archival Project, Container 5, Folder 21, Mississippi Valley Collection, University of Memphis.

school activism. Smith credited the black establishment with his early knowledge of the civil rights movement. “We came up under Maxine [Smith] and those,” recalled Coby Smith.¹⁰⁰ The NAACP effectively used coalition politics in an effort to avoid the intense and violent racial unrest that plagued other cities.¹⁰¹ Because its leaders negotiated with whites, they acquired a stigma that their decisions were made in the best interest of the city’s black elite first, and the black community secondly. Sensing a need for community action and what they perceived as “independent community action, by members of the black community who had a free hand to operate without the controls from any outside forces,” Charles Cabbage and Coby Smith felt a strong desire to offer an alternative form of leadership to the black community in Memphis. There was not simply just a need to organize, the two men suggested, but also to create an organization independent of the city’s traditional black leadership.¹⁰²

After a year and a half in Atlanta, Cab and Smith turned down opportunities to continue organizing in Atlanta and in other locations with SNCC and SCLC. They wanted to return to Memphis and spark a movement in their hometown. “SNCC wanted me to go to Baltimore,” recalled Cabbage, “but I thought that people needed to go back where they came from and begin organizing in their own local communities for them to have any impact.”¹⁰³ On the surface, seemingly, the heat of the civil rights movement had passed Memphis. Yet Cab and Smith knew better. Despite having the right to patronize

¹⁰⁰Coby Smith, interview.

¹⁰¹Wright, *Race, Power, and Political Emergence in Memphis*, 55.

¹⁰²Charles Cabbage, interview.

¹⁰³Ibid.

venues they once could not, the black community continued to deal with issues of police harassment and brutality. Disparities in housing, employment, and education remained even larger hurdles to black progress. The city's preemptive desegregation of public facilities had not stopped isolated proprietors from refusing African Americans service or making black patrons uncomfortable in their establishments.

Labor historian Michael Honey's chronicle of Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Memphis sanitation strike reveals the contradictions in the city's racial dynamics. Blacks could vote without the intimidation tactics that plagued blacks in other cities in the Jim Crow South, and a reorganization of the city government opened up City Council positions for African Americans. Yet outside of isolated incidents, signs of black progress remained hard to find.¹⁰⁴ In her study of Memphis politics, Sharon Wright also suggests that despite certain advancements, "racial polarization in Memphis worsened after the protests of the 1960s."¹⁰⁵

Edwina Harrell, who became an active force in Memphis State University's Black Student Association in 1968, explained that she returned home to Memphis and became associated with Cabbage and Smith and their incipient movement "out of a desire to be actively involved in the struggle for civil rights." In high school Harrell explained that she was "stimulated by the things I had heard in parts of Georgia and Mississippi where college students had left school to work with the NAACP." Like Cabbage and Smith, Harrell left Memphis for Atlanta to attend Spelman College where she became more politically conscious. "I had been involved with some other groups away from home and

¹⁰⁴Honey, *Going Down Jericho Road*, 66; Green, *Battling the Plantation Mentality*, 15.

¹⁰⁵Honey, *Going Down Jericho Road*, 66.

I thought how challenging it would be to come home and do this work,” she explained. The excitement and freedom of being actively involved in making decisions and forcing change had eluded Harrell in Memphis. Around the nation black students and black youth were acting on their own behalf in the larger interest of the community. Yet in Memphis, after the sit-ins, youth and student activism independent of the black leadership was rare. Limited networks and organizing vehicles for youth and student activism left students such as Harrell, Cabbage, and Smith without a place in the movement to come home to.¹⁰⁶

Like the Smiths, the Hooks, the Sugarmons, and the Willises a decade before, Cabbage and Smith also returned to Memphis armed with a college education, but they owned a different kind of organizing experience and a more radical disposition. Hoping to spark a new revolution, Charles Cabbage and Coby Smith left Atlanta and returned to Memphis to form the Black Power organization, the Black Organizing Project (BOP), which eventually became a catalyst for the city’s youth and student based Black Power Movement. They expressed great excitement “about the possibilities of organizing the black community into a unified political front,” that included all segments of black society.¹⁰⁷

Memphis’s black community had answered the call of the *Tri-State Defender* for a new outlook on racial progress in 1960. The tenor of African American activism began to change in the mid-1950s with the emergence of a new cadre of young, black

¹⁰⁶“Invader Tactics,” *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, April 28, 1968.

¹⁰⁷Invaders of ’67 Claim Corner in Memphis Civil Rights Fight, *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, April 1, 1993.

professionals who assumed leadership roles in the NAACP and other political and civic organizations. By 1960, youth and student activism emerged side-by-side in a new spirit of protest aimed at disarming Jim Crow in Memphis. Seizing on the momentum of the national wave of sit-ins and other direct action protests, students at LeMoyne College and Owen Junior College established their political voice through their own direct action campaign, sparking an eighteen-month Freedom Movement that eventually destroyed the last vestiges of legal segregation in Memphis. However, to students such as Charles Cabbage and Coby Smith, these changes ultimately did little to transform the racial dynamics of the city. They became “frustrated by Memphis’s black leaders’ status quo way of doing things,” and through the experience and knowledge gained through their activism with the civil rights movement in Atlanta, they returned to Memphis in 1967, becoming the impetus of the city’s modern Black Power Movement.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁸ Tim Sampson, "Blacklash," *Memphis The City Magazine*, April 2008, 31-32.

Chapter Two

“Damn the Army, Join the Invaders”: The Black Organizing Project and the Invaders

*“The looters got away very early in the game
Have you ever seen a thief linger around to be contained?
They claimed our Negro leaders could not control the crowd.
Unfounded lies and accusations, they denounce our leaders loud...
They lay everything on Black Power, but them boys are college bred.
And are too smart to rob a pawnshop, while the coppers beat their heads...
Will they lump us all together forever and a day?
Or will...a new awakening, humane and fairness be their way?”¹ —Ettam Pryor,
Poem on Memphis Racism*

“So when the march got started and all of this business happened you see...Just as the march rounded Main and got to, I guess...Main and Beale (Streets),” explained Calvin Taylor, “King and them probably up near Goldsmith’s. And the young men there...the youngsters...the Stokely Carmichaels who wanted to see their names in the paper the next day decided that this was the moment to make the trouble...and they began breaking out windows and running.”² Taylor, a senior at Memphis State University and a member of the Memphis based Black Power organization, Black Organizing Project (BOP), recalled the events that transpired on March 28, 1968, when a nonviolent march, intended to demonstrate support for the black sanitation workers in Memphis and show the city’s white citizens the solidarity of the African American community, turned violent. In an attempt to endorse the labor stoppage of the sanitation workers, and as a precursor to his Poor People Campaign, Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) tried to lead the march. Civil Rights veteran and fellow nonviolent practitioner Reverend James Lawson, and head of the local

¹“Poem on Memphis Racism,” *Tri-State Defender*, April 6, 1968.

²Calvin Taylor, interview.

organization, Community on the Move for Equality (COME), prodded King to come to Memphis to support the striking sanitation workers. The hastily organized march turned chaotic. Lemoyne-Owen College student Ronald Hooks assessed the situation. “People were trying to walk much too fast for a crowd that size. Dr. King was being pushed and people were walking on each other’s heels.”³ Taylor suggested that local leaders used King’s celebrity recklessly by placing King at the front of the disorganized march without much thought to the outcome.⁴ As the situation deteriorated, organizers of the march and SCLC staff whisked King away. With chaos all around, it was ironic that King once proclaimed, “Riots are the voice of the unheard.”⁵

If any one event foreshadowed the chaotic March 28 demonstration it was the disturbance that occurred earlier in the day at Hamilton High School. At Hamilton, a predominately black high school in South Memphis, COME leaders encouraged students to leave school and join the march to support the strikers. COME leaders and BOP leaders recruited African American students to leave their college and high school campuses all over the city in an effort to inflate the march’s numbers and provide a good showing for the national news media that followed King and his staff as they crusaded around the country. In addition to students from Hamilton High School, students from other area high schools and colleges also left their respective campuses to join the march. Estimates placed the number of marchers downtown that day anywhere between three thousand and five thousand with the majority of march participants in high school and

³Joan Beifuss, *At the River I stand: Memphis, the 1968 Strike, and Martin Luther King* (Memphis: St. Luke’s Press, 1990), 292.

⁴Calvin Taylor, interview.

⁵Martin Luther King, Jr., Edited by Clayborn Carson, *The Autobiography of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (London: Abacus, 2000), 293.

college.⁶ Lawson assigned members of the COME staff to escort students from Hamilton and other local high schools downtown, but at Hamilton, as students attempted to leave to join the nonviolent demonstration, police, who had been dispatched to restore order, began pushing students back into the school.⁷ Soon rumors circulated that the police killed a young girl in the melee. The rumor increased the anxiety level in an already tense atmosphere.⁸

Back on Beale and Main Streets where the “Stokely Carmichaels” had gathered, sounds of broken windows and flying bricks accompanied chants of “Black Power” and “Burn it Down Baby.”⁹ “I saw a group of young punks with sticks hitting a pawn shop window,” said one marcher. “And I said to myself, ‘Good heavens! What the hell are they trying to do to us? Get us all shot?’”¹⁰ Dissenters transformed protest signs used to display movement slogans into weapons and missiles, a move that prompted city leaders to seriously consider changing the protest guidelines. A report compiled on civil unrest in the aftermath of this disturbance concluded: “In the disorders that erupted from the demonstration in Memphis, it was observed that rioters were employing sticks, which had previously been used by marchers to mount signs. As a result of this experience, Memphis is reportedly considering an ordinance that would require that signs used in

⁶Invaders, “FBI Memo, Racial Matters, 157-1067” (Memphis, Tennessee, March 1968).

⁷“Day’s Log of Police Calls Traces Racial Disturbance Shock Waves,” *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, March 29, 1968.

⁸David Tucker, *Memphis Since Crump: Bossism, Blacks, and Civic Reformers* (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1980), 159.

⁹Branch, *At Canaan’s Edge*, 733.

¹⁰*Ibid.*

demonstrations be carried by the person rather than on mounted sticks.”¹¹ While not explicitly implicating the Invaders, the *Tri-State Defender* reported, “thirty youth joined the march with the intentions of tearing up Beale.”¹²

The strike also forced the Memphis City Police Department to reconsider its policing options. In February the department mandated that its officers work 12-hour shifts and forego off-days and personal leave in an effort to maintain order.¹³ The department also allowed officers to use guns from their personal arsenal in addition to their department-issued service revolvers. Looters smashed windows of stores on Beale Street and took merchandise. In the midst of the melee, police officer Leslie Dean Jones shot and killed sixteen-year-old Larry Payne with his off-duty weapon.¹⁴ According to Jones, Payne allegedly stole a television set from Sears and Roebuck. The officer pursued Payne into the Fowler Homes Housing Project where he claimed that the youth threatened him with a butcher’s knife.¹⁵ Witnesses reported hearing Payne yell, “don’t shoot,” as Jones “shoved the gun in Larry’s stomach and shot.”¹⁶ The highly contentious

¹¹Civil Disorders After-Action Reports, Sanitation Strike Archival Project, University of Memphis, Container 5, Folder 16.

¹²*Tri-State Defender*, April 4, 1968; “Relatives of Slain Youth Dispute Policeman’s Story,” *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, March 30, 1968.

¹³Larry Payne Case: Clippings, Notes and Other Data, Sanitation Strike Archival Project, Container 6, Folder 22, Mississippi Valley Collection, University of Memphis, Memphis, Tennessee.

¹⁴“Too Nice for a Riot – But It Came,” *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, March 29, 1968.

¹⁵Larry Payne Case: Clippings, Notes and Other Data, Sanitation Strike Archival Project, Container 6, Folder 22, Mississippi Valley Collection, University of Memphis, Memphis, Tennessee (August 17, 1968).

¹⁶*Tri-State Defender*, April 4, 1968.

relationship between the police and the black community added to the combustible situation.

Some black youths at the march wore jackets emblazoned with the word “Invaders” on the back. The line of demarcation between looters, militants, and march participants vanished in the fracas. Fair or not, true or not, the blame for the riot now fell squarely on the shoulders of the Invaders, one of several smaller organizations under the auspices of the Black Organizing Project.¹⁷

The abrupt nature of the Beale Street Riot, or Tough Thursday as some called it, shocked the COME staff and Dr. King, but the restive, emotionally charged nature of the black community should not have come as a surprise to those closest to the Memphis situation. BOP founding member Coby Smith blamed King’s neglect of the existing organizing structure: “You don’t go into an area and bypass the people who are there.”¹⁸ Just six days before the March 28 riot, the *Commercial Appeal* reported a judge’s Chicago ruling that, “making a crowd angry is perfectly permissible under the First Amendment.”¹⁹ Furthermore, the judge decreed that the spirit of the First Amendment allowed for a person to move others to action and cited the American Revolution as an example of such action.²⁰ This ruling held true for the disaffected young Black Power advocates in Memphis. Smith further detailed the temperament of the city: “The city of Memphis has willfully and vagrantly attacked the black community. It’s a clear line

¹⁷Beifuss, *At the River I Stand*, 294.

¹⁸Coby Smith, interview.

¹⁹“Judge Cites Right to Incite Crowd: Will Says First Amendment Defends Action,” *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, March 24, 1968.

²⁰*Ibid.*

here...I don't know why you persist in saying Dr. King," he explained to a reporter. "This is Memphis; the city belongs to people here. The black people here have to set the temper of the times. If Dr. King is going to come in here, he's going to have to come in here and analyze the situation and meet the needs of the people here. If he doesn't the same thing will happen to him everywhere he goes that happened here in Memphis."²¹ Smith's warning never became reality – on April 4, 1968, King died from a fatal gunshot wound on the balcony of Memphis's Lorraine Motel.²²

Taylor and others in BOP distanced themselves from the events on March 28. No one with any influence or leadership status in the group even admitted to attending the march, yet the bricks, bottles, and rocks hurled that day represented the actions of a frustrated and neglected constituency of blacks, particularly black youth who exploded during what later became one of the most tragic moments in civil rights history. In the same march where sanitation workers wore placards that read, "I Am A Man," stating what they believed the city's racist and paternalistic white power structure failed to acknowledge, these youth in their own manner, demanded acknowledgment. BOP member Calvin Taylor took no responsibility for the disruption, but confessed that his organization created the tension that day: "We represented the [frustrated] element that really did break it [the windows], but these people were not controlled by us."²³ Taylor

²¹*At the River I Stand: Memphis, the 1968 Sanitation Strike, and Martin Luther King*, Documentary, directed by David Appleby and Allison Graham, California Newsreel, 1993.

²²"King Disappointed in March – He'll Try Again Next Week," *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, March 30, 1968.

²³Calvin Taylor, interview.

realized that neither he nor his organization could control any one person's action, yet they took credit for the heated environment that led to the ruckus.

Whether they accepted the blame for the riot or not, Taylor identified his organization's impact on the situation – BOP and the Invaders did represent Memphis's Black Power element. For years, the city's black leadership kept its youth on the fringes of civil rights and political activity. Black leadership's failure to effectively utilize and sustain a significant youth presence created a void that BOP and the more radical Invaders filled. Using Black Power politics, BOP attempted to organize and politicize Memphis's black youth and provide an alternative model of empowerment to youth who felt disaffected by the city's more conservative models of civil rights activists. As the Black Power Movement emerged nationally, BOP and the Invaders infused the city with their version of Black Power politics. City officials, the white community, and many in the black establishment branded them punks, thugs, and undesirables. The organization symbolized for many Memphians, black and white, the "evils" of the Black Power Movement in their own city. The formation and early beginnings of BOP reveal the organization's efforts to confront and change the city's political dynamic and foster a Black Power revolution in Memphis.

Formed in 1967, the Black Organizing Project represented a stark departure from Memphis' traditional outlets for black activism. Memphis was regarded as an "NAACP town," with the local branch of the NAACP spearheading most of the black protest

activity in the city.²⁴ “The Black Organizing Project organized in the streets, in the schools, in the churches, in the pool rooms,” Smith explained, recalling the early beginnings of BOP. When he and Cabbage returned to Memphis from Atlanta in the summer of 1967, they initially started organizing by creating sports and recreational activities for the city’s “incorrigible” black youth. “My emphasis is on the young. Nobody has really been able to communicate with them before...you’ve got to be able to relate to them and to understand their problems,” explained Smith.²⁵ As the summer progressed, the emphasis shifted to academics and political theory with a group that the press labeled a “boy’s club.” The purpose of the Black Organizing Project, Cabbage explained, “is to stimulate in young blacks a sense of black identity, black pride, and black consciousness, to create in the blacks an independent spirit, to cease to be dependent upon and influenced by the white race.”²⁶

As students themselves, they eventually expanded their base to the city’s college campuses. They introduced some students to the revolutionary readings of Malcolm X, Franz Fanon, and Che Guevara. They also encouraged students to read *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, Franz Fanon’s *Wretched of the Earth*, and C.L.R. James’ *Black Jacobins* in their attempts to politicize and educate the black youth in Memphis.²⁷ “We began to teach awareness of what it was to be black and live in America and brought that down to what it meant to be black and live in Memphis,” Smith said. BOP leaders

²⁴Honey, *Going Down Jericho Road*, 44.

²⁵“Two Ignore Order to Quit Job,” *Memphis Press-Scimitar*, August 9, 1967.

²⁶ Invaders, “FBI Memo, Racial Matters, 157-1067” (Memphis, Tennessee, 1968).

²⁷Coby Smith, interview.

also played audio recordings of speeches given by the Black Power Movement's ideological father, Malcolm X.²⁸

By the time Coby Smith and Charles Cabbage returned to Memphis to initiate the Black Organizing Project's program and start their "Black Power bit," ideologically the Black Freedom Movement was at a crossroads.²⁹ From a legislative standpoint, the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965 secured African Americans access to public facilities and the voting booth. And while those gains represented progress, some African Americans viewed the legislation as a culmination of years of struggle, while other blacks remained dissatisfied and disillusioned. Though traditionally historians have viewed the Black Power Movement as a reactionary response to the perceived limitations of the civil rights movement. Black Power activists considered their actions a tactical change, another way to continue the fight and redefine the struggle.³⁰ The same year of BOP's birth also marked the publication of Stokely Carmichael and Charles V. Hamilton's, *Black Power: The Politics of Liberation*, in which the two men outlined and defended their political ideology. Black Power, Carmichael and Hamilton argued, demanded that blacks "consolidate behind their own, so that they can bargain from a position of strength," and not weakness as they had been doing historically.³¹ Carmichael's and Hamilton work became required reading for Black

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Calvin Taylor, interview. Taylor discusses the beginnings of BOP and Smith and Cabbage attempts to organize in the Memphis community, which he says was referred to as the "Black Power bit."

³⁰ Joseph, ed., *Neighborhood Rebels*, 4.

Power advocates, providing motivation to Smith and Cabbage. Carmichael himself proved influential to the men since they were acquainted with him during their days in Atlanta. “We were just trying to bring about change – to see businesses in our communities and make life better for our people,” said Smith, “Whites had the power of life and death over us. That had to change.”³²

That change initially came around the fall of 1967 and the spring of 1968 in the form of an eight-point program entitled, *The Black Organizing Project: Where We Go From Here*, which articulated their program and marked the more formal beginnings of BOP.³³ The program emphasized their modified take on Carmichael and Hamilton’s thesis, as well the ideologies of forefathers of the Black Power Movement such as Black Nationalists Marcus Garvey and Malcolm X. Ironically and unintentionally the program borrowed its name from Dr. King’s 1967 work, *Where Do We Go From Here: Community or Chaos*, as both platforms looked to outline a new, progressive agenda. BOP’s goals resembled those of the Black Panther Party for Self Defense (BPP). Bobby Seale and Huey Newton founded the BPP in 1966 in Oakland, California in response to the Oakland Police’s assault on the black community. *What We Want*, the Party’s Ten-Point platform, outlined the organization’s aims and stressed their desire for the black community to control its own destiny.³⁴ The BOP outlined similar objectives for Memphis’s black community, including community control over education, finances,

³¹Kwame Ture (formely known as Stokely Carmichael) and Charles V. Hamilton, *Black Power: The Politics of Liberation* (New York: Vintage Books Random House, 1967,1992), 47.

³²"The Invaders: 'Real Story Never Told'," *Tri-State Defender*, April 4, 2008.

³³Invaders, “Black Organizing Project Program: Where We Go From Here, “ Racial Matters, FBI File 57-1067” (Memphis, Tennessee,1968).

³⁴Ogbar, *Black Power*, 85.

politics, and land ownership. Specifically, the platform called for: an independent black-controlled school board, an independent financial base, policing of the black community by blacks (excluding “brainwashed black policemen), and establishment of a Black United Front to “coordinate and implement all Black community politics, full land ownership in the areas of the city where the majority of blacks lived, control of the War on Poverty resources, and the unconditional release of all incarcerated blacks.”³⁵ It also called for a “Ghetto Tax.”³⁶ The Ghetto Tax, the organization argued, was white penance for setting up businesses in the black community, but not investing any resources to help the community. Above all, the program stressed and warned, “We must gain our Liberation through any means at our disposal.”³⁷

As initially conceived and constructed, BOP operated as an umbrella organization that housed several different subsidiary youth and student organizations. As they organized and raised consciousness levels, “high school and college students began networking forming groups that took up the banner of unity.”³⁸ Those organizations included: the Black Student Association (BSA) at Memphis State University, the Intercollegiate Chapter of the NAACP at Lemoyne College, the African American Brotherhood at Owen College (LeMoyne and Owen merged in 1968), the City Organizers, and the Invaders. Each organization’s leader maintained a position on BOP’s

³⁵Invaders, “Black Organizing Project Program: Where We Go From Here, “ Racial Matters, FBI File 57-1067” (Memphis, Tennessee,1968).

³⁶Ibid.

³⁷Ibid.

³⁸“Invaders of '67 Claim Corner in Memphis Civil Rights Fight,” *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, April 4, 1993.

unifying board. The board then made decisions and implemented those decisions in their respective groups.

According to members of BOP, they helped push black students to form the BSA and become a more active force on campus. Cabbage recalled that a group of Invaders stormed the cafeteria and stood on top of the tables and demanded that the black students take action.³⁹ Soon after, BSA leaders such as David Acey, Ester Hurt, and James Pope began to mobilize black students on campus. Memphis State's BSA eventually became one of the most active organizations on campus. "We're beginning to move on the college campuses to organize there," Charles Cabbage explained, "and from there we're beginning to form what we call an umbrella structure to involve more organizations out in the community."⁴⁰ Despite their local orientation, BOP's goals did not differ from those of most Black Power advocacy groups. "Black people need to control their communities," Charles Cabbage commented, "They need to control the economics, the politics, the social life as well as the cultural life of their community."⁴¹

After being honorably discharged from the Air Force, Vietnam veteran John Burl Smith returned to Memphis and expected to resume his normal life. On July 1, 1967 Smith and Charles Cabbage stopped for gas at a local station. After Smith finished pumping the gas, he could not locate the car's gas cap. He accused the white station owner of stealing the cap in an effort to "run a scam."⁴² The owner of the station, Smith

³⁹Charles Cabbage, interview.

⁴⁰Charles Cabbage, interview.

⁴¹Ibid.

suggested, would steal gas caps from customers and then resell the caps to their owners for a dollar. Perplexed and aggravated by the scheme, Smith confronted the owner and called the police. After his service in the military Smith described himself as both an “American and a Negro.”⁴³ John Smith’s friend, Coby Smith, described the veteran’s attitude as very “all-American.”⁴⁴ Smith’s self-appraisal recalled W.E.B. Dubois’ concept of double-consciousness. The desire “for a man to be both a Negro and an American without being cursed and spit upon by his fellows, without having the doors of opportunity closed roughly in his face.” Yet Smith’s definition dealt less with an internal struggle to belong and more with a newfound idealism and patriotism associated with his time in the military. ‘Black Power’ was not in my vocabulary at the time,” recalled John B. Smith.⁴⁵

When the police arrived at the scene and sided with the station owner, Smith realized that he was “just another nigger to them.” Smith’s skirmish with the police put the veteran on notice that America’s promise of equality did not always apply to every one. The ill-fated encounter at the gas station soon changed John Smith’s stance on Black Power. “Here I was, a Vietnam War Veteran,” Smith explained, “and I thought I had some rights. I believed in the Constitution. Cabbage said to me at the time, ‘The Constitution doesn’t work for people like you and me,’ but I didn’t believe him.”⁴⁶ Soon the altercation between Smith, Cabbage, and the station owner turned into a larger

⁴²Tim Sampson, "Blacklash," *Memphis The City Magazine*, April 2008, 31-32.

⁴³Ibid.

⁴⁴Coby Smith, interview.

⁴⁵Tim Sampson "Blacklash," *Memphis The City Magazine*, April 2008, 31-32.

⁴⁶Ibid.

confrontation. Multiple police officers arrived on the scene and arrested Smith and Cabbage. “They threw us in jail...we had committed no crime – just because we were black...that was my baptism by fire. Everything changed after that.”⁴⁷

“Before that I didn’t even believe in Black Power,” John Smith said. Charles Cabbage had been trying to persuade Smith to commit to their movement. John Smith’s coming of age experience played out on different stages in a myriad of ways in cities to young black men all across the nation. Incidents of injustice, like Smith’s, pushed many young black men toward militancy in instances when they had no intentions of becoming involved in the Movement. His awakening came during BOP’s infancy and his arrest indirectly triggered the rise of the Invaders. Not only did Smith become more politically conscious after the incident, but he also became the unofficial head of the Invaders.⁴⁸ Smith’s political point of view radically changed, so much so that Cabbage claimed “he took to it [Black Power] like a duck to water.”⁴⁹ Initially Cabbage’s younger brother, Richard Cabbage, headed the group, but the elder Cabbage promoted John Smith to the leadership because, “he had the military training and he had the tactical know-how and he was great at organizing young fellows.”⁵⁰

Who were the Invaders? If BOP was the brains of Memphis’s Black Power Movement, then the Invaders were the muscle. A member described the group’s purpose as “responsible for security, for putting out sheets [pamphlets and newsletters] on

⁴⁷Ibid.

⁴⁸“Invaders of '67 Claim Corner in Memphis Civil Rights Fight,” *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, April 4, 1993; Calvin Taylor, interview.

⁴⁹Charles Cabbage, interview.

⁵⁰Calvin Taylor, interview.

guerrilla warfare, training people in liberation tactics.”⁵¹ FBI and local law enforcement officials labeled the group as “just a bunch of kids trying to cash in on the Black Power idea.” The “military end” of the BOP, the Invaders derived their name from a short-lived, but popular 1967 television show starring Roy Thinnes. The show’s premise centered on aliens from a dying planet. The aliens had one mission: to make Earth their new home. The aliens took human form, which made it hard to discern real human beings from the alien life-forms. Every week, Thinnes’ character, David Vincent, tried to convince the world that these Invaders truly did exist and to stop them from taking over Earth. The action series lasted only a year, but it lasted long enough to inspire the young militants.⁵² Calvin Taylor described the theory behind the name:

The name came up – the idea behind everything now was for the BOP to take on the form of a great TV program that was on at the time known as The Invaders. And The Invaders worked on this premise...that we looked, talked, act, and carry ourselves in the form of everyday, ordinary people act. So if you saw me downtown, I’d look like any other shopper downtown and you wouldn’t know if I was really a black man, you know, getting ready to bomb your place or just a black man in the city.⁵³

While college students populated most of BOP’s cells, the Invaders targeted high school students. Smith and Cabbage decided early in the organization’s infancy, despite their college background, that they would not restrict their organizing to college campuses.⁵⁴ They opened their organization up to just about any young black man or woman who believed in their agenda, with the majority of the group’s make-up

⁵¹“Activist Charles Cabbage a Voice for Reason,” *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, June, 29, 2010.

⁵²Worldvision Television, “Invaders Introduction,” <http://www.clivebanks.co.uk/Invaders%20Intro.htm> [accessed 2003].

⁵³Calvin Taylor, interview.

⁵⁴Charles Cabbage, interview.

consisting of Carver High School students and graduates.⁵⁵ Taylor suggested that age did not matter – simply living in the racist society qualified the young high school students for membership. Taylor remarked, “A black boy, when he’s fourteen, isn’t really a boy, he’s a man – ‘cause he knows what the world is all about. So we decided we’d go a step further – and we’d get people in high school...and people who were freshmen and sophomores in college to make up this Invader group.”⁵⁶

Taylor’s view that racism and society’s ills accelerated black boys’ path to manhood underscored the issues of masculinity that scholars of gender and the civil rights and Black Power Movements suggest permeated both movements. In his study of race and manhood during the civil rights movement, Steve Estes argues that those issues of masculinity were deeply entrenched in the struggle for racial equality.⁵⁷ During the height of the Black Power period, some black men, and particularly some Black Power activists, developed a sense of hyper-masculinity in their quest to reclaim and prove their manhood, often times marginalizing women in the process. Black Power organizations such as the Black Panther Party, Estes’ argues, utilized a “masculinist liberation ideology” that won the organization recruits as well as allies, but also promulgated “the use of violence to prove their manhood rather than to further a progressive political agenda.”⁵⁸ The Invaders appealed to black high school-aged young men disaffected by racist societal strictures that restricted their ability to achieve full citizenship and assert

⁵⁵"Invaders of '67 Claim Corner in Memphis Civil Rights Fight," *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, April 4, 1993.

⁵⁶Steve Estes, *I Am A Man!: Race, Manhood and the Civil Rights Movement* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005), 142.

⁵⁷Ibid, 3.

⁵⁸Ibid, 155.

their manhood. Despite assertions from the community, Invaders insisted that they were no boy's club. To be an Invader, "every boy must be a man," Invader Lewis Welch insisted.⁵⁹

While the community boasted of very prominent and accomplished black professional men such as Benjamin Hooks, Russell Sugarmon, Vasco Smith, and A.W. Willis, the Invaders offered the city's young black men an alternative model of manhood. In comparison to the city's older black male leaders, Invaders such as John B. Smith and Charles Cabbage talked tough, wore fashionable clothing and hairstyles, were from the same neighborhoods and close enough in age to relate the high schoolers. Exuding the cool that defined the aesthetic of the movement, the Invaders for many black young men were the closest representation of the Black Panther Party, Stokely Carmichael, or H. Rap Brown. But many local black community leaders balked at the Invaders' brand of manhood and suggested that they use their influence over the young males for more positive action. "The Invaders ought to lead their followers into an invasion of night schools...such an invasion should be a major program of their black militancy. Then will begin the real 'march' to the realization of the black 'man' image...rather than the 'boy' designation," wrote journalist, educator, and WDIA Disc Jockey Nat D. Williams.⁶⁰

By early 1968 members estimated Invader membership at anywhere from 1,500 to 2,000 young Black males between the ages of 13-22.⁶¹ Yet leadership often inflated the

⁵⁹Invaders, "FBI Memo, Racial Matters, 157-1067" (Memphis, Tennessee 1968).

⁶⁰"A Point of View: Men or Still Boys?" *Tri-State Defender*, August 31, 1968; Louis Cantor, *Wheelin' on Beale: How WDIA-Memphis Became the Nation's First All-Black Radio Station and Created the Sound that Changed America* (New York: Pharos Books, 1992), 25.

actual number on the membership roster to confuse people into believing that they had more influence than they really did and to promote the idea that they alone controlled the city's black youth. The Invaders mirrored the Black Panther Party more than they did the stringently organized Fruit of Islam.⁶² Similar to the BPP, the Invaders embraced the so-called brothers on the blocks: the gang members, the dropouts, the hoodlums and converted the recruits to the revolutionary cause.⁶³ The Panthers used the Marxist terminology, Lumpenproletariat, to describe the "lower-class...downtrodden...brother on the block most open to rebellion and revolution."⁶⁴ Most middle-class African Americans in Memphis belonged to or supported the initiatives of the church and/or the NAACP, and BOP looked to empower other segments of the black community. "[The Invaders] is a group for boys who otherwise would be known as incorrigible hoodlums and thieves. Through the club they can find a new way of life, can help themselves," Coby Smith explained.⁶⁵ Membership applications circulated soliciting any young African American that might "believe in building black in your community and the total liberation of Black people" to sign up.⁶⁶ In opposition to military veteran John Smith's former "all-American" attitude, the recruitment slogan read: "Damn the Army, Join the Invaders."⁶⁷

⁶¹Black Organizing Project, Container 5, Folder 21, *Sanitation Strike Archival Project*, Mississippi Valley Collection, University of Memphis, *Memphis Root*, Vol. 1, No. 2, Memphis, TN; Coby Smith, interview; "Two Ignore Order to Quit Job," *Memphis Press-Scimitar*, August 9, 1967.

⁶²Branch, *At Caanan's Edge*, 737.

⁶³Charles Cabbage, interview; Cabbage describes the early days of organizing in South Memphis. "The core of the organization was formed right out of that community, out of gang membership," Cabbage recalled.

⁶⁴Ogbar, *Black Power*, 94.

⁶⁵Two Ignore Order to Quit Job," *Memphis Press-Scimitar*, August 9, 1967.

With a slogan so bold, it did not take long for the FBI to take notice of the Black Power element forming in the city. They began targeting BOP and its leadership in late 1967. “If you said ‘Black Power,’ you were an immediate threat. And we were saying it,” remarked Coby Smith.⁶⁸ The Memphis Police Department organized the Domestic Intelligence Unit (DIU), or Red Squad, to specifically monitor the movement of BOP and the Invaders. Policemen “enrolled” as students at the local college campuses, and an agent, Marrell McCollough, even infiltrated the Invaders.⁶⁹ In a memo profiling the origins and set-up of the organization, Agent Burl F. Johnson reported that BOP’s “ostensible purpose was to create pride in black identity, to teach black culture and black history, and to obtain employment for young blacks.”⁷⁰ The rise of the Invaders forced DIU to closely monitor the young radicals. Organized in the wake of the “long hot summer” of 1967, the DIU’s close surveillance of the organization showed city authorities’ fear of Black Power infiltrating Memphis.⁷¹

⁶⁶Invaders, "FBI Memo, Racial Matters, 157-1067" (Memphis, Tennessee, November 11, 1968).

⁶⁷Invaders, "FBI Memo, Racial Matters, 157-1067" (Memphis, Tennessee, March 31, 1970). The Domestic Intelligence Unit, or Red Squad, was organized in 1967 specifically to monitor the activities of BOP-Invaders.

⁶⁸Honey, *Going Down Jericho Road*, 232.

⁶⁹McKnight, *The Last Crusade*, 47; In a series of articles, Memphis Commercial Appeal writer Marc Perrisqua revealed that famous photographer Ernest Withers acted as an FBI informant and reported on the activities of the Invaders.

⁷⁰Invaders, "FBI Memo, Racial Matters, 157-1067" (Memphis, Tennessee, March 31, 1970).

⁷¹McKnight, *The Last Crusade*, 45. Long hot summer “of 1967 refers to the race riots that rocked cities such as: Detroit, Newark, Chicago, and Milwaukee. Member of the Invaders threatened similar action in Memphis and the city experienced what McKnight called, “riot fever.”

The Invaders were certainly different than the high school and college students that sat-in at the city's libraries and integrated Memphis's public facilities almost a decade earlier. They argued, too, that their frustrations felt a lot different. Those earlier students had been inspired by the passage of *Brown*, emboldened by the desegregation of Memphis State University, and moved to action in the early 1960s; they remained optimistic about their ability to change the future course of race relations. Black Power advocates such as the Invaders were pessimistic about America's ability to fulfill the promises of the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence. The civil rights struggle and passage of the Civil Rights and Voting Rights Acts in the early part of the decade raised expectations. Organizations like the BPP routinely used phrases from the two documents in their speeches and carried around pocket versions for reference. Invader Lance Watson, also known as "Sweet Willie Wine," argued that the Founding Fathers would approve of their revolutionary stance. "Anytime a government does not fulfill the needs of the people you have a right to overthrow the government," Watson suggested. "So we are doing what the founding fathers said that we could do. Every time we turn around we been told that the white man said this and we been taught that the white man's always right so we're going to use the Declaration of Independence as our guideline."⁷²

The FBI, however, read the BOP and the Invaders as a threat. The FBI's National Bureau warned the local division about the developing new organization. A memo dated January 15, 1968, noted the incipient movement: "A Black Power Movement known as

⁷²"Memphis Root, Vol. 1, No. 2," Sanitation Strike Archival Project, Mississippi Valley Collection, University of Memphis, Container 5, Folder 21.

The Invaders, is in the Memphis Division, Keep the Bureau informed concerning the progress of this organization.”⁷³

The antics of the Invaders and persecution by law enforcement began to eclipse Cabbage and Smith’s intentions to promote a program to organize the black community and instill political and cultural awareness. Not everyone under the BOP umbrella considered themselves, or their organization, a part of the Invaders. Once clearly established on Memphis State’s campus, members of the BSA, though still affiliated with BOP, began to maintain an autonomy that separated their activities from those of the Invaders. The merger of LeMoyne College and Owen Junior College placed the two cells associated with BOP in limbo, and consequently the Owen cell folded in the merger. Eddie Jenkins, a BSA member at Memphis State, recalled some tension between black Memphis State students and Invaders because of their choice to attend Memphis State and not LeMoyne. “I remember Charles Cabbage and John Smith gave us hard time, ya’ll down here in East Memphis with these white folks, ya’ll uncle toms and house niggers,” Jenkins recalled.⁷⁴

However, membership did overlap in many instances. Members of the other organizations under the BOP banner claimed Invader membership, but many of the younger Invaders did not participate in the organizing aspect of BOP. The Invader arm of BOP allowed for different recruitment opportunities since the organization did not have

⁷³Invaders, “FBI Memo, Racial Matters, 157-1067,” (Memphis, Tennessee, 1968).

⁷⁴40th Anniversary Commemoration of Martin Luther King, Jr.: The Man, The Mission, The Movement,” The University of Memphis (Audio Recording in the Possession of the Author) April 2, 2008.

ties to any particular campus or student organization. The Invaders component also allowed the organization the ability to operate under different auspices.

However, the open enrollment opportunities that the Invaders provided the city's lumpenproletariat became a weakness for the organization. Since anybody could be an Invader, membership became hard to control, especially the more radical members. Because of the relaxed requirements, anybody wearing an Invader jacket, tiki necklace, and anything considered militant garb could claim to belong to the group. The organization's heightened visibility, enhanced by their actions and the popularity of the Invader jackets, broke away from the group's original cloak and dagger intent. There was no system of checks and balances, nor did efforts to curtail the violence by reining in the young members always succeed. "Yeah, all you had to do was be in your late teens and early twenties, have a tiki on your neck, and have more hair than you should have from your last haircut," recalled Coby Smith, "And our guys wore some little old blue jean jackets with Invaders on it. So anybody could be an Invader overnight. Didn't have a membership card, no initiation, no discipline, no function."⁷⁵

Politically, 1967 proved to be an important year in Memphis. Black Power in the form of electoral politics arrived in the city when Attorney A.W. Willis formally announced his plans to run for city mayor. The same year Cleveland's Carl Stokes made history as well when he became the first African American mayor of a major U.S. city. A year before the election of Stokes, the citizens of Springfield, Ohio, made Robert C. Henry the first African American mayor in the history of the United States.⁷⁶ Willis

⁷⁵Coby Smith, interview.

hoped to duplicate the feat in Memphis. He believed that he had an especially good chance since African Americans comprised forty percent of the city's population. Willis, the first black candidate to officially run for mayor, campaigned under the city's new Mayor-Council form of government. In 1966 voters approved a referendum that changed the form of City Government. Instead of a Mayor and five Commissioners, a Mayor and thirteen City Council members elected to serve four-year terms would now run the city. Many black Memphians saw this as an upgrade because of the districting, which ensured that at least three African Americans would serve on the City Council.⁷⁷ With this new change, Willis believed 1967 was an ideal time to run for mayor. He hoped the new system would encourage African Americans to think positively about their potential voting power and the effect it could have in changing the city's political landscape.

According to Taylor, BOP leadership offered their services to the Willis campaign. Having already created an organizing base, Taylor and other BOP leaders believed that they could use their influence to rally Willis's grassroots base. "So we pooled our resources, and we got down to Willis's office, and told him 'look, you got some campaign workers right here, you can pay us if you want to pay us or pay us if you don't want to pay us.'"⁷⁸ Taylor also claimed that BOP and Willis struck up an agreement. In return for helping Willis gain the vote in the black community, Willis would in turn work for black people once in office and also provide BOP with funding to promote their platform. Willis, with a campaign mired in controversy, eventually lost the

⁷⁶Leonard N. Moore, *Carl B. Stokes and the Rise of Black Political Power* (Urbana-Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2003), 5.

⁷⁷Wright, *Race, Power, and Political Emergence in Memphis*, 61; Dowdy, *Crusades For Freedom*, 124-125.

⁷⁸Calvin Taylor, interview.

election to Henry Loeb. Rumors circulated that Loeb paid Willis \$35,000 dollars to run in order to split the black vote between Willis and white moderate William B. Ingram.⁷⁹ Despite Stokes' success in winning the Mayoral race in Cleveland, many BOP members felt that Memphis was not quite ready for a black Mayor. African Americans, they argued, were so intrinsically used to white leadership that they were not fully ready to embrace the idea of the a black person governing the city, even someone as capable and respected in the black community as Willis. It also did not help Willis's cause that the media portrayed him as being in "cahoots with the Black Power Boys."⁸⁰ BOP promised Willis's constituency that he would win the race, and after the backlash, Willis began to regret the alliance. So did BOP. "It was just a bad political move on our part," said Taylor, "he cut us loose, the city cut us loose, the community cut us loose...you just don't lose with black people."⁸¹

Willis's campaign for mayor spoke to the boom-bust relationship between the black leadership and the Black Power Boys. Many acknowledged the Invaders' ability to relate to black residents in the lower income neighborhoods of the city. Controlling that element remained another matter altogether. However, soliciting help from the Invaders and then dismissing the youth became a constant trend throughout the organization's existence, brought on in part by the rogue element of the organization, but also by the black leadership's refusal to view Black Power as articulated by BOP and the Invaders as a viable way to organize the black community.

⁷⁹Wright, *Race, Power, and Political Emergence in Memphis*, 63.

⁸⁰Calvin Taylor, interview.

⁸¹Ibid.

BOP derived the plan to divide the communities into districts with satellite offices and personnel in each section of the city. Each community, the leadership argued, had its own particular set of problems and needed people available to respond those particularities.⁸² Their grand plans included the creation of “Liberation Schools” to teach black history, art, and culture, but they initially lacked the funding to get the project started. The organization’s membership base hailed primarily from South Memphis, the area where Cabbage grew up. Coby Smith spent his childhood days in North Memphis. Both men took the lead in organizing those respective communities. Skill sets became important to the growth of group. Coby Smith did the majority of public speaking on BOP’s behalf, while Cabbage and John Smith handled the majority of the field organizing and recruiting.⁸³

Calvin Taylor occupied a unique position in the organization. Taylor worked at *The Commercial Appeal* as a copy boy. He used his writing skills to handle the administrative and public relations responsibilities. Also, because the paper employed a police scanner to stay abreast of the events happening in the city, Taylor used the same information from the scanner to inform and warn members of possible police crackdowns.⁸⁴ Taylor and Coby Smith provided a counterbalance to Cabbage and John Smith’s more rugged personas. “Coby and I sort of talked a little differently from them.”⁸⁵ Taylor suggested that the rank and file related more closely to Cabbage and John B. Smith and were less apt to “move” for others in the leadership.⁸⁶

⁸²Ibid.

⁸³Calvin Taylor, interview.

⁸⁴Calvin Taylor, interview by Author, Memphis, TN, June 29, 2010.

And move they did. Disaffected youth from the different communities in the city flocked to join the Invaders. Invader Minister of Defense John Smith started wearing a military-style jacket with “Invaders” sewn onto the back that soon became popular among the membership and non-membership alike. Any study of the Black Power Movement cannot overlook the impact of the dress, style, and music and culture during this era. Many black youth connected more to the Movement’s cultural flourishes than they did to the ideological framework.⁸⁷ Likewise, the jackets, the clenched fists, the afro hairstyles, and berets like those worn by the BPP attracted many of Memphis’s black youth to the Invaders in ways that Smith or Cabbage’s message did not, despite their charisma. Leadership targeted local high school campuses to promote the organization and push the school administration to offer black history courses.

Controversy followed the Invaders, and yet the Invaders did not shy away from the attention, negative or positive, that they received. Leaders openly touted their disdain for nonviolence and its tactician. They proclaimed that Memphis needed a “good riot” in order for the city to understand the seriousness of the racial dilemma.⁸⁸ The group constantly had its hand on the panic button and used scare tactics to promote its own agenda. Members threatened to burn the city down if leadership did not capitulate to their wishes. In an effort to prove their seriousness, the organization distributed a mimeographed newsletter with a step-by-step guide on how to create a Molotov cocktail. Calvin Taylor explained their mindset: “You get inside a man’s mind and you can wreck

⁸⁵Calvin Taylor, interview.

⁸⁶Ibid.

⁸⁷Van DeBurg, *New Day in Babylon*, 10.

⁸⁸Invaders, “FBI Memo, Racial Matters, 157-1067” (Memphis, Tennessee, 1968).

him...see, but now the physical violence that could take place – that worries people, you see, and we use it as a threat.”⁸⁹ An unidentified South Memphis merchant wrote a letter to Memphis’s Director of Fire and Police Frank Holloman in which he described a threat he received from the “Black Invaders,” to “hire all negro management or vacate premise or they will burn him out,” an example of the Invaders attempts to institute the Ghetto Tax.⁹⁰ On one hand, the organization desperately needed money to operate; on the other, they reveled in their sullied reputation and ability to scare both the white and black establishment.

On a rainy February day in 1968, two Memphis sanitation workers huddled inside a garbage truck to avoid the wet conditions. Faulty mechanical equipment set off the truck’s compactor before the men could escape their dry reprieve. The deaths of Echol Cole and Robert Walker sparked the beginning of the Memphis Sanitation Strike, the most empowering, yet ultimately tragic, civil rights and labor campaign in the history of the city. Memphis’s sanitation department was overwhelmingly black, with the exception of management.⁹¹ Once the workers decided to officially walk off the job, labor and community leaders rallied around the workers. At the chance to become involved in a real grassroots campaign led by the rank-and-file, BOP leaders responded, “O.K., here we go. Now we’ve got us something to be demonstrating for.”⁹² Taylor called the initial

⁸⁹Calvin Taylor, interview.

⁹⁰Memorandum to Frank Holloman, Director Division of Fire and Police," Office of the Mayor: Departmental Communication, Frank Holloman Collection, Shelby County Room, Benjamin L. Hooks/Central Library (Memphis, Tennessee, January 15, 1969).

⁹¹McKnight, *The Last Crusade*, 34-35.

organizing in late 1967 and early 1968 Phase One. The sanitation strike provided the organization to step up and initiate Phase Two.⁹³

As the resolve of the workers strengthened, so did Mayor Loeb's. No one anticipated that the "wildcat" strike would become a two-and-a-half month work stoppage and ultimately a civil rights struggle, though the horrible working conditions, poor pay, and past attempts at a strike hinted at the possibility that something larger could happen. BOP leaders claimed that they understood more than any other leadership faction in the city that Memphis could explode at any moment. The FBI took notice of the dispute as soon as the local NAACP sided with the workers. The Bureau also watched out for any "black nationalist infiltration" or influence on the striking workers, though they did not detect such infiltration in the early stages of the strike.⁹⁴ While bracing for any influence of Black Power, law enforcement officials could not account for the impact of the strike on the black community and the power derived from the workers' courageous stand. "Black people all over the city...wasn't nothing going on but the sanitation strike. They didn't care if you were a Black Power militant, if you were an Uncle Tom, but if you were behind the sanitation strike you were a brother," recalled Taylor.⁹⁵

In early March, with the Mayor and the American Federation of State County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME) union officials gridlocked, the ministerial alliance took the lead in supporting the sanitation workers and organizing the marches and meetings

⁹²Calvin Taylor, interview.

⁹³Ibid.

⁹⁴McKnight, *The Last Crusade*, 35.

⁹⁵Calvin Taylor, interview.

with the sanitation workers.⁹⁶ Soon the unofficial coalition of ministers and other community leaders coalesced into the more formal Community on the Move for Equality (COME). Reverend James Lawson, pastor of Centenary Methodist Church and a man Martin Luther King considered “the leading theoretician of nonviolent protest in the United States,” headed the newly formed coalition.⁹⁷ With COME involved, the work stoppage became a full-fledged civil rights issue, despite the newspapers’ characterization of the ministers’ approach as a “racial pitch.”⁹⁸ The organization began to employ economic boycotts of downtown businesses and the city’s two dailies, *Commercial Appeal* and *Press-Scimitar*. It further demanded better jobs, better housing, and an end to discrimination and brutality of African Americans by police.⁹⁹

Youth also became an essential component of the strike. After the sanitation workers, high school and college students were constant fixtures at the downtown marches. On several occasions, at the behest of the Invaders, students skipped school to join the strikers.¹⁰⁰ The marches provided many with their first direct experience in the Movement, another example that gave credence to BOP’s suggestion that black leadership underutilized the city’s youth. “You might say we don’t know what we are

⁹⁶“Negro Pastors Take Reins As Garbage Strike Leaders In Switch to Racial Pitch,” *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, March 12, 1968.

⁹⁷Richard Lentz, "Sixty-five Days in Memphis: The Commercial Appeal, The Press-Scimitar and the 1968 Garbage Strike," (Master of Arts Thesis, Southern Illinois University, 1976), 89.

⁹⁸“Negro Pastors Take Reins,” *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, March 12, 1968.

⁹⁹*Ibid.*

¹⁰⁰“March Arrest Second for Youth,” *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, March 14, 1968. Memphis Police arrested Invader John Henry Ferguson and eight others for disorderly conduct and resisting arrest for trying to “incite students at Carver High School to join a downtown demonstration.”

doing here, but we know this is a cause, in that it involves black people and we are black,” expressed one student.¹⁰¹ Some adults, however, questioned whether or not the students should participate in the marches or concentrate solely on school. Some adults suggested that the youth were “too immature emotionally to become actively involved in controversial social issues of the day.” Their concern as the students’ caretakers notwithstanding, arguing that the students should not participate because they “needed time to grow” underscored the disconnect between the adults and the youth’s desire to contribute the “black cause.”¹⁰² Lawson, who helped organize the Nashville Sit-In Movement and SNCC, understood the power that youth brought to the Movement. To capitalize on the youth presence, present a united front, and to bridge the divide with the “militants,” Lawson invited Charles Cabbage as a BOP representative to participate in the COME strike strategy sessions.

From the start, there existed a shaky marriage between the “Black Power Boys” and COME. Neither side totally trusted the other. Invader Charles Ballard accused the “so-called big preachers” of grandstanding and taking over the strike for the sanitation workers, a move he labeled as “worse than Mayor Loeb,” for its paternalistic behavior toward the workers.¹⁰³ The workers, Ballard and other Invaders suggested, did not have their own voice represented in the negotiations and that “civil rights tactics of ‘63’ are not sufficient in the form of pressure on political structures.”¹⁰⁴ Further alleging that the older

¹⁰¹Richard Lentz, "Sixty-five Days in Memphis," 97.

¹⁰²“A Point of View: Which is Best?” *Tri-State Defender*, March 9, 1968.

¹⁰³Charles Ballard, Interview by James Mosby, July 13, 1968, The Civil Rights Documentation Project, Ralph J. Bunche Collection, Howard University, Washington, DC.

guard was out of touch with the reality of the situation, John B. Smith told members of the ministerial alliance, “You preachers do the praying and we’ll do the other work.” Cabbage also criticized the ministers. Cabbage’s criticism stemmed partly from the ministers’ position of authority and adulation among the black community, but he insisted despite the power they held they still could “get nothin’ done.”¹⁰⁵ Cabbage’s comments showed the premium that he and his cohorts placed on having power.

Without power and a significant role in COME, BOP felt marginalized as well, despite FBI reports that Cabbage had gained more influence in COME meetings. The FBI also accused him of using the strike “as a vehicle to stimulate interest on the part of Negro youths in his Black Power Movement.”¹⁰⁶ Cabbage acknowledged that the strike brought the black community together in support of the workers, but it irritated him that he and his organization had little involvement.¹⁰⁷ The ministers, BOP suggested were too busy turning the strike into “one big revival,” and with all the singing, praying, and marching, they ignored the real issues.¹⁰⁸ Cabbage’s appraisal ignored that the ministers initiated and supported COME’s civil rights plank, although he argued that the issues COME supported were issues that BOP had tried to make priorities in the first place. Although many of the ministers took a more militant stance than they normally conveyed in public or from their own pulpits, they still disagreed with the radical posturing of BOP

¹⁰⁴“Invaders,” FBI Memo, Racial Matters, 157-1067,” Afro-American Brotherhood Speaks: Black Thesis Black Power!!!” (Memphis, Tennessee, 1968).

¹⁰⁵Charles Cabbage, interview.

¹⁰⁶Invaders, “FBI Memo, Racial Matters, 157-1067” (Memphis, Tennessee, 1968).

¹⁰⁷Charles Cabbage, interview.

¹⁰⁸Invaders, “FBI Memo, Racial Matters, 157-1067” (Memphis, Tennessee, 1968).

and the Invaders. Lawson characterized the Invaders' militant flourishes as "rhetorical radicalism," while other ministers argued that for all the talk of revolution, the group did little to actually personally help the cause of the workers.¹⁰⁹

As negotiations between the mayor and AFSCME broke down, Lawson decided that the strike needed the attention of nationally recognized civil rights leaders. Even when police sprayed mace in the crowd during an impromptu February march, the strike still failed to garner much attention from national media outlets. In March, Executive Secretary of the national NAACP, Roy Wilkins and civil rights veteran Bayard Rustin visited Memphis to show their support for the strike. Lawson promised that Wilkins and Rustin would be "the first in a whole series of people coming in from all over the country to help you march and lead you to victory."¹¹⁰ BOP leaders, however, wondered why COME enlisted help from outsiders instead of utilizing their services. Wilkins and Rustin's visit to Memphis served as a prelude to Lawson's promise to bring the national spotlight to Memphis and the struggle of the sanitation workers. Lawson managed an even larger coup when he convinced Martin Luther King, Jr. to come to Memphis. On March 18, King addressed a large crowd at Mason Temple and promised to return to Memphis to lead a march.¹¹¹ King, in the midst of preparing for SCLC's Poor People's

¹⁰⁹Honey, *Going Down Jericho Road*, 231.

¹¹⁰"Negro Pastors Take Reins," *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, March 12, 1968; "Wilkins, Rustin Praise Negro Unity in Memphis," *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, March 15, 1968; *Tri-State Defender*, "Roy Wilkins is Coming to Memphis Thursday," March 16, 1968.

¹¹¹"King Implored by Ministers to Come Here; Civil Rights Leader Urged to Support Strikers; Marches Continue," *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, March 14, 1968.

Campaign to address the nation's economic disparities, pledged to the workers that their struggle in Memphis would mark the beginning of the campaign.¹¹²

King did not return to Memphis triumphantly. An unexpected snowfall forced COME to postpone a March 22 date for protest for March 28. The subsequent Beale Street riot on March 28 placed a dark cloud over King's decision to use the sanitation workers' strike as the preface to the Poor People's Campaign. King and his staff scrambled to find out what exactly happened and talk to the parties they believed started the fracas. BOP leadership disagreed with inviting King and, strategically, they never really supported the march. In protest and simply in an effort to avoid being targeted and personally blamed, the leadership decided to stay away from the march altogether. "We [the leadership] were getting the blame for everything and we were nowhere near the place...the next morning when we read the newspapers and the Invaders were taking the blame for everything, we decided that, you know, we better straighten this thing out," Taylor explained.¹¹³

The absence of BOP leadership did not stop anyone from pointing the finger at the organization. City Councilman Fred Davis succinctly called the riot "a damn shame," and without naming names, *The Commercial Appeal* blamed the disturbance on "angry young people who wanted an incident in Memphis."¹¹⁴ Instead of viewing the alienation of the young activists as a misstep on the part of the adults, Reverend Samuel "Billy" Kyles suggested that the Invaders' reluctance to conform caused the riot. "The Invaders,

¹¹²Honey, *Going Down Jericho Road*, 231.

¹¹³Calvin Taylor, interview.

¹¹⁴"Moment of Truth," *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, March 29, 1968.

that young group started the breakup of the march. They were always pulling away from what we were doing, trying to establish their own identity,” recalled Reverend Kyles.¹¹⁵

Reverend Dick Moon, Pastor of the Presbyterian University Church at Memphis State University and member of COME, insisted that the marginalization of BOP in the strike strategy sessions led to the disturbance. “Well I think it occurred because...the young people in the black community were not given enough say – were not given any representation. And Ralph Jackson and Jim Lawson pretty well held them down and even though they were willing to listen to them, they weren’t willing to involve them into the actual strategy committee...if we don’t involve them in what we’re doing, they are just going to continue to bust us up,” Moon suggested.¹¹⁶ Lawson disagreed with Moon’s observation and BOP’s belief that they had been excluded from the strategy sessions. “There has been communication. I don’t accept that,” Lawson responded when asked about COME’s rejection of BOP.¹¹⁷ Others looking to combat criticism leveled at King argued “for weeks [Memphis] has been a smoldering cauldron waiting for the occasion to boil over into a racial outburst,” and that the riot “could have happened even if the marchers had been Sunday School children on their way to a picnic ground.”¹¹⁸

¹¹⁵“Invaders of '67 Claim Corner in Memphis Civil Rights Fight,” *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, April 4, 1993.

¹¹⁶Reverend Dick Moon, Interview by James Mosby, July 10, 1968, The Civil Rights Documentation Project, Ralph J. Bunche Collection, Howard University, Washington, D.C.

¹¹⁷“King Disappointed in March – He’ll Try Again Next Week,” *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, March 30, 1968.

¹¹⁸“Dr. King and Memphis,” *Tri-State Defender*, April 20, 1968.

Yet Cabbage admitted that BOP and as an extension, the Invaders, needed to challenge nonviolence as a tactic, and the march did just that.¹¹⁹ They reiterated their opposition to King's presence, and like other critics of King, feared that a successful outcome for the civil rights leader would undermine their work. Cabbage recalled the organization's fears years later:

We had been working for two-and-a-half years trying to get ourselves established and trying to organize, trying to build the organization, and all of the sudden he comes in. The ministers hadn't been doing nothin' during all that time and all of the sudden King comes in and pulls up this fantastic mob, gets the sanitation workers the right to have a recognized union, and moves the ministers to the front of the leadership.¹²⁰

Cabbage also insisted that in the haste to bring in King, Lawson and COME leadership did not properly prepare people for the march. Memphis, Cabbage argued, "hadn't had a nonviolent demonstration in years and years," prior to the planned March 28th protest.¹²¹ According to Cabbage, he begged Lawson to hold off on inviting King to allow BOP to work with the community and instruct the citizens in nonviolent protest tactics, or at least send in SCLC representatives ahead of King to conduct nonviolent workshops. Cabbage and his organization remained uncommitted to nonviolence in principle, but realized that to even entertain the use of nonviolence as a tactic required a certain know-how and discipline that many black Memphians simply did not have. For all the controversy surrounding BOP and the Invaders, Coby Smith and Charles Cabbage possessed a background in civil rights organizing and could speak with some authority to those issues. "People are not automatically in tune to being able to adjust to a nonviolent

¹¹⁹Charles Cabbage, interview.

¹²⁰Ibid.

¹²¹"Invaders of '67," *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, April 4, 1993.

political position,” Cabbage argued, “especially in the middle of a hatred that was going on in Memphis during that particular time.”¹²²

After the melee, King summoned Cabbage, a fellow Morehouse man, for a meeting at his hotel room at the downtown Holiday Inn-Rivermont. Along with Cabbage, Charles “Izzy” Harrington and Calvin Taylor attended the meeting. King’s second in command, Ralph Abernathy, immediately blamed the Invaders for the breaking up the march. Abernathy’s accusations placed them on the defensive. Cabbage told Abernathy that his organization had nothing to do with disrupting the march. Before things became too heated, King appeared out of the shower and began his own inquiry. King questioned the young men about their involvement in the disruption of the march and asked, “why would you resort to violence, anyway when you know that violence hasn’t worked for white people, why would you do that?”¹²³ Cabbage, the group’s spokesman, continued to deny any culpability and the conversation soon changed. Cabbage informed King about BOP’s platform, the trouble he and the organization had with Lawson and the other ministers, their alienation from the actual strike organizing, and how a lack of financial support hindered their attempts to truly implement the programs necessary to achieve anything substantial for black Memphians. Cabbage talked up the organization’s Community Unification Program.

Naively, Cabbage believed that he could secure a three million dollar commitment from King. If King could indeed secure three million dollars, on the cusp of the Poor People’s Campaign, he had no intention of committing that amount of money to BOP.

¹²²Charles Cabbage, interview.

¹²³Calvin Taylor, interview.

King instead listened to their concerns, agreed that BOP should have a voice in COME leadership, and promised to help the group get financial backing if they assured no violence on King's next attempt to march with the sanitation workers. King also asked Cabbage to pledge to serve as marshals for the march, or "parade," as Cabbage referred to the demonstration. King's very aura calmed the highly excitable young men. "I had never seen a man that looked like peace...this man actually lived and believed in nonviolence," Taylor replied in awe.¹²⁴ Cabbage, John Smith, and a group of Invaders met with King again on April 3, this time at the Lorraine Motel. King and the young men again debated the merits of nonviolence. According to Cabbage, SCLC staff wrote the organization a check for ten thousand dollars, with the promise of more to come, in exchange for guaranteeing a peaceful march.¹²⁵

Before King could fulfill any of the promises made to Cabbage, the BOP, or even the sanitation workers, an assassin's bullet struck King down on April 4 on the balcony of the Lorraine Motel. In the aftermath, King's widow, Coretta Scott King returned to Memphis on April 8 to lead the march that her husband had pledged to lead before his assassination. As peace marshals, the Invaders made sure that they kept their pledge of no violence to Dr. King. Calvin Taylor, normally just a copy boy, had the opportunity to actually report on the march. He interviewed fellow Invader and march marshal, John Henry Ferguson. Ferguson told Taylor "he'd rather be out raising hell...burning the city down...but that he had made a commitment to Dr. King, and he wasn't about to break it

¹²⁴Ibid.

¹²⁵Charles Cabbage, interview.

under any circumstances.”¹²⁶ In death, Dr. King brought the organization stability – even if only temporarily.

In the months following the march, SCLC officials continued King’s work in Washington, D.C. for the Poor People’s Campaign. The Invaders proved during the national march in Memphis that they could remain nonviolent. That fact, coupled with King’s attempt to reach out to the group before he died, earned the Invaders an invitation to work security in Resurrection City, the makeshift living quarters for the Poor People’s Campaign. On the surface, the new relationship between SCLC and the Invaders fulfilled King’s prophesy: “black youth attracted to Black Power and armed self-defense could also be brought into the nonviolent movement.”¹²⁷

Back from the Poor People’s Campaign, SCLC held their annual convention in Memphis in the August of 1968.¹²⁸ SCLC, the Invaders, and black Memphians hoped that the convention could serve as a cathartic event. SCLC made the conscious decision to hold the convention in Memphis only four months after the death of King. However, like the Poor People’s Campaign itself, things did not go according to plan for other the SCLC – the Invaders. Many in Memphis considered Lance “Sweet Willie Wine” Watson the most controversial of all the Invaders. An upperclassman at Manassas High School

¹²⁶Calvin Taylor, interview.

¹²⁷Honey, *Going Down Jericho Road*, 477; “SCLC Calling Students to May 27 March Effort,” *Tri-State Defender*, May 11, 1968. Along with the Invaders, newly elected SCLC President, Ralph Abernathy solicited youth from across the country to join the organization for the Poor People’s Campaign in Washington. “Students in America, both black and white, have provided great physical, moral and intellectual support for human rights movements in the past,” said Abernathy.

¹²⁸“Celebrities Are Coming For SCLC’s Confab,” *Tri-State Defender*, August 17, 1968.

when Coby Smith attended the school, Watson headed up the organization's effort in Washington. Certain members of SCLC harbored ill feelings toward the Invaders over their supposed responsibility for King's death, despite the strides made between the two organizations in the immediate aftermath of King's death. Watson and other Invaders approached Andrew Young in hopes that he and Ralph Abernathy would help to exonerate the organization against charges that their actions precipitated King's death. Watson regarded the organization's work in Washington as successful and integral to SCLC's campaign; and he hoped that SCLC felt the same way and would convey that same sentiment to the Memphis community.

Allegedly, when Watson asked Young if SCLC planned to make good on King's promise to help fund the organization's programs, Young "got a little bit upset because we had the nerve to come to him and ask him to make good on the commitments."¹²⁹ Those commitments, according to the Invaders, included six cars and 300,000 dollars in financial aid.¹³⁰ According to some of the Invaders, Andrew Young, in anger and grief over King's death, blamed Memphis for contributing to the conditions that caused the King's murder. Young alleged, "the niggers in this town got Dr. King killed."¹³¹ Obviously upset at the accusation, Invaders circulated flyers that condemned the Memphis ministers who brought King to Memphis, and they denounced the Poor People's Campaign and Resurrection City as failures. They also accused SCLC of

¹²⁹Calvin Taylor, interview; "Memphis Street Gang Threatens SCLC, Young," *The Washington Evening Star*, August 17, 1968. Young admitted that King had promised to help the Invaders raise money, but not 300,000 dollars that the group claimed.

¹³⁰"SCLC to Fulfill MLK's Promise; Militants Blast SCLC for Campaign Conduct," *Tri-State Defender*, August 24, 1968.

¹³¹Calvin Taylor, interview.

languishing in “air-conditioned comfort at a Washington D.C. motel...sleeping with white girls, feasting on steaks, and enjoying an unaccustomed social schedule” while they ate bologna and cheese sandwiches and built Resurrection City.¹³² The flyer also charged SCLC with not doing enough to help the Invaders’ reputation in the community: “The Invaders are having their lives threatened because of their work in the Black Community and SCLC could clear their name, but refuse to do so.”¹³³

The incident happened during a difficult and critical period for SCLC. King’s death left the organization without a charismatic spokesman to “compete” with fiery Black Power leaders such as Eldridge Cleaver, Stokely Carmichael and H. Rap Brown. The Poor People’s Campaign did not have the impact or yield the results that they hoped. At a time when the organization needed to exude strength, the controversy with the Invaders came at an inopportune time, especially at the first convention since King’s death. Several Invaders stormed the convention and charged Ralph Abernathy and Andrew Young with “reneging on [financial] promises made to the group by the late Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.”¹³⁴ Angry at the failure to secure funding and Young’s accusation, they gave the SCLC Vice President two hours to get out of Memphis. Partly under duress, Young admitted, “he probably said some things he shouldn’t have said.” Young confessed that anger fueled his attack, but that “the Invaders did do quite a bit to make the Poor People’s Campaign a success. They are probably mad at me because I neglected them. That’s what happens – as soon as we begin to neglect them, they begin to

¹³²“SCLC to Fulfill MLK's Promise,” *Tri-State Defender*, August 24, 1968.

¹³³“FBI Memo, Racial Matters, 157-1067” *Black Liberator* (Memphis, Tennessee, 1968).

¹³⁴*Ibid.*

resent us.”¹³⁵ He apologized to the Invaders as he credited their efforts with the Poor People’s Campaign.¹³⁶ Young’s mea culpa echoed his mentor King’s belief that alienating young Black Power activists did more harm than good. However, Young’s statement, while patronizing in some respects, suggested that the older generation needed to have a certain level of tolerance and patience for the wayward thinking youth instead of engaging in meaningful dialogue. Abernathy agreed to fulfill King’s pledge, although the organization never received any funding from SCLC.¹³⁷ The Invader confrontation aside, the local black press praised the convention and Abernathy, even as many questioned how successful he could be as the SCLC head.¹³⁸

Once back in Memphis, the unity that SCLC and the Invaders created after Martin Luther King’s death dissolved. Not everybody in SCLC committed to providing BOP with financial resources, but King had wanted to make sure that the young men would not make trouble. The fallen leader had wanted to channel what he deemed as negative behavior into positive energy, so that Memphis and SCLC could use for the betterment of the community. With King’s death, the prospect of national recognition and respect eluded BOP; they never escaped the stigma associated with the March 28 disturbance, which led to King’s return and ultimately his death. Cabbage and Coby Smith had

¹³⁵“SCLC to Fulfill MLK's Promise,” *Tri-State Defender*, August 24, 1968.

¹³⁶“Memphis Street Gang Threatens SCLC, Young,” *The Washington Evening Star*, August 17, 1968. Young claimed that during an exchange with the Invaders about funding, an Invader said “he wasn’t concerned about King’s death and felt that the gang wasn’t responsible.” Young replied that “he wasn’t so sure ou didn’t have something to do about it because of the sanitation workers’ march and all that kept Dr. King in Memphis.”

¹³⁷SCLC to Fulfill MLK's Promise,” *Tri-State Defender*, "August 24, 1968.

¹³⁸“A Point of View; SCLC Undertones,” *Tri-State Defender*, August 24, 1968.

returned to Memphis in the summer of 1967 with the goal of redeeming the soul of the city and replacing black fear with a new, more assertive political posture. However, controversy began to obscure their purpose, placing the organization's Black Power ambitions in jeopardy. Then, in the summer of 1968, an opportunity to run the federally funded War on Poverty program called the Neighborhood Organizing Project (NOP) gave BOP and the Invaders another chance to implement their platform. Their involvement with the federally funded programs created a controversy that placed the Invaders, Black Power, and Memphis in the national spotlight.

Chapter Three

“Make the Scene Better”: The Neighborhood Organizing Project, The Decline of the Invaders, and the Promise and Limits of Black Power in Memphis

*“The N.O.P is going to do all it can to try and solve the many problems that exist between the two races. The solving of these problems can’t be done by the people of N.O.P. alone but they must be solved by the two races working together on a man to man basis.”*¹ – **Black Organizing Project, Neighborhood Organizing Project**

*“They [the Invaders] are the black youth who have felt the sting of white racism, the frustration of inadequate employment, the injury of social rejection, the despair of hopelessness, the desperation of a loss of faith in anything but their own strength”*² – **Nat D. Williams, WDIA Disc Jockey**

“Are you white?” Joan Crawford, a field worker with the Neighborhood Organizing Project (NOP), asked a group of young African American students. When a young girl answered, “no, I’m colored,” Crawford quickly corrected her. “You’re not colored,” she said. Another student instead answered, “Black” and Crawford followed the students’ response by asking if they were proud to be black. When the students answered “Yeah,” Crawford pushed again and asked, “Do you all want to be white?” This time the entire group of students said no. “If somebody asks you what nationally you are, you tell them black Afro-American,” Crawford continued, “Black for beauty.” Crawford’s and the students’ lively discussion typified a usual exchange at one of the five designated sites of the controversial NOP. The NOP was a War on Poverty Committee (WOPC) summer program that began in 1968. It was primarily staffed and operated by members of the Black Organizing Project (BOP) and the Invaders. Invader and NOP project

¹Invaders, “FBI Memo, Racial Matters, 157-1067-221-157-1067-304” (Memphis, Tennessee, June-August 1968). War On Poverty projects in Memphis.

²“A Point Of View; The Invaders,” *Tri-State Defender*, February 1, 1969.

director Charles Ballard formally articulated Crawford's informal dialogue with the students into the organization's and the project's mission. "We want to teach these people where they stand in the black man's struggle for liberation," Ballard said.³

According to Ballard, the NOP sought to improve the quality of life for Memphis's black citizens by teaching black history, black arts, and black politics including, "voter registration drives, teaching people how to use voter registration machines, how to vote, how to relate to politics, city politics, national politics, and how to make up their own minds about things."⁴ Amidst accusations that BOP, and the Invaders specifically, bore responsibility for the events that led to Martin Luther King's assassination, the creation of the NOP represented a legitimate opportunity to advance the organization's platform and turn their rhetoric into results. BOP leadership fought against the derogatory labels as well as the implication that they were simply nothing but militants with no real purpose or agenda. They attempted to change this perception by organizing a community outreach program aimed at instilling black pride, educating the poor and disadvantaged, and fostering black empowerment. For the liberal establishment, NOP represented in part a way to institutionalize the local Black Power Movement by adopting components of the organization's program into a government program framework. By integrally involving BOP and the Invaders in the operation of the War On Poverty program, liberals sought to tame the organization and ward off the possibility of racial unrest in Memphis. However, those reluctant to endorse the WOPC program called

³"A Report on the Controversial NOP; Black Pride Stressed in Memphis Project," *Memphis Press-Scimitar*, July 11, 1968.

⁴Charles Ballard, interview.

it an expensive, unnecessary, and unproductive attempt to placate so-called unredeemable segments of the society.⁵

How far could Black Power penetrate? If supported and cultivated, could it be effective? Could institutions operate autonomously and independently if funded and guided by the hand of the federal government? As a test case for those questions, the NOP in the end achieved only marginal success, not the lasting impact the activists envisioned. The program's limited budget, a limited faith in the program's efficacy from conservatives, and resistance to the involvement of Black Power radicals in a federally funded program contributed to the NOP's lack of long-term success. The actions of the Invaders compounded those issues. Repeated arrests, infighting, and a lack of organizational structure, not only factored into the program's insolvency, but also scripted the decline of the organization. The NOP exposed the limits of Black Power's reach into the Memphis community.

As President Lyndon Johnson stood on the podium and addressed the graduating class of 1965 at Howard University in Washington, D.C., he "promised bold, new efforts in housing, employment, welfare, and education to assist the Blacks' struggle to move beyond the goal of equality of opportunity to racial equality as a reality."⁶ Johnson proclaimed it was not "just enough to open the gates of opportunity," but that "all citizens

⁵"A Point of View," *Tri-State Defender*, February 2 1969. Nat D. Williams article, A Point of View, outlines the issues that many in Memphis society (black and white) had of the Invaders. "Too many in Memphians, black and white are too quick to dismiss these youths as thugs, criminals, drop-outs, and lunatic fringe fools."

⁶Sitkoff, *The Struggle for Black Equality*, 184.

must have the ability to walk through those gates.”⁷ As a Texas Senator and Senate Majority leader, Johnson guided the first civil rights legislation through Congress since the Reconstruction period. As President of the United States, he signed into law two monumental pieces of legislation, the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965. President Johnson’s promises meshed with his track record, and his commencement address was generally well received.⁸ However, five days after his address at Howard, a confrontation between a young African American male and a white police officer erupted in the Watts section of Los Angeles into what one historian called, “the most destructive race riot in more than two decades.”⁹

The country stood at a crossroads. Johnson’s speech, which many in the African American civil rights establishment praised, served to “dissipate the storm that was gathering in America’s ghettos before it burst upon the nation.”¹⁰ But storm clouds had been in the horizon for some time, and the Watts uprising put Johnson and the nation on notice that African Americans could no longer serve as bystanders in the operation of their own communities.¹¹ Peniel Joseph suggests, “Watts exposed the bitter reality behind Johnson’s plea to end black isolation in urban ghettos by waging war on the poverty that

⁷Clayborne Carson, David J. Garrow, Gerald Gill, Vincent Harding, and Darlene Clark Hine, ed., *The Eyes on the Prize Civil Rights Reader: Documents, Speeches, and Firsthand Accounts from the Black Freedom Struggle* (New York: Penguin Publishing, 1991), 612.

⁸Joseph, *Waiting ‘Til the Midnight Hour*, 122.

⁹Ibid, 185.

¹⁰Ibid.

¹¹Randall Woods, *LBJ: Architect of American Ambition* (New York: Free Press, 2006), 589.

stifled dreams.”¹² The unrest, which many also considered a revolt against the moderate black leadership that characterized much of the early modern civil rights movement, prompted leaders who previously focused so much of their attention on legal battles, direct action protests, and voting rights issues to finally deal with the “heirs of Malcolm X.”¹³

According to President Johnson’s biographer Randall Woods, his answer to the Watts riot was to get “at the roots of the rioting, lest other American cities go up in flames.”¹⁴ In the riot’s aftermath, Martin Luther King, Jr. and Johnson talked at length about the crisis. King implored Johnson to get the “poverty programs going.” In his first State of the Union address as President after the assassination of John F. Kennedy, Johnson had promised to wage a full-scale war on poverty. An element of his Great Society platform, the War on Poverty programs aimed to eliminate “poverty in the country’s two most publicized deindustrialized spaces: central cities and the rural counties of Appalachia.”¹⁵ Robert O. Self argues in *American Babylon: Race and the Struggle for Postwar Oakland* that Johnson’s Great Society and the advent of federal War on Poverty program in 1964 was responsible for ushering in a second wave of civil rights and Black Power organizing.¹⁶

¹²Joseph, *Waiting ‘Til the Midnight Hour*, 122.

¹³Sitkoff, *The Struggle for Black Equality*, 591. Sitkoff describes the temperament of the Civil Rights Movement after the Watts riot. The Autobiography of Malcolm X had just been published, influencing a new generation of young disillusioned blacks. Thus, the Sitkoff dubbed them the “Heirs of Malcolm X.”

¹⁴Woods, *LBJ: Architect of American Ambition*, 589.

¹⁵*Ibid.*

King and other African American leaders viewed the passage of the legislation and War on Poverty funding into African American communities as an opportunity to stimulate economic growth, as well as to provide African Americans with opportunities to control their own financial destinies. The Economic Opportunity Act of 1964 created the Office of Economic Opportunity (OEO). As the administrator of War on Poverty funding, the OEO oversaw the antipoverty programs designed to assist urban and rural areas with problems of indigence and the areas afflicted with perpetual poverty and unemployment. Watts provided the government with a blueprint on ways to ward off urban violence and redirect the attention of so-called militant organizations, all while using government-controlled programs to keep tabs on their movements. In the interim, however, “the daunting long term challenge Johnson faced was designing a combined civil rights and antipoverty strategy that would fulfill the promises he made at Howard University, but also defuse the anger of the ghetto, while at the same time remain faithful to the values of an increasingly skeptical Middle America.” Grants began to flood volatile inner-city areas considered only an explosive incident away from a repeat of the violence and destruction that occurred on that hot August day in Los Angeles.¹⁷

In “Black Power, White Resistance, and Public Policy: Political Power and Poverty Program Grants in Mississippi,” political scientist David C. Colby assesses the relationship between Black Power organizations and their ability to secure poverty grants. Colby argues that tactically Black Power advocates, notwithstanding their more radical

¹⁶Robert O. Self, *American Babylon: Race and the Struggle for Postwar Oakland* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2003), 178.

¹⁷Gareth Davies, *From Opportunity to Entitlement: The Transformation and Decline of Great Society Liberalism* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas), 80.

philosophy, influenced the distribution of poverty grants.¹⁸ Colby also suggests that Johnson's War on Poverty initiatives and his focus on eradicating poverty were more politically than socially motivated.¹⁹ With his Dixiecrat constituency slipping away, Colby contends that Johnson tried to compensate for those losses by liberally doling out grants to civil rights organizations and Black Power advocates. James Button's analysis of the urban unrest in the 1960s, "Black Violence: Political Impact of the 1960's Riots," suggests that the OEO increased the number of poverty grants in the 1967-1969 period in response to the rising violence and uprisings in urban areas.²⁰ With the Black Power Movement at its arguable zenith in the late 1960s, and despite what Colby refers to as the "counter movements" attempt to discredit black militant organizations, organizations such as BOP secured government funding to advance their political platform.

No one mistook Memphis for Watts. Yet black poverty, poor education and limited employment opportunities, united inner-city Watts with other centers of African American population around the country. In 1965 Memphis's rate of poverty exploded as the city became the "largest single pocket of poverty in Tennessee," at 27.5 percent. The high percentage even trumped the rural sections of Western and Eastern Tennessee.²¹ The rural exodus, or, "Delta flow", from Mississippi to Memphis inflated the poverty index,

¹⁸David C. Colby, "Black Power, White Resistance, and Public Policy: Political Power and Poverty Program Grants in Mississippi," *Journal of Politics*, vol. 47 (1985). 575-595.

¹⁹Ibid.

²⁰James Button, *Black Violence: Political Impact of the 1960's Riots* (New Jersey: Princeton, 1978), 178.

²¹"Memphis has Most Poverty," *Memphis Press-Scimitar*, October 9, 1965.

and those encompassing the 27.5 percent earned less than \$3,000 per year.²² Many dwelling in abject poverty had to take extreme measures to survive. A sixteen-year-old African American young man arrested on charges of theft explained to the judge he stole a pair of shoes from a local store just so he “could go to school.”²³ Beyond a lack of the necessary material possessions, Memphis also suffered from high rates of malnutrition among children. “If every undernourished child in Memphis were hospitalized there wouldn’t be room for them,” remarked a Memphis doctor.²⁴ In Memphis’s case, unlike Watts, the target of the city’s first flood of poverty grants did not target rooting out the causes of inner-city conflict. Instead they addressed the sources of poverty in a city that the OEO described as having the “some of the worst urban poverty in the nation.”²⁵

In March of 1966, a year after its formal incorporation, the Memphis Area Project South (MAP-South) submitted an application for \$234,000 in federal funding for its “proposed broad-scale attack on problems of the poor in Shelby’s County largest poverty area.”²⁶ MAP-South “addressed problems of unemployment, job training, and supplemental food distribution; organized summer youth programs; and coordinated

²²“Poverty in Memphis: Yes, It’s Here – And the Cause is Usually ‘No Education,’” *Memphis Press-Scimitar*, March 17, 1965; “Rural Poor Dream of an Escape to Memphis,” *Memphis Press-Scimitar*, October 29, 1969.

²³“Poverty Here in Memphis? Facts Say ‘Yes’” *Memphis Press-Scimitar*, March 16, 1964.; Green, *Battling the Plantation Mentality*, 270.

²⁴“Many Shelby Children Go Hungry,” *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, March 1, 1964.

²⁵“City Challenges Poverty Report,” *Memphis Press-Scimitar*, March 14, 1967.

²⁶“Shelby’s Biggest Poor Area Gets Poverty War Go-Ahead,” *Memphis Press-Scimitar*, March 17, 1966.

efforts of block clubs, public housing resident associations, and other groups.”²⁷ MAP-South’s grassroots organizing emanated from several South Memphis neighborhoods, which formed the nucleus of the newly created organization.²⁸ WOP programs, and particularly MAP-South, placed the decision-making power in the hands of those whom the programs would impact the most. The same South Memphis neighborhood where LeMoyne College trained the future black middle class was also classified as the poorest area in the county. The election of Reverend James Lawson as president of the organization showed MAP-South’s commitment to the revitalization of the South Memphis community. His election also signaled a connection between the issues of civil rights and economic justice.

“We have some information on some people in Memphis,” Mississippi Senator James O. Eastland told a Senate Judiciary Committee. After a long, hot summer of riots in cities across the country in 1967, most notably in Cleveland, Detroit, and Newark, the United States Congress held special hearings to consider passing an antiriot bill that would make crossing the state lines with the purpose of starting a riot a federal offense.²⁹ The Committee’s inquiry included exploring the possibility that the War on Poverty programs subsidized rioters.³⁰ At the behest of Memphis’s Congressional Representative, Dan Kuykendall, the Congressional hearing turned the spotlight on two young of

²⁷Green, *Battling the Plantation Mentality*, 270.

²⁸Ibid.

²⁹“Senate Committee Opens Hearings; Fiery Speech Blamed for Cambridge Riot,” *Memphis Press-Scimitar*, August 2, 1967.

³⁰“‘Hate School’ Reports Stirs Capitol Hill,” *Memphis Press-Scimitar*, August 4, 1967.

Memphis's young Black Power activists Charles Cabbage and Coby Smith. "I don't know whether they will be called to testify or not. We'll have to study the information and see," Eastland explained. As field workers for MAP-South, Cabbage and Smith caught the committee's wrath for their affiliations with the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). According to the committee and some Memphis WOPC and MAP-South officials, anyone employed by the federal government could not hold a position in any federally funded program if they held membership in any organization classified as subversive by the government. SNCC's objectives, WOPC officials argued, did not "coincide with those of the anti-poverty effort." Yet SNCC's belief in participatory democracy and allowing the people most affected to control the decision-making process aligned with the WOPC's commitment to same ideals.³¹

Months before the Congressional inquiry, the controversial Black Power activist Stokely Carmichael resigned his post as the chairman of SNCC. His tenure as head of the civil rights organization ushered in a new period of radicalization for SNCC. In April of 1967 violence erupted in Nashville in the wake of an appearance by Carmichael at Vanderbilt University. It did not matter that Carmichael left the city prior to the violent episode; Nashville police chief John Sorace believed that there was "no doubt" that the outside agitators shouldered the blame for the disturbance. In fact, Sorace accused the local SNCC branch of encouraging Nashville black youth to "hate all whites...and make Molotov cocktails," in Liberation Schools funded partially with federal funds.³² The

³¹"Senator Eastland's Prober Checks on Memphis, Investigator Reports to Committee; Eastland May Widen Scope of Inquiry," *Memphis Press-Scimitar*, August 18, 1967.

³²"Police Officials Tells About Intelligence Division; How Nashville Prevent Outbreak of Violence," *Memphis Press-Scimitar*, August 3, 1967; "Kill the Whites – Children Re-Enact Slave Rebellion," *Memphis Press-Scimitar*, August 17, 1967.

Tennessee House of Representatives demanded Carmichael's deportation back to his native Trinidad, and it asked the federal government for help in doing so since no provision in the Tennessee state statutes outlawed individuals or organizations from inciting a riot.³³ With Black Power and the violence associated with the Movement so close to home, Memphis WOPC officials called for the dismissal of Cabbage and Smith. A fear developed that Nashville's "problems" could happen in Memphis. The young activists, with ties to same organization that Carmichael once led, could be catalysts for such a raucous episode.³⁴

Cabbage and Smith's association with MAP-South came via their relationship with James Lawson. Lawson recruited Smith and Cabbage to aid in MAP-South's efforts to reinvigorate the South Memphis community and educate its residents on ways to improve their living conditions. According to Lawson, MAP-South had done a poor job of dealing with the youth. Unemployment among South Memphis's youth remained high, and that demographic, Lawson suggested, constituted the largest segment of poverty in South Memphis. Lawson appreciated the young men's organizing experience, familiarity with the community, and youthful exuberance.³⁵

But in Cabbage and Smith, Lawson also saw an opportunity to mentor the two and channel their energies into positive endeavors. As MAP-South employees, Cabbage and Smith canvassed South Memphis neighborhoods; they knocked on doors and talked

³³Ibid.

³⁴Joseph, *Waiting 'Til the Midnight Hour*, 178.

³⁵Reverend James Lawson, interview by Joan Beifuss and David Yellin, September 23, 1969, Container 24, Folder 115, Sanitation Strike Archival Project, Mississippi Valley Collection, University of Memphis, Memphis, TN.

to residents about their rights as tenants. Cabbage and Smith believed that the residents had the right to organize rent strikes to protest inhabitable living conditions. Although a component of the MAP-South's mission included informing and empowering residents to work on their own behalf to better their circumstance and build up the community, antipoverty workers could not encourage tenants in federally subsidized housing to withhold rent. Another problem also surfaced: WOPC officials suspected that the young men promoted their Black Power agenda during working hours.

MAP-South board members called a policy meeting in early August 1967 at Lawson's pastorate, Centenary Methodist Church, to discuss concern over Cabbage and Smith's activities and employment with the organization. The two men, board members claimed, were either members of SNCC or SNCC sympathizers. Either way, the members argued, their employment threatened the program's federal funding. Although the MAP-South was not a federal program, it was tied to the WOP as a third-party program that received antipoverty funds for many of its initiatives. To head off any controversy, some members called for their dismissal. Lawson disagreed with the dissenters and contended that Cabbage and Smith's participation was necessary. "You can't do anything with a poverty organization unless you use the type of people who can communicate with all elements of the community," Lawson explained. In the interim, while the board sorted out the confusion, they voted not to immediately dismiss Cabbage and Smith because "we have an obligation not to act on the basis of alleged remarks."³⁶

Lawson's decision to hire Cabbage and Smith, despite their fundamental differences about the use of nonviolence in the civil rights movement, spoke to the

³⁶"Two Names Cause Stir," *Memphis Press-Scimitar*, August 4, 1967.

minister's conviction for nonviolence and the strength of redemption.³⁷ His belief in nonviolence extended beyond an effective tactical approach in combating injustice.³⁸ Cabbage and Smith, like Carmichael, believed in nonviolence as simply a tactic, and they would abandon the strategy if the situation called for more extreme measures. By 1967 the two young men were arguing the inevitability of armed struggle. "Nonviolence, as a strategy, was doomed to fail," they concluded. Lawson balked at the young men's attitudes and attributed their revolutionary rhetoric to "nihilistic romanticism." He also believed that "eventually once brought into the fold that he [Cabbage] would change."³⁹

Few besides the Methodist minister had faith. Many began to label Cabbage and Smith as detrimental to the long-term success of MAP-South. Amidst threats that OEO would pull the project's funding, Memphis WOPC officials reversed the initial decision to keep the two on staff. Attorney and WOPC Chairman Herschel Feibelman reiterated the Senate Judiciary Committee's position – Cabbage and Smith's affiliation with SNCC and promulgation of Black Power precluded their employment with MAP-South.⁴⁰ Others associated with MAP-South argued that since the organization was an independent entity that happened to receive federal funding, it should make its own decision regarding Cabbage and Smith. Washington Butler, Memphis's WOPC Director, had ironically revealed his own prior ties to SNCC, although he confessed "he didn't have time for it now." Butler stated that the WOPC would withhold paychecks until

³⁷Calvin Taylor, interview; Honey, *Going Down Jericho Road*, 231.

³⁸Turner, *Sitting in and Speaking Out*, 52-53.

³⁹Ibid.

⁴⁰"Two 'Angry Young Men' Kicked Out," *Memphis Press-Scimitar*, August 8, 1967.

someone could prove that neither young man belonged to any subversive organization or one that advocated rioting.⁴¹

Lawson, who took the accusations against Cabbage and Smith personally, struck back at the charge and the WOPC Executive Committee's mandate for weekly reports. "They want to check and see if we are teaching hate...they are not concerned with trying to wage an effective war. If this is their attitude, they might as well close up," Lawson responded. The Senate Judiciary Committee's investigation had led to a discovery of alleged "hate schools" in the Nashville WOP program operated by Black Power advocates with ties to SNCC. They accused local SNCC members of promoting Black Power, excluding whites, teaching the students to "hate whitey." The reenactment of slave insurrections also shocked the Judiciary Committee. Fred Brooks, Chairman of the Nashville SNCC chapter, did not completely deny the accusations. "We teach the historical facts that whites came to Africa and viciously enslaved many of the great African people. If the history of their Negroes' past leads them to hate white people, that's not our responsibility," Brooks replied.⁴² In fact Brooks declared that the program would continue to operate with or without federal funding.⁴³

The activities of the Nashville antipoverty program and Fred Brooks's stance opened MAP-South up for scrutiny. Officials worried that Cabbage and Smith would influence MAP-South the same way that Brooks did the program in Nashville. WOPC abandoned their prudent, wait-and-see approach. On August 8, the *Memphis Press-*

⁴¹"Senator Eastland's Prober Checks on Memphis, Investigator Reports to Committee; Eastland May Widen Scope of Inquiry," *Memphis Press-Scimitar*, August 10, 1967.

⁴²"Hate School Report Stirs Capitol Hill," *Memphis Press-Scimitar*, August 4, 1967.

⁴³"'Liberation School'; SNCC Head Says 'Keep Your Funds'" *Memphis Press-Scimitar*, August 5, 1967.

Scimitar revealed that the WOPC officially relieved Cabbage and Smith of their positions only a week after agreeing to wait. Despite his show of support against the firing, Lawson's characterization of the youth did little to change the mind of the Judiciary Committee in Washington, or regional, state, and local WOPC officials. "Both men fired are angry guys...they have been taught by society which gives credence to war. They are fairly typical of this generation of students," Lawson explained. He acknowledged the disconnect between the Black Power activists' views and his own, but suggested that their employment provided an opportunity to reach out to the "angry guys" who were "searching for direction."⁴⁴

"Somebody is definitely out to get my job...maybe I should say somebody is out to get me...this is not just something that happens. It is well planned, they have been working on it a long time...it has been clear that someone has been out to get me since the first day I arrived at MAP-South," remarked Coby Smith, displaying the paranoia that many in the Movement felt toward the government.⁴⁵ Smith accused the WOPC of trying to discredit the entire MAP-South organization. Both men rejected Feibelman's claim that the "firings were not intended to reflect on the character or the activities of the two young men."⁴⁶ On the contrary, because they were so connected to their work as MAP-South employees and community organizers, they viewed the attacks as personal. In protest both men ignored the order to leave their positions and argued that an affiliation with SNCC or a shared ideology with the organization had no bearing on their

⁴⁴Two 'Angry Young Men' Kicked Out," *Memphis Press-Scimitar*, August 8, 1967.

⁴⁵"Two Ignore Order to Quit Job," *Memphis Press-Scimitar*, August 9, 1967.

⁴⁶Two 'Angry Young Men' Kicked Out," *Memphis Press-Scimitar*, August 8, 1967.

community organizing work.⁴⁷ “If a man is dealing with a problem as it is, what matter if he is a member of SNICK, is a Communist, is a Black Nationalist, or whatever,” said Cabbage.⁴⁸ Both men believed that their actions helped to empower African Americans to take control of their communities. By organizing young black males, many of whom eventually became the Invaders, they were helping to curb gang violence.⁴⁹

Increased pressure from inside and outside of the organization mounted, as government and some WOPC officials demanded that the activists comply with the order to leave their posts. Cabbage and Smith argued that the daily articles in the *Commercial Appeal* and *Press Scimitar* only presented one side of the story, which did not present them in the best light. Despite the demand by WOPC that both men stay away, the young men continued to report to work. Smith urged the public to consider both sides of the story and “not be fooled by these attempts to turn this into a newspaper lynching. He also threatened that BOP would have to “burn it [the city] down” in order to expose South Memphis’s poverty plight.⁵⁰ Such provocative statements did not help their cause in the public eye. Critics wondered why the young men would not reveal or deny their affiliation with SNCC. “It’s inconsequential,” explained Cabbage, who had no official standing in SNCC, only relationships with SNCC members. “If Stokely [Carmichael] was

⁴⁷“Two Ignore Order to Quit Job,” *Memphis Press-Scimitar*, August 9, 1967.

⁴⁸“Senator Eastland’s Prober Checks on Memphis, Investigator Reports to Committee; Eastland May Widen Scope of Inquiry,” *Memphis Press-Scimitar*, August 10, 1967.

⁴⁹Coby Smith, interview.

⁵⁰*Ibid.*

to come in here, if he was the best man to do the job of fighting poverty, then he ought to have the job...but they say he's black fire him, he's SNICK fire him."⁵¹

What began as inquiries soon took on the tenor of a witch hunt. On the House floor, Congressman Dan Kuykendall called for a thorough investigation of the OEO, "its personnel and especially subordinate organizations such as the one involved now in the controversy in Memphis."⁵² The conservative Republican Congressman won his seat partially by campaigning against President Johnson's Great Society programs and the excessive government spending attached to them.⁵³ Kuykendall's congressional inquiry on the two workers simultaneously attacked Johnson's programs while showing his commitment to law and order by rooting out the Black Power element. "The dismissal of the two was ordered because of their alleged affiliation with organizations advocating black power and the use of violence to obtain their end," said Kuykendall.⁵⁴

Kuykendall, a conservative Memphis businessman, won Memphis's Ninth Congressional Seat by defeating the Democratic incumbent and "Great Society liberal" George Grider.⁵⁵ By the end of the 1960s many white Americans had grown frustrated with President Johnson's Great Society and what they considered an increasingly more and more intrusive federal government, the civil rights and student movements, the

⁵¹"MAP-South Aides Report For Work Despite Ruling," *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, August 10, 1967.

⁵²"Kuykendall Asks OEO Inquiry," *Memphis Press-Scimitar*, August 15, 1967.

⁵³Dowdy, *Crusades for Freedom*, 115-116.

⁵⁴"Kuykendall Asks OEO Inquiry," *Memphis Press-Scimitar*, August 15, 1967.

⁵⁵Dowdy, *A Crusade For Freedom*, 115.

counterculture and urban rioting.⁵⁶ Kuykendall's win unmasked the frustrations of white Memphians with the liberal policies and legislation of the Johnson administration. According to G. Wayne Dowdy's account of the campaign, Kuykendall accused Grider of being the President's puppet and "rubber stamping what the federal extremists back in Washington want because it is politically expedient." Despite his best efforts and aggressive courting of the African American community, the conservative evening daily the *Memphis Press-Scimitar* endorsed Kuykendall instead of Grider, citing the Congressman's support of Johnson's excessive government spending.⁵⁷

Kuykendall, openly "anti-civil rights," and in Lawson's view unconcerned with the welfare of the impoverished people living in his district, was a World War II veteran who moved to Memphis in 1955 to work for Proctor and Gamble. Kuykendall rose to local political prominence in the early 1960s as one of the "architects of the Shelby County Republican Party," during its period of resurgence after the end of the Crump machine.⁵⁸ When he defeated Grider in 1966, he became the first Republican to win election to the House of Representatives from West Tennessee since 1883. The staunch conservative's election and "McCarthy-esque" attacks on the OEO, on MAP-South, and on Cabbage and Smith revealed the contempt and the disillusionment of conservatives against the liberal agenda of the left.

⁵⁶Randall Bennett Woods, "LBJ, Politics, and 1968," *South Central Review*, (Winter 1999-Spring 2000): 16-28.

⁵⁷Dowdy, *A Crusade For Freedom*, 115-116.

⁵⁸"Ex-Congressman Kuykendall Dies," *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, June 12, 2008.

In Devin Fergus's work *Liberalism, Black Power, and the Making of American Politics, 1965-1980* he argues that the liberal agenda and the relationship between liberalism and Black Power helped engender conservatives of the New Right like Kuykendall. As liberalism created an "operational space" for Black Power radicals, conservatives like those in Memphis bristled at the government's support of those they considered among society's most dangerous elements. In fact, Kuykendall warned that MAP-South's refusal to deal with Cabbage and Smith would lead to the "federal financing of agitators."⁵⁹ Certainly, in his estimation, the employment of the young men confirmed his belief. However, through his paranoia and myopic focus on the SNCC affiliation and Black Power advocacy of Cabbage and Smith, Kuykendall ignored their positive impact on the youth in the South Memphis community. Despite his ideological differences, even Lawson respected their commitment to organizing the community. Kuykendall was fixated on weeding out Black Power radicals from an organization that Cabbage, Smith, and Lawson all agreed he found to have little merit anyway.⁶⁰

Two days after Archie Walter (A.W.) Willis, a prominent Memphis attorney, announced his candidacy for Memphis Mayor at Centenary Methodist Church, becoming the first African American to run for the position, members of the MAP-South policy committee held a closed door meeting, also at Centenary, to decide Cabbage and Smith's fate.⁶¹ They barred the media from the meeting, prompting Representative Kuykendall to

⁵⁹Devin Fergus, *Liberalism, Black Power, and the Making of American Politics, 1965-1980* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2009), 2-8.

⁶⁰"Hearing Scheduled on WOPC Payroll," *Memphis Press-Scimitar*, August 16, 1967.

question the legality of such an action. Kuykendall was not the only person concerned with the outcome of the meeting. About thirty minutes after the start of the proceedings, a group of Invaders interrupted the meeting. “We came up to tell these people what we want. We want to show our support.” Lawson calmed the group down and explained that since he hired Cabbage and Smith he would make sure that they would be treated fairly. “Who hired Coby? I did. And I hired Cabbage. As long as I’m there, you know the battle’s being fought. I’ve been marching since before you even thought about it,” said Lawson, touting his credentials to the youth. One youth suggested that if they were in the meeting discussing the issue of poverty that they should be included in the discussion as well. Many residing in the LeMoyne Garden housing project complained of a lack of recreational facilities as well as poor treatment from police officers. “We pay our rent but can’t sit in our yard,” complained one youth. Lawson suggested that instead of complaining, the group should get organized and protest their complaints nonviolently.⁶²

Although Lawson publicly supported Cabbage and Smith, privately the three men remained at odds over their ideological differences. “They were taking a line that I didn’t particularly care for,” Lawson recalled. He still insisted, however, that they needed the constructive outlet MAP-South provided. As a civil rights veteran with an extensive track record, it angered Lawson that Cabbage and Smith dismissed leaders such as Martin Luther King as reactionary. “They didn’t really know what was going on,” said Lawson, but “if you are not going to try to work with this element of people in the community,

⁶¹“A.W. Willis Announces for the Mayor’s Race,” *Memphis Press-Scimitar*, August 8, 1967; “Anti-Poverty Group Demands Hearing for Two Controversial Workers,” *Memphis Press Scimitar*, August 11, 1967.

⁶²“Anti-Poverty Group Demands Hearing for Two Controversial Workers,” *Memphis Press Scimitar*, August 11, 1967.

then you are just playing games.” In Lawson’s estimation, it became clear that Cabbage and Smith’s militant stance was more rhetoric than anything else, but he disagreed with the WOPC’s attempts to dismiss them without a fair hearing.⁶³

While not explicitly saying it, Lawson felt disrespected by the two young men with little organizing experience who questioned his commitment to the movement and to the work that he had done throughout the years. Lawson viewed himself as a revolutionary and had the resume to prove it. He had been imprisoned for four years for refusing induction into the military during the Korean War. By telling the gathering of young Cabbage and Smith supporters that he had been battling against racial injustice longer than they had, he revealed his frustration with the youth and their rebellion against the older black leadership. In his estimation, pacifism and nonviolence were militant actions, but it was difficult to convince Cabbage, Smith, and their supporters otherwise.⁶⁴

The OEO’s refusal to order MAP-South to release the transcripts from the closed door meeting angered Kuykendall. “They [OEO] exert independence which borders on arrogance. This is a dangerous situation because it leads to federal financing of agitators who use the prestige of the federal office...to initiate race hatred which in turns leads to violence, rioting and the burning and looting which we have so recently witnessed in cities across the land,” admonished Kuykendall.⁶⁵ The Congressman blamed President Johnson, Vice President Hubert Humphrey, and Attorney General Ramsay Clark for their presumed failure to maintain law and order, another indicator of a continued dissatisfaction with the Johnson’s administration’s handling of “subversives” and other

⁶³Reverend James Lawson, interview.

⁶⁴Ibid.

⁶⁵“Kuykendall Ask OEO Inquiry,” *Memphis Press-Scimitar*, August 15, 1967.

dissidents.⁶⁶ Smith responded by accusing Kuykendall of worrying more about possible connections with Stokely Carmichael and less with the issues of poverty in the city's black community. He also argued that Kuykendall's portrayal of him and Cabbage as extremists and pariahs left them unable to penetrate the power structure, thereby eliminating their effectiveness in solving problems in the community.⁶⁷

Cabbage and Smith continued to fight their dismissal. White attorney Lucius Burch agreed to represent them at the MAP-South board meeting on August 23.⁶⁸ Burch, a member of the MCCR, did not subscribe to any of Cabbage or Smith's rhetoric; however, he did not believe that they should have not been fired on the basis of unfounded allegations. At this meeting the board gave them one last opportunity to speak on their own behalf. This time, however, they invited Congressman Kuykendall to attend the meeting. The congressman, who stayed in Washington to attend legislative sessions, did not attend.⁶⁹ Lawson suggested that his fascination with the MAP-South controversy was the first time he had shown any interest in any organization of any kind that dealt with the issue of poverty in Memphis.⁷⁰ Lawson concluded that he was more of a threat than Cabbage, Smith, or anybody else affiliated with the city's burgeoning Black Power Movement. "We need to take our minds off people like Cabbage and Smith and, instead, put them on people like me...people like me still think there's hope. People like Rap

⁶⁶"Kuykendall Puts Blame on Leaders," *Memphis Press-Scimitar*, August 22, 1967.

⁶⁷"Senator Eastland's Prober Checks on Memphis, Investigator Reports to Committee; Eastland May Widen Scope of Inquiry," *Memphis Press-Scimitar*, August 10, 1967.

⁶⁸"Decision Expected Tonight in Case of Two Dismissed Poverty Workers," *Memphis Press-Scimitar*, August 24, 1967.

⁶⁹"Kuykendall Wants His Vote Recorded," *Memphis Press-Scimitar*, August 23, 1967.

⁷⁰"Hearing Scheduled on WOPC Payroll," *Memphis Press-Scimitar*, August 16, 1967.

Brown who yell a lot about violence usually aren't the ones who do it. The real source of violence in America is going to come from guys who aren't doing the yelling," countered Lawson.⁷¹

Mayoral Candidate Willis backed Cabbage and Smith and called the proceedings a "Kangaroo trial." "I asked Coby if he was out trying to start trouble. He said no, that was good enough for me," remarked Willis. He continued, "We need more people concerned with the ghetto. I didn't ask if he was a member of SNCC, and I don't care. I am a member of some organizations I am ashamed of one of them is the Chamber of Commerce."⁷² Willis's comment shocked NAACP President and WOPC Executive Committee Director Jesse Turner, but his endorsement, Burch's representation, or the testimony of the two dismissed employees did little to sway the committee's decision. The issue of the legality of encouraging rent strikes resurfaced, and both men did not deny that charge. When asked about the legality of WOPC workers organizing rent strikes, Cabbage answered, "I am part of the black poverty community. I work seven hours for MAP-South, but I live in poverty 24 hours a day."⁷³ In the end, the committee allowed the men to stay on the payroll for the remainder of the month until their termination of August 31.⁷⁴ The young radicals and MAP-South leaders differed on the method and approach, but they coalesced around the issue of poverty and infusing power into a community that felt powerless to solve its own problems.

⁷¹"Wider Scope Planned for Embattled Project; MAP-South Men Defend Controversial Anti-Poverty Work, *Memphis Press-Scimitar*, September 11, 1967.

⁷²"Decision Expected Tonight in Case of Two Dismissed Poverty Workers," *Memphis Press-Scimitar*, August 24, 1967.

⁷³Ibid.

⁷⁴"MAP-South Workers Remain on Payroll," *Memphis Press-Scimitar*, August 25, 1967.

The impassioned pleas did not salvage Charles Cabbage and Coby Smith's positions with MAP-South. Nor did their refusal to kowtow to the demands of the Senate Judiciary Committee, Congressman Kuykendall, the OEO, or the WOPC elevate their status with larger segments of the community. In fact, in October of 1967 the WOPC committee took more control over MAP-South's hiring practices in an effort to avoid a similar episode in the future.⁷⁵ Even with the new, firmer policy, MAP-South continued to be a lightning rod for criticism. Some City Council members questioned its merit of the program and the "usefulness" of Lawson as the chairman. The Council disapproved of his support of Cabbage and Smith, as well as his own incendiary comments regarding the city's race relations. They threatened to withhold funding if MAP-South kept Lawson as chairman, but the organization's status as a citizen-controlled body barred the WOPC or the City Council from firing Lawson, who remained chairman until 1969.⁷⁶

Charles Cabbage and Coby Smith left their first experience with a WOPC-sponsored program with feelings of disillusionment and anger.⁷⁷ Despite the unceremonious ending of their tenure with MAP-South, Cabbage credited Lawson, who hired the two for their positions with MAP-South for indirectly helping to keep BOP in existence, illustrating Devin Fergus's argument that liberalism created operational space for Black Power activist and their programs.⁷⁸ "Without Jim Lawson there is very real possibility that we would not have been able to pull off the Black Organizing Project

⁷⁵"Committee Tightens Control Over MAP-South Hirings," *Memphis Press-Scimitar*, October 18, 1967.

⁷⁶"Council Delays Approval of MAP-South Funds, Criticizes Chairman Lawson," *Memphis Press-Scimitar*, October 16, 1968.

⁷⁷Coby Smith, interview.

⁷⁸Fergus, *Liberalism, Black Power, and the Making of American Politics*, 1965-1985, 7.

because we would not have been able to live,” recalled Cabbage, “We would have had to take jobs, but we had jobs working for MAP-South.”⁷⁹ Though Cabbage and Smith no longer worked with MAP-South, the incident heightened the concern among white Memphians. The threat of urban unrest, the rise of a local Black Power Movement, and the relationship between War on Poverty initiatives and the radical activists occupying the positions in the programs were all issues that caused concern for Memphians.

After the MAP-South controversy in 1967 there was little chance that anyone associated with Black Power would work with the organization again. However, in 1968, nine months after the organization’s founding, BOP proposed its Community Unification Program (CUP). “We have our program for community development which we call the Community Unification Program, which should be everybody’s concern...the unification of the Black community, which is the only way we’ll be able to get things that we need in terms of...survival, existence and things of this nature – period,” commented Charles Cabbage.⁸⁰ BOP envisioned the program reaching the “Black ghetto dwellers,” the neglected and invisible constituency of the Memphis’s community.

As with many of BOP’s programmatic ambitions, they lacked the necessary funding to make the program a reality, although they did not shy away from soliciting financing from the very power structures that they repudiated.⁸¹ “We have attempted to get our program funded through...the existing agencies like War on Poverty Committee and of this nature,” continued Cabbage. Request for financing from outside entities

⁷⁹Charles Cabbage, interview.

⁸⁰Charles Cabbage, interview.

⁸¹Ibid.

placed the organization in a precarious situation. In order to implement any of their ideas, they needed money, but they feared being co-opted. An FBI report noted that at an April 30, 1968, meeting at Clayborne Temple, Invader Oree McKenzie spoke of their intent to start Liberation Schools as well as black arts and culture classes that would be “sponsored and financed by the War on Poverty Committee.”⁸² BOP’s plan integrated elements of the emerging Black Arts Movement with practical ideals to restore race pride into the community.

A revolutionary and innovative agenda, but also something foreign to the Memphis community, CUP united common threads of Black Power thought – black empowerment, self determination, cultural awareness, and economic self-sufficiency – into one extensive platform. One could not address the issue of poverty, BOP argued, unless the black community united around the general direction that the community should take to alleviate poverty, unemployment, and educational discrepancies. Stressing the importance of involving Memphis’s black community and specifically the poor in the restructuring and revitalization of their own community, the proposal suggested that “in order for the community to be responsible to and feel responsible for the anti-poverty organization programs, the community must produce the initial structure...inhabitants of community must control and operate the organization.” Advancing their adaptation of the Black Panther Party’s lumpen ideology, the program could only succeed and the community would only improve if the program involved “the most unstable, unreliable and uncommitted element of the community.”⁸³

⁸²Ibid.

⁸³Invaders, “FBI Memo, Racial Matters, 157-1067-221-157-1067-304” (Memphis, Tennessee, June-August 1968). Black Organizing Project’s War on Poverty Platform.

Under the umbrella of CUP, BOP proposed a diverse set of initiatives that the organization estimated would only take “minimum cost and overhead expenditure” to operate. The program included several components targeted toward improving and uplifting the black community. A key aspect of the proposal, Intra-City Pride Incorporated, aimed to develop black pride on the local level and “teach community organization techniques to the neighborhood representative.” Upon establishing neighborhood chapters of Intra-City, Inc., trained staff would hold workshops and direct the neighborhood chapter representatives in a “physical clean-up and improvement campaign within its own neighborhood.” Ambitious in its goal, BOP planned to house the recruits from every predominately African American neighborhood in Memphis in outside facilities while they trained. They would then move back into their respective neighborhoods upon completion of the program to organize within the community “around the issues of Black Pride and Identification.” In addition to community beautification, CUP proposed a Black Arts program, a liberation school to teach black history, neighborhood cooperatives, a physical fitness program, and newsletters and radio programs to service the black community.⁸⁴

BOP leadership imagined a project where under their leadership, a board of directors would manage the operation of activities centers catering to the needs of young adults in the areas of social and athletic activities, tutoring, counseling services, and employment training. Employing all-black personnel, BOP estimated that they needed \$2,000,000 dollars per year to keep the program operating at full capacity. BOP touted itself as a “kind of Half Way Organization” that bridged “the gap between the ghetto and

⁸⁴Ibid.

the rest of society.” CUP, BOP suggested, would reach the so-called unreachable and those excluded from the larger community. “The community is impressed by the fact that, prior to BOP, there has been little success in efforts to involve the ‘guys from the streets,’ the semi-literate, the jobless, in programs of recreation, culture, and self-enhancement,” a testimonial from the CUP proposal stated.⁸⁵

While all the pieces were there in BOP’s detailed proposal, they lacked the financial means to enact such a program. The organization approached local businesses and civic and political organizations for support for CUP. During the sanitation strike, Charles Cabbage, on behalf of BOP and the Invaders, requested \$200,000 from Martin Luther King, Jr.’s Southern Christian Leadership Conference.⁸⁶ While King and his top aides “acknowledged...the Invaders could turn out young people in large numbers,” they believed that the Invaders were fixated on purging Jim Lawson from leadership and “committed to teaching guerrilla warfare and martial arts.” Skeptical of the groups’ motives and Black Power militancy, Andrew Young “offered to help them translate militancy into a funding proposal that King could endorse, without violence.”⁸⁷ Unfortunately, King died before he could lend his help to the young radicals.⁸⁸ After the death of King and the failure of the organization to secure significant funding from the SCLC for the CUP and the liberation school, BOP turned to other sources.

⁸⁵Ibid.

⁸⁶Branch, *At Canaan’s Edge*, 754.

⁸⁷Ibid.

⁸⁸40th Anniversary Commemoration of Martin Luther King, Jr.: The Man, The Mission, The Movement,” (Audio Recording in the Possession of the Author) April 2, 2008.

The Memphis Police Department's (MPD) Community Relations Bureau noted in a meeting on April 25, 1968, that several Invaders met with business owner and President of the Memphis Junior Chamber of Commerce (Jaycees) Dan Wilkinson, Jim Dowers of the Youth Guidance Commission (YGC), and Detective R.H. Ferguson of the MPD to solicit funding for CUP. When Wilkinson asked the group why they approached the Jaycees for funding, Invader Oree McKenzie explained, "Most people think all teenagers that get in trouble associate with the Invaders, this is not true. Even though we are a Black Power group, we still want to help our community. What we want is this, for business men to give us funds so we can set up work programs and help to train the black youths." Dowers explained to McKenzie and the other Invaders that his organization, the YGC, also helped youth to find jobs. Although he believed that the Invaders could help organizing, the Invaders were a "hard product to sell."⁸⁹

Dowers commented to McKenzie: "Your plans are vague. I'm afraid that people will say you just put the money in your pocket." McKenzie, the spokesman of the group, explained that the Invaders were only trying to help their race, not profit off of donations. Detective Ferguson interjected and asked if the Invaders had asked any of the "colored businessmen" for money. McKenzie, answered no, suggesting that to do such would brand their organization and the program as separatist. "Oree I want to be honest with you," Detective Ferguson offered. "People are leery of you and your club has a stigma. There are several things about your organization that are hazy to me...but I can't help but feel, that perhaps you might want this money to start a 'hate school' such as the one operated in Nashville last year," said Ferguson, referencing a WOP controversy over

⁸⁹Invaders, "FBI Memo, Racial Matters, 157-1067-221-157-1067-304" (Memphis, Tennessee, June-August 1968).

Henry Brooks and the Nashville chapter of SNCC. After the meeting adjourned, the detective relayed his feelings about the Invaders to Wilkinson and Bowers. “I couldn’t help but feel they were up to no good,” said Ferguson.⁹⁰ The March 28 riot, King’s death, and the smeared reputation of the city in the aftermath never strayed too far from the minds of many white Memphians, who blamed black leadership for inviting King and the militants for causing him to come back. The stigma made it almost impossible for BOP and the Invaders to gain any trust among community and business leaders.⁹¹

BOP’s aggressive and ambitious plan required major financial backing. The \$2,000,000 estimated one-year budget for the CUP operating expenses appeared outrageous, but in an effort to reach the so-called wayward youth, gangs and militants, the OEO started granting funding to institute programs to avoid riots in the summer of 1967. For example, Chicago WOPC officials proposed a grant to the OEO with the idea of enlisting help of the Blackstone Rangers and the Disciples, two Chicago-area gangs, to assist in combating poverty in the Woodlawn area of the city. By 1967, with the Black Power Movement at its peak, the two gangs had begun to move away from strictly gang activity to dabble in some Black Power political tactics. Jeff Fort, the infamous leader of the Blackstone Rangers, also took a leadership role in the program. As some Chicago community leaders suggested, if the charismatic, Mississippi-born gang leader could get

⁹⁰Ibid.

⁹¹Honey, *Going Down Jericho Road*, 487.

thousands of young men to join his gang, then it stood to reason that if given the opportunity, he could channel that energy and rally the youth in a positive direction.⁹²

The OEO gave the gangs a \$927,000 grant as an operating budget. Although OEO director Sargent Shriver enthusiastically backed the project, no grant in the history of the OEO “was as complete a failure” as the one operated by the Chicago gangs.⁹³ In an attempt to create opportunities for warring gangs to make positive impacts in their respective communities, Shriver did not fully account for the bad blood between the two rival groups. The lack of adequate supervision and training for the gang members was another major reason for the program’s failure. Fort and David Barksdale, the leader of the Disciples, used the WOPC training centers for gang-related business, which meant that not only did the two men conduct illegal business on the premises, but they also spent less time actually executing the goals of the program and managing the finances. The program’s “accounting procedures were spotty,” and “no one in authority interacted” with the members of the gangs.”⁹⁴ The program ended abruptly when three Rangers were arrested and charged with rape.⁹⁵ City Councilman James Netters felt confident that the NOP would not end up like Chicago and “go the route of...bringing in militants.”⁹⁶

⁹²Nicholas Lemann, *The Promised Land: The Great Black Migration and How It Changed America* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf Publishing, 1991), 246.

⁹³Ibid.

⁹⁴Ibid. While Lemann does not assert that fear of the gang members was a reason for the minimal interaction between WOPC staff and the Rangers and Disciples, there is a strong implication that the behavior of the gang members were not reigned in because of their violent propensity.

⁹⁵Lemann, *The Promised Land*, 246.

⁹⁶“Various Charges Pending Against Leaders; ‘Bold Concept’ for the Black Militants Backfire,” *Memphis Press-Scimitar*, August 28, 1968.

During his April 25 meeting with Wilkinson, Dowers, and Ferguson, McKenzie expressed doubts about aligning the Invaders and the CUP with MAP-South, but MAP-South's access to WOPC funding and the maximum feasibility mandate made the organization an optimal choice to work with despite past entanglements.⁹⁷ Amending BOP's original plan and program title, a new WOPC and MAP-South proposal for the Ghetto Organizing Project (GOP) and MAP-South Life Experience Project surfaced in its place.⁹⁸ Although Charles Cabbage felt that this was a step in the right direction, he admitted that the GOP was "not our overall program."⁹⁹ CUP, and its scaled-down version GOP, both targeted the neglected youth demographic. However, the \$20,000 budget of both programs fell far short of the \$2,000,000 estimate of CUP.¹⁰⁰

The GOP agenda nevertheless showed how BOP leadership shaped the policy and direction of the program. MAP-South's proposal for their version of a community development program was filled with references to unification, uplift, and providing opportunities for the most unstable and unemployable elements of Memphis society – all aims of BOP's initial offering. Other objectives of the program were to organize "low-income dwellers in black and white ghettos of Memphis and Shelby County, provide volunteers from both college students and community young adults, provide employment

⁹⁷"Invaders, "FBI Memo, Racial Matters, 157-1067-221-157-1067-304" (Memphis, Tennessee, June-August 1968).

⁹⁸"Invaders, "FBI Memo, Racial Matters, 157-1067-166" (Memphis, Tennessee, June 19, 1968) Ghetto Organizing Project and MAP-South Life Experiences Project.

⁹⁹Charles Cabbage, Interview by James Mosby, *The Civil Rights Documentation Project* Ralph J. Bunche Oral History Program, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, (Washington, D.C., July 13, 1968).

¹⁰⁰"Invaders, "FBI Memo, Racial Matters, 157-1067-166" (Memphis, Tennessee, June 19, 1968) Ghetto Organizing Project and MAP-South Life Experiences Project.

opportunities for young adults and youth living in low-income ghetto areas, organize neighborhood improvement projects around issues determined to be important by the residents of a given area, and to respond to rapidly changing conditions on the Memphis scene, and assist in meeting the crucial needs identified and given priority by involved youth.”¹⁰¹

In addition to the organizations under the BOP umbrella, the proposal enlisted student groups from the other local predominately white college campuses, Christian Brothers College and Southwestern at Rhodes. WOPC officials also changed the focus of the venture from a program that strictly operated by African Americans, to an inter-racial project where BOP would share leadership, negating the group’s belief that “the ultimate success of the War on Poverty efforts being directed in most American cities depends upon the direct involvement and participation of the people for who the specific programs are designed.”¹⁰²

“Neighborhood Organizing Project helps build Black Pride,” read the Soul Set section of the *Tri-State Defender*. Reportedly Memphis’s WOPC received approval from Washington, D.C. for funding for a total of twenty-seven youth projects, among them the Ghetto Organizing Project summer program, renamed to the more politically correct Neighborhood Organizing Project (NOP).¹⁰³ Touting unification as the “password to Black Pride, Power, and Politics,” the *Tri-State Defender* offered praise for the civil

¹⁰¹Ibid.

¹⁰²Invaders, “FBI Memo, Racial Matters, 157-1067-221-157-1067-304” (Memphis, Tennessee, June-August 1968). Black Organizing Project’s War on Poverty Platform.

¹⁰³27 Youth Projects OK’d by Washington Office,” *Memphis Press-Scimitar*, June 12, 1968.

rights movement and its accomplishments. Yet the movement failed, in the paper's estimation, to reach the grassroots and the poor with any kind of comprehensive unification program. "What has happened basically is that the movement has blundered around aimlessly, realizing few victories; and every effort to made to develop a solid foundation has been stymied by a disgruntled hierarchy that has created more divisions than unity." Memphis's elder civil rights leaders perpetuated those divisions, the paper continued, and the newly organized NOP and the youth in charge of the program had the opportunity to rectify movement leadership's oversights by instilling pride and unity into the black community.

Beginning in June 1968, the NOP offered arts, crafts, music, and discussions on Black Power, black pride, and black politics. The *Tri-State Defender's* Soul Set called for support of the program and the youth involved from the entire community. "The time for positive action is now. Black is beautiful and unity is our salvation," the article concluded.¹⁰⁴ The program's list of objectives included "developing job opportunities for young adults, providing tutorial projects directed toward increasing self-awareness, providing provocative discussion groups and organizing neighborhood improving projects." WOPC officials also believed that involving the Black Power activists in NOP would create "charismatic indigenous leadership."¹⁰⁵ A year removed from the controversial dismissal of Cabbage and Smith as MAP-South employees, the WOPC decided to take another chance on Black Power.

¹⁰⁴ "Neighborhood Organizing Project Helps Build Black Pride," *Tri-State Defender*, July 20, 1968.

¹⁰⁵ "War on Poverty Is Accused Of Duping Council On 2 Projects," *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, July 24, 1968.

Title II of the 1964 Economic Opportunity Act paved the way for the creation of the NOP as well as other federally funded WOP programs across the nation. Title II established Community Action Agencies (CAA) and Community Action Programs (CAP) whose purpose was to “provide stimulation and incentive for urban and rural communities to mobilize their resources to combat poverty.”¹⁰⁶ Title II also allowed for flexibility in creating “Special Impact Programs” aimed at “solving critical problems that existed in urban communities and neighborhoods throughout the nation where especially large concentrations of low-income persons dwelled.”¹⁰⁷ The CAA’s came into existence when the character of the civil rights movement was changing. Civil rights groups and Black Power organizations used CAAs as a potential base for political power. “If Community Action was conceived as a means to contain racial militancy, it proved to have just the opposite effect,” critics suggested.¹⁰⁸

The youth board made the majority of the major decisions for the NOP; placing the power in the hands of those most affected by the program’s outcome. Five of the board’s eleven members were BOP and the Invaders. Verdell Brooks, Oree McKenzie, Charles Harrington and Ben Berry Heard all held membership in the Invaders, while Edwina Harrell, a NOP youth board member and a self-described “political revolutionary,” held membership in the Memphis State University’s Black Student Association and affiliated with the BOP and the Invaders.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁶Economic Opportunity Act, “Economic Opportunity Act of 1964,” http://wps.prenhall.com/wps/media/objects/751/769950/Documents_Library/ea1964.htm [accessed February 2011].

¹⁰⁷Ibid.

¹⁰⁸Ibid.

From the outset, controversy surrounded the program. A passage in the proposal angered several City Council members, Mayor Henry Loeb, the Memphis and Shelby County Youth Guidance Commission, and the Mayor's Youth Coordinator Advisory Committee. It read:

The Memphis community has recently been convulsed by a number of shattering events – a ten-week long sanitation strike, a mass march which was accompanied by violence, a sharp polarization of efforts between white and black communities, the murder of Martin Luther King, Jr. in our city, more violence and instances of police brutality. In the midst of these eruptions the white leadership has shifted from stances of slow progress, to complete paralysis, to frantic activity.

Still reeling from *Time* magazine's negative characterization of the city in the wake the assassination of Martin Luther King, the mayor and the council took exception with program's characterization of the white community and the charge that they were somehow slow to move and unreceptive to the needs of the black community. "We have never been paralyzed. We have worked with you all along," Councilman Wyeth Chandler told WOPC Executive Director Washington Butler, Jr. Other Council members questioned the proposal's charge of police brutality. "What about the looting and firing not being mentioned," remarked Councilman Billy Hyman. Hyman, referencing the March sanitation strike disturbance, insinuated that police did not perpetrate the violence, but only responded. Butler took responsibility for the language in the report, explaining that the candid words were meant for the regional OEO in Atlanta, which wanted a detailed explanation of the need for a project like the NOP.¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁹"Biracial Meeting Gropes for Valid Communication," *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, May 4, 1968.

¹¹⁰"Report by WOPC Is Attacked," *Memphis Press-Scimitar*, June 11, 1968.

“Make The Scene Better,” read the sign on the door of the 1217 Thomas Street NOP headquarters, one of five locations scattered throughout North and South Memphis. “To a child who has lived in Memphis all his life and who has never seen the Mississippi River, it would be a big deal to take him down and see the river,” explained James Phillips, NOP area coordinator, Owen Junior College student, and Invader. The reality that some black youths had never seen the Mississippi River despite its close proximity, BOP members argued, was one of several reasons why the black community needed the NOP. For many children who had rarely ventured outside of their neighborhood, field trips exposed the students to city landmarks and areas that they had never seen in their own hometown. Helping children overcome a “lack of culture,” Phillips suggested, was one of many of the goals of the NOP.¹¹¹

Classroom sessions led to lively and sometimes controversial discussions of black history and the contributions of African Americans to American society. Explaining the reasons for the variance in skin colors among African Americans and the vulnerable position that enslaved females often found themselves in, NOP field worker Joan Crawford told the class, “the reason there are different shades of Negroes is that the white plantation owner, when his wife’s back was turned, snuck into the barn with a beautiful black woman. And from that we got the different colors of the black man.”¹¹² BOP believed that teaching the youth about their heritage and instilling pride would translate into more engagement in their respective neighborhoods. “We want to give them a

¹¹¹“High Hopes, Few Facilities Launch Regional Offices,” *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, July 11, 1968.

¹¹²“A Report on the Controversial NOP; Black Pride Stressed in Memphis Project,” *Memphis Press-Scimitar*, July 11, 1968.

background on their culture. We want to give them self-identity – who they are, what they are, and where they’re going,” explained Charles Ballard.

Not everyone understood how teaching black history would benefit the unemployed. Councilman Wyeth Chandler questioned Butler about the efficacy of such an approach: he asked how could “the teaching of black history, black art, and black culture in this project could help the apparently unemployable.” Specifically, Chandler wondered how the program could help the Invaders?¹¹³ Butler answered, “There is a lot of frustration. We are trying to recapture these people, give them self-respect, get them on their feet. This program is trying to reach the proponents of violence.”¹¹⁴

Councilman Robert James asked Butler if the program would do more to polarize the Memphis community than it would to unify it. “Why all this emphasis on Black and negative things?” James wondered. Butler told the Councilman that he did not believe the program would polarize anyone, but that just the opposite would happen. Many blacks, Butler suggested, were not afforded the same economic advantages or opportunities of whites, and as a result they felt alienated from society, or at least from having opportunities to advance. “Now we would like to show people who are black that they have something in their background of which they can be proud of. We are trying to shake some of these people out of the alienation they have for society.”¹¹⁵

While the City Council questioned the need for the NOP, a program called “Let’s Go,” teaching black children how to use public transportation, specifically how to ride the city buses, received no criticism from City Council members. At a cost of \$9,000,

¹¹³“Report by WOPC Is Attacked,” *Memphis Press-Scimitar*, June 11, 1968.

¹¹⁴“27 Youth Projects OK’d by Washington Office,” *Memphis Press-Scimitar*, June 12, 1968.

¹¹⁵“Butler Defends Poverty War Stand,” *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, June 12, 1968.

Butler expressed his pride in the program. “We will not just teach them how to use available public transportation but show them where it will take them...this will show them how to get out of their ghetto and into other areas of the city, via public transportation,” Butler explained. James Lawson, however, did not see the same potential in the program as Butler, suggesting the program bordered on redundancy. “I guess they will teach them how to get on the bus without walking into the door and the like,” Lawson mocked.¹¹⁶

The MAP-South Chairman made a valid point. Most of the children in the lower income areas relied exclusively on the bus for transportation, so why would the WOPC need to spend \$9,000 on a program to teach children to use transportation system that they rode on regular basis? He also suggested that other programs could benefit from that funding. While WOPC allocated funds to teach children how to ride the city bus, Lawson complained “MAP-South was criticized for spending money, giving children a stipend to attend schools and workshop.” While the WOPC readily handed out funds to teach children to ride the bus, Lawson argued that more worthwhile programs such as the fix-up and paint-up program, which hired elderly persons as construction and paint supervisors, caught unwarranted criticism.¹¹⁷ “It would seem far more important to me for summer programs to be focused around taking people into the poverty areas – not children out of them. I think we should utilize our community resources – like art

¹¹⁶“How-to-Use Bus Course Criticized,” *Memphis Press-Scimitar*, May 29, 1968.

¹¹⁷“MAP-South Men Defend Controversial Anti-Poverty Work,” *Memphis Press-Scimitar*, September 11, 1969.

students and music students going into the ghetto and teaching the children new and useful things,” Lawson offered.¹¹⁸

However, Butler’s comments about the NOP’s intent to reach the proponents of violence reinforced the concerns of the City Council, WOP officials, and other government entities concerned that the Nashville controversy and hot summer of 1967 would filter down to Memphis. Rumors of the Invaders using the poverty funding to “teach children insurrection methods” surfaced, a charge that members vehemently denied.¹¹⁹ They instead reminded the critics that the program, the staff, and the executive board were not completely composed of African Americans. White students from Christian Brothers University, the Young Democratic Club of Memphis State, and from Southwestern at Rhodes were on the NOP’s payroll, as well.¹²⁰

Council members, representatives from the Mayor’s Youth Coordinator Advisory Committee, and the Youth Guidance Council (YGC) charged Butler and the WOPC with “duping” the City Council into approving the summer projects. Officials accused the WOPC of using the names of the Mayor’s Youth Coordinator Advisory Committee and the YGC to make the City Council think that the two organizations had approved the projects. Butler took exception with the charge that he and the WOPC purposely attached the two organizations to the projects to ensure that that programs received funding.

The City Council also argued that the \$20,000 allocated for the NOP, to which the city and the county contributed \$4,000 of the \$20,000 could be used to service more than

¹¹⁸Ibid.

¹¹⁹“High Hopes, Few Facilities Launch Regional Offices,” *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, July 11, 1968.

¹²⁰“Biracial Arm Flexes Muscle,” *Memphis Press-Scimitar*, July 11, 1968.

the fifty or so people that programs initially targeted. Council members, as well as the attorney for the YGC, again broached the issue of the relevancy of a “Negro History” course in a poverty program designed to make low-income residents more employable. Suggesting that the program had a limited scope and reach, James Bower, the Executive Director of the YGC, said to Butler, “I think we can reach more kids than the 36 in this one program. We’ve got 9,600 kids between the ages of 16 and 19 in the poverty areas. Taking into consideration all the job opportunities, we can only reach about 50 percent of them. This means we are going to have about 4,000 youngsters walking around this summer with nothing to do.”¹²¹

Herschel Feibelman did not agree with the Council’s criticism. Feibelman called the program “bold and probing,” despite the limited number of students enrolled. “We are going to have to take risks on a quality program which may or may not produce quality. If you want to water the program down to its lowest common denominator, you will join its enemies,” Feibelman warned. Councilman James questioned the makeup of the staff since “militant groups are chosen to be leaders of such groups in other cities.” George Hunt, Assistant Director of the Memphis Youth Opportunity Project, explained to the rest of the Council members: “These programs are not geared to destroy anything, but to build.” As Director of the Life-Experiences Program Isaac Taylor continued to explain the details of the project and its goal to discuss “the pressures against the Negro family and current events as well as Negro history,” Councilman James reversed his prior

¹²¹“War On Poverty Is Accused of Duping Council on 2 Projects,” *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, July 24, 1968.

stance, on the MAP-South Life Experiences Program saying it sounded worthwhile and he hoped to attend a session.¹²²

BOP understood what critics of the program did not: teaching black history, and emphasizing the legacies of people of African descent would help destroy the psychological barriers of inferiority and in turn would foster pride. For all of its political dimensions, the Black Power Movement's focus on building positive self-worth through a renewed emphasis on black culture and consciousness was just as important to the success and legacy of the movement as its political focus. As the "central thrust of the Black Power Movement," cultural nationalists sometimes clashed with advocates of revolutionary nationalism who promoted armed resistance and class struggle.¹²³ The Black Panther Party and the Black Cultural Nationalist organization US stood at the forefront of the debate. In spite of the characterization as "pork chop nationalists," by the Black Panther Party, Maulana Karenga, the leader of US, insisted, "you must have a cultural revolution before the violent revolution." "The cultural revolution," Karenga offered, "gives identity, purpose, and direction."¹²⁴

Teaching black history, black arts, and black music, ultimately reshaping the way the black community viewed itself, would ensure the program's long-term success BOP members argued. William Van DeBurg's *New Day in Babylon: The Black Power Movement and American Culture, 1965-1975*, contends that cultural nationalists believed that by "nurturing a 'significant sense of self,' an individual could hope to become self-

¹²²"WOPC Defends Class Program," *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, July 4, 1968.

¹²³Ogbar, *Black Power*, 94; Joseph, *Waiting 'Til the Midnight Hour*, 243.

¹²⁴Scot Brown, *Fighting For US: Maulana Karenga, The US Organization, and Black Cultural Nationalism* (New York: New York University Press, 2005), 23.

reliant, highly motivated, and goal oriented, no longer in doubt as to their worth as human beings, race-conscious blacks felt comfortable in ‘speaking up, standing tall, and thinking big.’”¹²⁵ The program’s goal of teaching job skills in addition to the classes and workshops on black history, music, and art bridged both the economic and the cultural needs of the community.¹²⁶

African American labor activist James Boggs critically assessed federally funded programs like the NOP that operated on limited resources, but under much scrutiny and with the expectation of failure. Both instrumental in local black radical organizing in Detroit in the 1960s, the auto worker and his wife Grace Lee, who held a Ph.D. in English, were both “Marxist theoretician,” whose “analysis of race, class, and revolution influenced young activists increasingly committed to both black nationalism and anticaptialist struggles.”¹²⁷ “The Black community cannot be developed unless Black youth, in particular, are given real and not just rhetorical opportunities to participate in the actual planning and development of the Black community,” Boggs argued.¹²⁸ Citing what he coined “One Hot Summer” programs; Boggs believed that projects such as the NOP were created specifically with the intention of pacifying and sedating black youth radicalism. They were designed with the intent of usually only lasting throughout the summer and were constructed, Boggs suggested, “without any fundamental perspectives

¹²⁵Van DeBurg, *New Day in Babylon*, 51.

¹²⁶“Bracial Arm Flexes Muscle,” *Memphis Press-Scimitar*, July 11, 1968.

¹²⁷Joseph, *Waiting ‘Til the Midnight Hour*, 58.

¹²⁸James Boggs, *Racism and the Class Struggle: Further pages from a Black Worker’s Notebook* (New York: MR publishing, 1969), 144.

for developing new social institutions or for resolving the basic issues and grievances which affect the largest section of the Black community.”¹²⁹

Despite Herschel Feibelman’s proclamation that the effort to reach out and include the city’s Black Power element in the planning, implementation and oversight of the NOP constituted an “imaginative, bold concept,” the NOP followed the “One Hot Summer” structure that Boggs warned against. By the conclusion of the program in August, Feibelman did not deliver on his assurances of a groundbreaking program. Despite the program’s promise, by summer’s end the long-term health of the NOP, BOP, and the Invaders were in jeopardy. Directly tied to the fortunes of BOP as the organization’s ability to successfully manage the poverty program and end its ties to criminal and violent activity.¹³⁰

“These boys in the Neighborhood Organizing Project are not going to stir up trouble because they know how much is riding on it,” Feibleman suggested.¹³¹ Yet the loose organizational structure of BOP, the lumpen element in the Invaders membership, and the subsidiary groups within the organization made it difficult to predict the actions of members directly involved with the NOP and even those who were not.

A month before the official launch of the NOP, in May 1968, MPD accused several Invaders of starting a riot at Carver High School in South Memphis. Members of the Invaders, police and school officials suggested, encouraged Carver students to hurl

¹²⁹Ibid.

¹³⁰“Various Charges Pending Against Leaders; ‘Bold Concept’ For Black Militants Backfire,” *Memphis Press-Scimitar*, August 28, 1968.

¹³¹Ibid.

bricks through windows to protest the poor food in the cafeteria, lack of black history and art classes, and the school administration's refusal to allow an official chapter of the Invaders at the school. Some students stood outside of the school's auditorium chanting, "black power, black power," an action school officials directly attributed to the Invaders. In an account of their version of the events, entitled "How It Was and How It Is," the letter outlined the students' motivations, frustrations with the Carver administration and the school board, and pride in their stand against the school. For the "first time many of us knew how it really felt to truly be an Invader and how it felt to be on the front lines fighting as a Black man against the enemy of our people," read the letter.¹³²

The Carver situation caused concern among city and community leadership with the "trend of black power militants, who call themselves the Invaders, of using the city high schools to campuses, primarily Carver High as a base for organizing activity."¹³³ Invaders warned that if the school board and school administration did not act on the students' demands, then they could expect to "feel the full weight of the black community." They also criticized the outdated curriculum, and the black principals, who, they suggested, were condemning the Invaders and the students' demands did so out of fear of reprisals from the school board. They also condemned the school board for its control over the black schools. "This is not a threat from the Invaders," said John Smith, "but a demand from the housewives, factory workers, garbage men, postmen, winos, pimps, prostitutes – the entire black community."¹³⁴ Larry L. Davis, John Henry

¹³²Black Students' Militancy and Organizations, Memphis," Letter circulated at Negro High Schools by militant students after May 17, 1968 disturbance at Carver, *Sanitation Strike Archival Project*, Container 5, Folder 21, Mississippi Valley Collection, University of Memphis.

¹³³"Carver Violence Spawns Dilemma," *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, May 22, 1968.

Ferguson, Oree McKenzie, and John B. Smith, all members of the Invaders, were arrested in the disturbance. McKenzie and Smith worked with the NOP.¹³⁵

Police accused the organization of using the incident to recruit and organize at Carver, but also to generate publicity and fear. In fact, Lance “Sweet Willie Wine” Watson and several students from Memphis attending the Poor People’s March “were accused of creating a disturbance in a Washington, D.C. high school,” in an effort to organize and inform the students about the Poor People’s Campaign, but others believed that it was another attempt to gain national notoriety.¹³⁶ Davis, Ferguson, McKenzie, and Smith all received the maximum penalty, up to five years in prison, and all of the young men except Davis received a \$1,000 fine.¹³⁷

WDIA General Manager Bert Ferguson released an editorial condemning the Invaders for the Carver High situation. Ferguson referred to the Invaders as outsiders and troublemakers who had “thrown a shadow over that area in South Memphis.” Although he gave credence to the demands for more black history instruction, he doubted the sincerity of the organization’s request. “WDIA believes that those who are making these demands are motivated mostly by a desire to put themselves in the public spotlight.” The editorial continually dismissed the motivations of the Invaders and suggested the NAACP should handle the matter. “We suspect that very few of have any personal knowledge of

¹³⁴“Mr. Hollowman Where Are You,” *Tri-State Defender*, June 1, 1968.

¹³⁵“Classes Disrupted In Uprising At Carver High,” *Tri State Defender*, May 25, 1968.

¹³⁶*Ibid.*

¹³⁷“Carver Rioting Brings Terms,” *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, February 1, 1969.

Negro history that they are willing to break windows about,” the editorial opined.¹³⁸ Yet Ferguson’s harsh critique of the Black Power activists did not stop him from using the organization to boost the sagging rating among the sixteen to twenty-one year old demographic by featuring Charles Cabbage and John B. Smith on the station’s program, “Young American Speaks.”¹³⁹

“To say that vandalism at 12 city schools is directly attributed to the leadership element of the Invaders is absurd as having a condemned man on death row to believe that everything will be alright,” read BOP’s mimeographed response to the WDIA editorial. Calling Ferguson out of touch with the black community, BOP argued that Ferguson had no right to speak for the black community because he lacked the “right and the emotional capacity,” to do so and unlike African Americans he as a white man had “always been free.”¹⁴⁰ BOP asked Ferguson, “What about our history?” and “When did WDIA become the pulse of the black populace?” That WDIA was the first radio station in the South to switch to an all-black programming format did not give the Ferguson the right to speak on behalf of African Americans in the city. Invader head, John B. Smith took exception with Ferguson’s use of the phrase, “We at WDIA.” “If he really had feeling for the black community he should give his job to one of the black DJ’s who knows the black community.”¹⁴¹

¹³⁸Invaders, “FBI Memo, Racial Matters, 157-1067-151-157-1067-220” (Memphis, Tennessee, June-August 1968). Arrests at Carver High School

¹³⁹Ibid.

¹⁴⁰“Mr. Hollowman Where Are You,” *Tri-State Defender*, June 1, 1968.

¹⁴¹Ibid.

A year later, in 1969, as members of the Steering Committee for Operation Boycott WDIA, many of the issues that BOP confronted in their 1968 rebuttal to Ferguson became the demands of the steering committee. The committee, which included prominent black Memphians such as Bishop G.E. Patterson of the Church Of God In Christ, demanded the station hire more black personnel at the station and place more money into the black community. The committee insisted that Ferguson discontinue his editorials. “Bert Ferguson cannot speak and think for the black community,” read an item on the list of demands.¹⁴² Operation Boycott successfully pushed WDIA to make changes in its broadcasting, hiring, and business practices, but the impetus of the movement began a year earlier with BOP’s stance against Ferguson.¹⁴³

Despite claims of an integrated staff, BOP members or affiliates occupied seventeen of the twenty paid NOP staff positions. A Memphis Intelligence Bureau report claimed, “BOP completely dominates and controls the federally-financed NOP.”¹⁴⁴ The report also accused BOP members of not working. As with the Rangers and Disciples in Chicago, no one interacted with the workers, nor did anyone care about their alleged lack of work ethic. The report charged that Charles L. Cabbage and John B. Smith, whom the WOPC had banned from the NOP, were actually in charge of the program and instructed the Director Charles Ballard in what to do. The intelligence report also suggested that NOP employees kicked back portions of their earnings to Smith and

¹⁴²“Operation Boycott, WDIA Cites Gains,” *Tri-State Defender*, February 22, 1969.

¹⁴³Invaders, “FBI Memo, Racial Matters, 157-1067-221-157-1067-304” (Memphis, Tennessee, June-August 1968).

¹⁴⁴Ibid.

Cabbage. James Philips allegedly admitted that NOP field workers “shook down” white businessmen in black neighborhoods, with the purpose of raising funds and merchandise for NOP, but instead keeping portions of the money for themselves.¹⁴⁵

But members of BOP would not allow detractors to paint the entire program as unsuccessful. Cabbage admitted that possibly the “overall broad scope” of CUP scared some people away from fully supporting the program.¹⁴⁶ BOP released a memo highlighting the positive impact of the NOP despite budgetary constraints, limited resources, and accusations that the organization “bragged about teaching Black supremacy and Black separatism.”¹⁴⁷ Of the \$20,000 allocated for the program, \$17,000 went to salaries for the staff and BOP members and affiliates. WOPC also allocated \$175 per month for the rental of a Ford Mustang for Project Director Charles Ballard to use to drive to and from the different neighborhood centers. In spite of that, BOP believed the organization had “made some significant gains in the way of helping poverty stricken people of Memphis.” It also outlined the mission for Operation Shoes, Operation Clothing, and Operation Culture, three programs the organization created under the banner of the NOP to assist in eliminating poverty. Operation Shoes and Clothing distributed shoes and clothing to poor children. Operation Culture, “designed to acquaint young black children and adults with their heritage and culture,” featured guest speakers and black history courses. “The Black man must begin to help himself,” read the memo.

¹⁴⁵Ibid.

¹⁴⁶Charles Cabbage, interview.

¹⁴⁷Invaders, “FBI Memo, Racial Matters, 157-1067-221-157-1067-304” (Memphis, Tennessee, June-August 1968). War on Poverty Projects in Memphis.

“With some financial support from the white community and self-help from the Black community the problem and the tension exist[ing] between them could be eased.”¹⁴⁸

Many white Memphians still felt uncomfortable with a program funded by their tax dollars and operated by Black Power radicals. Technically, the WOPC did not pay for office space for the organization, but a *Press-Scimitar* article titled “WOPC Pays Rent at Invaders’ Building,” embellished the relationship between the WOPC and the Invaders. The building in question, an old tire shop on 1310 Florida Street, was NOP headquarters and doubled as office space for the Invaders. WOPC officials sanctioned the building as an office space for the NOP, not as an Invaders headquarters. WOPC officials soon discovered membership applications for the Invaders that listed Florida Street as the return address. The application encouraged anyone believing in “building Black in your community and the total liberation of Black People” to join the Invaders. “There is no age group, anyone can join,” the membership application read. Herschel Feibelman responded that a person can work for the WOPC and also be “a member of the Invaders,” but he insisted that the “NOP is certainly not to be used as headquarters for the Invaders.”¹⁴⁹ Then, the MPD accused Invaders and NOP employees Oree McKenzie and Womax Stevenson of ambushing a police squad car, shooting a police officer, and using the building as a meeting place to plan the attack. The claim further complicated the perceived relationship between the WOPC and Invaders’ elicited activities.¹⁵⁰

¹⁴⁸Ibid.

¹⁴⁹“WOPC Pays Rent at Invaders’ Building,” *Memphis Press-Scimitar*, August 23, 1968.

¹⁵⁰Various Charges Pending Against Leaders; ‘Bold Concept’ For Black Militants Backfire,” *Memphis Press-Scimitar*, August 28, 1968; “3 Charged In Wounding Of Officer; Arrest Follow Three Incidents of Sniping,” *Memphis Press-Scimitar*, August 26, 1968.

As the late 1960s progressed, tension between the Invaders and the Memphis community increased. Invader leadership fluctuated, and organizations under the BOP umbrella, such as the Memphis State University Black Student Association, the LeMoyne College Intercollegiate chapter of the NAACP, and the City Organizers discontinued their affiliations with BOP.¹⁵¹ An FBI report described the Invaders as “not as communists per se, but ‘conniving,’ ‘criminal minded,’ ‘monkey-like,’ ‘sullen,’ ‘loud-mouth’ collection of teenage dope heads, ‘movement pimps,’ and ‘Beale Street bums’ who were also serious readers of Afro-American literature.”¹⁵² The Invaders were Memphis’s representation of Black Power in action. To many the Invaders resembled the “Black Panthers in California and the Blackstone Rangers in Chicago,” than they did dope heads.

By 1969 the Invaders promised that the community would see a different side of the organization. What started as a subsidiary of BOP became the primary fascination of the community. Some in the organization felt as though BOP could never escape the stigma of the sanitation strike disturbance. “We were asked to support the sanitation strike, and when we did this, we were branded and blown up in print as militants. The death of Dr. King didn’t help the morale of the group at all. We had been branded as militants, and then we became what they wanted us to be, but that was not our original purpose,” an Invader explained.¹⁵³ After the NOP, there was not much investment by the white or black community in helping the organization advance its platform. Both the

¹⁵¹Invaders, “FBI Memo, Racial Matters, 157-1067-1863” (Memphis, Tennessee, May 27, 1970).

¹⁵²Kenneth O’Reilly, *Racial Matters: The FBI’s Secret File on Black American 1960-1972* (New York: The Free Press, 1989), 273.

¹⁵³“Invaders Tactics: Are They Justifiable?” *Memphis Press-Scimitar*, April 28, 1969.

mass-circulation and black press rarely referenced BOP, instead focusing on the Invaders. According to FBI intelligence reports, by the spring of 1968, BOP had “degenerated into a group of approximately 30 to 35 young Memphis blacks.”¹⁵⁴ After a rash of arrests, the Invader leadership took to the press to champion the organization’s past accomplishments and promote the new agenda. Lance “Sweet Willie Wine” Watson, once the organization’s Prime Minister, replaced Charles Cabbage and Coby Smith as the most visible Invader.

Paranoid about possible infiltration, especially during leadership voids created by arrests or assassination attempts, the organization had always publicly taken the stance that the Invaders did not have a leader. “There’s no one leader,” Sweet Willie Wine reasoned. “We let everybody know that they’re a leader in their own sense. So this way they won’t be worrying about trying to pick me off.”¹⁵⁵ The two men instrumental in planting the seeds of Black Power in Memphis were no longer at the helm. Cabbage, who began as an anti-war activist in Atlanta in 1966, was arrested on charges of draft evasion and burglary and possession of a firearm.¹⁵⁶ Cabbage received four and a half years in prison for the charges.¹⁵⁷ Looking back on his Invader experience, Cabbage admitted that even though he, Coby Smith, John Smith, and other in others in leadership positions tried to maintain order, he had a “hell of a time trying to hold everybody in line.”¹⁵⁸

¹⁵⁴Invaders, “FBI Memo, Racial Matters, 157-1067-1863” (Memphis, Tennessee, May 27, 1970).

¹⁵⁵“Memphis Root, Vol. 1, No. 2,” Container 5, Folder 21, *Sanitation Strike Archival Project*, Mississippi Valley Collection, University of Memphis, Memphis, TN

¹⁵⁶*Memphis Commercial Appeal*, April 24, 1969.

¹⁵⁷*Memphis Press Scimitar*, August 28, 1968.

Coby Smith became a victim of the organization's increasingly radical posture. Some members called Smith "too preppy" and claimed that he did nothing but "make speeches." Younger members were upset by Smith's refusal to "bust heads." Seeing how far some members had strayed from the original purpose of the organization, Smith reminded them that instead of resorting to violence, members had to "use their minds, too." Smith also claimed that he used portions of money saved for college tuition to help fund the group and he expected reimbursement from the NOP grant, but "after the money came they didn't want me to have anything."¹⁵⁹

BOP and the Invaders precariously balanced between fighting the system and appealing to the system for financial help, further complicating the already murky relationship between Black Power and liberalism. Smith unsuccessfully led the organization's attempt to secure a \$50,000 grant from the National Council of Churches (NCC) for their proposed Memphis Leadership Conference For Black and Poor People. The proposal for the six-month program included training 120 young and older adults in the areas of: "community organizing, voter registration, use of the vote, political power, forms of agitation, propaganda and communications." At a meeting with representatives for the NCC, BOP once again solicited liberal support. Coby Smith and Louis Welch spoke on behalf of the organization asked the NCC for help against the persecution from law enforcement and the local press. According to Welch, "No one has said that since the assassination of Martin King more than 60 young black men and women have been jailed, more than half a million dollars in bond have been assessed, and almost every man labeled by the local news media as a 'black militant' has been thrown into jail." Smith

¹⁵⁸Charles Cabbage, interview.

¹⁵⁹Coby Smith, interview.

appealed to the group's liberal mission and Christian consciousness. "Our people have been jailed on charges ranging from armed robbery and murder to prostitution. We need to mobilize every Christian from Billy Graham to Oral Roberts to combat this sort of thing...we don't expect you to fight with us, but if you are Christians, we expect your help," said Smith.¹⁶⁰ In spite of Welch and Smith's impassioned pleas, the organization did not receive the grant. At the close of the year, Smith, one of the organization's steady leadership examples, left Memphis for New York.

But the "new Invaders" could not shake the problems that plagued the "old Invaders." After being arrested for allegedly threatening the owner of a neighborhood convenience store, Watson fasted at the Shelby County Jail to protest his imprisonment.¹⁶¹ The causes of Watson's arrests ranged from the Invaders' involvement with protests in Fayette County, Tennessee, and Forrest City, Arkansas, to carrying loaded firearms.¹⁶² The "Free Sweet Willie" campaign did not garner the same national attention as the campaign to free imprisoned Black Panther Party leader Huey P. Newton, but Invaders rallied around Watson, hoping to draw attention to the unfair persecution of

¹⁶⁰ "Invaders Ask NCC for Help in Freeing 12 of Its Members," *Memphis Press-Scimitar*, January 12, 1969; *Tri-State Defender*, March 8, 1969; In March of 1969 the Invaders hosted the "Invaders Leadership Conference," in effort to "bring more unity to Black Memphis."

¹⁶¹ "Sweet Willie Wine' Watson Continues His Fast in County Jail," *Tri-State Defender*, February 8, 1969.

¹⁶² "Invaders Join Blacks Marching In Arkansas," *Tri-State Defender*, June 28, 1969; "Beating of Woman Sparks Boycott in Fayette," *Tri-State Defender*, August 23, 1969; "Invaders Will Help," *Tri State Defender*, Aug. 23, 1969; *Memphis Press Scimitar*, October 28, 1969.

the organization.¹⁶³ Watson's dramatic stance ushered in a period of increased visibility and political activity for the Invaders within the more established networks.¹⁶⁴

But the arrests of members and associates, not the protests, received the majority of the attention. Lewis Welch insisted that the organization had moved "to disassociate ourselves with persons who use the Invaders as a base to hide." Welch continued, "Every effort will be made to protect the image of the Invaders as the true representative for the downtrodden blacks."¹⁶⁵ As a part of the transformation, when the MPD opened a service center in the same building on Florida Street that once served as the site of the NOP, several Invaders met with Detective Ed Redditt to lend their support for the center, while pledging to engage only in constructive activities. "The Invaders are serious and I believe they want to do the right thing...this is a time for community, a time to do things," Redditt told members of the Invaders.¹⁶⁶

But the Invaders' relationship with the established black leadership teetered between two statuses: pawns and pariahs. While the organization lent support to the campaigns such as union recognition for the striking St. Joseph Hospital workers, the NAACP Black Monday protests which demanded more black representation in school board and administrative positions, and crusades against racial injustices in Forrest City,

¹⁶³“Free Sweet Willie Campaign,” *Tri-State Defender*, February 8, 1969; “6 Youth Arrested In Front of Store; Group Of Invaders Handing Out Watson Handbills,” *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, February 20, 1969.

¹⁶⁴“Sweet Willie Wine’s Verdict; ‘Not Guilty’ and ‘Guilty’” *Memphis Press-Scimitar*, October 20, 1969.

¹⁶⁵“The Invaders; Problems, Programs, Personalities,” *Tri-State Defender*, February 8, 1969; “Redditt Says No to City Council Seat,” *Tri-State Defender*, August 7, 1971. Redditt was eventually released from his position at the Florida Street location after he “attempted to aid citizens in that area in a complaint against several white officers accused of police brutality.”

¹⁶⁶“Police Center Gets Help From Ex-Adversaries: Invaders,” *Memphis Press-Scimitar*, October 18, 1969.

and Fayette County the programs created by Invaders received tepid support at best. Drawing inspiration from James Meredith's 1966 March Against Fear, Watson conducted his own March Against Fear in 1969 from Forrest City to Little Rock, Arkansas, in protest of the horrid living and racial conditions in the region. Watson and several members of the Invaders worked with the Arkansas-based Committee for Peaceful Coexistence to conduct boycotts to dramatize "the plight of people not only in Forrest City but in Eastern Arkansas."¹⁶⁷

In Arkansas Watson and the Invaders found a new cause to champion and a community desperate for help in bringing attention to their battle. Many blacks in the city welcomed Watson and supported his efforts. When Forrest City police arrested Watson on a disorderly conduct charge, Florence Clay, the owner of, a Forrest City Mortuary, provided the bail money for the activist's release.¹⁶⁸ Despite pockets of success among some of Memphis's youth, the Invaders never received the same support in Memphis. Amid accusations that Watson and the Invaders only sought publicity for their efforts in East Arkansas, a *Memphis Press-Scimitar* article credited Watson with being "the real behind-the-scene catalyst," an accolade the organization rarely received for any of their efforts in Memphis.¹⁶⁹

¹⁶⁷Kelly Delaney and Lance Watson, interview by James Mosby, June 5, 1970, The Civil Rights Documentation Project, Ralph J. Bunche Oral History Program, Howard University, Washington, D.C.

¹⁶⁸"Arkansas Police Arrest Militant," *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, September 15, 1969.

¹⁶⁹"The Protest March Settled – Well, What?" *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, August 24, 1969; John A. Kirk, *Redefining the Color Line: Black Activism in Little Rock, Arkansas, 1940-1970* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 2002), 178; "Sweet Willie's Verdicts: Not Guilty and Guilty," *Memphis Press-Scimitar*, October 20, 1969; "No New Outbursts At Invaders' Trial," *Memphis Press-Scimitar*, November 11, 1969. During the campaign Watson was beaten by a

Another program, Operation Breakfast, modeled after the Black Panther Party's Free Breakfast Program, fizzled out before children could benefit from the free meals.¹⁷⁰ An FBI report labeled Operation Breakfast as "racket...pattern[ed] after the Black Panther Operation Breakfast program in Oakland, California whereby the Black Panthers virtually extorted food and money from merchants in order that they might furnish free breakfasts to ghetto children in an effort to win support to their cause and to cover up some of their illegal activities."¹⁷¹ However, in actuality, the Party's Survival Programs were among the organization's most successful initiatives. With Memphis ranking so high on the poverty index, the failure of Operation Breakfast to gain widespread support was emblematic of the strained relationship between the organization and the community.¹⁷²

Fascination, curiosity, fear, and disgust encapsulated the way many Memphians viewed the Invaders. In many ways, the organization embodied all of those contrasting descriptions. Their image was so antithetical to the established black leadership that for some young black men, being an Invader became a badge of honor. Yet others were repulsed by the organization's propensity to engage in reckless and criminal behavior. Many in Memphis, both white and black, had branded the youth as trouble from their first

group of whites, and arrested, as well as another Invader Eddie Tate who was charged in a separate incident with robbery and assault.

¹⁷⁰“Inside Memphis; Operation Breakfast,” *Memphis World*, September 27, 1969.

¹⁷¹Invaders, “FBI Memo, Racial Matters, 157-1067-1594” (Memphis, Tennessee, October 7, 1969).

¹⁷²Invaders, “FBI Memo, Racial Matters, 157-1067-157-8460” (Memphis, Tennessee, March 31, 1970).

stint with MAP-South and the WOPC, before they could institute any of their concrete objectives. When the opportunity arrived to involve the youth in the NOP, so much had transpired between the founding of BOP, the MAP-South controversy in 1967, the sanitation strike, and the assassination of Martin Luther King, that the odds of the program's success appeared slim. Yet as Charles Cabbage suggested, "no one ever wanted to hear about the structure. They only want to hear about the Invaders because the Invaders were really the ones that were kicking up all the dust."¹⁷³ When that dust settled, Memphis's liberal establishment did experiment with BOP, the Invaders, and NOP. That, too, failed to make a lasting impact, and it failed to institutionalize Black Power and the Invaders.

Nat D. Williams, WDIA Disc Jockey and journalist, warned those quick to dismiss the organization that, "It might be well for the black and white community of well wishing people of goodwill in Memphis to take a closer look at the Invaders. They may have something more than the muscle to marshal demonstrate parades and the like. They may be saying something and standing for something fundamental."¹⁷⁴

The community ignored Williams' plea to take a closer look at the Invaders, or possibly they took a closer look and were not swayed. BOP's and the Invaders' involvement with the War on Poverty programs displayed the inability of Black Power to penetrate conventional political avenues. After the "One Hot Summer" diversionary program, BOP never realized its plan to institute political education courses in addition to its black history curriculum, limiting the organization's ability to make inroads

¹⁷³Charles Cabbage, Interview by Michael Honey, *Notes in Collection of the author*, Memphis, Tennessee (August 4, 2004).

¹⁷⁴"A Point Of View; The Invaders," *Tri-State Defender*, February 1, 1969.

politically. Culturally, however, the program exposed young students to black pride and self-assertion, impacting the entire Black Power generation.

Chapter Four

“Why not at LeMoyne-Owen?”: Student Activism and Black Power at LeMoyne-Owen College

*“We, as students of LeMoyne-Owen College have made one of the greatest steps toward determining the power of the student body. Are you satisfied with your teachers, our learning processes, and so-called great power the administration possesses? We realize that in all cases, except the Student Government Association, that the administration has the power. Together, we are. Scared, we are not. We want, we obtain. Satisfied, we are not.”*¹ — **LeMoyne-Owen Student**

November 25, 1968, a night intended to honor Dr. Hollis F. Price, President of LeMoyne-Owen College (LOC), the small, private historically black college (HBCU) situated in South Memphis, turned into a bittersweet moment.² Greater Memphis State, Incorporated, an organization affiliated with Memphis State University, honored Price as a lifelong educator with its coveted “Educator of the Year Award” for his years of service and dedication to higher education in Memphis.³ “As a teacher, a dean and a college president he has distinguished himself,” read an article in the local paper.⁴ Born in Capahosic, Virginia, Price arrived in Memphis in 1941 and started out as dean of the college. Two years later the school’s board appointed Price the first African American president of the college.⁵ Price modestly downplayed the paper’s review of his many

¹“Force and Power (A Senior’s Comments)” Invaders; LeMoyne-Owen Disturbance, “FBI Memo Racial Matters 157-1067-569-157-1067-633.”

²Robert D. Bullard, ed., *In Search of the New South: The Black Urban Experience in the 1970s and 1980s*, (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 1989), 103.

³Dr. Hollis Price is named Greater MSU Top Educator, *Memphis Press-Scimitar*, November 11, 1968. The Greater Memphis State, Incorporated was founded in 1952 to “support activities and programs at Memphis State University.”

⁴“A Merited Honor,” *Memphis Press-Scimitar*, November 27, 1968.

⁵“He Showed The Way,” *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, November 9, 1982.

accolades and acts of service through the years. “I am deeply honored,” said Price. “I only hope that during the past years, I have done enough for this community to warrant this award.”⁶

Back at Price’s campus he left a group of rebelling students and non-student dissidents who cared little about the president’s accomplishments or his recognition at Memphis State. Their immediate concerns centered on their uneasiness with the direction of campus politics and their lack of involvement in the decision-making process. Dr. Price did not have much time to savor the honor. Immediately after accepting the award, he hurried back to LeMoyne-Owen to control an increasingly unstable situation on the campus.

A palpable tension existed on campus during the week leading up the president’s coronation as Educator of the Year. But true to his reputation among the community and the student body, Price believed that he could control of the situation. “I guess I’ll live through it,” Price told local reporters when pressed for a response to the circumstances unfolding on the normally quiet campus.⁷ “Live,” the operative word in Price’s reply, suggested that he understood that in order to move beyond the ruckus he could not idly dismiss the students’ grievances – he had to address them, whether he totally believed in their validity or not. He needed to manage the emotions of the protesting students and temper the influence of outside protestors not enrolled at the college. He knew that his reaction determined the future course of campus relations at the school.

⁶Ibid.

⁷“Disturbance at LeMoyne-Owen; Students Demand Changes,” *Memphis Press-Scimitar*, November 24, 1968.

The student protestors asked: Why not LeMoyne-Owen? Out of the four college campuses located in Memphis, LeMoyne-Owen College, with its emphasis on conservative black middle-class values, seemed the least likely to be the first of the city's colleges to join the national wave of campus protests. But the language and attitude of the students' and non-student protestors' demands mirrored those of Black Power proponents at other institutions. Students at LeMoyne-Owen rebelled against a perceived lack of respect from instructors, staff, and administration. Engaging in a symbiotic relationship, the students and the "outsiders" used each other to further their respective agendas. With the "help" of the community's more outspoken proponents of the Movement - the local Black Power organization, the Invaders - the activists worked to change the campus dynamics and its relationship with the community. The students, already feeling disrespected, saw the Invaders as a means to an end - an instrument to make school officials react to their demands. As a grassroots organization rooted in the community, the Invaders felt they had as much stake in the struggle as the students and used the opportunity to infiltrate the campus with their brand of Black Power ideology. The group urged students to seize the moment and build on the momentum of the burgeoning student movement on campuses around the country.

LeMoyne-Owen's stature as a Historically Black College and its place in the heart of South Memphis distinguished it in the mind of the black community from the other Memphis schools. For many years, LeMoyne College provided African Americans their only opportunity to pursue higher education in Memphis. The school, therefore, symbolized much more than simply an institution of higher learning; it represented a

source of pride for African Americans in Memphis. “The families...the hardworking families, poor, middle class, a few upper class...that’s the type of support the students at LeMoyne had during that time,” recalled former LeMoyne-Owen College Senior Class President Charles Diggs in characterizing the African American community’s commitment to the school.⁸

LeMoyne College’s rich tradition of service to Memphis’ black community began in 1862 when the American Missionary Association (AMA) dispatched a representative to “open an elementary school for ‘Contraband’ Negroes and ‘Freedmen’ at Camp Shiloh just below Memphis.” The organization traced its benevolent beginnings to 1839 when a group of separate abolitionist societies joined together in support of an insurrection of Africans aboard the slave ship *Amistad*.⁹ The separate groups merged in 1846 and formally incorporated as the American Missionary Association. In addition to their abolitionists’ endeavors, the AMA’s mission included political and educational opportunities for African Americans. Along with the Bureau of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands (Freedman’s Bureau), the AMA established black colleges in throughout the south.¹⁰

The AMA’s desire to assist the Freedmen in their quest for education brought the organization to the Memphis area explicitly for that purpose. No institution or association needed to convince the masses of African Americans of the importance of an education.

⁸Charles Diggs, interview.

⁹“A Mutiny Aboard a Slaver and a Buggy Accident Led to Founding of LeMoyne,” *Memphis Press-Scimitar*, November 15, 1946.

¹⁰LeMoyne-Owen: A School That Works, *Memphis Commercial Appeal Magazine*, March 22, 1981.

African Americans had long valued education and the possibilities it presented.

Education and the ability to read and write constituted a type of freedom that transcended the escape from physical bondage; it also represented a form of mental emancipation for African Americans.

The small school transitioned from its Camp Shiloh location on the outskirts of the city into the city proper in 1863. The move helped to facilitate the rapidly growing student body. Similarly, the nation, and the South in particular, found itself in the midst of a transition. After the Civil War the nation looked to quickly heal the physical and emotional damage between the feuding sections. The Reconstruction period attempted to reunite the succeeding southern states back to the Union and to revamp and revive the region's labor system and answer the question: What to do with the newly freed slaves? Working with the Freedman's Bureau, organizations such as the AMA attempted to solve the question by focusing on educating the Freedmen.¹¹

By 1866, under the auspices of The Lincoln School, the future LeMoyne College continued to grow. The same year the federal government removed the protective presence of federal troops; racial violence and riots ensued. Rioters set LeMoyne on fire, but the fire did not shake the AMA or the students' resolve. The AMA reconstructed the school shortly thereafter. The enrollment increased to 150 students and six teachers. The physical resurgence of the school did not translate into financial health, even with the backing of the AMA. A \$20,000 gift from physician Francis J. LeMoyne in 1871 fortified the school's place in the city. The school was renamed the LeMoyne Normal and

¹¹Eric Foner, *A Short History of Reconstruction* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1990).

Commercial Institute. The school finally transitioned from its high school status to a full-fledged four-year institution when it became LeMoyne College in 1934.¹²

In 1968 LeMoyne College and Owen Junior College merged their two respective institutions. “I will hate to see the school close...[Owen Junior College] has made me realize what it means to have a friend, and I realize how many I have now,” expressed Miss Owen Junior College Patricia McWright.¹³ McWright worried that closing the junior college would leave her and other students without an educational alternative. Skeptical of her ability to get into Memphis State after the merger, she expressed an interest in attending another historically black institution, Tennessee State University in Nashville. With the inevitability of the LeMoyne and Owen merger looming, she questioned the motives of those in charge of keeping the school viable, especially its sponsor, the Tennessee Baptist Church Convention. “It is one thing I would like to know,” inquired McWright, “all the ministers that are supposed to be supporting this school, what do they do with the money, where does it go?”¹⁴

The institution struggled financially after a dormitory and a main building on campus caught fire in January of 1967.¹⁵ The fire destroyed Roger Williams Hall, which

¹²“LeMoyne-Owen: A School That Works,” *Memphis Commercial Appeal Magazine*, March 22, 1981.

¹³“Invaders; LeMoyne-Owen Disturbance,” FBI Memo Racial Matters 157-1067-569-157-1067-633” (Memphis, Tennessee November 25, 1968).

¹⁴Ibid.

¹⁵“Owen College Dorm Completely Destroyed; Owen Officials Study Plans to Replace Roger Williams Hall,” *Tri-State Defender*, January 21, 1967.

also served as a dormitory.¹⁶ The blaze displaced students living on campus and destroyed the school's main hall. With finances at a premium, Owen President Dr. Charles Dinkins hoped for assistance from the federal government to repair the damaged buildings. Dinkins also blamed the increased cost of yearly operations and maintenance for the school's need to even consider the merger.¹⁷ For Owen, a merger made fiscal sense. The schools began discussing the proposed union in the spring of 1967.

LeMoyne's president cited "improvement...[the desire to] strengthen academic programs, improve facilities, and increase student services," as primary reasons that the schools decided to join forces.¹⁸ In a *Commercial Appeal* article, both presidents found themselves explaining the merger and defending the relevance of black colleges in general. As boundaries tumbled, black students found the opportunities to attend predominately white institutions increase. While black colleges provided nurturing and protection from society's corrosive racial elements, they lacked the resources of many of their white equivalents. Black students themselves began to question the politics of HBCUs. Viewing the schools as out of touch with the realities of contemporary black life, students attending historically black schools challenged their institutions to "become actively involved in the drive to liberate and empower African Americans."¹⁹

LeMoyne, and to a lesser extent Owen, found itself in competition with Memphis State, though neither side acknowledged it. Black colleges were valuable resources,

¹⁶Ibid.

¹⁷"LeMoyne, Owen Talk of Merger; Protest Planned," *Memphis Press-Scimitar*, May 5, 1967.

¹⁸"'Improvement' is Goal in LeMoyne and Owen Merger Plan," *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, November 11, 1967.

¹⁹Van DeBurg, *New Day in Babylon*, 69-70; Turner, *Sitting In and Speaking Out*, 166.

contended Price, and the merger increased the effectiveness and attractiveness of both schools. Owen President Charles Dinkins furthered defended the validity and necessity of historically black schools. “You can’t look at Negro colleges as a class,” Dinkins explained, “They run the spectrum from good to bad. Negroes have pride in their colleges...you can’t decry these services just because the colleges aren’t second Harvards.” Pedigree and prestige, he argued, could not and did not always determine the quality of education.²⁰

Officials decided to merge without much student or community input. During a time when students all around the nation demanded a larger role in determining the direction of their institution, Owen students, like Patricia McWright, expected administrators to solicit their input. Beyond those expectations, the students recognized Owen’s importance. “This’ll knock a lot of people out of their education,” insisted Owen Student Government President Charles Turner.²¹ As a voice for the student body, Turner relayed the students’ angst over the merger. Most students attended Owen in the first place because of tougher admission standards at LeMoyne, Memphis State, and other four-year institutions.²²

The unification process did not happen smoothly. Initially school officials targeted completion of the merger by the fall semester of 1967. However, they soon realized that deciding on specifics of the move proved more difficult than originally planned. Both sides worked diligently on the logistics, but an important question

²⁰“‘Improvement’ is Goal in LeMoyne and Owen Merger Plan,” *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, November 11, 1967.

²¹Ibid.

²²“LeMoyne and Owen Discuss Merger,” *Memphis Press-Scimitar*, May 5, 1967.

remained: How would the school absorb the 400-plus Owen students? Trustees of both schools questioned if they could smoothly exchange faculty, or if they could move all their cultural events and programs to one campus. “We decided there are a lot of problems involved in meshing two institutions smoothly,” Dr. Price explained. “If you rush it, you do a bum job.”²³ Also, because of LeMoyne’s long-standing status in the community, would the merger be equitable? In light of those issues, officials postponed the merger a year, although a \$10,000 grant from the United States Office of Education awarded to Owen eased some of the financial burden.

On May 6, 1967, a year before the school unification, approximately 100 students voiced their displeasure with the merger.²⁴ Despite the students’ passion, school officials virtually ignored their show of discontent. A year later and closer to the actual merge date, the students staged another protest. This time they took their grievances directly to a meeting of the Tennessee Baptist Missionary and Educational Convention, where board members convened to vote on whether or not to continue with the proposed merger.²⁵ “Owen is fulfilling a unique function,” remarked Owen student, local Black Power activist, and member of the Invaders, John B. Smith. “It provides educational opportunities to many black students who would not be able to meet the entrance requirements at LeMoyne or Memphis State.”²⁶

²³“College Union Reaches Delay; LeMoyne-Owen to Go ‘Step-by-Step’ Declares Dr. Hollis Price,” *Memphis Press-Scimitar*, June 20, 1967.

²⁴Ibid.

²⁵“Students Protest College Merger,” *Memphis Press-Scimitar*, February 21, 1968.

²⁶Ibid.

Smith also questioned LeMoyne's ability and desire to accept all of the Owen students, but Dr. Price promised that current Owen students in good standing who wanted to transfer could do so without penalty.²⁷ "It is the overall common good for LeMoyne to merge with Owen. The merger will give us a broader base of support and provide an opportunity to be of larger service to the community," said Price.²⁸ For the long term, however, the students suggested that if the merger happened, the state should seriously consider creating another junior college in Memphis.²⁹ Despite the students' efforts – Smith declared that a yes vote by the board was akin to "tampering with our future" – the governing body of Owen Junior College pledged their support for the union.³⁰ Conversely, the merger did not seem to faze LeMoyne College students. Possibly the students realized, the move was a "merger" in name only. "Students at LeMoyne didn't care one way or the other. It was more of an issue for Owen," recalled Charles Diggs.³¹ LeMoyne students' only concern was the possibility of an overcrowded campus.³²

In June 1968, Owen held its last commencement exercise and graduated the largest class in the brief history of the school.³³ Local news outlets converged on Saint John's Baptist Church, the venue for the school's final ceremony. "It [Owen Junior

²⁷"Final Action on Owen Merger is Expected," *Tri-State Defender*, May 25, 1968.

²⁸"Two Colleges Merge; Become LeMoyne-Owen," *Tri-State Defender*, June 1, 1968.

²⁹ Ibid, Dr. Price waived LeMoyne admission requirements for the students at Owen affected by the merger.

³⁰"Owen Backers Support Merger," *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, February 22, 1968.

³¹ Charles Diggs, interview.

³²"LeMoyne, Owen Talk of Merger; Protest Planned," *Memphis Press-Scimitar*, May 5, 1967.

³³"Owen Graduates Its Final Class, Mainstream By Combining Into a Larger Unit," *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, June 4, 1968.

College] started 14 years ago with 33 pilot students and a loan of \$500,” President Dinkins told the graduates.³⁴ More than 4000 students attended Owen during its existence. Though Dinkins praised the school for its impact in the city, he argued still that a transformation in the local educational landscape necessitated the merger of the schools. Owen Junior College, Dinkins suggested, “had begun to feel the impact of change.”³⁵ All of Owen’s assets, physical and financial, were transferred to LeMoyne in the merger.³⁶ The commencement had a two-fold purpose: it ushered its graduates into the real world, and it closed its doors. The same month also witnessed the official birth of LeMoyne-Owen College.³⁷

“The students mean business,” reported a *Tri-State Defender* editorial on the state of student-faculty-administration relations across the country. The weekly regional paper, which serviced Tennessee, Mississippi, and Arkansas, often published editorial pieces outside of the usual local and regional news reports. The commentary in the editorial did not blindly condemn campus radicals or criticize the right of students to protest. Instead the author chose to focus on the most constructive aspects of campus protest. The editorial praised student councils and government associations for the organized manner in which they challenged authority on their respective campuses. Students across the nation, the article suggested, grew tired of pacifying tactics of administrations who

³⁴“50 Students Receive Degrees in Owen’s Final Commencement,” *Tri-State Defender*, June 15, 1968.

³⁵*Ibid.*

³⁶“Final Action on Owen Merger is Expected,” *Tri-State Defender*, “May 25, 1968.

³⁷“LeMoyne-Owen Feels Growth Push,” *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, June 27, 1968; “LeMoyne-Owen Ready to Open,” *Memphis World*, August 17, 1968.

allowed them “sitting-in privileges at faculty meetings;” they demanded instead a “greater say in policy-making.” Colleges invited extremism, the author reasoned, by not listening to the reasonable request of students. At this point, campus upheavals were happening around the nation. Yet at press time, Memphis had yet to feel the sting of student dissent. Soon it would.³⁸

LeMoyne-Owen’s special events committee, aided by the student government association, attempted to exercise some independence with its Inquiry Week program.³⁹ A new idea and very much in line with the students’ desire for more control, the committee invited local and national speakers to the campus to “discuss current issues of the day.”⁴⁰ As one of the first major programs since the merger, the decision to initiate a program such as Inquiry Week reflected a heightened level of consciousness among the student body and to some degree, the faculty and administration. They invited an array of speakers with different backgrounds and ideological viewpoints on the racial issues of the day. The new head of the Memphis branch of the NAACP, Reverend Ezekiel “Zeke” Bell, delivered a speech. Zeke Bell, a fiery Presbyterian minister, differed from the past NAACP leadership. Bell was not a part of the upper crust of Memphis’s black society, yet he rose to leadership in the organization because he reflected the branch’s new, more radical reality. Former LeMoyne College student leader Marion Barry also returned to Memphis at the students’ invitation, reinforcing the connection between the civil rights leader’s activist beginnings at the college and his grassroots leadership on the political

³⁸ “The Student Revolt,” *Tri-State Defender* November 16, 1968.

³⁹ “Inquiry Week Continues on LeMoyne-Owen Campus,” *Tri-State Defender*, “November 11, 1968.

⁴⁰ “Invaders; LeMoyne-Owen Disturbance,” “FBI Memo Racial Matters 157-1067-569-157-1067-633” (Memphis, Tennessee November 26, 1968).

scene in Washington, DC. “We knew of his [Marion Barry] history with the sit-ins and integrating the public libraries,” explained Charles Diggs.⁴¹ In many ways Barry personified the national student movement to the students. Barry’s speech, “So you’re a College Student and you have a Right – A Right to What?” showed his connections to his student activist past.⁴² The speech intended to provoke the students to think deeper about their responsibility as college students, especially as more and more students demanded power.

But it was a November 15 speech by BOP cofounder and Invader Coby Smith that caught the attention of the Memphis Bureau of Investigation. Smith, a recent college graduate, provided a unique viewpoint that neither Bell nor Barry could give. Smith spoke to the students specifically about their role and responsibility as black students in the current local movement. The FBI had been targeting BOP on a limited scale since its inception in 1967. The national office’s Counter Intelligence Program, code named COINTELPRO, monitored the activities of any and every so-called subversive organization, individual, or movement, including, and most particularly, civil rights and Black Power activists.⁴³ In a report that detailed the Inquiry Week activities and the movements of the “subversives” involved, local Bureau agents claimed that Smith’s talk provoked the students. Smith, the Bureau reported, “told the students they were not doing enough and that they should initiate some action to assert their independence of the

⁴¹Charles Diggs, interview.

⁴²“Inquiry Week Continues,” *Tri-State Defender*, “ November 11, 1968.

⁴³Nelson Blackstock, *COINTELPRO: The FBI’s Secret War on Political Freedom*, (New York: Pathfinder Press, 1975), 16.

school administration.”⁴⁴ BOP believed in the same “move or get moved over” attitude that many Black Power advocates of the day embodied. The group’s more virulent call for action coincided with their view of their responsibility as the city’s sole purveyor and defender of Black Power ideology. While it is hard to determine how much of an impression Smith’s Inquiry Week speech left with the students, or if it indeed provoked the students as the FBI claimed, Smith did force the students to think closely about their responsibilities as college students.

The 1968 Inquiry Week festivities ended on such a high note that organizers began to plan for the following year.⁴⁵ “The committee is very proud of the students’ response to this week of activities,” expressed LeMoyne-Owen Student Center Head Dorothy Harris.⁴⁶ The open format encouraged students to not sit idly and listen, but to question the speakers. Conceptually, Inquiry Week succeeded because it allowed the students an opportunity to express themselves in an open forum and challenge the views of established civic and community leaders.

Tensions, however, bubbled beneath the surface during the week of activities. The Memphis field office noted dissension among several in the school’s older student population.⁴⁷ Older students often took advantage of cheaper tuition and relaxed admissions standards by taking classes at Owen. With the merger of the schools, it was

⁴⁴“Invaders” LeMoyne-Owen Disturbance, “FBI Memo Racial Matters 157-1067-569-157-1067-633” (Memphis, Tennessee November 23, 1968).

⁴⁵“Inquiry Week Gains Students’ Approval,” *Tri-State Defender*, November 23, 1968.

⁴⁶“Inquiry Week at LeMoyne-Owen Holds Attention,” *Memphis World*, November 23, 1968.

⁴⁷“Invaders” LeMoyne-Owen Disturbance, “FBI Memo Racial Matters 157-1067-569-157-1067-633” (Memphis, Tennessee November 23, 1968).

not uncommon to see older and younger students comingling on the same campus. Younger students joined with the older students to lodge complaints with Dr. Price “seeking better food in the school cafeteria, cheaper food prices, more off campus activities to be permitted on campus, and greater student participation in the overall operation of the school.”⁴⁸ They also demanded longer hours for certain buildings on campus, improvement to facilities, a more favorable grade point scale, improved bookstore, more black history courses, lower tuition, additional campus police, establishment of on-campus health services, and optional, not required, attendance at assemblies.⁴⁹ Dr. Price planned to retire from his post as school president at the year’s end. The students, fearful of the trustees handpicking another “company man” to replace Price, wanted to help name his successor.⁵⁰

Some of the students’ complaints also questioned the fiscal responsibility of the school and its trustees. “The students are charged high tuition and have to go to class in a garage-type building,” some complained.⁵¹ In a larger show of discontent during the week, the students boycotted all of the campus facilities that needed money – their money – to operate. They neglected the vending machines in the student areas, avoided the cafeteria, and even stopped using the pay phones. These simple moves proved powerful

⁴⁸Ibid.

⁴⁹“Disturbances at LeMoyne-Owen; Students Demand Changes,” *Memphis Press-Scimitar*, November 23, 1968; “Demonstrators Barricade LeMoyne-Owen; Administration Seeks to Settle Grievances,” *Tri-State Defender*, November 30, 1968.

⁵⁰“Grievance Action Ends Occupation,” *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, November 27, 1968.

⁵¹“Demonstrators Barricade LeMoyne-Owen,” *Tri-State Defender*, November 30, 1968.

enough to gain the administration's attention.⁵² Some promoted the idea of a non-violent Black Power. Instead of revolutionary nationalism, some African Americans advocated control of the "economic, education, and political institutions" in their communities.⁵³ The boycott placed pressure on Price to act swiftly and the students threatened to respond more aggressively if he did not.

The boycott of the facilities put the faculty, staff and administration on notice. The students asked for small concessions from the administration, but at a time when many campuses railed by protest, not every student protesting perceived injustices claimed to be a radical, and not all campus disturbances centered on anti-war and civil rights disparities. Even if students championed other causes, they also gravitated toward issues personal to their campus experience. The mild demands of the LOC students reflected that reality. They simply called for respect and recognition, or as a handwritten proposal described, "an equilibrium of power between the administration and the students."⁵⁴ It was one thing to call for a larger hand in deciding their own fate, but a demand for an equal share of power with the administration was an unrealistic request even in the best of circumstances. If the administration and staff questioned anything, it was not the students' ambitiousness.

On November 21, the students planned a sit-down protest in the halls of the administration building, Brownlee Hall, to demand that the administration make

⁵²Ibid.

⁵³"Non-Violent Power Seen As Negro's Hope," *Nashville Tennessean*, November 24, 1968.

⁵⁴"Force and Power (A Senior's Comments)" Invaders; LeMoyne-Owen Disturbance, "FBI Memo Racial Matters 157-1067-569-157-1067-633."

changes.⁵⁵ Again, they demanded that Dr. Price respond immediately to their concerns. Price argued that he was in no position to do so.⁵⁶ In response, students took turns sitting in the unoccupied seats in the waiting area outside of the president's office.⁵⁷ Alternating bodies, the students protested without missing class, showing their commitment to their education while adhering to certain procedures in order to get the respect they sought. "I told them [the students] to stay in class...I didn't want them thinking we were cutting class," recalled Charles Diggs.⁵⁸

Throughout the day the students continued their protest, content to gain the attention of the administration without causing a major disruption. Some students remembered the activism of past LeMoynites and how they achieved success in their movement. "A lot of things they did made it so when I was in high school we could go to the library," Diggs explained, recalling the efforts of those involved in the city's sit-in movement.⁵⁹ The protest continued, quietly, without much fanfare, and seemingly without much acknowledgement from anyone in authority.

A handwritten manifesto entitled "Force and Power (A Senior's Comment)" circulated throughout the campus. The unnamed senior, who called himself "ignorant and oppressed," accused the administration of sealing "my mouth with their threats and

⁵⁵"Disturbances at LeMoyne-Owen," *Memphis Press-Scimitar*, November 23, 1968.

⁵⁶"Faculty to Study Student Demands; Action on 7 Items Sought by LeMoyne-Owen Group," *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, November 24, 1968.

⁵⁷Invaders; LeMoyne-Owen Disturbance, "FBI Memo Racial Matters 157-1067-569-157-1067-633" (Memphis, Tennessee November 23, 1968).

⁵⁸Charles Diggs, interview.

⁵⁹*Ibid.*

nonchalantness.”⁶⁰ The senior’s accusation did not mark the first time that students charged the administration with not taking their cause seriously. “I have potential power, but it has been confiscated. I am Black, but I’m being white indoctrinated,” the student maintained in another claim against the perception that the school did not promote or encourage enough black cultural values.⁶¹ The document also formally outlined the students’ grievances:

- I. Use of facilities at all times
- II. More Black Curriculum
- III. Bookstore (More contemporary books)
- IV. More courtesy from the business office
- V. Use of student lounge
- VI. Knowledge of qualifications of new president
- VII. Health Services (more availability of health services on campus)
- VIII. Lowering of tuition
- IX. Allocation of activity fee
- X. Improved dormitory facilities for athletes
- XI. More campus police

Preaching unity and black awareness while calling for an educational revolution, the document proclaimed that the students realized that together they could change their lot. “We all have proved to the administration, faculty, and to ourselves that we are Together,” the student stressed.⁶² Still, the students felt they lacked respect from the faculty and administration, as well as a voice in the decision-making process.

Much to the dismay of the administration, outside elements joined the students’ cause. On the afternoon of the initial protest, the FBI reported spotting Invader Lance “Sweet Willie Wine” Watson and several members of the organization on the campus

⁶⁰“Force and Power (A Senior’s Comments)” Invaders; LeMoyne-Owen Disturbance, “FBI Memo Racial Matters 157-1067-569-157-1067-633.”

⁶¹Ibid.

⁶²Ibid.

talking with LeMoyne-Owen students. Although Watson and many of the Invaders grew up near the campus and were products of the South Memphis community, administrators did not welcome their involvement. “We had Lance (Sweet Willie Wine) Watson and some Black United Front (a militant Black Power Group) are talking to the students,” lamented Dr. Price.⁶³ While the students hoped to prove a point, so did the Invaders. Some students voiced concerns about the aggressive approach of the Invaders. Though they wanted change on campus, many LOC students believed that Dr. Price treated the students fairly. Charles Diggs specifically remembered Dr. Price soliciting his advice on what the students wanted. He remembered telling Price, “We are the future leaders of this nation and we want to be respected by the people that are running this college.”⁶⁴

Understandably, Price worried about the influence the group could have on the students. Many of the city’s young black men rebuffed the more conservative politics of the NAACP and the various ministerial alliances. They gravitated toward the organization’s more radical ideology. Some of those same men attended LeMoyne-Owen College. Watson believed it was their responsibility to help the students, out of loyalty to their community, as a voice for the underrepresented. Coby Smith and other Invaders held a meeting with some of the students to lend support, and to also stoke the fire of an already uncomfortable situation.

Some students welcomed the support of the more militant group. Putting a more aggressive face on the situation, they argued, could only speed up the process and show their seriousness to the administration. Senior Class President Charles Diggs argued that the students could hide behind the actions of the Invaders. He said, “without telling them,

⁶³“Disturbances at LeMoyne-Owen,” *Memphis Press-Scimitar*, November 23, 1968.

⁶⁴Charles Diggs, interview.

you can get people to do things you can't do.”⁶⁵ However, that stance applied to the Watson and the Invaders as well. If the Invaders helped the students to gain the attention of the administration, the students in return gave the Invaders a platform to advocate their Black Power agenda. When some students began to insist that they did not need outside help, members of the Invaders pushed back. The FBI, having already infiltrated the group with an informant of its own, reported on the closed-door meeting. According to their report, a student suggested, probably sensing trouble, that LeMoyne could handle the problem internally and did not need the interference of the Black Power group.

Donald Stone, reportedly a field representative for the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), replied, “this [situation] is small and a black revolution is going on all over the United States and you will need help of the outsiders.”⁶⁶ Reportedly, Watson responded more aggressively and definitively: “We are the Invaders and the black people's army. We are going to help you whether you want us to or not.”⁶⁷ Rumors circulated that an Invader pulled a gun and fired shots toward the dissenting students.⁶⁸ But a few students agreed with Stone and asked the Invaders to stay and help.⁶⁹ Though he did not agree with the more radical approach, Diggs recalled respecting the Invaders' stance simply because, “they had what it took to get up in their

⁶⁵Ibid.

⁶⁶“Invaders” LeMoyne-Owen Disturbance, “FBI Memo Racial Matters 157-1067-569-157-1067-633” (Memphis, Tennessee November 25, 1968). Subsequently it has surfaced that Ernest Withers reported to the FBI on certain key events during the incident.

⁶⁷Ibid.

⁶⁸Ibid; “Grievance Action Ends Occupation,” *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, November 27, 1968.

⁶⁹Ibid.

[the administration's] face."⁷⁰ Early on the morning of November 25, students ran through the hallways and into classes in an effort to cause a disruption and get the campus's attention. Several students sat down in the hallways to impede the movement of anyone who ventured outside the classrooms. The LeMoyne-Owen situation prompted support from other student organizations. White students at Memphis State University attempted to establish a chapter of the Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) on the campus with no success, but a local city chapter emerged in 1968 and many Memphis State students held membership.⁷¹ SDS members, along with Memphis State Black Student Association members, aligned themselves with the Black Organizing Project. They met at Memphis State University to discuss the events unfolding at the South Memphis campus to discuss if they could help.

LOC students moved beyond hallway hijinks to more aggressive tactics. They had already determined that some sort of campaign to disrupt the normalcy of day-to-day operations, even on a small scale, could get the attention of the administration, faculty, and staff. A spokesman for the group "insisted that violence would not be tolerated and instructed the group that if police disturbed their sit-in not to resist arrest and proceed to jail in an orderly manner."⁷² The faculty met early on November 25 to discuss the

⁷⁰Charles Diggs, interview.

⁷⁰Ibid.

⁷¹"Minority Gyped," *Tiger Rag*, March 8, 1969; Jack Lorenzini, "We Didn't Reject the System, the System Rejected Us": The SDS Failure to Obtain a Charter at Memphis State University, 1968-1970," *The West Tennessee Historical Society Papers*, Volume 62, (2008): 24-43.

⁷²"Demonstrators Barricade LeMoyne-Owen; Administration Seeks to Settle Grievances," *Tri-State Defender*, November 30, 1968.

students' concerns. The students' threat of more intense action if they did not return with an immediate response loomed over the proceedings.⁷³ Faculty obviously did not heed the threat, nor did they feel intimidated. "We were upset because the faculty had belittled our grievances," explained a student, "They came out of the meeting and said they were laughing at our demands, but to us this was a very serious thing."⁷⁴ No school that experienced any campus upheaval during the 1960s and 1970s took kindly to disorder and chaos from student dissidents, but for a small black school, any deviation of the schedule or destruction of resources could cause more setbacks and problems than at the larger majority white universities.

About 4:00 on the afternoon of November 25, LeMoyne-Owen students, along with members of the Invaders, some members of SDS, and the Memphis State BSA, began to gather around Brownlee Hall, the administration building and main campus hub.⁷⁵ Months earlier at Columbia University, black and white students seized buildings on the campus in an effort to avert the university's planned expansion into a nearby Harlem park.⁷⁶ At Columbia students strategically captured two of the school's more important buildings, Hamilton Hall and Low Library. Though neither the LeMoyne-Owen students, SDS, the MSU BSA, nor the Invaders explicitly cited Columbia as an inspiration for their decision to take over the administration building on their own

⁷³"At LeMoyne-Owen College; Militants Leave Seized Buildings," *Memphis Press-Scimitar*, November 26, 1968.

⁷⁴"Grievances Ends Occupation," *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, November 27, 1968.

⁷⁵"Protestors Keep Night Vigil Behind Locked Door," *Memphis Press-Scimitar*, November 26, 1968.

⁷⁶Stefan M. Bradley, *Harlem vs. Columbia University: Black Student Power in the Late 1960s*, (Urbana-Champaign: University of Illinois Press), 3; Anti-War concerns also drove the protest.

campus, the tenuous mix of young activists using one protest to promote their respective agendas resembled the situation at Columbia.

While the students gathered outside of Brownlee Hall, faculty and administration continued their discussion of the students' demands in the library. The students' opening salvo in the hallways did little to garner sympathy from the faculty and administration. "There is a procedure for orderly change, the students could have followed it rather than submit the demands...they just think their voice can't be heard, but it can," Price assured.⁷⁷ Many students reasoned, however, the matter was not as simple as Price proposed. "We're fighting for something we believe in," declared one student.⁷⁸ Dissenters had an overwhelming sense that they did not have the respect of the faculty, even during times that the campus life ran smoothly and everyone co-existed peacefully. The students' claimed they received at best only "half-hearted" respect and support from the faculty.⁷⁹ But Price pointed out that the students enjoyed more freedom, expression, and privileges than they acknowledged. "Students are on every college committee except one and have a student council," he explained.⁸⁰

Stressing the community nature of the school, the students argued that the LeMoyne-Owen family consisted not only of the faculty, staff, administration, and the

⁷⁷"Faculty to Study Student Demands; Action on 7 Items Sought by LeMoyne-Owen Group," *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, November 24, 1968; Disturbances at LeMoyne-Owen; Students Demand Changes, *Memphis Press-Scimitar*, November 23, 1968.

⁷⁸"Demonstrators Barricade LeMoyne-Owen; Administration Seeks to Settle Grievances," *Tri-State Defender*, November 30, 1968.

⁷⁹Ibid.

⁸⁰Ibid.

student body, but the “physical neighbors of LeMoyne-Owen College.”⁸¹ One of the students’ demands included their physical neighbors, the residents of the nearby public housing development LeMoyne Gardens. They not only demanded that the school open up facilities for later hours, but also they wanted facilities such as the swimming pool made available for community use.⁸² “Students want a closer alignment between the campus and the community. They want all facilities to be open to the community, allow the public to attend social functions,” explained psychology instructor William Zachary.⁸³ Ever the pragmatist, Dr. Price wondered how they could open the pool to the children of LeMoyne Gardens and ensure their safety.⁸⁴ Students instead insisted that class bias, not safety, motivated Price to keep the pool closed to the neighborhood kids. Price, the students alleged, would not open the pool because he felt the “black kids of LeMoyne Gardens are too dirty to swim in the pool at the college.”⁸⁵

Certainly the inclusion of the surrounding community became integral to the cause. Invaders leader Lance Watson walked through LeMoyne Gardens hoping to get help from its residents.⁸⁶ It is unclear whether local residents actually followed Watson and joined the fight. Yet the matter spilled beyond the borders of the school, forcing the South Memphis college to make itself more accountable to the community.

⁸¹Invaders; LeMoyne-Owen Disturbance, “FBI Memo Racial Matters 157-1067-569-157-1067-633” Force and Soul (A Senior’s Comments).

⁸²“50 Students Wait Action on Demands,” *Memphis Press-Scimitar*, December 2, 1968.

⁸³“At LeMoyne-Owen College; Militants Leave Seized Buildings,” *Memphis Press-Scimitar*, November 26, 1968.

⁸⁴“50 Students Wait Action on Demands,” *Memphis Press-Scimitar*, December 2, 1968.

⁸⁵“Demonstrators Barricade LeMoyne-Owen; Administration Seeks to Settle Grievances,” *Tri-State Defender*, November 30, 1968.

⁸⁶“Invaders,” FBI Memo, Racial Matters, 17-1067-569-157-1067-633 (Memphis, Tennessee, November 26, 1968).

The students and their supporters barricaded the doors of Brownlee Hall, using rope to secure the doors. They allowed the switchboard operator and other officials inside to leave.⁸⁷ Despite the alleged mocking of their demands by faculty, students defended their need to protest. “The quality of the education we receive is our primary concern,” one student conveyed, “This is not my personal fight; it involves all students.”⁸⁸ In spite of that assertion, not all students, even those sympathetic to the cause, joined in the battle.

The escalation of the protests did not sway the unconvinced. Faculty returned from their meeting only to find that they were persona non-grata at the administration building. In the meeting the faculty decided that some of the students’ requests had validity; others, they would refer to a “steering committee” for a final decision.⁸⁹ Refusing the faculty entry into Brownlee Hall not only challenged the authority of the faculty, but also placed the students in a position of power. The physical barricade complicated matters, as did the approaching Thanksgiving break, as well as the school’s scheduled payday. Whether strategically planned or not, blocking the doors on payday further frustrated the school’s personnel.⁹⁰

Two hours had passed since students, Invaders, and other supporters had secured Brownlee Hall. An FBI source reported that a few Invaders left LeMoyne-Owen and headed for their office at Clayborne Temple AME Church around 6:30 p.m. to retrieve guns. Watson, the informant reported, suggested that they surround the perimeter of the

⁸⁷Ibid.

⁸⁸“Grievance Action Ends Occupation,” *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, November 27, 1968.

⁸⁹“LeMoyne Students in Protest Stand,” *Memphis Press-Scimitar*, November 26, 1968.

⁹⁰“Demonstrators Barricade LeMoyne-Owen; Administration Seeks to Settle Grievances,” *Tri-State Defender*, November 30, 1968.

school in case any police approached, so they would be ready to defend themselves.⁹¹ The informant's report backed up the FBI's claim that the SDS and Invaders looked to use the LeMoyne-Owen situation as a way to enhance their own standing in the city and among the more radical and militant organizations nation-wide. Indeed, the Invaders looked to capitalize on the situation and aggressively spread their Black Power ideology, though not maliciously or in an attempt to "brainwash" the LeMoyne-Owen students, as the FBI suggested.⁹² Ultimately, whether or not one agreed with the group's approach, their concern for the black community never wavered.

Dr. Price approached the building prepared to reason with the students without police interference. He conceded, however, that the students "don't have much faith in my talk."⁹³ Earlier, Price and school personnel asked detectives from the Memphis Police Department (MPD) to run the outsiders off campus, but the MPD explained that they could not just run them off; they had to arrest those responsible. Price refused to have the police officially arrest the students involved. "This is tragedy enough," he said.⁹⁴ With rumors of protestors holding guns, Price feared that having the police clear the building would aggravate an already hostile situation. He would have to "find another way" to reach the students.⁹⁵

⁹¹"Invaders," FBI Memo, Racial Matters, 17-1067-569-157-1067-633 (Memphis, Tennessee, November, 1968).

⁹²Ibid.

⁹³Protestors Keep Night Vigil Behind Locked Doors," *Memphis Press-Scimitar*, "November 26, 1968.

⁹⁴"At LeMoyne-Owen College; Militants Leave Seized Buildings," *Memphis Press-Scimitar*, November 26, 1968.

⁹⁵Ibid.

About forty or fifty on-lookers gathered around Brownlee Hall. The president talked briefly with students, but gained no headway with the protestors, since he could not assure them that he and the staff would agree to all of their demands.⁹⁶ He slipped the students a note that asked them to consider meeting with the administration.⁹⁷ Rumors circled that SDS members planned to “hold key faculty members and LeMoyne administrators as captives inside the library building” if faculty members and administrators failed to properly address the grievances.⁹⁸ Intelligence reports from the local FBI office often sprinkled kernels of truth around exaggerated rumors and hearsay. The LeMoyne-Owen situation, with its seemingly spontaneous origins, made it harder to determine exactly what was happening on the campus. However, students did warn the staff, “if you come in, you don’t go out.”⁹⁹

“When I have a problem, I work on it and do the best I can. I know the answers I get won’t be perfect,” a Price told a *Memphis Press-Scimitar*.¹⁰⁰ Price was often cited as a visionary for the education of African Americans in Memphis. He used that same resolve to help end the situation on his own campus.¹⁰¹ Price left the negotiations with the students in Brownlee Hall to attend the Educator of the Year ceremony. When he

⁹⁶“LeMoyne Students in Protest Stand,” *Memphis Press-Scimitar*, November 26, 1968.

⁹⁷Ibid.

⁹⁸“Invaders,” FBI Memo, Racial Matters, 17-1067-569-157-1067-633 (Memphis, Tennessee, November 25, 1968).

⁹⁹“LeMoyne Students in Protest Stand,” *Memphis Press-Scimitar*, November 26, 1968.

¹⁰⁰“A Merited Honor,” *Memphis Press-Scimitar*, November 27, 1968.

¹⁰¹Dr. Hollis Price Dies; Led LeMoyne-Owen 27 Years,” *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, November 7, 1982.

returned to LeMoyne-Owen at about 9:30 p.m., the situation in Brownlee Hall remained unresolved and the stalemate continued. Dr. Price seemed reluctant to indict the staff or fully condemn the students despite their actions. “They’ve been protesting the sins of the administration,” he explained in response to the students’ qualms.¹⁰² While some students applauded Price’s fairness, others felt invalidated and marginalized. Price touted an open door policy whereby students did not need to protest, but some students still believed that they would only gain a voice and respect through drastic actions.

The administration and faculty mistakenly thought the standoff would end before nightfall. Price feared “major difficulty” if the students stayed in the building all night.¹⁰³ Duty called faculty back to the campus, while students and non-student supporters stood firm in Brownlee Hall overnight. They roamed the hallways and did not enter the offices, though surely the temptation hovered. Ignoring the initial warning to stay out, Price, along with a photographer and Reverend Malcolm Blackburn of Clayborne Temple African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church, entered the building through the basement door and remained there to deal with the situation personally. One protestor stood guard at the door at all times.¹⁰⁴

Lance Watson pressed for Price to “sign an agreement granting all grievances,” which Price refused to do.¹⁰⁵ Price got word to Frank Holloman, the Director of the

¹⁰²“Disturbances at LeMoyne-Owen; Students Demand Changes,” *Memphis Press-Scimitar*, November 23, 1968.

¹⁰³“Protestors Keep Night Vigil Behind Locked Doors,” *Memphis Press-Scimitar*, November 26, 1968.

¹⁰⁴*Ibid.*

¹⁰⁵“Invaders,” FBI Memo, Racial Matters, 17-1067-569-157-1067-633 (Memphis, Tennessee, November 26, 1968). The FBI claimed that Watson and other Invaders tried to

Memphis Fire and Police Departments, that he was safe. Price continued unsuccessfully until about 11 o'clock that night to persuade the students and others to leave the building, warning that he would make a decision in the morning on whether or not to call for their arrest.¹⁰⁶

Obviously upset with the pace of the administration's deliberations, the protesters switched strategies. During the night students left and entered the building, which contributed to disjointed leadership and an abrupt change in tactics. It is unclear who was in charge, Invaders or students. The FBI believed that Watson and the Invaders, as well as SDS, used the students as pawns in their plans to wreak havoc on the campus. Intelligence reports charged SDS, and the Invaders with using the students and taking the demonstration away from them. SDS, already in a fight to gain a charter at Memphis State, pulled out either during the night or the early morning of the standoff, in order not to further "hurt their image in Memphis." By 10:00 the next morning the protest spread from Brownlee Hall to include the science building and the Co-op building. Protestors halted all communications to the school, since the administration building housed the school's switchboard.¹⁰⁷ Brownlee Hall, a symbol of repression in the eyes of the rebelling students, was now designated a "liberated area."¹⁰⁸ Self-determination and autonomy remained central to the Black Power Movement and its proponents. Even those

"verbally intimidate" Hollis Price into agreeing to demands as well as not pressing charges against those involved.

¹⁰⁶Ibid.

¹⁰⁷“At LeMoyne-Owen College; Militants Leave Seized Buildings,” *Memphis Press-Scimitar*, November 26, 1968.

¹⁰⁸Ibid.

less focused on the Movement's principles, as in the case of some of the students, acknowledged the importance of having a voice in determining their own state of affairs.

At LeMoyne-Owen the issues of blackness, community, and power permeated discussions between the Invaders and students. Although some students solicited the Invaders for help, they did not predict that the situation would progress so quickly. Some students felt that they made their point to the administration, and now they should work out their issues. Protestors draped what they called the Black Flag of America outside of the administration building. Lance Watson described the significance of the flag:

The black background represented the black people of America united and the triangular red tips on each side represent the blood that black men shed in the past struggles for freedom. A gold horseshoe-shaped fig leaf wreath represents the virtue food of Africa. Inside the wreath is a Monarch sword, once used by the Moors in Africa.¹⁰⁹

Along with the liberated zone designation, the flag visually denoted the attempt to transition the "Negro" campus to a "Black" campus in thought and orientation. Watson walked from occupied building to occupied building displaying the flag in an effort to rally the troops. Dr. Price diplomatically called for an early morning meeting with the faculty that this time included student leaders. Students reiterated their complaints, but also included smaller issues. Charles Diggs remembered being charged with lab fees even when not enrolled in lab. Students could appeal to Price's logic, Diggs suggested.¹¹⁰ Most students agreed with a LeMoyne-Owen freshman from Memphis who told the press he

¹⁰⁹“At LeMoyne-Owen College; Militants Leave Seized Buildings,” *Memphis Press-Scimitar*, November 26, 1968.

¹¹⁰Charles Diggs, interview.

was not satisfied with the school's direction. "I'll tell you one thing, " the freshman said, "a lot of changes have to be made."¹¹¹

The press was alerted to the escalation of the situation. They initially did not cover the build-up to the administration building occupation in any depth. The situation remained underground and private until the Invaders became integrally involved. When the city's media outlets showed up to the school to report on the situation, the students did not greet them too kindly. The private school preferred to keep the matter private. The Student Council President, Donnell Cobbins, explained, "students had not intended that internal matters they were seeking to have solved on campus should be aired in the news media."¹¹² They did not want or solicit the help of outsiders. Though students had the right to be angry, Price reasoned, the influence of outsiders created confusion.¹¹³ "Some outsiders had talked to the students before we could," said Cobbins, obviously annoyed at the circus unfolding on the normally quiet campus.¹¹⁴ Nevertheless the press continued to roll the cameras and jot notes, much to the dismay of the students. Chants of "the press has got to go" reverberated around Brownlee Hall.¹¹⁵ Concerned about their image and the portrayal of the event, one student covered the camera with a coat. "You're

¹¹¹"At LeMoyne-Owen College," *Memphis Press-Scimitar*, November 26, 1968.

¹¹²"Demonstrators Barricade LeMoyne-Owen; Administration Seeks to Settle Grievances," *Tri-State Defender*, November 20, 1968.

¹¹³*Ibid.*

¹¹⁴"Grievance Action Ends Occupation," *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, November 27, 1968; FBI Memo, November 26, 1968, FBI reported that "students took delight in chasing reporters of the news media and threatening to physically harm them." Local newspaper articles noted the students' disgust with the press, but never mentioned any threat of physical violence from the students.

¹¹⁵*Ibid.*

not going to make bums of us,” the student yelled.¹¹⁶ Another student went as far so to rip up the notes of one CBS reporter. Watson yelled that he would “have the reporter’s head.”¹¹⁷ When they asked the reporter to leave the campus, he did so with no hesitation. Internally they may not have agreed with the direction of the protest, or whether to even protest at all, but the students did not welcome the presence of the media; instead they looked to end the situation.

With most of the students fatigued and ready for some sense of normalcy to return, campus leaders again met with school officials to bring an end to the drawn-out and over-dramatized affair. “Demonstrations to show dissatisfaction with the policies of LeMoyne-Owen College have been met with some effort for settlement by the faculty,” read a prepared statement by the student representatives.¹¹⁸ In a four-hour meeting intended to clear the air, more confusion seeped in. Some students became upset when Price chose only a few campus leaders to attend the meeting.¹¹⁹ Additionally, the students asked the Invaders to leave in order to allow the meeting to take place. Senior Class President Charles Diggs and Student Council President Donnell Cobbins, not among those camped out in Brownlee Hall, attended the closed-door meeting with Price and faculty.

To whom exactly did the title “campus leaders” refer to? The students who officially held positions in student government, or the students directly involved in the

¹¹⁶Ibid.

¹¹⁷“At LeMoyne-Owen College; Militants Leave Seized Buildings,” *Memphis Press-Scimitar*, November 26, 1968.

¹¹⁸“Grievance Action Ends Occupation,” *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, November 27, 1968.

¹¹⁹“Demonstrators Barricade LeMoyne-Owen; Administration Seeks to Settle Grievances,” *Tri-State Defender*, November 20, 1968.

protest? The two groups were not always one and the same. Not every student protested, and those that did wanted to be included in the closed-door meeting. They were not included when the sides sat down at the bargaining table. Nevertheless, the two sides reached a tentative agreement. Among the demands met, officials voted to “open to students a special dining area and lounge to the student center...return to the students a student lounge in Brownlee Hall, which several weeks ago was converted into office space and record room.”¹²⁰ That school officials used a student-designated space for their own needs without consulting the student body seemed, on the surface, a petty issue. Yet it resulted in a breach of respect that had spilled over into the weeklong protests. In addition to the agreement to open more areas, Price supported the students’ desire for more black history courses, better dormitory facilities for athletes, and a larger bookstore. In the end school officials agreed to meet most of the demands, but also decided they needed to meet again to iron out details.¹²¹

As a sign of good faith the students huddled together and came to a decision to release the three buildings around 1:30 p.m. on November 26. The siege had lasted almost twenty-hours.¹²² “We’re pulling out now,” LeMoyne-Owen student and protestor Franketta Guinn replied. “We’ll give the administration until Monday to meet our demands.”¹²³ In accordance with the students’ request, the administration agreed to close the campus for the remainder of the week, with the understanding that they “would

¹²⁰“Open More Areas to Students at LeMoyne-Owen,” *Memphis World*, November 30, 1968.

¹²¹Ibid.

¹²²“Classes Closed at LeMoyne,” *Memphis Press-Scimitar*, November 27, 1968.

¹²³“At LeMoyne-Owen College; Militants leave Seized Buildings,” *Memphis Press-Scimitar*, November 26, 1968.

attempt to equitably adjust the grievances and bring back a final report to the students when class resumed on December 2.”¹²⁴ Dr. Price charged committees comprised of students and faculty with the task of working together to mend the wounds. Cooperation between faculty and students, some students argued, had not happened much before that time. “There has been a lack of communication between students and faculty and among students themselves. Now we know how to talk to each other,” said a student representative.¹²⁵

The administration, staff, and student committees did not invite the Invaders – the “People’s Army,” as they dubbed themselves – to the table to work out the final negotiation with the students and school officials. The Invaders urged the students to stand firm and stay in the building until the administration met all of their demands. When the students asked the Invaders to leave, effectively splitting what was left of the already fractured coalition between the students, Invaders, SDS, and other supporters, the group did not take too kindly to the dismissal.¹²⁶ A few hours after the students released the buildings, against the wishes of the Invaders, shots rang out near the campus. Campus workers spotted three young black men running away from the campus, followed shortly thereafter by several more young black men carrying guns. Allegedly the armed confrontation stemmed from LOC students taking back control of the campus. Police apprehended the LeMoyne-Owen students reported running from the campus. The LOC students informed the police that a scuffle broke out because they informed the Invaders

¹²⁴Ibid.

¹²⁵“Grievance Action Ends Occupation,” *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, November 27, 1968.

¹²⁶“Invaders,” FBI Memo, Racial Matters, 17-1067-569-157-1067-633 (Memphis, Tennessee, November, 1968).

their involvement was no longer needed their involvement. A heated verbal exchanged ensued, the students explained to the police, and shots followed.¹²⁷

“We couldn’t just let them run us [Invaders] off. It would cost us some support,” an FBI informant reported overhearing Lance Watson say. The Invader leader, however, claimed that the LeMoyne-Owen students attacked first and pulled guns on him and the other Invaders. They only returned gunfire, he argued, because the students fired shots.¹²⁸ The organization and their unsteady reputation in Memphis caused some students to question their presence. “A number of us were pursuing a different course of action,” a student said when questioned about the role of the Invaders in the protest, “But I think the student body is more united now.”¹²⁹ Others argued that LeMoyne-Owen needed a revolution of some sort and appreciated the Invaders serving as a conduit. “Students around the country are moving in this direction,” stated a student-penned position paper.¹³⁰ The students of LeMoyne-Owen, the paper suggested, should look at other campuses, see how those students stood their ground, and harness their own potential. In addition to acting as a mouthpiece and taking some of the heat for the students, they argued against labeling the Invaders as outside agitators who had no right to be on the

¹²⁷“Grievance Action Ends Occupation,” *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, November 27, 1968

¹²⁸ FBI Memo, November 26, 1968; “LeMoyne Classes Suspended; Militants End Campus Siege,” *Memphis Press-Scimitar*, November 27, 1968.

¹²⁹“Grievance Action Ends Occupation,” *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, November 27, 1968.

¹³⁰“Demonstrators Barricade LeMoyne-Owen; Administration Seeks to Settle Grievances,” *Tri-State Defender*, November 20, 1968.

campus. “This is a community college,” a sympathetic student explained, “They had as much right here as the newsmen.”¹³¹

The students’ divergent viewpoints mirrored arguments of more well-known proponents and opponents of the Black Power Movement. Some believed that the Black Freedom Movement, in order to continue to build upon the promise of the gains with the passing of the major civil rights legislation of the mid-1960s, had to increase the pressure and make it happen “by any means necessary,” a phrase made popular by Malcolm X.¹³² These same arguments played out the smaller stage at LeMoyne-Owen College. “We tried to speed up improvements...to bring things to the attention of the administration,” a student claimed.¹³³ Others called the occupation of the administration building a means to an end. Over forty years after the incident, Charles Diggs remembered using the protests as a tactic. “We got mad one day. So we got their attention ...when it got down to it,” he explained.¹³⁴

Though the faculty and the administration sat down to discuss the problems with the students and agreed to most of the changes, the attitude still remained among officials that the protest was an unnecessary and unfortunate event. “They didn’t think the demands warranted the extent of the demonstrations...most of the demands were reasonable, and we were meeting most of them. I don’t see why the students should have

¹³¹ Ibid.

¹³² Judson Jeffries, ed., *Black Power in the Belly of the Beast*, (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2006), 8.

¹³³ “Grievance Action Ends Occupation,” *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, November 27, 1968.

¹³⁴ Charles Diggs, Interview.

gotten so upset,” claimed one professor.¹³⁵ The climate of 1968 probably did as much to amplify the issues as the actual problems themselves did. Campuses around the nation and the country exploded, exposing students at smaller schools like LeMoyne-Owen to the impact of student power. Psychology instructor William Zachary placed the students’ grievances in perspective, considering all the campus turmoil during 1968: the demands were “all valid...and not as dramatic as the student demands at other colleges.”¹³⁶

The school did not punish or prosecute any one involved.¹³⁷ School began again on December 2 and the staff/administration committee met with the student council to finalize the agreement.¹³⁸ The committee and the council agreed to all of the demands with the exception of two: lower tuition and public dances on campus.¹³⁹ In the matter of lower tuition, the administration informed the students that the board of trustees had to make that decision. Recent attempts to open up the dances had resulted in damage to the campus and the administration argued could ill afford to have facilities on the small campus destroyed.¹⁴⁰ They could not reach a consensus regarding opening the swimming pool for neighborhood use, but several other issues met the committee’s approval, including abolishment of required assemblies, opening the gym for student use, establishment of health services on campus, lowering cafeteria prices (though they could

¹³⁵“Grievance Action Ends Occupation,” *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, November 27, 1968.

¹³⁶At LeMoyne-Owen College,” *Memphis Press-Scimitar*, “November 26, 1968.

¹³⁷“Grievance Action Ends Occupation,” *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, November 27, 1968.

¹³⁸“50 Students Wait Action on Demands,” *Memphis Press-Scimitar*, December 2, 1968.

¹³⁹“Invaders,” FBI Memo, Racial Matters, 17-1067-569-157-1067-633 (Memphis, Tennessee, November, 1968).

¹⁴⁰“Students Back in Classes at LeMoyne-Owen,” *Memphis World*, December 7, 1968.

not guarantee that demand), and improvement of the food.¹⁴¹ Price informed the students that he would consult the student body about hiring his replacement and that the school would exercise more transparency with student fees.¹⁴² He also reiterated his commitment to honor the students' wishes for more black curricula. In an effort to facilitate the request, he pledged to send a student delegation to an African and African-American Studies Conference at Atlanta University. LeMoyne-Owen already offered some "Negro" history and literature courses, but students wanted more breadth of subject matter such as politics, music, and art.¹⁴³ In addition to a wider African American curriculum, Price hoped to get "additional resources to provide for an interdisciplinary minor in African Studies."¹⁴⁴ The entire student body held a meeting where Diggs reported on the outcome of the meeting and asked the students to vote yea or nay on the proposals. In addition to accepting the proposals, they also halted their economic boycott of the cafeteria and pay phones.¹⁴⁵

Coby Smith attempted to continue to inspire the LeMoyne-Owen and encourage the activism in the black students at Memphis State. During a Black Student Association forum at Memphis State, Smith briefed the black students about the LeMoyne-Owen

¹⁴¹"50 Students Wait Action on Demands," *Memphis Press-Scimitar*, December 2, 1968; FBI Memo, November 26, 1968.

¹⁴²"Students Back in Classes at LeMoyne-Owen," *Memphis World*, December 7, 1968.

¹⁴³"Demonstrators Barricade LeMoyne," *Tri-State Defender*, November 30, 1968.

¹⁴⁴"Invaders," FBI Memo, Racial Matters, 17-1067-569-157-1067-633 (Memphis, Tennessee, November, 1968).

¹⁴⁵"Students Back in Classes at LeMoyne-Owen," *Memphis World*, December 7, 1968.

situation and asked, ““how long are we going to sit in forums and just talk?””¹⁴⁶ Black students had a responsibility to relate to the black community, and that could only happen not with words, but with action. Smith urged “Black students to work in the black community in the areas of sociology, political science and psychology,” and suggested that the “BSA here at Memphis State communicate with all black students in Memphis.”¹⁴⁷ As students matriculated out and freshmen entered in at LeMoyne-Owen, campus activists primed the incoming students to their importance in keeping the Movement alive and holding the administration accountable. *What’s Trump*, a mimeographed campus newsletter, outlined the role of the freshman on LOC’s campus:

As Freshmen, you are the most important students on LeMoyne-Owen’s campus this year. You have reached this educational crossroad, just as hundreds of other students that have gone before you. Your choices will be the same as theirs, but your dicisions [sic] can be different. You can choose to become black students, rather than middle class Negro pseudo-intellectuals committed to the philistinistic ideals of White America.¹⁴⁸

The newsletter continued to stress that freshmen determined the fate of the campus and what they did during their time at LeMoyne-Owen determined the fate of the black community. “Our president seems to be ingaged [sic] in a conspiracy with the White community, aimed at removing any vestige of Blackness from our campus,” the newsletter warned the freshmen.¹⁴⁹ It also, in essence, called LeMoyne-Owen a whitewashed institution that did not have control over its own destiny. “At one time, a

¹⁴⁶Memphis State University Black Student Association Black Thesis Newsletter, *The Realm of the Black Mind*, Volume 2, Number 3, N.D.,” University of Memphis Special Collections, Mississippi Valley Collection, Memphis, TN.

¹⁴⁷Ibid.

¹⁴⁸*What’s Trump: Freshmen This Is It*, Volume 1, “LeMoyne-Owen College Archives, Memphis, Tennessee.

¹⁴⁹Ibid.

few years ago LeMoyne-Owen was deeply involved in an effort to throw off its plantation heritage,” the author wrote in reference to the 1968 protest.¹⁵⁰ In the eyes of some students, the direction of campus politics had not changed much since the November 1968 event.

Ultimately, what did the stance and its outcome all mean for the students? Instead of a story that championed the students, or even reluctantly credited their success in gaining almost every demand they requested, the press instead chose to frame the LeMoyne-Owen incident as a professional triumph for Dr. Price. Their stories showed him prevailing over the angry, meddling militants and a few unruly students. In the days that followed, one headline read, “Dr. Price Keeps his Cool,” and other stories focused on Price’s ability to maintain order. Not one article, not even in the black press, told the students’ side of the story. None questioned why, if protests were so unnecessary, the administration granted so many of the students’ demands. Nat D. Williams’s editorial in the *Tri-State Defender* suggested that as the “highest cultural expression for black people in Memphis,” the LeMoyne-Owen situation “threaten[ed] the stability and progress of the school.”¹⁵¹ Williams acknowledged that neither he nor other Memphians knew the reasons behind the students’ and activists’ actions, but their primary concern was the safety of the Dr. Price, who had “earned the right to end his career in there in an aura of peace and honor.”¹⁵² In Williams’ estimation, the institution’s and Price’s stature in the community trumped the demands of a few disgruntled students.

¹⁵⁰Ibid.

¹⁵¹“With Regrets,” *Tri-State Defender*, December 7, 1968.

Months later at Memphis State University, the local NAACP rushed to the side of the protesting students and pledged its support. The NAACP by all accounts was absent during the LeMoyne-Owen incident.¹⁵³ Memphis's evening paper, the *Press-Scimitar*, lauded Price and chastised the students who were "aided and abetted by outside agitators who have little or no interest in education."¹⁵⁴ Even LOC students tossed around the word "outsider," which only served to place more distance between the members of the community and the Ivory Tower. Using language usually reserved for criminals, like "aided and abetted," and assuming that the "outsiders" had no interest in education, belied the real truth: for a brief and mostly forgotten moment in Memphis, a few students and some community activists coalesced around issues of community, power, respect, and class to make a "Negro" campus aware that in 1968 it was indeed "Black." LeMoyne-Owen College was not insulated from the sting of student rebellion. Decades later, still keenly aware of the attitude that sparked the event, Charles Diggs recalled his and many of his classmates feelings' about the situation. "It's like they [faculty and administration] were teaching us skills to work in their world," Diggs reflected, "But the thing of it is, we wanted our world."¹⁵⁵

¹⁵²Ibid.

¹⁵³"Group Help is Pledged After Sit-In at MSU," *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, April 24, 1969.

¹⁵⁴"Dr. Price Keeps His Cool," *Memphis Press-Scimitar*, November 27, 1968.

¹⁵⁵ Charles Diggs, interview.

Chapter Five

“We can’t be isolated any longer”: Memphis State University, the Black Student Association and the Politics of Racial Identity

*“The real issue of Memphis State is not whether or not we are going to get \$1750 to bring Congressman [Adam Clayton] Powell here. The real question is whether or not we as a people are going to stand up and say to this administration and to the world: “We are not your slaves and we are here and must be reckoned with – and that is the issue.”*¹—

James Mock, Memphis State University Black Student Association member

*“Are you as Black Memphis State students aware of the answer, or even the problem? Do you realize that you are attending an integrated school? Are you in other words ‘hip’ to the Black Revolution? It’s what’s happening you know. By the white man’s standard it [Memphis State] has been integrated for 10 years, since the Ralph Prater vs. Memphis State incident. Now ask yourself the question, ‘Am I proud of the progress that I have made of the Prater struggle?’”*² – **The Black Speak Easy, Black Student Association, Black Thesis, Vol. 1, No. 1**

On April 23, 1969, James Mock and another member of the Memphis State University (MSU) Black Student Association (BSA) approached MSU President Dr. Cecil C. Humphreys while he walked across the campus. The two students reiterated a previous BSA request for funding to bring in Congressman Adam Clayton Powell, Jr. as the keynote speaker for the organization’s Black Extravaganza festivities. President Humphreys considered the issue a moot point, since the school previously denied the organization’s funding request. He placated the students explaining that while he was sympathetic to their plight, because of a lack of funding, he in no way could justify the \$1750 it would take to bring in Congressman Powell. Humphreys retreated to his office and the BSA members regrouped, no doubt alerting other members about the earlier

¹“Black Student Appeal Volume 1, 25 April 1969,” University of Memphis Special Collections, *Memphis Press Scimitar* Clippings File, Memphis, Tennessee.

²“Memphis State University Black Student Association Black Thesis Newsletter, Volume 1, Number 1, N.D.,” University of Memphis Special Collections, *Memphis Press Scimitar Clippings* File, Memphis, Tennessee.

impromptu session with President Humphreys. Shortly after noon that day the students who approached Humphreys returned to his office with seventy-three more students. A potential crisis was quickly quelled, after threats of police intervention. The students left unsatisfied and undeterred. Four student representatives of the BSA returned the next day with a longer list of demands. President Humphreys agreed to confer with the students at a later meeting.³

When the students later met with Humphreys and two other school officials, Dean Dr. Jess Parrish and Dr. Ronald Carrier, both sides stood their ground. Unsatisfied with Humphreys' continued refusal to allocate the funding, the students refused to leave his office. Humphreys felt threatened by the students' stance and called on the police to secure the campus. As a former FBI agent, Humphreys relied on his law and order sensibilities to control the situation. He vowed to "carry on the business of the university, regardless of what it takes to do it" and "use whatever force necessary."⁴ No action was taken and the students left peacefully, but undeterred. The students returned on April 28th, five days after the initial flare-up and used a more direct and aggressive approach. Approximately 200 students flooded the President's office, refusing to leave until 109 were arrested for their actions.⁵

The funding to sponsor Powell's visit, the ostensible reason for the students' actions, soon took a backseat to the larger issues on the students' agenda. Injecting those

³ Dr. Cecil C. Humphreys, "Statement of Dr. C .C. Humphreys to Students, Faculty and Friends of Memphis State University, 29 April 1969," University of Memphis Special Collections, Memphis, Tennessee. Dr. Humphreys drafted a letter to the university community to explain his side of the situation as well as why he took the action against the students that he did.

⁴"Protesters Get Warning...MSU Threatens to Use Force," *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, April 24, 1969.

⁵Ibid.

issues into the Powell debate after the intense sit-in in President Humphreys' office, BSA executive board member James Mock remarked, "We are not asking for any favors. It is no favor to me if you teach me the history of our own people. This is something we must have. These demands are things which are our basic rights, and you do us no favor by granting these rights to us."⁶ For over a year, Mock and other African American students campaigned for change on the urban campus, lobbying for several changes on behalf of the black student body. Those changes became a list of demands that Mock and other BSA leaders presented to the administration. The issues, as Mock and other BSA members saw them, had less to do with the specific implementation of the demands on the list and more to do with why the list was even necessary at all. Like many black students attending predominately white educational institutions across the nation during the 1960s and 1970s, African American students at Memphis State University struggled to gain acceptance and inclusion into the campus culture. Many of the students argued that they did not see themselves represented in any significant fashion in campus activities, social events, academics, or athletics. They asked: where was the black studies curriculum? Why was there such sparse black representation in student government? Where was their voice? There were only two black professors on staff prior to the sit-in in the administration building in 1969, and there were no African Americans employed in the higher ranks of campus administration.⁷

The mid-to-late 1960s witnessed a flurry of campus activism, protest, and dissent. As baby boomers came of age, they questioned and sometimes the suburban existence of

⁶"Black Students Reveal Protest Issues...Present Demands to President," *Tiger Rag*, April 25, 1969.

⁷Hearing Reset for 109 MSU Students," *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, April 29, 1969.

their parents' generation. The boomers rallied around issues such as protesting against the Vietnam War, demonstrating for civil rights, and calling for free speech. They raised objections to strict and conservative university regulations.⁸ Campuses around the country exploded as the students, both black and white, shifted the focus of their civil rights protest from desegregating lunch counters and registering voters to transforming the culture and politics of higher education. William Van DeBurg author of *New Day in Babylon: The Black Power Movement and American Culture, 1965-1975*, contends that by 1968 black students no longer utilized the same modes of protest that characterized the struggle for civil rights in the early part of the decade. Protest became more aggressive, more vocal. They invoked more radical and inclusive demands than the previous phase of the movement. The civil rights legislation of 1964 and 1965 gave African American students the opportunity to focus on the inequalities in the academy. Van DeBurg argues that the scope of black students' protest "became somewhat more localized than in earlier years."⁹

In spite of the conservative nature of its student body, both black and white, Memphis State did not escape the campus unrest of the period. On the surface Memphis State did not appear to be an overtly hostile campus to student activism, such as the University of Mississippi (Ole Miss) or the University of Alabama. The schools did share one commonality – African American students experienced difficulty adjusting to life as minority students at a predominately white institution. Recalling his initial impressions of the campus, past BSA member John Gray expressed, "There were no university

⁸Kenneth J. Heineman, *Put Your Bodies Upon the Wheels: Student Revolt in the 1960s*, (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee Publishing, 2001), 6.

⁹Van DeBurg, *New Day in Babylon*, 69-70.

sponsored activities which encouraged cultural interaction at all. We on the whole felt that we were there and it was not necessarily because they wanted us to be there.” Black students, Gray argued, were only tolerated and not accepted.¹⁰

Understanding the importance of identity and the ability to create a cultural distinctiveness on a de facto segregated and racist campus, African American students at Memphis State University, and those particularly aligned with the BSA, placed the issue of racial identity at the forefront of their struggle for recognition and parity on campus. Many did not consider themselves Black Power activists; however, they rallied around the cultural tenets of the Black Power Movement, evoking the Movement’s insistence on self-definition, affirmation of a distinctive black cultural heritage, and advocacy of black representation in positions of power to promote the collective interest of the black community as a whole. Despite their frustrations and the opportunity to use more physically aggressive tactics, BSA members fused their newly appropriated Black Power ideology with traditional civil rights sensibilities. The students demanded inclusion, but also maintained that inclusion should not negate their identity as black students.

Scholars of the Black Power Movement stress the continuities between the civil rights and Black Power Movements. As Simon Hall argues, “The conventional dichotomy between ‘civil rights’ and ‘Black Power’ often serves to obscure rather than enlighten the scholarly discussion.” Black students at Memphis State straddled both worlds. The city of Memphis maintained strong ties to traditional civil rights organizations, specifically the NAACP, and no doubt many of the students took cues

¹⁰John Gray, interview by author, Memphis, Tennessee, March 13, 2009.

from the local branch. Yet, as the sit-in in President Humphreys' office illustrates, the students understood the changing dynamics of the Black Freedom Movement and the need for their activism to reflect that transformation.¹¹

Joy Ann Williamson provides an in-depth look at how black students organized their struggle around the tenets of Black Power. Her work, *Black Power on Campus: The University of Illinois, 1965-1975*, explores how students on the campus of The University of Illinois-Urbana Champaign used Black Power principles in their demand for reform of their institution. Williamson argues that African American students that attended predominately white universities during the height of the Black Power Movement used the Movement's "principles and molded them to fit their specific context." Though most predominately white campuses may have only contained a handful of activists, those activists used Black Power ideology to fight against the institutional racism prevalent on campuses. Whether it was establishing black student unions, demanding black studies curriculum, or calling for increases in black faculty, African American students during this period engaged in a mode of protest that embraced fundamental concepts of Black Power ideology. Campus activists at Memphis State, similar to the students at the University of Illinois-Urbana Champaign, used a Black Power framework in their protest and in the organizational structure of the BSA.¹²

As the first African American students to attend Memphis State either graduated or left for other institutions, black students that followed gained more latitude and were

¹¹Simon Hall, "The NAACP, Black Power and the African American Freedom Struggle, 1966-1969," *The Historian*, Volume 69, Number 1, (March, 2007): 49-82.

¹²Joy Ann Williamson, *Black Power on Campus: The University of Illinois, 1965-1975*, (Urbana and Chicago: The University of Illinois Press, 2003), 1.

more assertive in their desire for recognition. The students looked for ways to integrate campus life by creating cultural institutions that distinctly addressed the issues that they faced on campus. By constructing these institutions, black students established connections to the campus through activities and organizations that cultivated and promoted their cultural heritage. They formed organizations such as the BSA, held their own forums, and invited black speakers to campus that spoke not only to their plight as minority students, but also to their larger community concerns. They also printed their own publication, held their own showcases, and staged beauty pageants and plays to fill a cultural void. Desegregating the school was no longer the students' primary focus; now the issue was a genuine integration. Black students at MSU during this period sought to reform the higher educational system to make their experience on-campus experience more palatable. They further used their campus activities to affect change in the Memphis's black community.

With the tenth-year anniversary of the 1959 desegregation of Memphis State University looming, Memphis's daily newspaper *The Commercial Appeal* ran an article entitled, "Memphis State And the Negro." A retrospective of sorts, the article, could have doubled as an advertisement promoting diversity in the school's recruiting brochures. It extolled the university's virtues, while applauding its tolerance. It also suggested that the school was central in the lives of Memphis's African American community. The article's author, H. A. Gilliam, Jr., lauded the school's administration for the fairness it extended to all its students, including those who only ten years earlier could not enroll as students at the school. "We seek to give everyone an equal opportunity," Memphis State president

Dr. Cecil Humphreys expressed, “it is up to the individual to take advantage of it.” Several African American students quoted in the article echoed Dr. Humphreys’ sentiment. Two students, Helen Ann Forbes and Sam Johnson, both lived in the campus dormitories and both, at least according to the article, seemed oblivious to any issues that other black students faced on campus. The two students praised Memphis State for the opportunities it afforded and rebuffed any talk of militant action on campus. When probed about campus militancy, Forbes responded, “There are some individuals who believe in just picking up the gun and going at it, but there is not an organization of people like that I know of.” The only complaint Johnson lodged regarding any issues of equity between black students and the rest of the student body was the lack of black athletes on the football team.¹³

Despite the testimonials from the black students, the article neglected to discuss the difficulties black students in general faced during the school’s transition from a segregated to an integrated institution. Certainly the school experienced some growth, as Forbes and Johnson attested to, though it is not clear whether that growth reflected changes in attitude or reluctant conformity. Several years after the school’s integration, African American students still complained of harassment from white students. White students still ridiculed and targeted black students in the cafeteria. In fact, the issue was so commonplace that the local branch of the NAACP solicited help to stop the maltreatment from Tennessee Governor Buford Ellington, who chose not to intervene in the matter.¹⁴

¹³“Memphis State and the Negro,” *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, May 27, 1968.

Even after promises of equal access to facilities, the school still barred black students from taking swimming classes. Again, the Memphis NAACP took the lead on behalf of the students by sending letters of protest to President C. C. Humphreys, with copies also landing on the desks of the City Commissioner, State Commissioner of Education, and NAACP Executive Director Roy Wilkins, since the YMCA's guidelines also violated the newly passed Civil Rights Act of 1964.¹⁵ The University argued that it was not their policy that denied the students from the pool, but those of the owner of the pool – the YMCA. It was the YMCA's position, University officials offered, that the facilities remain closed to blacks and they were only obliging the club's policy.¹⁶ The majority of Memphis State's African American student body longed for the simplicity of campus life that Gilliam described in his article.

Even as the black students searched the campus for positive black representations and meaningful social networking outlets, white students flaunted their social freedom. Kappa Alpha Order (KA) Gamma Gamma Chapter, a fraternity founded in 1865 at Washington College in Lexington, Virginia, was one of the more popular organizations on campus among the white student body.¹⁷ To understand KA's philosophy, one only has to consider its "spiritual father," Confederate general and one-time Washington

¹⁴Maxine Smith, "Memphis Branch of the NAACP Report of the Executive Secretary," Maxine Smith Collection, Memphis-Shelby County Benjamin Hooks/Central Library, Memphis-Shelby County Room, Memphis, Tennessee, (May 3-June 6, 1961).

¹⁵Ibid.

¹⁶Maxine Smith, "Memphis Branch of the NAACP Report of the Executive Secretary," Maxine Smith Collection, Memphis-Shelby County Benjamin Hooks/Central Library, Memphis-Shelby County Room, Memphis, Tennessee, (February 3-March 2, 1965).

¹⁷ Kappa Alpha Order, *Kappa Alpha Order Rich Heritage*, 2003, [Online], Available from http://www.kappaalphaorder.org/repository/unmanaged_content/joinka/heritage.html. ND.

College president, Robert E. Lee.¹⁸ For many white southerners, Lee served as a hero and representation of a past not rooted in shame or hate, but in a strong, prideful southern heritage. Most black students, however, felt victimized by the fraternity. The organization's annual Old South Secession Ceremony sought to "revive the Old South in Memphis."¹⁹ The 'Cotton-Pickin' Ball was the highlight of the annual celebration. Fraternity members and their dates dressed as plantation owners and plantation mistresses.²⁰ In one final hazing event, the pledges donned slave costumes and jockeyed for the 'Best Slave' award. By week's end, pledges hoped their efforts ensured their full-fledged membership in KA.²¹ At the culminating parade, KA members dressed in Confederate military attire and mounted horses in tribute to the Old South. "Those white boys with KA use to ride around campus on horses with Confederate uniforms on," BSA leader David Acey recalled. "We didn't know what was going on. Those folks had horses out here. You walked across campus, they would charge at you on their horses," expressed Acey.²² The fraternity not only replicated the Confederacy with the regalia and antebellum attire, but they also "'seceded' from the Union for 24 hours."²³

At the 1962 celebration, KA wired then President John F. Kennedy a telegram that informed him of the organization's intent for secession. It was one thing to contend

¹⁸Jeffrey Harris, "A History of the Development of Greek Life, Religious Organizations and the Black Student Association" (Seminar Paper, University of Memphis, 2009), 10.

¹⁹ "MSU's Kappa Alpha Order Revives the Old South with Secession Ceremony, Parade and Grand Ball," *Tiger Rag*, January 12, 1962.

²⁰*Ibid.*

²¹*Ibid.*

²²David Acey, interview.

²³"KA's to Revisit Old South This Week," *Tiger Rag*, January 10, 1965.

with racism via lunchroom jeers or a swimming pool snub, black students argued; however, it was another matter altogether to have the Civil War reenacted and classmates dressed as slave owners and slaves. As they navigated the system of Jim Crow, KA's festivities made black students all the more mindful of slavery's horrific legacy. While northern troops fought the war to preserve the Union, the South fought to defend slavery. The Civil War and the Confederacy's role in it symbolized the South's last stand to maintain the peculiar institution. Recreations that glamorized the Civil War and slavery only heightened the students' awareness of how uncomfortable their situation on campus truly was.²⁴

“All I do is come to school, study, eat, go home or to work, hear my parents nag, go to sleep, get up the next morning and start the little merry-go-round again,” complained one black student to a reporter writing an article on Memphis State's African American students for the school's paper, *Tiger Rag*. As the pulse of the campus, the *Tiger Rag* served as the official mouthpiece of the student body. Though not all students felt represented in the publication's pages, this particular article, published in January 1966, “Negro Students Speak Out on Memphis State,” signaled the paper's first attempt to explore the attitudes of black students in a manner that allowed the students to candidly express their frustrations.²⁵

Black students griped about the lack of integrated social functions. Just as striking, the students objected to their inability to cultivate their distinctly black organizations. Chartered in 1963, the Epsilon Kappa chapter of Delta Sigma Theta (DST)

²⁴Ibid.

²⁵“Negro Students Speak Out on Memphis State,” *Tiger Rag*, January 14, 1966.

became the first African American fraternity or sorority on campus. Its members took the distinction seriously. DST members used their status as the first African American sorority on campus to promote a positive example of a black organization on campus. They hoped to make it easier for other black Greek-lettered fraternities and sororities to receive charters. Yet, DST members realized that the lack of exposure to Greek life, especially black Greek life, on their campus hindered the development of their chapter. “When sisters from other universities come home, it is embarrassing to see how little we know about Greek life on a college campus,” one DST member conveyed to the *Tiger Rag* reporter in an almost self-conscious manner. Nevertheless, “the ladies, as best they could, tried to bridge the racial divide that existed in the wake of integration, by participating in not only events germane to black student’s interests but to the common student body as well.” The Pan Hellenic Council did not invite the DST to join, but members did not take the snub by the Council as a sign to retreat. Instead, “they pushed to participate in pageants and talent shows such as the Delta Zeta Follies and All Sing with other white sorority contestants.”²⁶

Devoid of any real sense of belonging on campus, yet with no formal connection to each other, some black students at Memphis State decided to formulate a way to organize into one collective unit. In describing his first impressions of the school, BSA member Eddie Jenkins expressed not simply his feelings of alienation from the majority of the student body, but also a disconnect from black students. “You feel like a fly in the buttermilk even though you’re looking at black people all around. It’s not enough where

²⁶Harris, “A History of the Development of Greek Life,” (Copy in Author’s Possession).

you don't feel like, well you know, it's really a bunch of us here. You still feel like the fly in the buttermilk when you go into class." Ronald Ivy, another BSA member, agreed with Jenkins' assessment of the campus atmosphere. Ivy, however, suggested that black students not only experienced a sense of culture shock in the classroom, but also lacked self-awareness and engagement in their own cultural and community affairs. "I saw a need," Ivy explained, "for, at least, some awareness on their [African American students] part of the fact that they had to play a greater role, a larger role than just going...coming here, saying, I go to Memphis State." The attitude on campus reflected not only what black students perceived as prejudiced inclinations on the part of whites, but as Ivy argued, some black students failed to seriously consider the responsibility they had to improve their own plight. Ivy understood that while the accountability for fostering an environment where all students felt represented rested with the university, because of the systematic exclusion from many of the school's social activities, the onus was not only on the administration to create an open atmosphere, but also on black students to take control of their situation and demand inclusion.²⁷

In the mid-to-late 1960s, looking to forge their own path, black students on college campuses throughout the United States began forming Black Student Unions (BSU) and BSAs. In an article commemorating the legacy of BSUs, Ibram Rogers argues that black students reacted to the hostility they faced on predominately white campuses by creating "a political group that would unite Black students and demand a weather change, in addition to organizing social and political activities."²⁸ The first BSU began

²⁷Eddie Jenkins, interview by David Yellin, January 7, 1969, Sanitation Strike Archival Project, Mississippi Valley Collection, University of Memphis, Memphis, TN.

on the campus of San Francisco State College in 1966. As the “central coordinating mechanism for Black Power protests,” BSUs and BSAs through various modes of protests held administrations accountable for injustices and deficiencies in regards to the welfare of the black student body.²⁹ Though many BSUs shared similar goals, the nature and mode of organizations differed from campus-to-campus with local and regional concerns driving each group’s respective protest activities. More radical unions and demonstrations, such as those on the campuses of San Francisco State and Cornell, shape the dialogue and scholarship on the impact of BSUs and BSAs and the role of Black Power in campus politics; yet there is much to glean from the activism of unions and associations on smaller campuses and areas of the country less known for its Black Power activities. The larger movement encouraged black students at Memphis State to organize. “We realized the injustice of not having black student representation,” said James Mock.³⁰

A caption in the first edition of the Memphis State Black Student Association newsletter, *The Black Thesis*, read: “LOOK around you and see what is happening at San Jose State, Howard, Yale, Fisk, Tuskegee, Atlanta, Harvard, Berkeley, A&I, NYU and other universities where there is hope.” Imploring the students to act and to realize their own power, the newsletter boldly claimed that black students would “not be a crybaby,”

²⁸Ibram Rogers, “Celebrating 40 Years of Activism,” *Diverse Issues in Higher Education Online*, 2006, [Online], available from http://www.diverseeducation.com/artman/publish/printer_6053.shtml, 28 June 2006.

²⁹Van DeBurg, *New Day in Babylon*, 71.

³⁰“Black Students Open Office, Schedule Year’s Events Program,” *Tiger Rag*, April 22, 1969.

“equivocate” or “allow others to do all the work” on their behalf. Like many young men in the 1960s, especially black men who were less fortunate than their white counterparts in receiving draft deferments, the fear of being drafted to fight in the Vietnam War remained a pressing concern.³¹

The newsletter simultaneously condemned the war and the campus’s segregated ROTC program. Black men refused to be “pawns of war,” sent off to fight “a land he knows little about,” especially because the military training ground on their college campus remained segregated.³² The newsletter, circulated in the spring of 1968, marked the official beginnings of the BSA at MSU. The organization’s mission included furthering the “interest of black students of Memphis State University and the community and to participate in programs aimed at furthering the interest of the black community as a whole.”³³ Critical not only of the administration’s lack of black inclusiveness, leaders found fault with the SGA’s role on campus. “However well intention[ed] it was in forming the SGA to be representative of the student body, it failed to do so in as much as SGA is a white organization and BSA is a black organization,” Mock expressed. “It is my opinion it becomes an administrative problem of the university to serve all of its students,” he continued.³⁴

Informal organizing of the BSA began in 1966 and 1967 among a few black students. Several black students on campus realized the need to become a more active

³¹“Memphis State Black Student Association, *The Black Thesis*, Volume 1, No. 1, 1968,” University of Memphis Special Collections, Memphis, Tennessee.

³²*Ibid.*

³³“MSU’s BSA – Black, Bold & Beautiful,” *Tri-State Defender*, January 4, 1969.

³⁴“Black Students Open Office, Schedule Year’s Events Program,” *Tiger Rag*, April 22, 1969.

and organized faction in the university community. “Sixty-seven we finally got our act together as far as getting other members to join, because we had a plan,” explained Acey.³⁵ Outside pressure from local Black Power activists Charles Cabbage and John Smith proved crucial to the formation of the BSA as well. In early 1968, Cabbage, Smith, Clifford Taylor, and Memphis State student Ronald Ivy met with Dean Parrish to inquire about starting a black student organization on campus.³⁶ Although the details of the meeting are not known, that black campus leaders had begun to align their movement with the young community activists showed the seriousness of the need for a formal campus organization for the black student body. Using what Stefan M. Bradley defined as “Black Student Power” in his study of the 1968-1969 uprisings at Columbia University, students David Acey, James Pope, James Mock, Ester Hurt, Eddie Jenkins and Ronald Ivy all viewed themselves as Black Power activists who were ultimately responsible for leading the black student body.³⁷

All of the men were pivotal leaders in the BSA and they took the initiative in organizing the black students since they believed that the university had no interest in their development. “There is no vital effort by the administration to develop individual initiative or a competitive spirit vital to black survival,” read the BSA’s *Black Thesis*

³⁵David Acey, interview.

³⁶“Invaders,” FBI Memo, Racial Matters, 157-1067 (Memphis, Tennessee, 1968).

³⁷Bradley, *Harlem vs. Columbia University*, 3; Bradley defines “Black Student Power” as: “Black students on predominately white campuses who viewed themselves as Black Power activists, defining their own organizations, leading their own campus campaigns, and achieving their own victories.” Although MSU was different from any other predominately white campus since the school had the highest ratio of black students than any other predominately white college in the nation in 1968, black students still employed a form of “Black Student Power” in their struggle for recognition.

newsletter.³⁸ Because there was not a formal outlet that black students felt comfortable relying on, who could they lean on to bring pressure on the administration to solve their problems? BSA organizers argued that because they had no representation, the administration had even more latitude to ignore their concerns. “We had less than 100 black students out here I think at the time,” Acey recollected. “I was walking around campus and I met Pope, James Pope, and he had been to the Army also. We discussed the situation. ‘Man this is terrible over here.’ We kept talking about it, we said, ‘Well, what are we going to do?’ We said, ‘well, we need to organize and straighten it out.’ Then we met a few other people. ‘What we need to do is organize the Black Students Association. All the white people had all kinds of organizations.’”³⁹

The BSA had a simple mission: integrate as Memphis State students without sacrificing a collective black identity. “There won’t be any real integration at the university until a black student can be involved in campus activities and still maintain his identity as a black student who has black characteristics and a black culture,” one student argued, expressing his disdain with the campus’ expectation of conformity. “Now if he wants to participate,” he explained, “he has to imitate the white students or he won’t be accepted.” Arguably the most enduring legacy of the Black Power Movement is the ability it had to culturally redefine the image of what it meant to be and feel black in America. Those not in step with the ideological musings of Black Power activists could aesthetically connect to the Movement through dress, hairstyles, music and other cultural outlets. If African American students at Memphis State did not relate fully to Black

³⁸“Memphis State Black Student Association Black Thesis Newsletter, Volume 1, No. 2, N.D.,” University of Memphis Special Collections, Memphis, Tennessee.

³⁹David Acey, interview.

Power as a practical transition or extension in tactics in the Black Freedom Movement, their experiences on campus informed the connections they made with the Movement. Without strictly aligning themselves with Black Power, African American students spoke in clear terms regarding their feelings on black identity. “You can’t be a real human being without pride in yourself and your race... we don’t want what you’ve got, we just want to get something for ourselves. We’re not going to wait for handouts,” declared one black student. The students equated their physical existence directly to pride in their own heritage and culture. Clearly, the students adhered to key components of the Black Power Movement.⁴⁰

However, there was still the matter of approval of a charter to officially recognize the organization on campus, though leaders declared they had no real desire for formal recognition. University requirements for student organizations stipulated that an organization needed a faculty advisor and an approved constitution in place; the students found both tasks difficult. The school had no black faculty members at the time and students were cautious about relationships with white professors. A white English professor, Elizabeth Boyd, sympathized with the students and signed the petition. BSA leaders decided that the constitution should reflect the organization’s desire to emphasize all things directly related to the uplift and welfare of African American students. “Our constitution said that it [BSA] was going to be black,” recalled Acey. Fearful of the implication of an all-black organization, the administration accused BSA organizers of promoting segregation. The students questioned the hypocrisy of the administration’s response to their constitution. How could they question the BSA’s intentions when there

⁴⁰“MSU Negroes Seek Campus Unity,” *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, March 7, 1968.

were several organizations on campus that implicitly barred black students from participating? To circumvent the administrations' accusations, the BSA leadership included a clause that stated: "Anybody that is generally interested in supporting the programs of the black students can join and that the organization's mission is to "foster and develop the traits and talents of the Black People not in opposition to or contempt for other races." The change in wording technically left the door open for whites to participate in the BSA, but the organization instituted membership cards as a way of "getting around whitey." There was a legitimate fear among some members that whites would attend the meetings strictly for the purpose of reporting information back to the administration. Whenever the group needed to discuss important issues, they called a members-only meeting and only those who brandished membership cards could attend.⁴¹

Before the existence of the BSA, many black students felt powerless. "There were few people here that even had the guts to go and say anything to their instructors if they felt they got a bad grade," James Pope explained. "Not even mentioning going to speak to the president of the university and telling him that he thought that black people were being treated bad on campus. They weren't getting what was due them, you see?"⁴² Eddie Jenkins assessed that in order for the organization to effectively change the dynamics of campus race relations, they had to reclaim power and remove the students' fear – both black and white. "The individual black student feels a certain strength within each individual whether they use it [BSA] or not," said Jenkins. "They realize that there is an

⁴¹David Acey, interview.

⁴²Ibid.

organized power structure whereby he can call his hand, where beforehand there was no organized power,” he assessed.⁴³

A lack of organized power was only one of the internal issues among the black student body; apathy and lack of self-awareness were also problems. “When I first came out here, I saw something lacking. Some of the Negro students out here were lacking....Memphis State students always seemed so backwards,” Ivy suggested comparing black students at Memphis State to those at LeMoyne College and Owen College. “They knew what was in the books...but they didn’t know anything about what was happening in the world,” he concluded.⁴⁴

Clearly frustrated with the apathetic attitude some black students’, BSA leadership used an editorial in the *Tiger Rag* to send the students a wake-up call. “Black leaders have been actively soliciting the support of black students, but have failed to get it,” the article sounded off. The writer concluded that “seemingly, all black collegiates want to do is to get out of college and find a token job.”⁴⁵ Issues of class divided the black students on campus. The piece mocked the so-called black bourgeoisie, chiding, “we know you are the exception after all; your parents were professional people who brought you up in a stable middle-class neighborhood. We understand and we sincerely regret embarrassing you with all the demonstrations, freedom songs, sit-ins, and boycotts. We are sorry that because you look like us, white people invariably lump you together with us.”⁴⁶ The tone of the article alternated from pleading, to indignation, to mocking,

⁴³Eddie Jenkins, Interview.

⁴⁴Ronald Ivy, interview.

⁴⁵“Speaking Out: Plea for Black Unity,” *Tiger Rag*, November 19, 1968.

and ultimately to calling for the students to come together. “Black people must unite because unity is an agent that can be utilized to salvage black people from the effect of white racism. Unity is also a power base that black people can utilize to achieve total freedom.”⁴⁷

James Pope agreed with the article’s appraisal of blacks’ attitudes on campus, arguing that the black students straddled between various levels of black consciousness. He believed that their complacency with the conditions on campus paralleled the complacency of the city. “Concerned about the plight of black people” prior to entering Memphis State, Pope suggested that black students did not engage in campus politics because many never participated in any aspect of the Civil Rights Movement.⁴⁸ While not a completely accurate account of all protest activities of black students as, some students worked with other organizations not affiliated with the university, Pope’s statement connected to a larger theme of the BSA – in order for the circumstances of black students at Memphis State to change, the students themselves had to be the catalyst. “For all clarity, we are not condemning the administration alone for lack of efficiency. We should realize that the major problems lie within our own confines as unconcerned and uninterested black students,” read an issue of the BSA’s *Black Thesis*.⁴⁹ Not all of the

⁴⁶Ibid.

⁴⁷Ibid.

⁴⁸James Pope, Interview by James Mosby, June 4, 1970, Ralph J. Bunche Collection, Howard University, Washington, DC. Pope theorized that students had never been involved in “anything concerning black people,” although there were a few students involved with the NAACP Youth Councils.

⁴⁹ “Memphis State Black Student Association Black Thesis Newsletter, Volume 1, No. 2, N.D.,” University of Memphis Special Collections, Memphis, Tennessee.

black students wanted to be simply painted as victims. “We realize MSU has not been overlooked by the Black Revolution, rather MSU overlooked the Black Revolution.”⁵⁰

Despite accusations of complacency and apathy, “some black students had been concerned about the attitudes on campus, about the practices and actions on campus and nobody ever did anything about it.”⁵¹ BSA leaders worked actively during 1968 to increase the level of consciousness and stimulate interest in the BSA among black students. Beginning in the fall of 1968, BSA leaders David Acey, James Pope, James Mock and others coordinated small cultural sessions to discuss black pride and debate the philosophies of Malcolm X, Martin Luther King, and other black leaders to “stimulate the interest in blackness to the students at Memphis State.”⁵² Older students incubated incoming black students; believing that by absorbing the young students into the ranks of the BSA, the organization would continue to grow. Students who experienced difficulty in their classes received tutoring.

The organization also formed book clubs to ease the burdens on students that financially could not afford to purchase books each semester. “We had rooms in the University Center and we had long tables and we had the books lined up: freshman English, freshman biology, sophomore biology. We were passing to the junior area, we would take all our books and leave them, and then we would go to the junior section and pick up free books when the seniors had left. We had this rotation and everybody was to do this. There wasn’t any exceptions, whether you joined the organization or not,” Acey

⁵⁰Ibid.

⁵¹James Pope, Interview.

⁵²Ibid.

explained.⁵³ Determined not to be a fraternity, sorority, or just another campus social club, the BSA used social events like dances as recruitment tools. They lured the students into social gatherings under the guise of entertainment. Once congregated, BSA leadership planted seeds. Acey contends that black students, regardless if they officially joined the organization or not, faced the same issues as the students actively involved. “We had a motto,” Acey rationalized, “Get out of our way, or get ran over.”⁵⁴ Each event, each activity served the purpose to create unity, cement bonds and replace the apathy and fear with a non-violent, revolutionary spirit.

During the 1968 sanitation strike the BSA found what Jenkins described as an “issue to rally around and not just a cause.” Jenkins admitted that the black students, were not engaged in what was happening during the strike, like students were at LeMoyne and Owen. However, a chance meeting with Mayor Loeb reminded Jenkins that he and the black students at Memphis State had a responsibility to support the striking workers. Jenkins met Loeb at a downtown function and in front of several important city leaders asked the Mayor if he could meet to discuss the strike. The Mayor agreed, but when Jenkins arrived at his office, he refused to engage the topic with Jenkins. Angered by the failed meeting, Jenkins returned to campus and informed BSA members what had happened. Afterwards the BSA organized a march in support of the workers. That march was “a key in the Black Student Association...the issue helped our cause.”⁵⁵

⁵³David Acey, interview.

⁵⁴Ibid.

In March 1968 black and white students marched together in the largest march in the history of the university at that time. Professors admitted that the march was the first time that they witnessed black and white students communicating with each other. Groups of students discussed “the strike, human and racial relations.” They even talked about Black Power. The interracial march shocked Laura Ingram, a white student, who like others on campus had never seen that type of interaction between black and whites. “I could not believe that this was Memphis State. I was encouraged by it,” said Ingram.⁵⁶ After the march on campus, BSA members became more involved in the sanitation strike demonstrations. Jenkins stated that in the early days of organizing the BSA, members were trying to find a way to link their on-campus activism with the issues in the community. “We were still connected to the community,” Jenkins said. “We were looking for ways to connect back to the community.”⁵⁷

In general the year 1968 tested the strength of democracy as well as human and civil rights worldwide. Demonstrations and rebellions in urban communities, and campus unrest raged throughout the nation. The assassinations of Martin Luther King, Jr. and Robert Kennedy reverberated throughout the world, forcing many at home and abroad to question the integrity and soul of America. The fall of 1968 served as an important period of growth for the BSA. Members met with the administration to “discuss specific recommendations in regard to recruitment of Black teachers; initiation of a Black Studies

⁵⁵“Memphis State 109 Roundtable, Eddie Jenkins,” 40th Anniversary Commemoration of Martin Luther King, Jr.: The Man, The Mission, The Movement,” (DVD Recording in the Possession of the Author) April 2, 2008.

⁵⁶“Demonstration Brings First Communication,” *Tiger Rag*, March 8, 1968.

⁵⁷“Memphis State 109 Roundtable, Eddie Jenkins,” 40th Anniversary Commemoration of Martin Luther King, Jr.: The Man, The Mission, The Movement,” (Audio Recording in the Possession of the Author) April 2, 2008.

Program; suspension of fraternities, sororities and other campus organizations which discriminate against minority groups; and increased participation by Blacks in all phases of college life.”⁵⁸ After the death of King the organization “turned internally,” as it looked to refocus its attention on improving campus life.⁵⁹

On December 10, 1968, Charles Evers, civil rights activist and brother of slain civil rights martyr Medgar Evers, spoke to a group of students in the University Center Ballroom at Memphis State. The crowd of students, composed primarily of black students, filled the room to hear him speak. According to the *Tiger Rag*, Evers’ topic, ‘Black Nationalism and Civil Rights,’ promoted a message of hope, understanding and unity between the races. Evers warned the students to not succumb to violent Black Power. In light of Evers’ tragic family circumstances, he easily could have discarded the concepts of hope, understanding, and unity. Still his message remained positive. Surveying the Memphis State racial landscape, however, Evers voiced his disappointment in the school’s lack of black football players. He also questioned why “in a faculty of 650 (or more) MSU have only two Black teachers.”⁶⁰ Evers’ speech at the end of the fall semester served to bridge a frustrating time of inactivity in the organization’s infancy to a recommitment to the mission of the BSA and a new phase of involvement by the black student body.

⁵⁸James Pope, Interview.

⁵⁹“Memphis State 109 Roundtable, Eddie Jenkins,” 40th Anniversary Commemoration of Martin Luther King, Jr.: The Man, The Mission, The Movement,” (Audio Recording in the Possession of the Author) April 2, 2008.

⁶⁰“Evers’ Appeals Work Together,” *Tiger Rag*, December 13, 1968; Miriam D. “Laurie” Sugarmon, “Memo to Memphis State University Faculty 3 February 1969,” University of Memphis Special Collections, Memphis, Tennessee, (February 1969).

Twelve years after Memphis State rejected Miriam D. Sugarmon's application for admission, she returned to the campus in a more official capacity. In 1957, Sugarmon and Maxine Smith attempted to apply for admission to the school, but they were turned away before they could even submit an application. The women were already quite decorated academically. Sugarmon, a Phi Beta Kappa, earned her degree from Wellesley College. Smith graduated top of her class from historically black Spelman College and continued her studies at Middlebury College, where she graduated with a Masters of Arts degree in French. Smith and Sugarmon later credited Memphis State's rebuke for fueling their activist spirit. In the aftermath of the Memphis State incident, the local branch of the NAACP extended the women an invitation to join the executive board. NAACP led the charge again to desegregate the university in 1959.⁶¹

Now the first African American professor at Memphis State, a move that to some degree signaled the school's growth, Sugarmon still believed that the university needed to do more to promote diversity. She replaced Elizabeth Boyd as advisor for the BSA, giving the students the opportunity to work closely with an African American that also shared their vision. "She was a very positive inspiration for a lot of students," BSA member John Gray explained. "She was a motivation for those students believing we could make a difference...we weren't absolutely convinced we could make a change. We knew Dr. Sugarmon was intelligent and capable," said Gray.⁶²

In the aftermath of Charles Evers's appearance on campus, Sugarmon submitted a memo that called for the faculty and the administration to assess their role in changing

⁶¹ Sherry L. Hope and Bruce W. Speck, *Maxine Smith's Unwilling Pupils: Lessons Learned in Memphis's Civil Rights Classroom*, (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2007), 12.

⁶² John Gray, Interview.

the campus culture. She urged Memphis State to take a closer look at its human rights record and to critically evaluate its current state in the area of human rights. She also suggested recommendations for the future. “If you feel as I do,” Sugarmon wrote, “that MSU has a responsibility to offer creative leadership and to provide the kind of academic environment in which Blacks and whites can realize their full potential as human beings, will you do FOUR things:”

1. Indicate your support of this program to the Administration.
2. Contact 3 persons on the Faculty or Staff by telephone, letter or personal visit to enlist their support in this project.
3. Confer with your department chairman to ask that he actively seek out qualified black teachers and graduate students.
4. Use your influence with Faculty groups – Faculty Council, Curriculum Committee, Library Committee, AAUP, etc., – to which you belong to gain their support in this endeavor.⁶³

Sugarmon hoped the administration and faculty shared her goal of a more diverse and inclusive campus. She followed up her February 4th memo with another memo listing 23 black candidates for possible employment at Memphis State. The famed historian of black religious life and LeMoyne College graduate, C. Eric Lincoln, made Sugarmon’s list.⁶⁴ Some resented Sugarmon’s implication that the university needed to work on its human rights record. An anonymous, bold-faced printed copy of Sugarmon’s original memo revealed the bitterness: “Support Dr. Humphreys’ resistance to absurd demands

⁶³Miriam D. “Laurie” Sugarmon, “Memo to Memphis State University Faculty 3 February 1969,” University of Memphis Special Collections, Memphis, Tennessee, (February 1969).

⁶⁴ Miriam D. “Laurie” Sugarmon, “Memo to Dr. Ronald Carrier from Miriam Sugarmon 5 February 1969,” University of Memphis Special Collections, Memphis, Tennessee; *Tiger Rag*, 5-Proposal Petition Calls for Racial Balance at MSU, March 14, 1969.

and phony crusades that only serve to distort and aggravate real problems!!!”⁶⁵ Quoting philosopher Immanuel Kant and Founding Father Alexander Hamilton, it charged that Sugarmon’s request for a Coordinator of Black Affairs promoted “resegregation” and that “her proposal constitutes an invitation to unnecessary turmoil and divisions.”⁶⁶ A *Tiger Rag* editorial criticized the anonymous condemnation as a “racist attack...to slur a realistic and reasonable plan for working to help black students.”⁶⁷ Sugarmon did not intend to ignore the school’s racial situation like the critics of her proposal suggested. Instead, Sugarmon designed her proposal as a way to open an official line of communication between faculty, administration and students.

Sugarmon’s memo aimed to sway the faculty; a second memo written in conjunction with the Human Relations Club targeted the student body. The Human Relations Club distributed a petition that outlined a five-point program:

1. An immediate end to all forms of discrimination on campus.
2. Active recruitment of black personnel at all levels.
3. Formation of an MSU Human Relations Committee composed of an equal number of representatives of the Student Body, Faculty and Administration.
4. Development of a Black Studies Program leading to an Interdepartmental major with emphasis on the contributions of Africans and Afro-Americans to Western Civilization.
5. Employment of a Coordinator of Black Affairs⁶⁸

⁶⁵“Reprint of Miriam D. Sugarmon’s February 5, 1969 memo with anonymous markings, N.D.,” University of Memphis Special Collections, Memphis, Tennessee (February 5, 1969).

⁶⁶Ibid.

⁶⁷Plot Thickens,” *Tiger Rag*, March 14, 1969.

⁶⁸“5-Proposal Petition Calls for Racial Balance at MSU,” *Tiger Rag*, March 14, 1969.

These proposals reiterated, formalized, and expanded many of the BSA's initial mandates. They helped to further articulate the BSA's concerns, illuminate key racial issues, and extend a branch to other sympathetic student organizations on campus.

The BSA made additional requests for SGA funding, SGA representation, operational space, and campus jobs.⁶⁹ They also fought for positions on campus teams such as the cheerleading squad and the ROTC auxiliary, Angel Flight. Weekly, the *Tiger Rag* posted pictures of different women co-eds in their "Campus Cutie" section; none were black. Black students also accused the paper of using the "Campus Cutie" to promote white women as the ideal model of beauty. BSA members even threatened to storm onto the basketball court during a game against the school's biggest rival, Louisville. Calling their campaign "Black Power on the Hardwood," they outlined their threat in a letter to President Humphreys:

Information has been received from a confidential source that at the first basketball game at the Coliseum a group of Negroes are going to perform with a band and freedom singers to prevent the basketball game from taking place. This action will be preceded by a request to you that Negroes be permitted to be on the cheerleading team even though they are not properly trained. If this request is denied, the above action will occur. If this request is granted, I would assume that they will carry this action out anyway.⁷⁰

According to Acey, the tactic worked. By the next game, the administration responded by placing a few black women on the pep squad.⁷¹

⁶⁹David Acey, interview; "Where are the Black Students?," *Tiger Rag*, March 21, 1969, *Tiger Rag* article criticizes the Student Government Association for the lack of black students represented in the SGA.

⁷⁰Mr. Youngson, "Message to Dr. C.C. Humphreys, 7 November 1968," University of Memphis Special Collections, Memphis, Tennessee; Ibid, "Memphis State University Black Student Association, *Black Thesis* Newsletter, Volume 1, Number 2, N.D.," University of Memphis Special Collections, Memphis, Tennessee.

The students agitated long before their formal presentation of demands, but now with the BSA, they had a unified structure to organize around. Black students, thirsty for events suited to their interests, flocked to cultural rap sessions. The sessions created awareness in the students. In the fall of 1968 the BSA began to gain strength as new students joined and brought new ideas and energy to the organization. In the fall, the organization began to formalize its demands “to present to the university or president of the University for Redress of grievances.”⁷²

If BSA members needed any motivation on how to get a reaction out of the administration, they only needed to look at nearby Lane College, a CME-affiliated school. Located in Jackson, Tennessee, the small college seemed like an unlikely place for a campus revolt. Yet a campus organization called the Black Liberation Front (BLF) presented the college’s president, Chester Arthur Kirkendoll, a Bishop in the CME church, with a list of fourteen demands. The group, unsatisfied with the president’s reaction, set fire to several buildings on campus.⁷³ This revolt, and others like it, according to a *Tri-State Defender* article, marked a shift from previous uprisings because these “were created around black students’ demands for improvement of their lot.” Within weeks of the incident at Lane, disturbances broke out at University of Chicago, Harvard, Columbia, the University of Wisconsin-Madison, Duke, and Tuskegee. All of the incidents, with the exception of the sit-in at the University of Chicago “had an identity of their own,” because of the manner in which the universities “capitulated to

⁷¹David Acey, interview.

⁷²James Pope, Interview.

⁷³President C.A. Kirkendoll, “Statement to Parents of Students, Alumni, Supporters and Friends of Lane College 18 April 1969,” University of Memphis Special Collections, Memphis, Tennessee.

[the demands] black students.” Notwithstanding the rogue actions of some factions on these campuses, the revolts “brought forth...a change in mood and healthy innovation and academic reorientation that might not have occurred under happier circumstances.”⁷⁴

Believing their demands fell on deaf ears, the BSA began to contemplate its next move. Like the students at Lane, the MSU students understood that changing the campus mood required drastic, uncomfortable measures. The students reconfirmed their dedication. “The black students have made a commitment that Memphis State University is going to change and that we are going to help bring about this change.”⁷⁵ When infrequent discussions between members of the BSA and administration bore no fruit, the students became impatient. Acey, Pope, and other BSA members decided they would “go over and talk to the man about the reasons why he hadn’t taken any action on the demands.”⁷⁶

James Mock, a part of the big five BSA leadership that included David Acey, James Pope, Ester Hurt and Eddie Jenkins, was an enigmatic figure who himself had been involved in civil rights struggles prior to coming to Memphis State. The students elected Mock the unofficial spokesman for the organization. Charismatic and eloquent, with a penchant for inspiring the black students, Mock made for an easy choice for the organization’s spokesman.

⁷⁴“Revolt of the Blacks,” *Tri-State Defender*, March 9, 1969.

⁷⁵“Memphis State University Black Student Association Black Student Appeal Volume 1, 25 April 1969, “*University of Memphis Special Collections*, Memphis, Tennessee (April 25, 1969).

⁷⁶James Pope, interview.

At a March 1969 meeting, Mock, Acey, Pope and other leaders approached President Humphreys again to ask about his progress on their list of demands. Leaders accused Humphreys of giving them the run-around. Humphrey countered the allegations, saying that he and the administration had not had sufficient time to address the demands. “We’re working on getting some black instructors in and working on getting a black dean and working on trying to get a black coach in the organization,” Humphreys explained. It is unknown just how aggressive Humphreys’s attempts to hire more black instructors were, but the school did offer Reverend Ezekiel Bell, Pastor of Garden Presbyterian Church and head of the NAACP, the opportunity to teach a Black History course.⁷⁷ Because of other obligations, Bell declined.⁷⁸ But basketball coach Moe Iba’s “request” for the “Negroes on the basketball team to get rid of those naturals [hairstyles],” somewhat confirmed black students’ concerns that white coaches could not fully relate to the black athletes, and on a larger scale, Coach Iba’s sentiments reaffirmed that their demands were very necessary.⁷⁹

After several unsatisfactory attempts, BSA leaders prepared the students for more direct action. “Yeah, yeah, see they weren’t moving so our next step was to do the non-violent direct action and shut it down,” David Acey explained. “We gave them opportunities. You know Martin [Luther King, Jr.] said you negotiate, you talk, and once that don’t work you move to the next phase.”⁸⁰ The students entered that next phase on April 23, 1969, when BSA leaders and members confronted President Humphreys in his

⁷⁷James Pope, Interview.

⁷⁸“Inside Memphis,” *Memphis World*, September 28, 1968.

⁷⁹“Inside Memphis,” *Memphis World*, August 24, 1968.

⁸⁰David Acey, Interview.

office. On the surface, the administration believed the students' gripes stemmed from their refusal to fund Adam Clayton Powell's visit. Yet the students saw it differently. After years of frustrations and months of attempting to negotiate, the students used the Powell as an issue to expose the campus to their other demands. BSA members immediately issued copies of a special edition of their newsletter, *Black Student Appeal*, with their demands included. The students again requested an extensive Black Studies Program, a black dean, more black instructors, and more black athletes:

Are you going to allow racist instructors to constantly stand on us? Are you going to give us a method of identifying by bringing additional black faculty members on this campus? Are you going to allow us to remain lost as far as history is concerned by denying us all the beautiful phases of black history, or are you going to suddenly realize that we are in need of our culture, and our true culture, that we are in need of a true appreciation of it, and that there we must have: Black Studies, Black Dean and Black Athletes.⁸¹

The *Black Student Appeal* hearkened back to the days of the first black students on campus to show that not much, in their opinion, had changed. They complained that they were "in Memphis State, but not of it."⁸²

Unfazed by the pressure, President Humphreys continued to stand ground as well. In meetings with BSA members on April 24 and April 25, Humphreys reiterated his stance to the students, though he maintained communication and open dialogue with them. "Representatives of the Black Student Association met with me this morning and gave me a list of points for discussion, change and innovation. University officials will meet the representatives of the association to explore the actions requested and to work

⁸¹Memphis State University Black Student Association Black Student Appeal Volume 1, 25 April 1969, "University of Memphis Special Collections, Memphis, Tennessee (April 25, 1969). BSA demanded that the administration hire 60 black instructors by the fall. Memphis State staffed 650 teachers on faculty, only 2 of whom were African American.

⁸²Ibid.

on those points that can be accomplished,” he expressed.⁸³ The newly instituted student code of conduct explicitly forbade “unauthorized occupancy of the university facilities or blocking access to or from such areas,” reinforcing Humphreys’ ability to penalize the students. Yet he agreed not to take any disciplinary action against the students unless “there is any destruction or blocking of any of the passageways or interference with anybody who is carrying on his business.”⁸⁴

Regarding the students’ demands for personnel diversity, Humphreys believed that the institution needed more African American faculty, an issue he told the students that he and his staff actively worked to change. He disagreed, however, with the students’ insistence on a black dean to explicitly handle the concerns of black students. A black dean simply hired to service black students, Humphreys argued, constituted a form of segregation.⁸⁵ James Mock argued that the black students needed their own representative. “Black folk understand black folk,” remarked Mock.⁸⁶

Police roamed the campus at the president’s behest to maintain order. The police presence only agitated the black students more. They refused to further discuss any issues with the president until he removed the police from campus. Supported by community leaders H. Ralph Jackson, Jesse Epps, and Maxine Smith, the group held a rally on April 25th in front of approximately 375 students at the school’s University Center.⁸⁷ Having

⁸³“Black Students Reveal Protest Issues...Present Demands to President,” *Tiger Rag*, April 25, 1969.

⁸⁴ MSU Code Outlines Dissent Action,” *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, March 14, 1969; “Protestors Get Warning: MSU Threatens To Use Force,” *Memphis Press-Scimitar*, April 24, 1969.

⁸⁵“Blacks Talk Demands With MSU Head,” *Memphis Press-Scimitar*, April 25, 1969.

⁸⁶“Demands,” *Tiger Rag*, May 2, 1969.

been accused of being too general and vague, BSA leaders publicly revealed their demands and discussed their grievances.⁸⁸ Tired of talk and no action, Mock proclaimed, “We don’t want any newspaper articles and studies. We want action and we want it now.”⁸⁹ Mock urged students to stand up for their rights, but he stressed that the organization remain non-violent in its approach. Leaders tried to hedge the frustrations of some students that believed that the time for talk had come and gone. “Don’t think for one minute you can run over the National Guard, that you can shoot it out with any policeman or any of these racists that might move in on campus with us,” read the BSA newsletter in the immediate aftermath of the first sit-in.”⁹⁰

Undoubtedly other campus disturbances informed how Humphreys and other administrators approached the Memphis State situation. He perceived every newspaper quote by BSA leaders as threats to the campus. He even accused the students of conspiring with other groups from other cities.⁹¹ Whether the threats were real or imagined, Humphreys did not take any chances. “If force is the instrument of protest, then any person can be intimidated and the right of inquiry and the right to teach will be

⁸⁷“Blacks Talk Demands,” *Memphis Press-Scimitar*, April 25, 1969.

⁸⁸“Caution and Consideration,” *Tiger Rag*, April 25, 1969. An editorial in the school’s paper accused the BSA of being a “do-nothing” group and their primary issue was not the list of demands, but they simply acted out because they did not get Adam Clayton Powell as a speaker.

⁸⁹“Black Students Reveal Protest Issues...Present Demands to President,” *Tiger Rag*, April 25, 1969.

⁹⁰“Memphis State University Black Student Association Black Student Appeal Volume 1, 25 April 1969,” University of Memphis Special Collections, Memphis, Tennessee.

⁹¹Dr. Cecil C. Humphreys, “Statement of Dr. C.C. Humphreys to Students, Faculty and Friends of Memphis State University, April 29, 1969,” University of Memphis Special Collections, Memphis, Tennessee (April 29, 1969).

lost,” Humphreys said in a statement issued to local television and radio media.⁹² The students’ protest and disregard for the law, he argued, damaged not only academic institutions, but society as a whole. Police officers continued to patrol the grounds, much to the dismay of the students.

On Monday, April 28, still agitated about the police state on campus, members of the BSA held another mass meeting in the University Center. After the meeting, roughly 100 students headed to the president’s office.⁹³ The students demanded that the administration remove the police officers from campus and refused to leave the office until someone in authority gave the police the directive to go. The students argued that since they “made no threat of violence” and were protesting “under the banner of non-violence,” the police presence was unnecessary.⁹⁴ Students complained of harassment from police officers. “I’ve been stopped three times and had my picture taken for walking down the street,” complained one black student.⁹⁵ The students resented the administration’s refusal to negotiate without police present on the school grounds.

With the president away, the Dean of Students, Jess Parrish, tried to calm the situation and explain to the students that “under the circumstances, some kind of protection for the buildings and safety of the other students had to be provided.”⁹⁶ The students scoffed at Parrish’s explanation and refused to leave, telling the Dean to “do

⁹²“Suspensions From MSU Appealed, More than 100 Black Students Write Letters,” *Memphis Press-Scimitar*, April 30, 1969.

⁹³Ibid.

⁹⁴“Hearing Reset for 109 MSU Students,” *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, April 29, 1969.

⁹⁵“Black Students Arrested and Suspended from MSU,” *Tiger Rag*, April 29, 1969.

⁹⁶“109 MSU Students Suspended After Being Arrested at Sit-In,” *Memphis Press-Scimitar*, April 29, 1969.

what you got to do...we're not leaving until our grievances are addressed."⁹⁷ They huddled into the office singing "We Shall Overcome" and "Oh Freedom."⁹⁸ The students' insistence on remaining non-violent and singing freedom songs showed their commitment to traditional civil rights protest techniques, although the tenor with which they presented their demands put them in concert with other Black Power campus uprisings. "These kids are pledged to non-violent tactics," explained attorney Walter Bailey.⁹⁹ Citing Lane College as an example, Humphreys argued that just because violence had not erupted, it did not mean that the possibility did not exist.¹⁰⁰ At the cost of \$3,218 per day, the police presence on campus began to bother the taxpayers almost as much as it bothered the students, albeit for different reasons.¹⁰¹ Ironically, Humphreys claimed that he and the administration planned to decrease the number on police on campus before the students stormed his office.¹⁰²

The reality of the situation set in for some of the students. A few left after Dean Parrish summoned the police. Undeterred by some students' change of heart, Ester Hurt pressed on. "Everybody come in that's going to jail with me," Hurt told the rest of the students and supporters.¹⁰³ Subsequently, the police herded 109 students, six of whom

⁹⁷James Pope, Interview.

⁹⁸"Black Students Arrested and Suspended from MSU," *Tiger Rag*, April 29, 1969.

⁹⁹"Tension Fills Air at MSU," *Memphis Press-Scimitar*, April 30, 1969.

¹⁰⁰"Why did it Happen at Memphis State," *Memphis Press-Scimitar*, May 2, 1969.

¹⁰¹"MSU Patrol Costs City \$3,218 Daily," *Memphis Press-Scimitar*, April 29, 1969.

¹⁰²*Ibid*; "Speaking Out", *Tiger Rag*, May 2, 1969, A student editorial discussed Dr. Humphreys television appearance in which he said that he planned to remove the police prior to the events on April 28th

were white, onto a police bus. The students were arrested and charged under the newly passed Tennessee State Code, 39-1214, a law that made trespassing, illegally taking possession of a public school or educational building, and refusing to leave school property a misdemeanor.¹⁰⁴ Employing the ‘jail no bail’ strategy made famous by SNCC, the students refused bond. Some students wore toothbrushes around their necks because they anticipated staying overnight.¹⁰⁵ Bailey, one of several attorneys defending the students, explained that the students “are dedicated primarily to getting an education at Memphis State. They don’t want any more trouble. They were really interested in attracting public attention to their problems.”¹⁰⁶ James Pope addressed the students in the courtroom. “I don’t think that any person, anyone of the 109 students arrested should leave this courtroom regardless of whether mom or dad is down here or not,” Pope urged, “We got to stick together and if we don’t stick together we’re going to be subjected to the same racist bullshit that we are subjected to out on campus down here in this courtroom.”¹⁰⁷

The BSA stance placed Humphreys and the school in a precarious position. Scheduled to participate in a panel, “Dissension in the University: Where Will it Lead?”

¹⁰³“Hearing Reset For 109 MSU,” *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, Students, April 29, 1969.

¹⁰⁴“Black Students Arrested and Suspended from MSU,” *Tiger Rag* April 29, 1969; “Hearing Reset for 109 MSU Students,” *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, April 29, 1969.

¹⁰⁵“Group Shortchanged in Sweetest Part of Sit-in,” *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, April 30, 1969.

¹⁰⁶“Tension Fills Air at MSU,” *Memphis Press-Scimitar*, April 30, 1969.

¹⁰⁷James Pope, Interview.

Humphreys canceled due to the discord on his own campus.¹⁰⁸ In the shadow of the stand-off between black students and faculty at Cornell University, and as campus unrest unfolded at academic institutions around the nation, Humphreys cautiously believed that Memphis State would avoid the same fate. Just two months earlier, Humphreys recalled a conversation with a black student. “A Negro student told me, ‘you’re not going to have trouble here because the black people think they can talk with you.’” Despite the tyrannical label that students saddled upon Humphreys, he did believe that he tried his best to keep an open mind to the concerns of black students and that they “recognized ever increasing strides made by the university in their behalf.”¹⁰⁹ However, no longer willing to wait for anyone to decide their fate, young blacks pushed boundaries and set the pace. “These are basic demands,” Mock stressed, “This is what we have got to have. I don’t want some long, drawn-out study. I want action and I want it now.”¹¹⁰

The university suspended the students involved in the sit-in, though they did offer the students the opportunity to appeal the suspension. Attorneys delivered written letters from the suspended students appealing their suspension.¹¹¹ The deferred suspensions allowed the students to continue their studies with the understanding that they would be permanently expelled for any violation of university policies.¹¹² Many understood that

¹⁰⁸“Campus Unrest Reduces Panel,” *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, April 30, 1969.

¹⁰⁹“Why Did it Happen At Memphis State?” *Memphis Press-Scimitar*, May 2, 1969.

¹¹⁰“Blacks Talk Demands With MSU Head,” *Memphis Press-Scimitar*, April 25, 1969.

¹¹¹“Suspensions from MSU Appealed, More than 100 Black Students Write Letters,” *Memphis Press-Scimitar*, April 30, 1969.

¹¹² “Student Protests Bring Suspensions, ‘New Dialogue’” *The Columns, Alumni Association of Memphis State University* May-June 1969: 1-2.; “Second Chance at MSU,”

the school and the Memphis community avoided the spectacle that other institutions experienced; yet there was still a sense that larger troubles brewed beneath the surface. In an editorial in the *Tiger Rag* entitled, “Black Frustration Could Lead to Change to Militancy,” the author blamed the school’s “emphasis on white studentry” as the cause for the sit-in.¹¹³ Arguing that the BSA’s insistence on non-violence separated the organization and the sit-in from other campus protests, the article implicitly compared the BSA and the more radical students critical of the BSA’s program to Martin Luther King and Malcolm X. If the school did not negotiate in good faith with the BSA, the article argued, it faced more militant reprisals from students unhappy with the BSA’s non-violent stance. “If the BSA’s program is continued at length without success, a group of students may secede from the main BSA body and organize themselves,” the author warned.¹¹⁴ With Community on the Move for Equality (COME) and the NAACP backing the BSA, frustrated students would only have the city’s more militant outfits to turn to. “We are dedicated to militant non-violence and we will protest injustice by every positive non-violent method,” proclaimed the BSA leadership.¹¹⁵ The sit-in was only a tactic, yet the tactic could easily transition into a more permanent, radical philosophy for the Memphis State’s black student body, the paper argued.

As expected, sides quickly formed in the aftermath of the incident at the administration building. Supporters and dissenters gathered on campus for a free speech

Memphis Commercial Appeal, May 22, 1969; “105 in MSU Sit-In Put on Probation,” *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, May 21, 1969.

¹¹³“Black Frustration Could Lead to Change to Militancy,” *Tiger Rag*, April 29, 1969.

¹¹⁴*Ibid.*

¹¹⁵“Hearing Reset For 109 MSU Students,” *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, April 29, 1969.

rally. Amidst heckling from some students and cheering from others, SGA leaders John L. Coscia and Jim Gaylord addressed the crowd and called for a “public hearing to air views from both sides.”¹¹⁶ Coscia cautiously measured his words. He also questioned the need for police on campus, especially the helicopter that circled the area, arguing that in other instances of campus disturbances law enforcement only exacerbated an already tense situation. He stopped short of throwing the SGA’s full support behind the BSA by suggesting that “we do not have enough information from either side,” to make a fair assessment of who was wrong and who was right.¹¹⁷ Vietnam veteran and white liberal supporter Victor Smith circulated a petition in support of the BSA.¹¹⁸ Another student on the platform, Jim Sims, spoke in favor of the BSA’s cause to end discrimination in hiring and curriculum.¹¹⁹ Humphreys quickly shot down the SGA’s suggestion of a public hearing as “not practical,” and although the new student center stood across from the administration building that housed his office, he claimed “there’s not a place big enough for such a meeting.”¹²⁰ Memphis’s black community and leadership continued to support the students as well. Immediately following the students’ arrests, 300 supporters, black and white, gathered at Clayborne Temple to discuss the issues, learn about the “BSA struggle,” and help the students plan their next course of action. The community and

¹¹⁶“MSU’s ‘Free Speech Rally’ Supported – and Heckled,” *Memphis Press-Scimitar*, April 29, 1969.

¹¹⁷*Ibid.*

¹¹⁸“MSU Campus Calm as Tension Eases,” *Memphis Press-Scimitar*, May 1, 1969.

¹¹⁹*Ibid.*

¹²⁰“Group Shortchanged in Sweetest Part of Sit-In,” *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, April 30, 1969; “New MSU Center is Attraction,” *Memphis Press-Scimitar*, June 6, 1968.

black leadership support, however, was contingent on the students' commitment to non-violence.¹²¹

For students who earlier confessed they felt that they were at Memphis State and not of it, certainly the suspensions reinforced that feeling. On-campus and off-campus outlets weighed in on the impact of the sit-ins. The West Tennessee chapter of the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) issued a statement regarding the Memphis State sit-in specifically and campus protests in general. The statement condemned violent and obstructive forms of protest, but in true ACLU fashion it supported the students' right to free speech, "even the most unpopular [viewpoints] within the society and the university."¹²² In an open letter to the president, faculty members blamed the administration's continued reliance on police after the April 23 incident for the tension on campus. "We wish simply that the tension which has developed on this campus during the past several days be dissipated as quickly as possible and we wish also that the situation be handled tactfully and humanely," wrote the faculty.¹²³ In his syndicated column, Morehouse President Benjamin Mays accused black students of hurting black colleges. By insisting that schools hire black instructors and admit more black students, Mays reasoned, black students at predominately white schools drained resources from black colleges. For many years, the best and brightest of the black intelligentsia taught at predominately black institutions because of the scarcity of opportunities at white

¹²¹"Suspensions From MSU Appealed, More than 100 Black Students Write Letters," *Memphis Press-Scimitar*, April 30, 1969; "Blacks Talk Demands With MSU Head," *Memphis Press-Scimitar*, April 25, 1969.

¹²²"West Tennessee American Civil Liberties Union Press Release ACLU Position on Memphis State University Sit-in and Other Campus Disorders, 25 April 1969," *University of Memphis Special Collections*, Memphis, Tennessee, (April 25, 1969).

¹²³"Open Letter to President Humphreys," *Tiger Rag*, May 2, 1969.

colleges. The increase in demand for black instructors by black students at predominately white schools, according to Mays, would “rob Negro colleges of some bright black scholars they would otherwise get.”¹²⁴

Letters flooded Dr. Humphreys’ office in support of his stance on the students. Some of the letters painted the students as naïve pawns, unaware of the impact of their actions. “Don’t let a small misled minority ruin our great Memphis State,” pleaded Mr. and Mrs. Pete Henry.¹²⁵ Other letters accused the controversial Adam Clayton Powell of prompting the students’ actions. One letter mocked their request for Black Studies. “Please, we in this state are thoroughly disgusted with Powell’s actions. A ‘Black Studies’ program? Come on now, use your intelligence, you want to prepare yourself for life in a worthwhile helpful existence, so it would seem the most direct way would be to learn the same basic studies as any religion or race would,” chastised a group of concerned white Memphis State alumni.¹²⁶ The *Commercial Appeal* applauded Humphreys for the way he handled the situation. “All students at Memphis State should understand that this community stands behind Dr. Humphreys when he says ‘We are going to carry out the business of the university, regardless of what it takes to do it. We will use whatever force necessary,’” read an editorial in the paper.¹²⁷ Clearly, the author’s stance that “this community stands behind Dr. Humphreys,” spoke for only one segment of the Memphis community.

¹²⁴“My View: Black Students – Helping? Hurting?,” *Tri-State Defender*, May 17, 1969.

¹²⁵“Letters to Dr. C .C. Humphreys in Support of his Stance on the 1969 Sit-In, April 1969,” University of Memphis Special Collections, Memphis, Tennessee, (April, 1969).

¹²⁶*Ibid.*

¹²⁷“Keeping Control at MSU,” *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, April 25, 1969.

The student reaction was mixed. White fraternities quickly collected 1200 signatures on a petition that praised the president for his swift action and pledged support for any decision regarding the actions of Memphis State 109.¹²⁸ The petition read:

We the undersigned do support President Humphreys and the administration's enforcement of Memphis State University policies in whatever means that is necessary to maintain order on our campus. We feel that the policies of the administration thus far, in regard to recent campus disorders, have been toward the over-all benefit of the students attending Memphis State University.¹²⁹

White students accused BSA members, dressed in "Afro-American garb," of snatching petitions from students and threatening those who wanted to sign. Some accused the petition of "further polarizing attitudes concerning the BSA proposals." The petition snatching accusations did little to help the BSA's image with the student body. Jack Powell's *Tiger Rag* article suggested that the BSA hire a "Public Relations Man" to help salvage the organizations image from "every loudmouth black radical" on campus. Another *Tiger Rag* editorial accused the BSA of more talk than action. If the BSA was concerned with underrepresentation in decision-making, why did they not nominate a slate of candidates for SGA elections? "The white students aren't going to beg black students to join their organizations, black students must get involved themselves," wrote Sharon Kraus.¹³⁰

Black students and their white supporters also used the paper to go on the offensive. "It is obvious, that he [the typical white students] has never mistakenly heard a so-called friend say that the 'the place for Negroes will always be the cotton fields,'"

¹²⁸"Unuseful", *Tiger Rag*, May 6, 1969; "Suspensions From MSU Appealed; More than 100 Black Students Write Letters," *Memphis Press-Scimitar*, April 30, 1969.

¹²⁹"Student Petitions in Support Dr. Humphreys Stance on the 1969 Sit-In, April 1969," University of Memphis Special Collections, Memphis, Tennessee, (April, 1969).

¹³⁰"Black Students Need Public Relations Man," *Tiger Rag*, May 6, 1969.

wrote Cozette Rogers in reference to the white students' negative comments. "It is obvious that he has not seen the grievances of his people presented for a year without result to the unrelenting hearts of his school administrators."¹³¹ Black students were dubious of the administration since they had not responded to students' requests. They felt that drastic actions called for drastic measures.¹³² Several white students agreed with the BSA's demands, but disagreed with their methods.¹³³ Some white students questioned how Humphreys handled the BSA, the sit-in, and the aftermath. They recognized the BSA's commitment to non-violence in contrast to aggressive episodes at other universities. The protest was "peaceful to the extreme...the students' actions fully lived up to the principles of the late Dr. Martin Luther King." So why didn't the administration handle the incident internally?¹³⁴

Not unexpectedly, there was no consensus on right or wrong, proper or improper. Yet the students' actions, mild by Cornell University standards, and even by Lane College standards, rattled the university and a community-at-large that believed they escaped the year of student revolt without incident. Administrators missed the students' signals of discontent, and therefore attributed the students' stance to ill feelings over funding for a speaker. But "a militant mood has been building for months among black students," BSA advisor Laurie Sugarmon informed *Memphis Press-Scimitar* reporter Kay Pittman Black. Sugarmon pointed to incidents of covert racism like exclusion in the Campus Cutie section of the *Tiger Rag*. "Overt racial acts on the part of the faculty and

¹³¹"Readers Response," *Tiger Rag*, May 6, 1969.

¹³²"Skepticism", *Tiger Rag*, May 2, 1969.

¹³³"MSU Campus Calm as Tension Eases", *Press-Scimitar*, May 1, 196.

¹³⁴"Speaking Out," *Tiger Rag*, May 6, 1969.

the student body are not as bad as they use to be now that there are more black students,” she explained.¹³⁵

Despite its impromptu nature, the sit-in revealed the students’ longstanding hostilities toward perceived and real inequalities at Memphis State. The sit-in also reflected the students’ awareness of the larger issue of reform in higher education. “We are not asking a major educational institution to grant blindly any and all requests made by any individual, group or all of its students,” explained the BSA publication, the *Black Appeal*. “We do not expect a responsible institution to succumb to pressure tactics. We DO expect, the paper asserted, responsible people to behave in a responsible manner and to listen with reason to our demands.”¹³⁶ The students pushed and the administration pushed back, but with both sides’ revealing their position, a dialogue for change opened. In an effort to avert any repeat disturbances, the administration formed “an ad-hoc committee consisting of administrative officials, faculty and black students...to discuss the reasons for black students’ dissatisfaction and to study what measures could be taken to avoid future confrontations.”¹³⁷ The students rejected the authority of the ad-hoc committee to determine the BSA’s future. “The future course of action on the part of administration officials toward the 109 students in question will play a significant role in

¹³⁵“Why Did It Happen at Memphis State?” *Memphis Press-Scimitar*, May 2, 1969.

¹³⁶“Memphis State University Black Student Association Black Student Appeal, Volume 1, 25 April 1969,” University of Memphis Special Collections, Memphis, Tennessee, (April 25, 1969).

¹³⁷“Student Protests Bring Suspensions, ‘New Dialogue.’” *The Columns: Alumni Association of Memphis State University* May-June 1969: 1-2; Dr. Sugarmon Raps Penalties, Quits MSU Unit, *Commercial Appeal*, May 22, 1969, Sugarmon quit in protest the committee after the administration imposed deferred suspension on the 109 students. “The university should grant complete amnesty to the students of the university charges and on the court charges,” she argued.

determining the direction in which the BSA will move in the future. If Dr. Humphreys continues in his present course, he will only be adding fuel to the proverbial flames,” warned Stephen Edwards.¹³⁸

After the administration building sit-in, the BSA finally hosted its first Black Extravaganza festivities. Adam Clayton Powell did not make an appearance. Neither did any of the other high profile activists on the BSA’s short list of possible Extravaganza speakers. What the ceremony lacked in celebrity appearances, the students more than made up for with their own black cultural showcase. The purpose of Extravaganza in Black was to “present a positive program with black involvement that hopefully will have a program that is indicative of maturing college young men and women and to further develop an appreciation of blacks as a part of the university family,” explained James Mock.¹³⁹ Not as explosive as the group originally intended, the show was nevertheless a success, considering the weeks leading up to the event. The Extravaganza included a fashion and talent show, as well as a Miss BSA pageant. The students’ determination to continue despite the arrests, appeals, and school suspensions that dogged many of the members showed a resolve that they hoped would serve the organization well in the future.

Considering the sit-ins a bridge to the larger university community, BSA leaders hoped that black students, both engaged and ambivalent, would rally together in the aftermath. To an extent they did. In the fall of 1969, Memphis State hired its first African

¹³⁸“Speaking Out,” *Tiger Rag*, May 2, 1969.

¹³⁹“Talent Show Heads Extravaganza,” *Tiger Rag*, May 16, 1969.

American administrator, Ernest K. Davis, to serve as Dean of Student Relations.¹⁴⁰

President Humphreys insisted that Davis was not hired as the ‘black dean’ for black students that BSA demanded; instead his job required that he serve as a representative for all students. However, black students placed a lot of pressure on Davis to represent their specific interests. Davis realized the importance of his position. In addition to serving the needs of all students, Davis expressed, “I hope to place black applicants in meaningful positions at Memphis State and in the community.”¹⁴¹ It did not take long for the students to lose faith in Davis. Giving him the unfortunate moniker of “Uncle Tom” Davis, the students argued that the administration “didn’t know what he was supposed to do, he didn’t either.”¹⁴² The students mocked Davis in an issue of the *Black Thesis*:

Note to the Dean: Dean Davis, we, the Black Students of Memphis State are very appreciative for the outstanding work you have done on campus. Your work is so outstanding that we can’t measure your accomplishments. We hope that you accomplish something that would be standing so that we can use in our revolutionary movement. Yours Truly, Hambone¹⁴³

The students’ statement, meant not only to disparage and embarrass Davis, cut deep. They signed the letter with the name of the *Commercial Appeal*’s minstrel caricature, exposed the depth of their critique of Davis, his job performance, and his loyalty to the black students. *Hambone’s Meditation* cartoon strip, created in 1910, appeared in the *Commercial Appeal* as an almost daily reminder of how whites in

¹⁴⁰“Dean Has Wide Experience,” *Tiger Rag*, September 26, 1969; “New MSU Post Awarded Negro,” *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, June 20, 1969.

¹⁴¹“MSU’s Black Dean Spans Generation Gap,” *Tri-State Defender*, August 23, 1969.

¹⁴²David Acey, Interview.

¹⁴³“Memphis State University Black Student Association Black Student Appeal, 5 February 1971,” University of Memphis Special Collections, Memphis, Tennessee, (February, 1971).

Memphis viewed the city's African American community. The paper's cartoon depicted Hambone as a shiftless, lazy, and unintelligent African American man with exaggerated facial features and broken dialect. Black community leaders fought hard to get the newspaper to remove the cartoon, suggesting, "Why can't there be something about what Negroes are doing, not as Negroes but as citizens of this city?" The students' use of Hambone, one of Memphis' most visual symbols of white's perception of black inferiority, placed Davis in low regard.¹⁴⁴

David Acey recalled the BSA being instrumental in Davis's hiring. "We told the university they weren't hiring anybody until they brought the application through us. We hired the first dean," said Acey. When it seemed like Davis was not working in the best interest of the organization, the students turned on Davis. "He ended up being a gatekeeper and we had to shut him down...we got your back. You wouldn't have been hired had it not been for us, who you think you're here for? They don't know what to do with us," Acey explained.¹⁴⁵

With their newly consolidated power, black students pressed to open the doors of campus organizations and events once closed to them. Janis Jones Fullilove, later a Memphis City Councilwoman, became the first African American woman to join the ROTC's Angel Flight squad. Previously an all-white organization, Fullilove promised to "raise much hell" on the squad.¹⁴⁶ The *Tiger Rag* opened the pages of its publication to more ethnic standards of beauty and culture. Although the Campus Cutie section of the *Tiger Rag* traditionally only depicted white women, that changed when Sandra Price

¹⁴⁴Honey, *Going Down Jericho Road*, 128.

¹⁴⁵David Acey, Interview.

¹⁴⁶"Black Students Start New Year," *Tiger Rag*, September 30, 1969.

posed for the Tiger Rag camera's as the first black Campus Cutie in the newspaper's history.¹⁴⁷ The newspaper also included more articles that related to black culture, dress, and black affairs throughout campus. The paper never credited the BSA or the events of that spring for the inclusion of more coverage of black students' issues at Memphis State, yet whether issues resonated with the general student body or not, the BSA's movement created an awareness of the plight of Memphis State's black students. No longer could faculty, administrators, or students claim not to know how most of the black students stood on matters of inclusion, racial equity, and black cultural distinctiveness.

In arguably the organization's largest show of power after the administration building sit-in, in 1969 the school crowned Maybeline Forbes the first African American homecoming queen in the school's history. Forbes, who identified herself as a "civil rights activist," was one of the 109 arrested protestors during the sit-in. Forbes' individual honor turned out to be a victory for black students campus-wide, as well as blacks throughout the city. "We felt that we would need 500 to 600 black votes for Maybeline to win," Acey said, "but at least 900 blacks voted. Maybeline's election will have unifying effect on Memphis State's black students...the BSA showed that it is still around and still able to mobilize black students."¹⁴⁸ The win also signaled a cultural shift. A picture of Forbes with her hand raised and fist clinched in the Black Power salute appeared on the front page of the *Tiger Rag*. "Black Power was used to elect Maybeline, just as white people have used white power to elect white queens. The Black Power symbol was symbolic and significant to the people who elected her their queen," Acey explained. "The symbol is not to be anti-white, but to be pro-black." Again, in a symbol

¹⁴⁷"Campus Cutie," *Tiger Rag*, October 14, 1969.

¹⁴⁸*Ibid.*

of their demands of inclusion without losing their identity, Acey argued that Forbes's win would only have an impact on the black students' identity issues if the administration, students, and community treated Forbes the same as the white queens. "Maybeline will represent the total university at all times, but will never deny her blackness," explained Acey.¹⁴⁹

The future contained more uncertainty than the BSA anticipated. The organization started the Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Memorial Scholarship fund to help recruit needy students in the community.¹⁵⁰ The Snack and Rap forums continued with distinguished lecturers such as James Lawson and Stokely Carmichael. Black and white organizations coalesced to host the Inquiry I symposium on contemporary problems, highlighted by speeches from Julian Bond and Dick Gregory.¹⁵¹ But dissension diluted the organizations' effectiveness as the years progressed. Even a unifying event like the Black Extravaganza did not escape scrutiny from the black student body. "Some of the people who ran [for Miss BSA] had not contributed to the black cause at this school at all. Somebody should have won who went to jail with the 109 students or at least, had shown that she was 'black-spirited,'" Judy Alexander complained.¹⁵² BSA spokesman James Mock took the blame for the breakdown in the organization. "I have to accept responsibility...for the stagnant period that has existed so far as the BSA is concerned. I

¹⁴⁹"Black Queen Reigns Over Homecoming," *Tiger Rag*, October 30, 1969.

¹⁵⁰"Black History Course Featured in Summer Evangelistic Series," *Tri-State Defender*, July 19, 1969.

¹⁵¹"Inquiry I Symposium Opens Thursday Night," *Tiger Rag*, March 23, 1971.

¹⁵²"Speaking Out," *Tiger Rag*, May 20, 1969.

organized people and in organizing them, I organized around a basic philosophy and around a personality, so consequently, many of the black students and white students began to relate to Jim Mock as their leader.” Having been in the civil rights movement, Mock knew the long-term dangers of any group rallying around one figure, one personality. “I failed to teach, instead I started to organize,” lamented James Mock.¹⁵³

Further exposing the group’s deficiencies, contended James Pope, “the organization has never been a stable organization on that campus. The black students play right into the white man’s hands and they’re playing his game beautifully of divide and conquer.” In terms of ideology, black students did not always agree on how to organize on campus. In that sense, the students’ actions mirrored the national Black Freedom Movement. As national movement leaders fought against discrimination, they also struggled internally with the direction and intensity of the movement. Black students at Memphis State, never a monolithic group, grappled with how much to push. How much Black Power is too much Black Power? It was one thing for the organization to demand black student representation in campus clubs or coordinate pageants and plays, but BSA leadership turned some rank-and-file membership off as they tried to push the group in an increasingly more political direction. A high-ranking BSA member thwarted a third attempt by the organization to move on Humphreys’ office. “One guy took the initiative to run over to the man’s office. He told the man, ‘I think there’s going to be some trouble on campus and I think you ought to go over and call Dr. Humphreys and tell him. I don’t want to see any violence on campus, you see. I don’t mind the black students demanding redress of grievances, but I don’t want to see them commit any violent acts, you see.’”

¹⁵³“Mock Talks About Black Students,” *Tiger Rag*, February 24, 1970.

Clearly frustrated, Pope vented, “They’re so divided out there...we hadn’t been able to jell together as a unit, as an organization never.”¹⁵⁴

Yet some students blamed the BSA for losing its edge. Though leaders vowed that the sit-ins and the arrests marked the beginning of a longer, more engaged struggle, some black students argued that the group worried more about administrative matters than it did about student activism.¹⁵⁵ The leadership also suffered a blow when BSA leader James Pope and James Buckmon, a BSA member and basketball player, were arrested and accused of wounding a white student during an argument.¹⁵⁶ Pope’s troubles with the police were not a first for the BSA leadership. James Mock came under scrutiny when the local news outlets discovered he had a fugitive warrant issued for his arrest by the Milwaukee county Sheriff’s Department.¹⁵⁷

When posed with the question, “Can White Racism Be Cured?” Jim Lawson, keynote speaker at a symposium discussion hosted by the Memphis State Human Relations Club, answered thoughtfully, “We must cure Memphis State! No more talk. There will be no cure unless you clear MSU of the racism which exists here. It’s your school and your vocation.”¹⁵⁸ Lawson, a civil rights icon and non-violent practitioner, viewed Memphis State and its racial complexities as a microcosm of the larger society. In

¹⁵⁴James Pope, interview, “Suspensions From MSU Appealed, More than 100 Black Students Write Letters,” *Memphis Press-Scimitar*, April 30, 1969.

¹⁵⁵John Gray, Interview.

¹⁵⁶“Athlete is Suspended After Knife Fight at Dorm,” *Tiger Rag*, February 20, 1970.

¹⁵⁷“Mock, BSA Spokesman, Named in Fugitive Warrant,” *Memphis Press-Scimitar*, April 25, 1969.

¹⁵⁸“Racism Cure Must Come From MSU Says Lawson,” *Tiger Rag*, February 14, 1969.

many ways, so did the Black Student Association at Memphis State University. “We presented a posture that was uncompromising. We had to. We challenged the Board of Regents, the Governor, the State of Tennessee, the administrators at the university and the Mayor and we won. We won,” proclaimed Acey. He echoed Fredrick Douglass in his call to “dare to struggle, dare to win.”¹⁵⁹

African American students on predominately white campuses faced a difficult task in finding avenues of expression, as well as inclusion. It was not simply a matter of needing to belong, but of needing the right to make that determination. Students rejected conformity, instead opting to maintain ties to their distinct cultural identities, which were reflected in their demands for more black studies curriculum, faculty, and administration, as well as fraternal organizations and auxiliaries. At Memphis State, black students forged an alliance in the form of the Black Student Association that challenged the university’s sticky racial patterns. Thanks to the BSA, the university moved from desegregation to integration.

¹⁵⁹David Acey, Interview.

Epilogue

“Black Panther Party Not Needed”: The Legacy of Youth and Student Activism and the Black Power Generation in Memphis

“You have to understand that in 1967, hardly anyone used the word black, that was fighting words. Back then you were colored and good colored folk and proud to be so.”¹

– **John Burl Smith, Co-founder, Invaders**

“A Black Panther organization has been formed in Memphis with some of its members and leaders drawn from the old black militant Invaders group which is now defunct,” reported Kay Pittman Black of the *Memphis Press-Scimitar* in December 1970. The branch functioned officially under the auspices of the National Committee to Combat Fascism (NCCF), the organizing arm of the Black Panther Party (BPP). However, it operated like most Panther branches across the country.² The Panther branch represented a new day in Memphis Black Power radicalism. The local press now labeled BOP and he Invaders, which one year earlier had been the city’s face of Black Power, as “old” and “defunct.”³

The Memphis division of the Federal Bureau of Investigation took note of the decline of BOP.⁴ In 1968 the Bureau reported the defection of all of its subsidiary

¹Tim Sampson, “Blacklash,” *Memphis: The City Magazine*, April 2008, 31-32.

²Judson Jefferies, ed., *Comrades: A Local History of the Black Panther Party* (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 2007), 60.

³“Black Panther Group Formed Here; Free Breakfast Project Underway,” *Memphis Press-Scimitar*, December 11, 1970.

⁴Invaders, “FBI Memo, Racial Matters, 157-1067-1502A” (Memphis, Tennessee, August 26, 1969). The FBI was able to monitor the organization’s inner workings primarily with the help of Memphis photographer Ernest Withers who photographed many moments during the civil rights movement.

organizations except for the radical arm, the Invaders.⁵ While not blaming its own provocateurs for hastening the demise of BOP, memos from the Memphis Bureau to the Federal Bureau credited repeated arrests, negative publicity from the arrests, withdrawal of support from black community leaders, and a lack of financial resources for the organization's weakened state.⁶ By late 1969 only the Invaders were active among the organizations affiliated with the BOP. Arrests drained the leadership as well as the rank-and-file membership of the organization whose leaders once bragged of membership rolls of approximately 1,500 of the city's black youth.⁷ In another memo outlining the status of "subversive" organizations in operation in the city, the memo listed the Invaders as a defunct organization that the agency no longer needed to monitor.⁸

Instead of keeping tabs on the Invaders, the Bureau turned its attention to two new organizations that evolved from the leftover membership, We The People and the People's Revolutionary Party (PRP). The BOP's founder's dream of creating a solidified Black United Front in Memphis never materialized beyond isolated moments of unity with other black organizations. Instead, in 1970 Lance "Sweet Willie Wine" Watson set

⁵Revolutionary People's Constitutional Convention Organized by the Black Panther Party "FBI Memo, Racial Matters, 157-1067-2026" (Memphis, Tennessee, November 3, 1968).

⁶Invaders, "FBI Memo, Racial Matters, 157-1067-1502A" (Memphis, Tennessee, August 26, 1969). The memo reported that the Invaders' offices were padlocked due to failure to pay rent, they owed over \$300 to the telephone company, and adult groups such as Ezekiel Bell, President of the NAACP and Reverend H. Ralph Jackson, Director of the AME Church's Minimum Salary Division stopped any funding or rent payments on the Invaders behalf. However, Bell and Jackson in a January 18, 1969 edition of the *Memphis World* denied ever paying the rent on the Invaders headquarters.

⁷Invaders, "FBI Memo, Racial Matters, 157-1067" (Memphis, Tennessee 1968); Invaders, "FBI Memo, Racial Matters, 157-1067-2050" (Memphis, Tennessee, May 28, 1971).

⁸Characterization of Subversive, Racial, Klan, White Hate, and Militant Black Organizations "FBI Memo, Racial Matters, 157-1067-2049" (Memphis, Tennessee, May 28, 1971).

out to establish what he called a “New United Front“ in the form of his new organization, We The People.⁹

The designation of the organization as a “New” instead of a “Black” United Front pointed towards Watson’s new political orientation. Using the first three words of the Constitution of the United States, We The People signaled a shift from strictly a Black Nationalist agenda to one that promoted a more pluralistic vision, while acknowledging the importance of embracing a larger struggle for human rights.¹⁰ “The only racial identity its members assume is that of human beings,” read the We The People newsletter.¹¹ Watson recounted that he “went through that stage” of using Black Power as the primary vehicle for black liberation, and “to go back to it again would be not to progress but to retrogress.” White people are “not my enemy,” he continued, “It’s 218 fellows who control this country. That is the enemy.” The “218 fellows” Watson referenced were members of the Rockefeller, Ford, and DuPont families among others. In Watson’s estimation these families controlled the majority of the country’s financial and political resources, at the peril of blacks and the poor.¹²

⁹Invaders, "FBI Memo, Racial Matters, 157-1067-1502A" (Memphis, Tennessee, August 26, 1969).

¹⁰Invaders, "FBI Memo, Racial Matters, 157-1067-1876" (Memphis, Tennessee, June 5, 1970); For more information on the history of the black struggle for human rights see: Carol Anderson, *Eyes Off The Prize: The United Nations And the African American Struggle For Human Rights, 1945-1955* (United Kingdom: Cambridge Press, 2003), 1-5. Anderson’s work chronicles the NAACP’s fight for human rights instead of the simply a struggle for civil rights in the wake of World War II. Anderson argues that the United States’ Cold War entanglements, the “symbolic politics” of President Harry Truman, and Eleanor Roosevelt as Chair of the United Nations’ Commission on Human Rights, and the NAACP’s fear of a “being labeled as a Communist front,” for its insistence on a Human Rights’ agenda altered the Association’s battle for human rights into a strictly civil rights plank.

¹¹Invaders, "FBI Memo, Racial Matters, 157-1067-1876" (Memphis, Tennessee, June 5, 1970).

Watson took his fight to the nation's capital, where he levied charges with the Justice Department against President Richard Nixon for "murder, perversion, and genocide."¹³ Watson credited Malcolm X for his more informed understanding of the worldwide struggle for freedom. In the last year of his life, Malcolm X, who had long linked the struggle of African Americans to the fate of people of color throughout the Diaspora, planned to bring a petition in front of the United Nations General Assembly against the United States for its human rights violations against African Americans. After his release from prison, Malcolm joined the Nation of Islam in 1959 and became the sect's most fiery minister. Critical of integration, Malcolm realized the problem was not simply a denial of civil rights, "but a problem of human rights."¹⁴ Although Watson's new allegiances, unlike Malcolm, included whites, his position that African Americans had to "stop struggling for civil rights and strive for human rights" aligned with the message of the father of the modern Black Power Movement.¹⁵ In a series of moves that included levying the aforementioned charges against Nixon, attending Earth Day Rallies, and protesting against police brutality in front of the Memphis Police Department, Watson also ran for the Governor of Arkansas in 1970.¹⁶ Watson had gained political alliances in the black community of several small towns in the Arkansas Delta during his

¹²Kelly Delaney and Lance Watson, interview by James Mosby, June 5, 1970, The Civil Rights Documentation Project, Ralph J. Bunche Oral History Program, Washington, DC; Invaders, "FBI Memo, Racial Matters, 157-1067-202" (Memphis, Tennessee, June 19, 1970).

¹³Invaders, "FBI Memo, Racial Matters, 157-1067-1876" (Memphis, Tennessee, June 5, 1970).

¹⁴Clayborne Carson, ed., *Malcolm X: The FBI Files* (New York: Carroll and Graf Publishing, 1992), 300.

¹⁵Kelly Delaney and Lance Watson, interview.

¹⁶Ibid; Invaders, "FBI Memo, Racial Matters, 157-1067-1768" (Memphis, Tennessee, February 26, 1970).

grassroots organizing in Forrest City and his March Against Fear to the Arkansas capital in 1969. Despite his proclamation that the “rule of the Razorbacks is on the way out,” Watson mounted an unsuccessful bid for control of the Arkansas State House.

The Memphis Bureau of Investigation classified the two new factions as extensions of earlier Invader efforts. Bureau memos described We The People as the political arm of the Invaders and the Peoples Revolutionary Party as the action arm.¹⁷ Ex-Invaders Maurice Lewis and John C. Smith led the PRP, which functioned more like the Black Panther Party than did Watson’s We The People.¹⁸ The *Commercial Appeal* reported that the PRP was “dedicated to overthrowing the government.”¹⁹ The two organizations cooperated on some level as members attending meetings for both organizations. At the BPP-sponsored Revolutionary People’s Constitutional Convention in Philadelphia in September 1970, the leadership of the PRP officially inquired to “someone in the Central Committee as to setting up a group in Memphis.” Soon after the convention, the PRP and its membership united under the Black Panther Party umbrella as the National Committee to Combat Fascism.²⁰

By 1970 the splintering of the BPP had begun to play out on a national stage. Its split was more acrimonious than the division within the Invaders. Huey Newton’s release from prison in 1970 after a jury declared a mistrial on charges of voluntary manslaughter

¹⁷We the People, "FBI Memo, Racial Matters, 157-2614" (Memphis, Tennessee, August 10, 1970).

¹⁸Invaders, "FBI Memo, Racial Matters, 157-1067-2020" (Memphis, Tennessee, September 16, 1970).

¹⁹“Panthers (Memphis Style),” Memphis Press-Scimitar, January 19, 1971.

²⁰Invaders, "FBI Memo, Racial Matters, 157-1067-2020" (Memphis, Tennessee, September 16, 1970).

in the 1967 shooting of an Oakland Police officer did not temper the split, as ideologically the organization found itself at an impasse between “hardcore revolutionaries and sensitive community caretakers.”²¹ During Newton’s incarceration the BPP grew under the leadership of cofounder and BPP Chairman Bobby Seale, Chief of Staff David Hilliard, and Minister of Information Eldridge Cleaver.²² The Party established branches in New York, Chicago, New Haven, Milwaukee and other cities throughout the country, extending the reach of the BPP organizing and community outreach programs beyond its national headquarters in Oakland.

The recruitment of *Soul On Ice* author Eldridge Cleaver proved to be one of the Party’s most important and influential recruits in the Party’s history. Not long after joining the BPP, Cleaver began to place his imprint on the Party. Over time, his vision shaped the perception of the Party as much as did Newton. Cleaver advocated hardcore and immediate revolution, while Newton pushed the organization toward its community-based Survival Programs and away from “reactionary suicide.” The split created factions within the organization that set off events “that signaled the beginning of the end of the Black Panther Party as a national organization.”²³ However, the PRP organized the Memphis chapter in advance of Newton’s directive to close all of the local branches in 1972 “to concentrate on developing local political power in Oakland.”²⁴

²¹Joseph, *Waiting ‘Til The Midnight Hour*, 252.

²²Jefferies, ed., *Comrades*, 4.

²³Joseph, *Waiting ‘Til The Midnight Hour*, 178, 267; Huey P. Newton, *Revolutionary Suicide* (New York: Penguin Publishing, 2009).

²⁴Joseph, *Waiting ‘Til The Midnight Hour*, 269.

In Memphis the BPP chapter represented a last gasp at sparking a radical Black Power revolution. The Free Breakfast program constituted one of the Party's first community outreach efforts after its establishment. Survival Programs offered food, clothing, and other services to those in the community that needed it the most. In addition to the Free Breakfast program, the Party also instituted the Free Shoes and Free Clothing programs. Their Busing to Prisons program helped families and inmates stay connected by providing transportation for family members to visit their incarcerated loved ones.

Huey Newton and Bobby Seale initially conceived the Survival Programs as a way to connect the Party to the community.²⁵ In Memphis, the programs had a similar impact. Party members labeled the city's effort to start its own breakfast program as reactionary and designed to undermine their efforts and curtail the organization's influence. Members bragged that the black community was not fooled by the city's attempt to stifle the Party's programs with its offer of a "cup cake and carton of stale milk." As historian Donna Jean Murch has noted, breakfast programs not only provided those in need with a free meal, but "ultimately became a conduit to the larger social problems facing the African American community."²⁶

In 1968 and 1969, when the BPP expanded their Survival Programs beyond the Oakland community, BOP and the Invaders initiated similar programs on a smaller scale. As a component of the War on Poverty financed Neighborhood Organizing Project, the free shoes and clothing component provided for the underprivileged. Lance Watson's Operation Breakfast never garnered the necessary support from the community to have the impact that he envisioned. He lacked the financial resources and institutional support

²⁵Murch, *Living For The City*, 175.

²⁶Ibid, 128.

to keep the program funded. Several years earlier, the Invaders' radicalism had hurt their ability to secure funding and to enact their platform, but the Panthers in some ways benefited from their militant posturing and the Black Panther brand. The *Tri-State Defender* lauded the Panthers' breakfast program as "progress" because it fed children that others had "overlooked."²⁷ *The Commercial Appeal*, by contrast, looked at the Party not as facilitators of progress, but as troublemakers that they hoped would disappear, "as did the Invaders."²⁸

On January 16, 1971, one week after police opened fire on the BPP Chapter in Winston-Salem, North Carolina, several families along with members of the NCCF visited the Memphis Housing Authority (MHA) to inquire about a notification some tenants received to vacate the property by January 16.²⁹ "We have no place to go and the housing we are living in, is unfit for people," a resident explained to housing officials.³⁰ Urban renewal projects were underway in several lower income areas in the city and residents who were forced out because of the urban renewal or city condemnations were prioritized on the public housing lists.³¹ Unsatisfied with the housing authority's response, Mrs. Vinie Boyd and her nine children, assisted by approximately twenty members of the NCCF "staged a live-in at a field office of the Memphis Housing Authority," in hopes of dramatizing "her need for decent housing." Boyd had been

²⁷"In Loeb's Words," *Tri-State Defender*, January 23, 1971.

²⁸"Panthers Aren't Needed," *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, January 20, 1971.

²⁹Joseph, ed., *Neighborhood Rebels*, 141.

³⁰"NCCF Cuts The Red Tape," *Tri-State Defender*, January 23, 1971.

³¹"Slum to be Cleared of Vacant Buildings," *Memphis Press-Scimitar*, May 23, 1968.

evicted after she refused to pay rent for a home that she described as “unsafe and unsanitary.”³² Boyd and her family suffered from health problems due to their poor living circumstances. Mrs. Paula Butts and her three children also occupied the MHA office. “We have never missed paying \$52 a month, but we got tired...one of our children has been treated for rat bites. The roof has almost fallen in the rear of the house. The bathroom isn’t fit to use,” complained Butts. After a one-night “live-in” the housing authority awarded Mrs. Boyd and her family a five-bedroom apartment and promised Butts that she would receive an apartment soon.³³

The initial protest and success of the Boyd family in procuring an apartment after only one day of protest encouraged the Party to repeat their actions. On January 18 the organization broke into several other apartments to move in other families in need of better housing.³⁴ The Panthers moved twelve families into the Ashby and Texas Court Apartment Housing Complex. Panther members boarded up windows and covered others with the Black Panther Newspaper, while BPP Minister of Information Elaine Brown’s Black Panther anthem, *Seize the Time*, played from speakers inside. Armed with weapons, the Panthers hoped the presence of women and children in the apartments would stop the police from shooting or throwing tear gas into the building. “The more of them [women and children] we have in here the less trouble we’ll have,” said one Panther. A standoff between the police and the Panthers ensued. Further connecting

³²“MHA Has Overnight Visitors,” *Memphis Press-Scimitar*, January 16, 1971.

³³“Apartment Found After Live-In,” *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, January 17, 1971; MHA Has Overnight Visitors, *Memphis Press-Scimitar*, January 16, 1971.

³⁴Panther-Police Storm Builds Up – And Then Suddenly All Is Still, *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, January 19, 1971. According to the article, Mrs. Boyd was high on the waiting list for an apartment before the “live-in.” She panicked because had to vacate her current residence on the same day of the staged live-in.

Memphis's radical Black Power past with its new Black Power element, Calvin Taylor, ex-Invader turned reporter for the *Commercial Appeal*, acted as mediator.³⁵

“We want Orelle Ledbetter, Get us Ledbetter” shouted several Panthers, demanding to see the Director of the Memphis Housing Authority, as well as Mayor Henry Loeb and Police Chief Henry Lux. The police threatened to use tear gas to draw the Panthers out if they did not surrender. Taylor identified himself and informed the police of the number of women and children in the apartment. “We don’t want to hurt those women and children. We just want the people we have warrants for to come out. The rest are free to stay,” Lux told Taylor. Taylor relayed the message. After negotiating the conditions of their surrender, the Panthers left the apartment. Fourteen were arrested and charged with conspiracy to disrupt trade and commerce.³⁶

The three-day live-in and subsequent stand-off accomplished what Vinie Boyd had hoped – it dramatized the plight of the city’s black poor and placed the issue of the shortage of decent and affordable housing for those living in the city’s poorest communities on the front page in all of city’s daily and weekly newspapers. The live-in also illustrated the unauthorized occupants’ level of hopelessness, frustration, and lack of faith in the system. After several attempts to have the landlord of their respective properties make repairs with no success, they turned to members of the NCCF for help. That these families turned to Black Power radicals, and not the city’s other more

³⁵Ibid.

³⁶Ibid; “3 More Panthers Are Freed On Bond,” *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, January 30, 1971.

moderate black organizations, reflected a need for immediate results that other organizations had not delivered.

The Panthers' stance elicited strong responses from both sides of the political coin. The *Commercial Appeal* urged the families on the MHA waiting list to follow procedure and be patient with the process, while warning the community that "stirring up trouble" was the Panthers' only motive in assisting the families during the housing crisis.³⁷ The *Tri-State Defender* accused the city's white leaders "dislike for dashikis," and "out and out prejudice" for their inaction in alleviating the economic disparities for the black community.³⁸ Point four of the Panthers' Ten Point Program demanded "decent housing, fit for shelter of human beings," and clearly the dilapidated housing of Boyd and the other families were not fit or safe places to live.³⁹ "We couldn't stand to see fourteen people out in the cold," a Panther explained.⁴⁰

The subsequent arrests of members thinned the membership ranks, but some in the black community, especially those living in the lower-income areas, applauded the Panthers' stance. "Their display of reckless bravery in the face of insurmountable odds was a dramatic lift to the morale of blacks everywhere," wrote Nat D. Williams in the *Tri-State Defender*. Williams criticized the Panthers for carrying weapons into the MHA office, but he supported their attempts to "try and do something effective" when no other organization in the city would.⁴¹ And while not officially supporting the Party's actions,

³⁷"The Panthers and Housing," *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, January 19, 1971.

³⁸"Mrs. Boyd's Plight," *Tri-State Defender*, January 23, 1971.

³⁹Murch, *Living For The City*, 128.

⁴⁰"MHA Has Overnight Visitors," *Memphis Press-Scimitar*, January 16, 1971.

the NAACP filed a complaint against the police department for its use of the word “nigger” in reference to the arrested Panthers.⁴² In earlier years the community shunned Black Power radicalism as espoused by BOP and the Invaders. However, the Panthers’ bold and effective move gave the Movement a tangible level of success that the Invaders had found difficult to obtain.

Shortly after the live-in, other BPP branches were established in Nashville and Chattanooga. The Memphis branch served as headquarters for the state chapter. The Memphis branch saw its membership and community support increase, as well as community participation in the Survival Programs. In response to the success of the Panthers’ “Free Breakfast” program, the city initiated a free breakfast campaign of its own. The Panthers responded by expanding their Free Breakfast program to reach more people.⁴³

The city felt threatened by the impact of the Panthers’ Survival Programs. The programs provided a bridge between the Panthers and the city’s black youth just as the Invaders had during its active years. Party members accused the police of exacting “Southern justice” against the city youth because they were “among the first to relate to the Black Panther Party and the Survival Programs.” The Panthers blamed the increase in incidents of police brutality against black youth as the police’s method of intimidating

⁴¹“A Point Of View; Panther Puffs,” *Tri-State Defender*, January 30, 1971.

⁴²“NAACP Complaint Filed With Police,” *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, January 20, 1971.

⁴³Its About Time – Black Panther Party Legacy and Alumni, “Black Panther Party Chapter History: Memphis Chapter,” http://www.itsabouttimebpp.com/Chapter_History/Memphis_A_Party_Needed_1.html [accessed April 2006].

and frightening the youth into “staying away from the Party and its ideas.”⁴⁴ In May of 1971, a twenty-year-old black male accused the police of forcing him into the back of the police car, beating him with a night stick, and striking him repeatedly until he could barely stand – all for having a “Free Angela” bumper sticker on the back of his vehicle.⁴⁵ Labor historian Michael Honey arrived in “terribly polarized” Memphis in 1970 as a community activist. He suggested that police brutality stemmed partly from leftover resentment from the sanitation strike. Police were “taking revenge on blacks for what happened in 1968,” Honey recalled. “They were attacking African Americans for anything.”⁴⁶

The death of seventeen-year-old Elton Hayes on October 15, 1971, at the hands of the Memphis Police Department proved to be a breaking point in the black community’s battle against police brutality. Three black youths – George Barnes, fifteen; Calvin McKissack, fourteen; and Elton Hayes, seventeen – were riding a pickup truck in a South Memphis neighborhood. After being spotted by the police, the three youths sped away, resulting in a high-speed chase. The driver, Barnes, lost control of the vehicle and ran into a ditch in an area outside of the city limits. Police officers gathered at the scene.

⁴⁴Ibid.

⁴⁵“Youth Claims Beaten Over Angela Sticker,” *Tri-State Defender*, May 15, 1971; Joseph, *Waiting ‘Til The Midnight Hour*, 251-252. Angela Davis was arrested in 1970 for allegedly providing Jonathan Jackson with the weapon he used in his attempt to free prisoners from a Marin County Courtroom.

⁴⁶40th Anniversary Commemoration of Martin Luther King, Jr.: *The Man, The Mission, The Movement*,” (Audio Recording in the Possession of the Author) April 2, 2008.

Some officers watched, while other officers severely beat the three youth. Barnes and McKissack survived, but Hayes died from his wounds at John Gaston Hospital.⁴⁷

The police reported that Hayes died as a result of injuries from the traffic accident, when in reality he died from wounds inflicted by the police officers.⁴⁸ Upon revelation of the truth, the black community exploded. Riots erupted in several black neighborhoods, resulting in the “most violent race riot in the city since the 1866 race riots.”⁴⁹ In the black Orange Mound neighborhood that Hayes had called home, about seventy-five youth near Melrose High School threw rocks, bottles, and firebombs as their measure of retaliation for death of Hayes.⁵⁰ In response, Mayor Loeb called a curfew, which enraged both the black community and the leadership. Several black leaders, whom Panther members referred to as the community’s “responsible black leaders,” met with Loeb to convince the Mayor to call off the curfew.⁵¹ Loeb complied with the leaders request, saying he was giving them the “chance they had demanded – to go into their communities and urge calm.” Stax recording artist Isaac Hayes went out into the community to help keep calm and offering free tickets to his benefit concert, but some

⁴⁷Wright, *Race, Power, and Political Emergence in Memphis*, 74-75; “Beating Hinted In ‘Crash’ Death,” *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, October 17, 1971.

⁴⁸“Beating Hinted In ‘Crash’ Death,” *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, October 17, 1971.

⁴⁹Wright, *Race, Power, and Political Emergence in Memphis*, 74; “Quiet Settles Over Memphis – Firebombs, Rock Tossing End; Protests End At Midnight,” *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, October 21, 1971. Stax recording artist Isaac Hayes helped to ease the tensions in the community

⁵⁰“Quiet Settles Over Memphis – Firebombs, Rock-Tossing End; Protest Ease At Midnight,” *Memphis Press-Scimitar*, October 21, 1971. In the chaos a police vehicle hit a three-old boy. Robert Reed, Jr. died as a result of the accident.

⁵¹Ibid; Its About Time – Black Panther Party Legacy and Alumni, “Black Panther Party Chapter History: Memphis Chapter,” http://www.itsabouttimebpp.com/Chapter_History/Memphis_A_Party_Needed_1.html [accessed April 2006].

youth rebuffed singer's advances. "Don't come down here offering us tickets to a free show. Get somebody in here to solve the problems," the youth replied.⁵²

While the NAACP and black civic organizations spoke out against the tragedy and demanded redress, black youth took their demands to the streets. Approximately 250 students from Northside High School, led by We The People's Lance Watson, "marched on city and county administration buildings while the adults were making plans to keep the city calm." The group, led by the ex-Invader, held up signs using the term promulgated by the Black Panthers, "death to the pigs."⁵³ Watson hoped that through the tragedy the black community would continue to take a stand against police violence instead of being "bystanders as their black brothers and sisters were beaten."⁵⁴

In its official organ, *The Black Panther Intercommunal News Service*, the Party praised the youth for taking a stance, especially the rioters. "Instead of sending flowers," youth chose to act by attacking the "oppressors in anyway they could."⁵⁵ Almost 150 students from Memphis Tech High School left the campus to attend a special City Council session. They expressed concern over the death of their "black brother." The spokesman for the group told the council members that "it could have been anyone of

⁵²"Quiet Settles Over Memphis – Firebombs, Rock-Tossing End; Protest Ease At Midnight," *Memphis Press-Scimitar*, October 21, 1971.

⁵³"Black, White Leaders Press Efforts to Curb Violence Across City," *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, October 22, 1971.

⁵⁴"Youth's Death Hits Police Abuse Note," *Tri-State Defender*, October 23, 1971. Despite Watson's claim, the NAACP as well as other community organizations had lodged complaints for years on behalf of the victims of police violence with the Memphis Police Department.

⁵⁵Its About Time – Black Panther Party Legacy and Alumni, "Black Panther Party Chapter History: Memphis Chapter," http://www.itsabouttimebpp.com/Chapter_History/chapter_history_index.html [accessed April 2006].

us.”⁵⁶ Hayes’s death highlighted the students’ awareness that they could also fall victim to police brutality. But it also reminded the youth, as well as the rest of the black community, that black life was still undervalued.

In the aftermath, nine officers were arrested and charged in connection with the death of Elton Hayes. Four of the officers were found guilty of first-degree murder, four others “of assault-to-murder in the first degree,” and another officer with “neglect of duty.”⁵⁷ The black community, still reeling over the loss of Hayes, demanded a police review board as well as more black police lieutenants and captains in the black community. Some African Americans blamed the City Council, especially black City Council members for not responding to Hayes’ death as aggressively as they should have. For years black Memphians had fought hard for representation in the city government decision-making body and the death of Elton Hayes as a platform to address other concerns as well. In a list of grievances they demanded Councilman Fred Davis “properly represent the black community or resign.” They charged J.O. Patterson, Jr. with not attending executive council sessions and thereby neglecting some of his important duties, but also leaving the black community underrepresented at important meetings.⁵⁸

Others recognized that the death of Hayes and the black youth’s reaction stemmed not simply from his murder and the subsequent cover up by the police. Larger frustrations with systemic issues of poverty and inadequate housing fueled their resentment at the police officers crude racism. In a sense, Hayes had become Memphis’s youth’s Emmett

⁵⁶“Youth’s Death Hits Police Abuse Note,” *Tri-State Defender*, October 23, 1971.

⁵⁷Wright, *Race, Power, and Political Emergence in Memphis*, 78.

⁵⁸“City Officials Promise at ‘Rap’ Session They’ll Consider Police-Community Council,” *Memphis Press-Scimitar*, October 23, 1971.

Till. Just as in 1955, when Ernest Withers's picture of Till on the cover of *Jet* magazine forced more Americans to acknowledge the region's racial strife, the Memphis BPP's use of a picture of the badly distorted body of Elton Hayes lying in a casket on the front page of their newspaper made police brutality and its most fatal result less of an abstraction and more tangible for the youth.⁵⁹ Hayes was their age and lived in their community, and despite their awareness of the rampant police brutality in their communities many understood for the first time that what happened to Hayes could have easily happened to other black youth.

In 2008 national and local activists gathered at the University of Memphis to commemorate the life and the 40th anniversary of the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. in Memphis, Tennessee. The event brought together figures from the labor movement, as well the civil rights soldiers of 1960s and 1970s, to celebrate King's legacy. They also assembled to discuss the fruits of their own activism. Several members of those arrested in April 1969 as a part of the Memphis State 109, as well as the members of the Black Organizing Project and Invaders, sat as guests on panels. They discussed their role in the local Black Freedom Movement. The venue provided many for the first time some legitimacy for their activism. The program's literature described the Memphis State 109 as a group responsible for "bringing new direction and leadership to the Black Student Association." It labeled Charles Cabbage, Coby Smith, and John B. Smith "militant founders of the Memphis Invaders Community Activist Movement."⁶⁰

⁵⁹Lewis, *The Shadows of Youth*, 25.

⁶⁰40th Anniversary Commemoration of Martin Luther King, Jr.: The Man, The Mission, The Movement," (Audio Recording in the Possession of the Author) April 2, 2008.

The program's description of the Memphis State 109 minimized the importance of the group's contribution to changing the culture of Memphis State University, which later became the University of Memphis. The Memphis State 109 did not simply bring a new direction to the Black Student Association; they helped to bring a new direction to the entire campus. Before the creation of the BSA, African American students fended for themselves, and despite their growing numbers many did not feel welcomed or wanted. With the administration building sit-in of 1969, Black students harnessed their "Black student power" to change the campus dynamics. Diversity grew out of their demand for inclusion; after 1969 African American students led the BSA to create outlets to explore and celebrate black life and culture, while becoming a more significant presence in the mainstream campus life. Their demands helped push the university to expand its Black Studies curriculum. Furthermore black students created parallel institutions and organizations such as the BSA and Miss Black Memphis State University. They also increased their participation in mainstream campus activities. One area that did not see a dramatic increase was the number of black faculty, although the school hired David Acey, a leader in the BSA, to teach classes in the Department of Communications and chair the Black Studies Department.⁶¹

Using Black Power as the conduit for protest, the BSA reshaped Memphis State University for the generation of students that followed. Recalling the actions of the BSA, Acey realized the lasting impact of the organization's activism on the current state of the university. We showed the "students and those who came after us, that freedom is not

⁶¹MSU's Acey Closes Communication Gap," *Tri-State Defender*, October 16, 1971.

free. If you don't continue to work at it and keep it, you'll lose it...we established this spirit of change that led to the integration of Memphis State.”⁶²

In 1968 no one referred to the Invaders as “community activists” or to the organization as a “community activist movement,” yet Charles Cabbage, Coby Smith, and John B. Smith sat on the stage in the Rose Theater recalling their days as young Black Power activists. Minister Sukara A. Yahweh, formerly Lance “Sweet Willie Wine” Watson, did not participate on the panel, but he walked through the audience handing out copies of his biographical information and his affiliations and accomplishments during the Black Freedom Movement.⁶³

In subsequent years, newspaper and magazine articles would mythologize the organization that was once blamed for the events that precipitated the death of Martin Luther King, Jr. When Charles Cabbage died on June 29, 2011, a *Commercial Appeal* article called the Black Power activist a “voice of reason” that “spoke for the community.” However, a reader objected to the newspaper’s characterization of Cabbage.⁶⁴ Instead of calling Cabbage a voice of reason, the writer suggested that the headline should have read: “Person who materially aided in destroying Memphis dies.” The writer blamed Cabbage for causing the riot that brought King back to Memphis, which he claims destroyed the city’s reputation.⁶⁵ In death, Cabbage found some

⁶² David Acey, Interview by author, Memphis, Tennessee, June 9, 2009.

⁶³40th Anniversary Commemoration of Martin Luther King, Jr.: The Man, The Mission, The Movement,” (Audio Recording in the Possession of the Author) April 2, 2008.

⁶⁴“Activist Charles Cabbage a Voice of Reason,” *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, June 29, 2010.

understanding that eluded he and the Invaders during their most active years, but he still could not shake the stigma of King's death.

In the fall of 2010 the Invaders once again gained notoriety when the *Commercial Appeal's* Marc Perrusquia revealed that famed photographer Ernest Withers operated as a confidential FBI informant. Withers's famous images of the civil rights movement graced the pages of magazines. He enjoyed access to movement leaders not afforded to many, which in the FBI's estimation made him the perfect informant. Withers reported on the activities of King during his visits to Memphis in 1968, but Withers is also credited with providing much of the information that "helped the FBI break up the Invaders."⁶⁶ After 1968, he almost exclusively reported on the activities of the Invaders. Questions about Withers's motivation remain unanswered since he passed away in 2008 without publicly revealing his role, but his role as an informant reveals the complex relationship between the Invaders, the Memphis black community, and Black Power.

By his own admission, Withers believed that the Invaders "were not capable of much action," but their radical rhetoric could cause trouble for the civil rights movement. The Invaders, conversely, looked to Withers as a father figure and an ally. They frequented Withers's studio and befriended his sons. While Withers may have had some affinity for the young men, from FBI reports he viewed them as cons, hustlers, and thieves looking to "scare and blackmail the community."⁶⁷ However, despite the

⁶⁵"Letters: A Different View Of History," *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, June 30, 2010.

⁶⁶"Photographer Ernest Withers doubled as FBI informant to spy on civil rights movement," *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, September 12, 2010; "Which Side Are You On? Another Look at Civil Rights Photographer Ernest Withers' Relationship With the F.B.I.," *Memphis Flyer*, December 16-22, 2010.

⁶⁷"Which Side Are You On?" *Memphis Flyer*, December 16-22, 2010.

revelations, former Invaders like Yahweh continue to hold Withers in high regard. "That's my daddy...If he was (an informant) I don't know anything about it ... He would call me his son. Right now, I'm still part of the family...I talked to (him) on his death bed."⁶⁸

Ultimately Black Power in Memphis in its different incarnations created a space for the youth and student activism that emerged in the period after the sit-in movement of the early 1960s. In Black Power they found a malleable and adaptive philosophy that traversed different sectors of life in Memphis. Through their activism, young Black Power activists set a stage for an increasingly more radical Memphis after 1968 when even moderate organizations such as the Memphis branch of the NAACP began to evoke the spirit of the Black Power Movement.⁶⁹

Memphis youth and students developed a cross-section of Black Power activism that in various ways mirrored the national Movement, while responding to local conditions. Viewing the sanitation strike as a major force for Black Power, the Black Organizing Project's involvement and relationship with black leadership during that campaign shaped the organization's future from that point forward.⁷⁰ With the assassination of Martin Luther King, the group once identified as a local "boys club" had moved from the periphery of black Memphis politics into the national spotlight, branded

⁶⁸"Photographer Ernest Withers doubled as FBI informant," *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, September 12, 2010.

⁶⁹James D. Conway, Jr. "Beyond 1968: The 1969 Black Monday Protest in Memphis, Tennessee" (Seminar Paper, University of Memphis, 2006).

⁷⁰Charles Cabbage, interview.

as complicit in the civil rights leader's death.⁷¹ Shaking that stigma proved impossible, even though BOP sought to carry part of King's legacy through its involvement in the Poor People's Campaign.⁷²

The organization's foray into War on Poverty projects suggested how Black Power could be applied to the institutions of liberal politics, but it proved unredemptive, further stymieing Black Power's ability to penetrate mainstream local politics. Charles Cabbage and Coby Smith's first experience with the War on Poverty funded organization MAP-South in 1967 placed Black Power on trial and on the defensive. In 1968 the organization received War on Poverty funding to operate the Neighborhood Organizing Project, a community organizing program. However, mismanagement by the Invaders, a lack of institutional support, and pushback from conservatives all factored into the program's small imprint.

However, the Neighborhood Organizing Project also included courses designed to affirm the importance of black culture, identity, and black history. Behind the criticism of the program's value to the Memphis community, these efforts reinforced Black Power's cultural importance, arguably its most tangible impact.⁷³ The Invaders themselves became a local cultural phenomenon among many black male youth who emulated their style of dress and mannerism, making the Movement, if not politically accessible, at least culturally accessible.⁷⁴ As Jim Dowers of the Youth Guidance Council reminded Invader

⁷¹"Two Ignore Order to Quit Job," *Memphis Press-Scimitar*, August 9, 1967.

⁷²"Memphis Street Gang Threatens SCLC, Young," *The Washington Evening Star*, August 17, 1968.

⁷³Van DeBurg, *New Day in Babylon*, 10.

⁷⁴Coby Smith, interview.

Oree McKenzie when he approached the organization for funding, BOP, the Invaders, and their Black Power program were “hard products to sell.”⁷⁵

On campuses, Black Power took on a different tone. Upheaval at historically black LeMoyne-Owen College unexpectedly placed the small school in the throes of the new cultural and political black renaissance in the fall of 1968. Disgruntled students and zealous Invaders challenged the school’s administration for more student control and community engagement. In the end, protesting students won several concessions, but Dr. Hollis F. Price, LeMoyne-Owen’s president emerged as the hero. His ability to keep the campus calm, keep students out of jail for their actions, and maintain a reasoned and measured approach to the students’ grievances earned Price praise from the black and white community. Dr. Price, who was scheduled to retire at the end of the year, had “earned the right to end his career in an aura of peace and honor,” as Nat D. Williams wrote.⁷⁶ Despite the community’s support of Price’s stance, however, the students gained their demands, and the Invaders helped to push the school to remain mindful of its neighbors in the community. The institution, at the center of the city’s civil rights movement in the early 1960s, became the first campus to experience student unrest showed that the school was not insulated from the Black Power Movement, despite its strong institutional and community support.

At predominately white Memphis State University, civil rights and Black Power stood side-by-side. Students informed by the emerging Black Power Movement

⁷⁵Invaders, “FBI Memo, Racial Matters, 157-1067-221-157-1067-304” (Memphis, Tennessee, June-August 1968).

⁷⁶“A Point of View,” *Tri-State Defender*, December 7, 1968.

connected the new language of Black Power with the civil rights concerns of old. Unlike their counterparts at LeMoyne-Owen, black students at Memphis State fought not simply to be heard, but to also be seen and included. By creating the Black Student Association, African American students created their own vehicle for campus change. What they lacked in terms of Black Studies, they gained through “rap” and debate sessions where they would argue the merits of violence versus nonviolence, discuss the decolonization movement in Africa, student protest at other institutions, and to local community issues. The students hosted plays and pageants that celebrated their blackness in the manner they believed the institution should have. In the spring of 1969 students sat-in at Dr. Cecil Humphreys’ office after unsuccessfully securing redress of their demands. They remained nonviolent and sang Freedom songs. Once arrested, they refused bail fusing together ideologies of civil rights and Black Power. Their actions ultimately changed the dynamics of the campus life for all students.

Youth and student activism helped shape the Black Freedom Movement in Memphis. Black Power, as articulated by student and youth organizations served as an ideological counterpoint to the community’s established black leadership. Youth and student activism, moreover, reveal the diversity in the articulation of Black Power ideology. As Coby Smith expressed as a young Black Power ideologue, the Movement’s roots existed as much in Ida B. Wells as it did in the fiery Malcolm X. Even Benjamin Hooks, Jesse Turner, Russell Sugarmon, Vasco Smith, and other prominent African American Memphians more closely associated with the civil rights movement provided not only young black Memphians, but Memphians in general, with examples of black

economic and political self determination. When asked if he saw any difference between his view of power and those of younger Black Power activists, Sugarmon responded, “None that I can see except in terms of levels of stridency and hyperbole in speech.”⁷⁷ These men were far from firebrands in comparison to the Invaders, but Black Power’s iconography of guns and raised fists obscures these parallels.⁷⁸

Using Black Power to respond to the specific conditions on campuses and in the community provides a glimpse of the regional, and ultimately the parochial nature of the Movement. African American students using Black Power at Cornell University in 1969 organized differently than the African American students at Memphis State University in 1969, yet challenging the white power structure was the goal of the students at both institutions. Although the Memphis press frequently referred to the Invaders as a Black Panther-styled organization, they were not the Panthers who were essentially a local organization with a national and international reach. However, when Charles Cabbage and Coby Smith created BOP and the Invaders in 1967 as their response to local conditions in their community, they followed the example of Huey Newton and Bobby Seale when they founded the Black Panther Party for Self Defense in Oakland in 1966 while maintaining ownership of their movement. “We were students. We were not a part of any national organization like the Black Panther Party. We were Memphis grown, and Memphis own,” remarked John B. Smith. Whether moderate or radical, implicit or explicit, used as a tactic or embraced as political philosophy Black Power gave youth and

⁷⁷Russell Sugarmon, interview by James Mosby, May 5, 1968, The Ralph J. Bunche Collection, The Civil Rights Documentation Project, Howard University, Washington, DC.

⁷⁸Joseph, *Waiting ‘Til the Midnight Hour*, xiii.

students a language through which to shape the black politics of Memphis, It was not just a NAACP town.

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