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THE NASHVILLE CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT: A STUDY OF THE PHENOMENON OF
INTENTIONAL LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT AND ITS CONSEQUENCES FOR LOCAL
MOVEMENTS AND THE NATIONAL CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT
AT GEORGIA STATE UNIVERSITY

by

BARRY EVERETT LEE

Under the Direction of Jacqueline A. Rouse

ABSTRACT

The Nashville Civil Rights Movement was one of the most dynamic local movements of the early 1960s, producing the most capable student leaders of the period 1960 to 1965. Despite such a feat, the historical record has largely overlooked this phenomenon. What circumstances allowed Nashville to produce such a dynamic movement whose youth leadership of John Lewis, Diane Nash, Bernard LaFayette, and James Bevel had no parallel? How was this small cadre able to influence movement developments on local and a national level? In order to address these critical research questions, standard historical methods of inquiry will be employed. These include the use of secondary sources, primarily Civil Rights Movement histories and memoirs, scholarly articles, and dissertations and theses. The primary sources used include public lectures, articles from various periodicals, extant interviews, numerous manuscript collections, and a

variety of audio and video recordings. No original interviews were conducted because of the availability of extensive high quality interviews. This dissertation will demonstrate that the Nashville Movement evolved out of the formation of independent Black churches and college that over time became the primary sites of resistance to racial discrimination, starting in the Nineteenth Century. By the late 1950s, Nashville's Black college attracted the students who became the driving force of a local movement that quickly established itself at the forefront of the Civil Rights Movement. Nashville's forefront status was due to an intentional leadership training program based upon nonviolence. As a result of the training, leaders had a profound impact upon nearly every major movement development up to 1965, including the sit-ins, the Freedom Rides, the March on Washington, the birth of SNCC, the emergence of Black Power, the direction of the SCLC after 1962, the thinking of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., the Birmingham campaign, and the Selma voting rights campaign. In addition, the Nashville activists helped eliminate fear as an obstacle to Black freedom. These activists also revealed new relationship dynamics between students and adults and merged nonviolent direct action with voter registration, a combination considered incompatible.

INDEX WORDS: Albany Movement, Bernard LaFayette, Birmingham campaign of 1963, Black Power, C.T. Vivian, Diane Nash, Freedom Rides, James Bevel, James M. Lawson, Jr., John Lewis, Kelly Miller Smith, Nashville Civil Rights Movement, Nashville Student Movement, Nonviolence, Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), Sit-ins, Selma voting rights campaign of 1965.

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A Dissertation in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

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Georgia State University

2010

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

In my view, revisionist history can be akin to a major physical examination that leads to corrective surgery. The patient may be reasonably healthy, but may have some minor problems because of a steady diet of dated Martin Luther King, Selma, Birmingham, and Mississippi sandwiches. They are all good eats, but feasting on too many sandwiches everyday is not a balanced diet. And what the historiography of the Civil Rights Movement needs is more balance. To be sure, great strides have been made in terms of the literature published over the last fifteen to twenty years. Many more African American and female scholars have published superb anthologies and monographs about this era. We have also seen a record of scholarship less focused on the “great men” of the movement, resulting in landmark work by Aldon Morris, Charles Payne, and John Dittmer and others who shifted our gaze toward more community-based activism.

This dissertation is partly a product of the trend inaugurated by Morris’ classic *Origins of the Civil Rights Movement*, one of the first pieces of scholarship to expose the significance of the Nashville Movement as an important “movement center” and as a place where the phenomenon of nonviolence-based intentional leadership development emerged. Using Nashville as one example, Morris revealed the significance of the movement’s origins, planning, decision-making, and execution at the local level, all accentuated by relationships between Black ministers and resources provided by local churches and other social institutions. Almost overnight, our scholarly gaze shifted from a top-down, nationally-driven interpretation of the Movement to one local in nature.

This dissertation is not a traditional study of a local civil rights movement. While my interest in Nashville is partly inspired by the work of Aldon Morris, Charles Payne, and John

Dittmer, scholars whose edifying work has taken a bottom-up approach to the analysis of the Civil Rights Movement, the centrality of Nashville here functions as a window into something larger and more profound than what any one local community or any particular group of activists can provide. Rather, the research presented here is a hybrid of two historiographical traditions, one encompassing a longstanding emphasis on Movement history as a national phenomenon and the other a more recent emphasis on the local nature of the Movement. In my estimation, the recent emphasis on local movement histories has obscured something equally as important: the connective tissue between local and national movements. They are not separate and apart, but interconnected, codependent, and intertwined. The research demonstrated here concerning Nashville makes this phenomenon apparent and significant.

In addition to the need to reconnect local movements with the national movement, there is another glaring gap that must be filled. Astonishingly, there has been no major scholarship produced on the Nashville Movement. Except for John Lewis' seminal memoir *Walking with the Wind: A Memoir of the Movement* and the account written by the now deceased journalist David Halberstam, *The Children*, the historical record on Nashville's role in the Movement is scant. The only other published monograph related to the Nashville Movement is Lisa Mullins' biography *Diane Nash: The Fire of the Movement* (2005), a more descriptive than analytical volume. The number of dissertations and theses are also few. One of the first pieces of scholarship on the Nashville Movement was a master's thesis written by Sandra A. Taylor of Fisk University in 1973, entitled, "The Nashville Sit-In Movement." In 1989, David E. Sumner completed a dissertation at the University of Tennessee entitled "The Local Press and the Nashville Student Movement, 1960." More recently in 1991, Leila Meier, a Vanderbilt University master's degree candidate wrote, "A Different Kind of Prophet: The Role of Kelly

Miller Smith in the Nashville Civil Rights Movement, 1955-1960.” Other than these, scholars interested in the Nashville Movement have few sources to which they can turn. And at the writing of this introduction, no one has yet published any scholarly biographies on the stalwarts of the Nashville Movement: Kelly Miller Smith, James M. Lawson, Jr., John Lewis, Diane Nash, James Bevel, and Bernard LaFayette.

By no means will the numerous gaps be entirely filled here. In fact, this research does not represent a full analysis of the Nashville Movement as a local development. Instead, what is intended here is an examination of the following: what made Nashville such a potent force in the early phases of the Movement; why and how its student leadership became so prominent not only in Nashville but in the larger Movement in general; and how Nashville leaders affected the development of Movement trends, particularly the sit-ins, the Freedom Rides, the emergence of SNCC and its character, the Birmingham campaign, the March on Washington, the evolution of the SCLC as a credible civil rights organization, and the Selma voting rights initiative.

Obviously, the research here takes a broad rather than a narrow focus simply because the breadth and depth of the influence of Nashville and its primary activists cannot be otherwise explored.

The unique contribution of Nashville is that no other movement city can boast of such an outstanding corps of leadership, including Atlanta, Little Rock, Jackson, Montgomery, and Birmingham.

The logical starting point for this study is the founding of Nashville in the late eighteenth century. Chapter Two outlines how the city emerged as a biracial outpost in Middle Tennessee and created numerous institutions, especially Black churches and educational institutions that became the backbone of elite Black Nashville and ultimately staples of the local and national civil rights movements. Over time, Nashville became the center of Black southern religious life,

a development connected to the advent of independent Black churches. As the chapter points out, the Black church formed in direct response to racism experienced by African Americans in majority white congregations and denominations. Elite black Nashvillians formed their own independent churches and later also helped found Black colleges. Beginning in the late nineteenth century, these colleges became sites of protest against racial discrimination and in the first half of the next century, Fisk University led the nation in the study of race relations under the direction of Charles S. Johnson and the Race Relations Institute. These developments laid the foundation for Nashville to have the capacity to support the student movement when it emerged.

Chapter Three, “The Misfits Come to Town: The Convergence of Key Activists Upon Nashville in the 1950s,” examines the early lives of Nashville’s key activists—Reverend Kelly Miller Smith, Reverend C.T. Vivian, Reverend James M. Lawson, James Bevel, John Lewis, Bernard LaFayette, and Diane Nash—as they became intolerant of racial discrimination and how they all found their way to Nashville in the 1950s (with the exception of Nash) as a result of their belief in the concept of providence. In Christianity, providence means that God directly intervenes in human history through strategically selected individuals. This principle, along with their grooming as social “misfits” who detested racial injustice, explains why they believed they were called to Nashville to lead a movement. While most of the scholarship concerning the role of the Black church in the Movement looks at the issue of ministerial leadership and the other tangible resources provided by individual congregations, few scholars have explored Christianity as a core motive for activists.

Chapter Four, “James M. Lawson, Jr., and the Disciples of Nonviolence: The Nashville Leadership Training Model,” examines how the local leadership strategically took indigenous adults and a small group of college students who were drawn to the city by the forces of

providence and trained them for roles as activists. This is the next logical step after the infrastructure of Black churches and colleges has been created and after the necessary leadership has assembled in the city. The decision by Reverends Smith and Lawson to train activists was one of the most important decisions made during the entire Movement. This factor compliments the influence of providence and propels Lewis, Nash, Bevel, and Lafayette on to later Movement greatness. The training process also illustrated that students and adults could work together for common goals and helped correct the common assumption that student-adult relations were exclusively conflict-riddled. In fact, the Nashville students, while experiencing some conflicts with their mentors, had great respect for Reverends Smith and Lawson, and who in turn respected the students as capable leaders. No other movement city, especially not Atlanta, seemed to have an intentional leadership training program coupled with an adult community who appreciated its student leaders.¹

As a result of Lawson's training modules, a group of students on November 28 and December 5, 1959 conducted a series of test sit-ins that predated the renowned Greensboro sit-in of February 1. These "tests" though routinely ignored in the liturgy of Movement historiography, force reconsideration of the Greensboro sit-ins, making them significant only as a spark and nothing more. Fred Powledge wrote that Greensboro "was a chronological aberration" and that "the sit-ins actually began in Nashville because their planning started in 1959."² Not only did the training give Nashville cornerstone status in terms of the sit-ins, but it also stimulated the

¹ The Atlanta movement is one of the best examples of a movement center where the traditional Black adult leadership treated student leaders as a nuisance rather than as a valued movement partner. For a discussion of the contentious relationship between the Atlanta Student Movement and the adult leaders who viewed them as "rabble-rousers" or trouble-makers, see the Southern Regional Council's *Will the Circle Be Unbroken? An Oral History of the Civil Rights Movement in Five Southern Cities and the Music of the Times*, episode 22.

² Fred Powledge, *Free at Last: The Civil Rights Movement and the People Who Made It* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1991), 203.

formation of SNCC's prototype, the Nashville Student Movement (NSM)³, perhaps the first such student organization created. The existence of the NSM corrects the notion that SNCC was the first student organization to develop during the Movement. Lawson's workshops, the pre-1960 test sit-ins, and the NSM allowed the Nashville students to assume leadership of the sit-ins from the Greensboro Four after February 1, 1960.

As Chapter Five details, the Nashville sit-in movement became the next logical step. Because of the expert training in nonviolent direct action provided by Reverend Lawson and wholeheartedly supported by Reverend Smith and his church, the students in conjunction with input from local residents, were ready to launch their pre-rehearsed sit-ins shortly after the spark provided by Greensboro. Rather than view students as another group competing for local leadership supremacy, Reverend Smith and other adult leaders considered the students as assets and developed their leadership potential. In the words of Bernard LaFayette, "We were warriors," because of the training modules.⁴ Lawson's nonviolence workshops made the Nashville Movement the most dynamic and unique local movement of the early 1960s and made them a band of warriors with the confidence and expertise to take on any civil rights challenge.

The Nashville sit-in movement and the early desegregation of selected downtown lunch counters on May 10, 1960, yielded a watershed of dividends for the city and its student leaders. It established Nashville as the most organized and successful sit-in movement in the country, making it a model for others to follow and attracting national television network film crews who produced two documentaries on the Nashville sit-ins.⁵ Nashville leaders expanded their influence

³ John Lewis, *Walking with the Wind: A Memoir of the Movement* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1998), 93.

⁴ In a film entitled "Nashville: We Were Warriors," made in 1960 by Films for Humanities and Science, Bernard LaFayette made this statement to summarize the end result of the nonviolence training they received from Reverend Lawson that began in 1958.

⁵ NBC produced *NBC White Paper # 2: Sit-In* in late 1960 and CBS released a documentary, *Anatomy of a Demonstration*, in early 1961; The story of the Nashville sit-ins also recorded on vinyl as *The Nashville Sit-In Story*:

through these film productions and exerted much clout at the founding conference of SNCC in April 1960 where Fisk graduate student Marion Barry became the first chair and Reverend Lawson reportedly wrote the statement of purpose of the organization. In many ways, the early SNCC was a reflection of the NSM in terms of adopting nonviolence as a guiding philosophy and the insistence upon students as the decision-makers for SNCC. While Ella Baker surely influenced the students in this direction, the NSM had already incorporated this mode of operation because of Reverend Lawson's influence.

The Nashville sit-ins demonstrated that trained student leaders could play a significant role in social change, evidenced by the expulsion of Reverend Lawson from Vanderbilt's Divinity School in early March in an effort to abort the sit-ins. By then the students had the self-confidence to proceed without him. A new leadership paradigm was inaugurated in Nashville, one that was bolder, younger, and uncompromising in its core principles. The sit-ins set up a small group of students to not only invigorate the sit-ins, but to also be perfectly positioned to usurp control of the next stage of the Movement: the Freedom Rides.

In Chapter Six, "What Freedom Will Demand": The Nashville Student Movement and the Freedom Rides," the Nashville warriors built upon their leadership potential and rescued the national Movement from certain disaster when James Farmer of CORE and the original Freedom Riders, with the exception of John Lewis, decided to abort the Rides after a Mother's Day beating in Birmingham. This research will demonstrate that Nashville students, because of their sit-in expertise and confidence, were the only group capable of resuming the abandoned Freedom Rides. As a result of the quick action of the Nashville students, the Freedom Rides were characterized by two phases. One brief and nearly disastrous one led by CORE and a success

Songs and Scenes of Nashville Lunch Counter Desegregation, directed by Guy Carawan, Folkways Records FH 5590, 1960.

second phase, referred within as the Nashville Phase, that completely reshaped the duration and purpose of the Freedom Rides, forcing the federal government to reluctantly intervene.

Bayard Rustin said during the Journey of Reconciliation, a 1947 pre-cursor to the Freedom Rides sponsored by the pacifist organization the Fellowship of Reconciliation (FOR), that freedom sometimes required those seeking it to sacrifice everything, including life itself.⁶ The Nashville activists gave meaning to his words when they commandeered the Freedom Rides and forced the Kennedy administration to protect the riders and to guarantee the right of Black people to ride non-segregated public transportation.

The Nashville phase also served as a catalyst for several local movements, including activism in Jackson and Greenwood, Mississippi, and in Albany, Georgia. Activists involved in the Nashville Phase descended upon Jackson, thus scattering across the state. This development brought Diane Nash Bevel and her new husband, James, to Mississippi for an extended period. While there they inspired and trained Jackson youth who initiated sit-ins and other protest actions. James Bevel, after leaving Jackson, ventured to Sunflower County where he motivated Fannie Lou Hamer to join the voting rights struggle. The impetus for the Albany Movement primarily came from the Nashville Phase of the Freedom Rides that made their way to Albany in late 1961, thereby setting in motion events that pulled the SCLC into its first significant direct action campaign since its founding. Because of SCLC's involvement and mistakes in Albany, the organization gained important lessons and retooled its staff to incorporate some of the young Nashville organizers like James Bevel who became a key strategist within the ranks of the SCLC.

⁶ Raymond Arsenault, *Freedom Riders: 1961 and the Struggle for Racial Justice* (London: Oxford University Press, 2006), 37.

There were other important consequences of the Nashville Phase of the Freedom Rides. It brought the leadership of Diane Nash to national attention, launching her on a journey that made her the most important woman activist in the country, far eclipsing Ruby Doris Smith Robinson or any other woman civil rights activist. The rides also helped the Movement cross a threshold made evident by Rustin's statement. Most adult leaders were unwilling to risk their lives and even Reverend Fred Shuttlesworth advised Nash that the Freedom Rides were too risky.⁷ But the threshold of potential death had to be crossed in order to advance the Black freedom struggle and the Nashville students knew this better than anyone and were willing to cross it.

Along the way, largely because of the Nashville Phase, new activists and influences were attracted to the Movement that lay the foundation for Black Power. Northerners, both Black and white, came south in significant numbers to join the struggle. Some of these new activists were not indoctrinated in the philosophy of nonviolence and their presence exacerbated subterranean philosophical disagreements about the viability of nonviolence as a way of life or just a convenient tactic. This development reveals two divergent camps: the proponents of tactical nonviolence and the adherents to nonviolence as a way of life. During the Freedom Rides, James Forman took the helm of SNCC as executive secretary, a significant development because Forman was a leading champion of tactical nonviolence. During his tenure, SNCC drifted away from nonviolence and Forman more forthrightly embraced the position of self-defensive violence after the Atlantic City national convention of the Democrat Party.

The Nashville Phase began the migration of Nashville's most prominent student leaders from Nashville and put them on a national stage. Thereafter, they involved themselves in every

⁷When Nash telephoned Reverend Shuttlesworth that her Nashville colleagues were continuing the Rides, he responded . . . [B]ut you must realize that here you might get killed. These people [the original Riders] almost got killed coming down." See page 271 of Andrew Manis' *A Fire You Can't Put Out: The Civil Rights Life of Birmingham's Reverend Fred Shuttlesworth* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1999).

major development of the Movement until 1965. Chapter Seven, “‘A Bevelution:’ The Influence of Nashville Activists on the Civil Rights Movement, 1963 to 1965,” explores the period when Diane Nash Bevel and her husband James Bevel had dominating influence as the most dynamic couple of the era. Their roles in the 1963 Birmingham campaign and the Selma voting rights initiative created a “Bevelution” in civil rights methodology and strategy. James Bevel’s insistence upon using children in Birmingham was unprecedented in that no civil rights organization had ever intentionally used children so young. Bevel’s ingenious and gutsy move was an overwhelming success and saved the campaign. This “Bevelution” set the stage for the March on Washington, solidified the SCLC as a premiere civil rights organization, made it possible for Dr. King to become an icon and Nobel Peace Prize recipient, paved the way for the 1964 Civil Rights Act, and helped enshrine Reverend Shuttlesworth as a national figure in the Movement. The second Bevelution came when the Bevels almost singled-handedly made the Selma campaign a reality, fusing direct action and voter registration work into one cohesive initiative. Heretofore, it was assumed that the two operations were separate and distinct. Yet they seamlessly fused two streams of activism that most leading civil rights practitioners viewed as polar opposite functions. In fact, in the early years of SNCC, the organization nearly imploded over the question of whether its future was in direct action or voter registration work. The period of 1963 to 1965 would have looked markedly different without the innovative activism of this couple.

The fact that Nashville became a leading city in the early years of the Civil Rights Movement and produced a stellar corps of young leaders was no accident. Black elites built independent churches and colleges in an era of white supremacy, institutions that began defending Black interests and dignity in the nineteenth century. These institutions laid the

foundation for a collection of adult and student activists who formed a strategic partnership starting in the late 1950s. Together, adult and student leaders not only put Nashville on the map as an epicenter of the Movement in the early 1960s, but also spread the gospel of nonviolence far and wide with spectacular results.

CHAPTER 2: SETTING THE STAGE: FROM SLAVERY TO ALMOST FREEDOM

Ordinarily, the early Twentieth Century might be a logical starting point for a study of Nashville's role in the Civil Rights Movement. However, Nashville is unique and deserves a non-traditional treatment with a longer historical vantage point. In order to fully understand how the city played such a critical role in the early 1960s, one must start with its frontier days in the late 1700s. In these formative years the settlement was populated by free Blacks and whites, indentured servants, and enslaved Blacks, who primarily settled there because of nature's abundance. What resulted was a city in the middle of the state that had a diverse population whose prosperity was based on small farms and not large slaveholding plantations and whose socioeconomic structure allowed free people the opportunity to prosper. Ultimately, a group of Black and white elites emerged, creating the conditions for Nashville's accommodationist style of race relations and the corollary institutions that it was known for by the time that the Civil Rights Movement began.

The context then is critical. In order to understand how Nashville came to have the institutions that supported its civil rights movement, it is necessary to understand how they emerged. What made Nashville unique was its abundance of religious institutions, colleges and universities, and a carefully groomed image as the "Athens of the South," a place that was progressive, refined, and cultured, very much atypical of most southern cities. These cultural assets, when combined with a group of leaders who migrated to the city in the late 1950s, produced the most dynamic movement center in the country.

Chapter Two will therefore examine how Nashville's physical environment led to a socially and racially diverse population that prospered without heavy dependence on slavery,

creating a significant Black and white elite who became reliant on each other. This relationship between elites was paternalistic and set the stage for race relations for generations to come and was not broken until the student movement began in the 1960s. Out of the Black elite and its paternal relationship to white elites arose a solid foundation of Black churches of every denomination, complemented by Black publishing houses and conventions attached to those denominations, and colleges and universities that produced even more elite African Americans. During the antebellum period, the institutions were mostly quasi-independent churches, but after slavery ended Nashville's African Americans founded their first truly independent churches, established ancillary religious institutions, and created the first higher education institutions for Blacks in the city. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the Black institutions of higher education became sources of community pride and places where Black dignity was defined and fiercely protected from white racial insensitivity, insults, and paternalism. In the 1880s Black students at Roger Williams University forced the president to resign behind racially offensive remarks and in the 1920s, Fisk students and local Black elites similarly forced the resignation of the school's president because of overt acts of racism. These successful protests established a pattern of Black protest in the city that were repeated during the Civil Rights Movement: successful student-adult collaboration against white racism. Additionally, the Fisk revolt led to another significant development in Nashville's civil rights history. It set the stage for Charles S. Johnson, Sr., as the first Black president of Fisk. The resignation of Fisk's president in the 1920s led to the installation of a much more racially sensitive white president who appointed Johnson as director of the Social Sciences Department in 1928, where he established the renowned Race Relations Department and Institute. These developments not only

propelled Johnson to the presidency of Fisk, but also established Fisk as one of the regional expert on race relations and helped make Nashville a leading city in progressive race relations.

The prevalence of so many independent Black religious institutions cannot be overlooked in Nashville's development as a major movement center. The presence of so many churches, religious publishing houses, denominational convention headquarters, a Black seminary and schools of theology⁸, made the city a place where religion became the foundation for a great social movement. These institutions not only provided a foundation for liberation theology, but also became the basis of support for the movement, developed the leadership model that made Nashville so unique during the early 1960s, and established elite Black Nashville as a community that could often think and act in its own best interests.

Largely because of its geography, Tennessee became a state that was racially, socially, politically, and economically three states in one. The area between the Mississippi and Tennessee rivers, where Memphis is located, contains fertile soil and its demographic and political attributes aligned with the slaveholding Deep South. Nashville is located in Middle Tennessee, which extends from the Tennessee River to the Cumberland Plateau, and became a land of small farms and tempered liberalism. Eastern Tennessee, a mountainous region east of the Cumberland Plateau, was known for its Unionist sympathies during the Civil War.⁹ These accidents of geography set the stage for the racial character of Nashville.

Present-day Nashville is a city located along the Cumberland Plateau in Middle Tennessee. The African American Community in Nashville emerged from the frontier village of

⁸ American Baptist Theological Seminary (ABT) along with departments of theology at Fisk University, Roger Williams University, and Walden University helped establish Nashville as a center for Black religious study. However, by the late 1950s, only ABT remained. ABT was a stand-alone institution that only offered theological studies for aspiring African American ministers. It did not offer liberal arts curriculum. For a brief history of these institutions, see Bobby L. Lovett, *The African American History of Nashville Tennessee, 1780–1930* (Fayetteville: The University of Arkansas Press, 1999), 193-197.

⁹ Bobby L. Lovett, *The African American History of Nashville Tennessee, 1780–1930* (Fayetteville: The University of Arkansas Press, 1999), 1.

Fort Nashborough, a complex barely the length of a city block, established in early 1779 when James Robertson led a small contingent of men, including a Negro, Robert, who was his servant. Later on in April of 1780, a flotilla led down the Cumberland River by Colonel John Donaldson deposited a mixed group of white slave owners and their captives—Cumbo, Fib, Febbie, Milla, and Patsy, among others—along with a few free Blacks, including a man known as Jack Civil.¹⁰

Because of ample rainfall, rich soil and minerals, and abundant timber and plant life that in turn supported scores of buffalo, deer, bear, and other fur-bearing animals, Fort Nashborough attracted a diverse group of settlers. Indentured servants, free whites, free Blacks, and the enslaved Blacks with their masters claimed the area home. This rapid population growth helped make Tennessee a state by 1796.¹¹

Such a racially diverse population made Fort Nashborough truly a biracial settlement. White settlers no doubt hoped to prosper when they reached Middle Tennessee by way of North Carolina and other points east. Free African American settlers, like their white counterparts, dreamed of self-sufficiency and freedom from a racially oppressive society found in the slaveholding Carolinas. In this early stage of Black settlement, free African Americans found little opposition to claims to land titles. Consequently, this population grew rapidly and simultaneously struggling white settlers transitioned into higher stations of great landowners, merchants, and elites. As a result of having known these persons before they acquired wealth, free African Americans and a few privileged bondspersons developed a natural alliance with these whites, resulting in a paternalistic racial relationship.¹²

In the first half of the 19th century, the demand for bonded labor was high, yet the proportion of free African Americans remained significant, especially compared to Memphis in

¹⁰ Ibid., 1-3.

¹¹ Ibid., 2.

¹² Ibid., 3.

western Tennessee. In 1830, nearly 10% of Nashville's Black population was free while Memphis had only 61 free Blacks and 2,049 bondspersons.¹³ The free Black population of Nashville is the key to the rise of the Black elite who were instrumental in the story of the development and character of the city's civil rights movement.

The urban character of slavery in Nashville and the need for mutual support in a frontier community reinforced a paternalistic and close-knit community between elite whites and African Americans. Elite whites provided special favors for free African Americans, offering legal help and jobs, especially for the mulattoes.¹⁴ In many cases, free African Americans developed closer relationships to elite whites than to either working class whites or enslaved Blacks. Many free Blacks set themselves apart from the masses of their enslaved brethren and often assumed an air of superiority.¹⁵ These circumstances should not be misinterpreted to mean that elite whites recognized any class fragmentation among free Black people or that free Black people assumed any peership to elite whites. In fact, whites recognized only a classless Black world that performed essential economic functions without real social standing and free African Americans accorded elite whites their sought-after standing as benevolent masters.¹⁶

Obviously, the institution of slavery helped shape not only the relationships between the races in Nashville, but also the responses of the African American community to bondage. Next to Memphis, Nashville had, by 1850, the second largest market for procuring bondspersons in

¹³ Ibid., 4

¹⁴ No doubt the mulattoes received special attention from their white relatives, a situation not unique to Nashville. Many Blacks gained their freedom and their elite status in their own community from the blood ties to elite whites. For example, according to Bobby L. Lovett in chapter one of his *The African American History of Nashville, Tennessee, 1780 to 1930*, (page 10) mulatto Sally Thomas gave birth to a mulatto son, John H., allegedly fathered by a white man known as John Thomas. When the mulatto John's employer, Richard Rapier, died, his will provisioned funds to purchase John's freedom. John changed his name to Rapier, moved to Alabama, and became a barber and real estate owner. John was not free because his mother was a quasi-independent woman who lived on her own but was technically the property of a white person.

¹⁵ Ibid., 7-8.

¹⁶ Ibid., 7.

the state. Local opposition to the practice of slavery developed and manifested itself through legends of an indigenous underground railroad with tracks to Cincinnati, Ohio, and a local manumission movement.¹⁷

As a consequence of a more stifling atmosphere during the antebellum period, a group of enterprising free Black people began building an institutional foundation in Nashville, most notably through schools and religious institutions. Nashville was part of a national phenomenon of building autonomous Black institutions designed to protect the community against the horrors of white oppression and institutional racism. Black churches were among the first such institutions created by African Americans. In the estimation of Gayraud Wilmore, the independent black church movement, during and following the period of the Revolutionary War, must be regarded as . . . *the first black freedom movement.*” The seeds of independent Black congregations originated with the Great Awakening of the eighteenth century when evangelists Jonathan Edwards and George Whitefield began preaching in an emotional style that resonated with Black people. Even more significant than the preaching style was the message that salvation was open to all who believed in Christ. Whitefield in particular began taking this message to white and Black audiences. As a result, not only did Black people begin converting to Christianity in large numbers, but they laid the foundation of Black liberation theology: that Whitefield’s message of spiritual equality also translated into earthly equality. The route from bondage to freedom was through Christianity.¹⁸

As a result of the Great Awakening, African Americans joined white congregations, but found themselves subjected to the humiliation of sitting in the segregated “African Corner,”

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Gayraud Wilmore, *Black Religion and Black Radicalism: An Interpretation of the Religious History of African Americans*, third edition (New York: Orbis Books, 1998), 103; Darlene Clark Hine, William C. Hine, and Stanley Harrold, *The African American Odyssey*, third edition (Upper Saddle River, New Jersey: Pearson Education, Inc., 2006), 66.

“Nigger Pews,” and crowded galleries referred to as “Nigger Heaven” by white congregants. Black members of biracial congregations were also required to take communion only after white members had taken it first and complained that the staid style of worship was not suited to their needs. These factors, combined with the continued existence of slavery, led Black Christians to seek alternatives to membership in white congregations. According to Wilmore, the desire to establish independent Black churches was an act of rebellion and a move to reclaim Black humanity.¹⁹

Seen in this light, a cursory investigation of the founding of Black religious institutions in Nashville must be interpreted in line with a long-term quest for freedom and human dignity. Many of Nashville’s white churches supported slavery and offered membership to African Americans but only on a segregated basis in order to appease conservative whites. Because of these discriminatory conditions, African Americans responded in a couple of ways. In some instances, they established clandestine churches secluded in lean-to structures, clearings in the woods, and in the homes of free Blacks. In other cases, they chose association with already-established denominations and began the path toward “the Black church” in Nashville by founding quasi-independent congregations supervised by white ministers but sometimes led by Black exhorters.²⁰ As was the case with the national impulse toward Black churchdom, Nashville’s Black Christians recognized that freedom was connected to having their own churches.

By the 1850s, Nashville was clearly moving toward quasi-independent Black congregations in the Methodist, Baptist, and Disciples of Christ denominations. As a sign of

¹⁹ Wilmore, 100-116.

²⁰ Lovett, 25-28; The term “lean-to” refers to a shed with a sloping roof and three walls that abuts the wall of another structure. This structure is generally a temporary building. See <http://www.wikipedia.com> for a more extensive definition.

prosperity, in 1853, Nashville's first Black brick church, Capers Methodist Episcopal Church, was built and during the city's civil rights movement it played an active role. More importantly, out of the white First Baptist Church sprang the most important civil rights era Black Baptist church—the First Colored Baptist, later renamed First Baptist Capitol Hill.²¹ Beginning in 1951, this church was pastored by Reverend Kelly Miller Smith, the most renowned activist minister in the city during the Nashville Movement.²²

The end of quasi-independent Black congregations and the corresponding eruption of truly independent African American denominational churches in Nashville was prompted by the beginning of the Civil War, the subsequent hoisting of the Confederate flag atop the state capitol on June 18, 1861,²³ and the more immediate capture of nearby Fort Donaldson in February 16, 1862. As word spread that the Union army had captured the fort and was headed toward Nashville, pro-slavery white churches decided to support the Confederacy. Such a move ended the experiment with biracial congregations and the sponsorship of quasi-independent Black congregations by many local white churches.²⁴

Prior to the Civil War, Nashville's African American community was primarily spread among six quasi-independent churches. But the advent of war and Reconstruction reshaped Black church-going tendencies, evidenced by the rapid increase in the number of independent African American churches.²⁵ In a postbellum world, integrated and assimilated congregations implied racial equality, a detestable concept to most white church-goers. Simultaneously, as Black religious institutions lost white oversight, formerly enslaved and free Black people began

²¹ Ibid., 28-29. For details on the history of First Colored Baptist, see the church's website www.firstbaptistcapitolhill.org under the section entitled "History."

²² Ibid., www.firstbaptistcapitolhill.org.

²³ Lovett, 45. In Middle Tennessee, white male voters approved secession by a wide 15,000 vote margin, whereas in East Tennessee, the voters cast 70% of the total number of the state's votes against secession and later convened to denounce secession and propose a separate, loyal state.

²⁴ Ibid., 33-34.

²⁵ Ibid., 173.

the process of creating “Negro” Nashville²⁶ with all of the aspirations and social structures that come with along with establishing a distinct community.

In this climate, First Colored Baptist Church, Capers Memorial CME, Greater Bethel AME, Mount Olive Missionary Baptist Church, Clark Memorial Episcopal Church, Spruce Street Baptist Church, Gay Street Christian Church, and many other Black-controlled congregations either divorced themselves of white overlordship, were newly formed, or came out of the shadows of clandestine worship. One of the first to rid itself of white control was First Colored Baptist Mission, the largest local Black Baptist congregation, a church under the paternalistic white, pro-Confederate First Baptist Church. The move to true independence was aided by the Union Army’s occupation of Nashville on February 25, 1862, and subsequent confiscation of the white First Baptist Church’s property and imprisonment of its pastor for preaching sedition against the U.S. In late winter of 1865, when the eminent demise of slavery was evident, the members of First Colored Baptist Church petitioned white First Baptist for its independence and on May 25, 1866, the congregation was incorporated as the First Colored Baptist Church of Nashville and located on North Spring Street. This newly independent church boasted a membership of five hundred.²⁷

In the early days of independence for First Colored Baptist, the church was pastored by a former bondsman, Reverend Nelson Grover Merry, who had been serving in a ministerial capacity since his ordination on November 29, 1853. Under Merry, the church flourished and its membership reached to an impressive 2,800 and was the site for the first meeting of the Tennessee Negro Baptist Association (TNBA) in 1866. Merry later became “president for life”

²⁶ Ibid., 47.

²⁷ Lovett, 174; Lovett, Bobby, :First Baptist Church Capitol Hill, Nashville,” <http://www.Tennesseeencyclopedia.net/imagegallery.php>

of the TNBA and played a leading role in the merger of the TNBA and the Northwest and Southern Baptist Convention into the consolidated American Baptist Missionary Convention.²⁸

In 1888, two years after the founding of the American National Baptist Convention, all of the Black Baptist associations convened at First Colored Baptist Church to attempt to form a unified Negro Baptist convention, a development that did not materialize until the founding of the National Baptist Convention in Atlanta in 1895. Merry continued to play a leading role in the Black Baptist denomination until his death in 1884 and stood out as a premier civic leader in Nashville. He served on the board of directors of Nashville's Freedman's Saving and Trust Company, was founder of and trustee for Roger Williams University—one of the early schools for Black students in Nashville—and gave prayer at Fisk University's first commencement in 1874.²⁹

After Merry's death, First Colored Baptist spawned two new congregations, both of them core participants in the Nashville Movement. In the late 1880s, Merry's successor, Reverend R. Thomas Huffman founded Mount Olive Missionary Baptist Church. The following decade in December 1893, after a fire destroyed First Colored Baptist³⁰, a faction led by Reverend Jesse E. Purdy chartered a new congregation, Spruce Street Baptist Church.³¹

The founding of congregations such as Mount Olive and Spruce Street represented a boom of Black church formation. By 1869, at least a dozen such churches existed and eventually most of the Black churches were Baptist, a development owing to the simple service and democratic structure of the Baptist church. Congregants could establish a church without

²⁸ "A Brief History of First Baptist Church, Capitol Hill: An Afro-American Journey in Faith," <http://www.firstbaptistchurchcapitolhill.org/about/history.html>, Merry was a co-founder of the Northwest and Southern Baptist Convention which was first convened in 1866 in St. Louis, according to First Baptist Capitol Hill's web site.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ "Historical Highlights," <http://www.sprucestreetbaptist.org/about.htm>.

answering to any sanctioning body³² and ministers were not required to have formal education in order to be ordained.

Nashville was also a field of ecclesiastical enterprise for independent Black Methodists, particularly the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church and the Colored Methodist Episcopal (CME) Church. These two Methodist factions dominated Black Methodism in the city. The AME Church was founded in Philadelphia after the American Revolution by Richard Allen and Absalom Jones. In the post-Civil War period, the AME Church³³ attempted to absorb all southern Black Methodists into its fold, a move blocked by southern white Methodists who feared the emergence of a strong northern-based Black church in the South. In order to thwart the AME's ambitions, Tennessee Methodists deeded property only to Black Methodists not affiliated with the AME Church. Nevertheless, the AME Church sent Bishop Daniel Payne to Nashville in the early 1860s where he established several churches in the Black community. In an effort to diminish control by southern white Methodists and to compete with the AME Church, a group of southern Black Methodists in December 1870 organized the CME Church in Jackson, Tennessee, a small city approximately one hundred miles west of Nashville.

Of the Black Methodist churches in Nashville that figured prominently in the city's civil rights battles, Capers Memorial CME perhaps tops the list. Capers gained its independence in 1866 from the southern Methodists and played a leading role in the founding of the CME convention. Not to be outdone, the AME Church established its first Nashville congregation in December 1863, Saint Paul AME Church, which was soon followed by Payne Chapel AME three years later. Payne's congregation was one of the many in the city supporting the local movement. Another important Black Methodist church to consider is Clark Chapel Methodist

³² Lovett, 175.

³³ Ibid.

Episcopal Church, established in the mid-1860s and affiliated with the northern white Methodists.³⁴ This church figured prominently as a place for mass meetings in the 1960s.

Throughout the rest of the late nineteenth century, Black Nashvillians continued to increase both the number and diversity of their churches. By 1889, a total of seventy nine Black churches existed in the city and the surrounding vicinity, and by 1900, local Blacks belonged to Baptist, Methodist, Christian, Congregational, Episcopal, Catholic, and Presbyterian denominations.³⁵ And by the second decade of the twentieth century, there were Black Pentecostal, AME Zion, Church of Christ, and a few independent congregations, all combining to boost the number of Black churches in the city to ninety six. Nashville became a city of churches, an asset fully utilized during the Civil Rights Movement.

Many of the independent Black churches formed in Nashville catered to the elite, specifically First Colored Baptist, Clark Memorial Methodist Episcopal, Capers CME, Saint Paul AME, Mount Olive Baptist, Spruce Street Baptist, and Howard Congregational. By far, the greatest number of elites, professionals, and college-educated church-goers were affiliated with First Colored Baptist, helping to establish it as the city's leading Black church and guiding light during the civil rights era.³⁶

With so many independent Black congregations, it is no accident that Nashville midwifed several church conventions such as the Tennessee Negro Baptist Association (TNBA) and the Northwestern and Southern Baptist conventions, both of whom merged to constitute the Consolidated American Baptist Missionary Convention. Leading Nashville churchman Nelson G. Merry was prominent in the formation of these early Baptist conventions. In 1886, the American National Baptist Convention (ANBC) was founded and met at First Colored Baptist in

³⁴ Ibid., 175-76.

³⁵ Ibid., 179, 183-84.

³⁶ Ibid., 182, 189.

Nashville in 1888 with the Baptist General Association of Western States and Territories and others in a futile attempt to forge a stronger national Black Baptist convention. Finally, in 1895, such an entity was formed when the National Baptist Convention (NBC) resulted from the merger of the Baptist Educational Convention and the Baptist Foreign Mission Convention. In 1915, because of a dispute over control of the publishing operation of the NBC, the National Baptist Publishing Board (NBPB), a new Black Baptist convention was organized, the National Baptist Convention of America (NBCA), based in Nashville. Efforts to reconcile such fissures failed and African American Baptists continued to splinter, resulting in five Black Baptist conventions by the 1990s.³⁷

Related to the growth and development of Black Baptist conventions in Nashville was the emergence of religious publishing houses. Black Baptist publishing enterprises arose in 1889 when the American Baptist Publication Society (ABPS) angered many Black ministers by refusing to publish their writings in the ABPS's Sunday school publications. Consequently, First Colored Baptist Church's pastor, Meredith Gilbert, led a group of Black Baptists to form a home mission society and to publish its own materials. The ABPS relented, but by January 1897, the National Baptist Publishing Board (NBPB) was established.³⁸

Stemming from factional disputes within the Black Baptist world over whether or not Blacks should remain dependent upon paternalistic northern white Baptists or lead their own missionary and Sunday school publishing operations, Richard Henry Boyd spearheaded a movement to establish a Negro Baptist publishing house independent of northern whites. Boyd set up shop in Nashville, much to the chagrin of Black Baptists content with their affiliation with the ABPS. Opposition from the pro-ABPS faction prompted Boyd and the NBPB to form the

³⁷ Ibid., 189-90, 193-94.

³⁸ Ibid., 190.

NBCA in 1915. A year later the National Baptist Convention, USA, formed its own Baptist Sunday School Publishing Board, also located in Nashville.³⁹

In addition to the Baptists, the AME and the CME churches selected Nashville as the home of their publishing operations. In the 1910s, the AME Sunday School Union convinced its convention to consolidate its publication initiatives in Nashville and the CME Church moved its St. Louis, Missouri, and Jackson, Tennessee, publishing facilities to Nashville.⁴⁰

Further solidifying Nashville's growing reputation as a center for southern religious activity was the establishment of numerous Christian educational institutions, many of them attached to Black colleges and some set up as free-standing, denomination-affiliated institutions. Among those created at Black colleges were departments of theology founded in the late nineteenth century at Fisk University, Roger Williams University, and Walden University. Those attached to particular denominations were the National Baptist Theological Seminary and Training School created in June of 1918 by the NBCA and the American Baptist Theological Seminary (later renamed American Baptist College) established in September of 1924 by the NBCI with assistance from the Southern Baptist Convention. The National Baptist Theological Seminary and Training School had a short life and was forced to close its doors in 1934 due to the Great Depression.⁴¹

A critically important institution for Christian education for Black Nashvillians was American Baptist Theological Seminary (ABT), an institution that began to take shape in 1904 when a joint commission of the Home Mission Board of the Southern Baptists Convention and the NBC met in Austin, Texas, to consider a school sponsored by both conventions. As a result of a series of setbacks, the school did not open until the fall of 1916 in Memphis. Two years later

³⁹ Ibid., 192-93.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 193-96.

⁴¹ Ibid., 196-97.

the seminary relocated to Nashville at the invitation of Roger Williams University where it set up shop on Roger Williams' new campus on White's Creek Pike overlooking the Cumberland River in North Nashville. When Roger Williams moved to Memphis in 1929, ABT shifted its location to First Avenue in South Nashville where it rented space from Meharry Medical College until 1934 when the campus previously owned by Roger Williams University became available and the seminary trustees purchased the property, allowing the school to return to North Nashville.⁴²

It was during the Civil Rights Movement that ABT gained a reputation as a training ground for activists who were proponents of nonviolent direct action. In the late 1950s and early 1960s, the seminary attracted several students who became legends and prominent leaders in Nashville and ultimately throughout the southern region. Among them were John Lewis and Bernard LaFayette who were roommates, Paul Brooks⁴³, and James Bevel⁴⁴. In addition to these students, Reverend C.T. Vivian also attended ABT and Reverend Kelly Miller Smith, pastor of First Baptist Capitol Hill during the Nashville movement, was a faculty member who taught homiletics—the art of writing and preaching a sermon—to Lewis and others. For such a small institution—in the late 1950s and early 1960s during the tenure of Lewis, Bevel, LaFayette and Brook there were less than one hundred students⁴⁵—its track record for producing so many legendary civil rights movement leaders is perhaps unmatched by any other seminary in the South.

Taken as a whole, the presence of so many Black churches, the denominational conventions, the religious publication houses, and the schools of theology and Christian

⁴² “American Baptist Theological Seminary.” <http://tennesseencyclopedia.net/imagegallery.php?entryid=a020a>.

⁴³ Paul Brooks, also a seminarian, was one of the group of Nashville students who continued the Freedom Rides when CORE abandoned them after the vicious attack of the Riders in Birmingham on Mother's Day of 1961. See page 144 of John Lewis' memoir, *Walking with the Wind*.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 83.

⁴⁵ In an interview of Bernard LaFayette by historian Clifford Kuhn in June 1981 in Atlanta, Georgia, LaFayette noted that the student body of ABT consisted of less than 100 students when he arrived in 1958.

education made Nashville a logical site for a social movement rooted in Black Christianity. As Wilmore noted, these institutions grew out of a yearning for freedom and human dignity, and therefore it seems unlikely that a twentieth century freedom struggle could have emerged without them. In fact, Wilmore's thesis that the first freedom struggle in America began with the emergence of an independent Black church movement in the eighteenth century⁴⁶ implies that the Civil Rights Movement is a continuation of the Black church's initial impetus.

The impetus for the Black freedom struggle supplied by the Black church was not enough. A secular partner was needed and Black colleges filled the void. While the Black churches provided a theological foundation for freedom, a wealth of local leadership, support for activists, and a host of material and human resources for a social movement, the colleges provided intellectual support, foot-soldiers, and a new breed of leadership necessary to advance the struggle. The Nashville Movement's successes resulted from a partnership between the Black churches and the students at the local Black colleges.

In fact, Nashville became a center of Black higher education with the establishment of Fisk University, Meharry Medical College, and Tennessee Agricultural and Industrial State College. These colleges not only helped uplift African Americans through education and thereby forming an educated core that became essential to Nashville's freedom struggle, but they also became a base of opposition to racial inequality as early as the 1880s.

In December 1867, the first effort by Nashville African Americans to establish their own technical college took place when leaders of the Colored Agricultural and Mechanical Association and the ministers of the Colored Christian (Disciple of Christ) Church established the Tennessee Manual Labor University. The school opened its doors in January 1868 with more

⁴⁶ See pages 78-98 of Wilmore for a thorough discussion of the genesis of independent Black congregations and their connection to the Black freedom struggle.

than one hundred students, but was forced to cease operation in 1874 when it was unable to obtain state funding.⁴⁷

More successful was the Nashville Normal and Theological Institute (Roger Williams University), founded in 1864 as a school for local Black Baptist ministers. In its first year Nashville Normal began classes in the home of a local white minister, Reverend Daniel W. Phillips and later moved into the First Colored Baptist Mission building—the predecessor to First Baptist Capitol Hill. Over time, because the school was financed by Northern white Baptists and to some extent by local Black Baptists, the Northern white Baptists took complete ownership of the school. In 1883, the school changed its name to Roger Williams University and upgraded its curriculum to offer a masters degree. Also in that decade the school became embroiled in a racial conflict in a time period known for scientific racism that justified white supremacy. The conflict began in 1885 when Black students accused the white Northern superintendent of industrial education of having an “offensive” attitude toward them. The insult was compounded when the president protected the superintendent by labeling the Black accusers of being “liars and fools worst than the heathens of Africa.”⁴⁸

The crisis was resolved only when the president was forced to resign after students organized a boycott. When Roger Williams’ proprietors, the American Baptist Home Mission Society (ABHMS), met in Nashville after the president’s resignation to discuss the situation, there was talk of closing the school and consolidating the Society’s freedmen schools into one regional entity. By the early twentieth century, the AMHMS ended its support for Roger Williams and there was pressure by white developers to acquire the property because of its prime location near Vanderbilt University. The ABHMS eventually sold the campus and the school was

⁴⁷ Lovette, 146,

⁴⁸ Ibid., 147.

reopened in 1908 on White's Creek Pike. By this time, Northern white Baptists were no longer interested in southern Black educational missionary work and the school moved to Memphis in 1929 and merged with Howe Institute, later becoming Le Moyne-Owen College.⁴⁹ Although Roger Williams University did not survive as a viable educational institution in Nashville and was not even an afterthought in Black Nashville by the late 1950s, it foreshadowed a tendency in the late nineteenth century that became more common in the twentieth century—racial activism by students. The refusal of Roger Williams University's students to suffer racial affronts from white authority figures is a scene that was repeated at Fisk University in the 1920s and at another fledgling institution created with the help of white Northern missionaries, Central Tennessee College.

Established by Northern white missionaries during Reconstruction, Central Tennessee College offered a wide range of course work, including industrial and manual arts and even more advanced study in medicine, law, and nursing. By the late 1870s, the college expanded its academic offerings to include algebra, geometry, Latin, and Greek, among other subjects. It also opened the Meharry Medical Department and a two-year law school. In 1900, with a student body of several hundred, the college was renamed Walden University. When the institution fell on financial hard times, the Northern white Methodists allowed Meharry Medical Department to be separately chartered as Meharry Medical School and Walden University closed in 1929.⁵⁰

Like Roger Williams University and perhaps influenced by the upheaval there, in 1885 some students at Central Tennessee threatened to revolt, prompted by the paternalistic attitudes of the school's white faculty members. The revolt was called off out of respect for Central's president, John Braden, a white man who had devoted his life to the education of former slaves.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 150-52, 154.

⁵⁰ For a detailed account of the early history of Fisk University, see Joe Martin Richardson, *A History of Fisk University, 1865-1946*, (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1980).

No more racial strife visited the campus during Braden's tenure which ended with his death in 1889.⁵¹ In the twentieth century when Central recreated itself into Walden University and gave birth to Meharry Medical College, the school supplied Black Nashville with doctors, nurses, dentists, and even civil rights leaders. During the sit-in movement, Meharry students, Rodney Powell and Gloria Johnson⁵², among others, became some of the most noted activists attending the medical school.

Meharry Medical College came to represent elite Black Nashville, especially after the institution transitioned from white control to Black control in the early decades of the twentieth century. Meharry's graduates were cited by Nashville's elite African American community as a sign of Black progress. Many of its graduates remained in the city to practice medicine, dentistry, and nursing.⁵³

Unlike Meharry, an institution designed with Nashville's Black elite in mind, Tennessee Agricultural and Industrial State Normal School for Negroes (Tennessee A & I) was established in 1912 to serve the working class. Erected on a site just west of Fisk University, The school was envisioned to train Black students in the industrial arts, a curriculum focusing on manual labor skills made popular by Booker T. Washington at Tuskegee Institute. The fact that Tennessee had no public educational institution for Negroes beyond high school precipitated an intense competition between Nashville, Chattanooga, and Memphis to win the distinction of landing

⁵¹ Lovett, 155.

⁵² According to David Halberstam's book *The Children* (New York: Random House, 1998), both Powell and Johnson felt out of place as Northern students at Meharry until they joined the sit-ins. The movement gave them a common bond, erased the isolation they both felt, and afforded them the opportunity to discover other things that they had in common. Eventually they became close friends, began dating and became husband and wife on Christmas eve of 1960. See chapters 7 and 41 of Halberstam's book for more details. Also see Clifford Kuhn's interview of Reverend C.T. Vivian in Atlanta, Georgia, in June 1981 in which Reverend Vivian noted that when the home of the lead defense attorney for the Nashville student movement was bombed in April of 1960, Meharry students joined the crowd of 4000 who descended upon the steps of City Hall despite threats of expulsion by medical college administrators.

⁵³ Lovett, 157.

such as important prize. Nashville's high caliber leadership and convenient Middle Tennessee location made it the choice site. Support from the governor was secured with a promise by Black proponents that the new school would feature an industrial arts curriculum.⁵⁴

Being the only school of its kind in the state, Tennessee A & I grew rapidly, amassing enrollment of over 1,100 students by 1917, becoming a full-fledged college by 1925, and expanding its student body to nearly 2,000 by 1930. With philanthropic assistance from the General Education Board, the Anna T. Jeans Fund, and the Rosenwald Fund, A & I established itself as a leading campus in the state for teacher enrichment and advanced course work, with Black teachers coming from all over the state in the summers.⁵⁵

A & I's first principal was William J. Hale, a Chattanooga Black man who was as white as any white man, but who was thoroughly versed in the racial mores of the South. He knew how to be accommodative around white officials and to use racial coded language that meant one thing to whites but another to African Americans. For example, the school's motto, "Enter to Learn, Go Forth to Work and Serve," was inoffensive to whites while encouraging Black students to prepare themselves to lead their people forward. Similarly, the faculty also cleverly camouflaged the Black history course under the bland descriptor "Industrial Education, with Emphasis on Negro Problems." Racial pride was encouraged among the students and leading "race men" including Carter G. Woodson, head of the Association for the Study of Negro History and Life, were brought to campus for mandatory chapel services.⁵⁶ Unlike on the campuses of Nashville's private Black colleges, A & I students exhibited no radical protest tendencies during the first three decade of the twentieth century, owing to the school's dependence on white approval and government support for its lifeline. The school's

⁵⁴ Ibid., 168-69.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 171.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 170.

administration and faculty did cleverly cloak elements of racial pride in its mission and routine activities. It would be several more decades before A & I students publicly defied white authority and played a major role in the Nashville movement sustaining the Freedom Rides.

Complementing Meharry's contribution to the growth of a Black elite community in Nashville was Fisk University, a school also born out of Northern white benevolence. Fisk was founded in December of 1865 as the Fisk Free School, acquired university status in August of 1867, and offered a full college curriculum by 1871.⁵⁷

Located in North Nashville, the Fisk campus was isolated from the world of poor Black Nashvillians, a concern for the school's officials. This isolation, along with the reality that Fisk had an all-white faculty in its early decades, intensified feelings among the faculty and the student body that Fisk was an emerging elitist school, a reputation that gained momentum as the nineteenth century progressed. In fact, by the time that W.E.B. DuBois arrived at Fisk as a student in September 1885, the school was growing more comfortably alienated from the local Black community.⁵⁸

Despite the estranged and apparently deteriorating relationship between white-run Fisk and the local Black elites, local Black leaders considered the school theirs and even mounted a fundraising drive in 1911 to raise \$10,000 and to show "what local Negroes think of higher education." But race relations between Fisk's white administrators and the local Black elite also turned ugly in 1911 when the university's president, George A. Gates, offended a visiting dignitary, a representative of the Baltimore *Afro-American Ledger* and a friend of Henry Allen Boyd, editor of the local Black Newspaper, the *Globe*. According to reports of the offending incident, Gates forced the visitor to attend chapel, to leave his belongings in the president's

⁵⁷ Ibid., 158-60.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 161-62.

office, and was told what he could and could not do. Relationships further deteriorated between Gates and the Black community when Gates invited whites to campus for the 1911 commencement exercises under assurances of segregated accommodations. Also, Gates was accused of dismissing Black staff in favor of white replacements. *Globe* editor Boyd condemned Gates' actions in several editorials, saying the Nashville Negroes considered Fisk University theirs and the recent affronts were deplorable and of great concern. When Boyd also charged Gates with firing six of twelve Negro faculty, the Associated Negro Press picked up the story and Black newspapers such as the *New York Age* followed suit.⁵⁹

Gates' reputation could not withstand this intense scrutiny and he was forced to resign in the fall of 1912. Not surprisingly, the *Globe* called for a Black president, but the Board of Trustees selected Fayette A. McKenzie and as a concession to the Black community, appointed conservative Bookerite James A. Napier to the Board.⁶⁰ McKenzie soon re-ignited racial tension with his paternalistic and stiflingly authoritarian ways. He suppressed the student newspaper, abolished the baseball and track teams, required conservative dress, refused to authorize a campus NAACP chapter⁶¹, and conformed "to the prevailing southern ideas concerning the Negro," as one critic put it, while neglecting Nashville's Black community.⁶² This conduct only validated the sentiments of some Black elites, such as Dr. James A. Jones, head of the Turner Normal School, who said that Fisk was not a Negro school but a "school for Negroes."⁶³

Gates, perhaps, had little recognition or concern for the fact that during his tenure, the character of the Fisk student body was being racialized and radicalized by the emergence of a

⁵⁹ Lester C. Lamon, "The Black Community in Nashville and the Fisk University Strike of 1924 and 1925," *Journal of Southern History*, V. 40, #2, May 1974; 226-28.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 228-30.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 232.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 231.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 229.

more assertive Black person, the New Negro. Alain Locke popularized the phrase “New Negro,” a term that referred to a Black person who had served in World War I, been tempered in the urban North by the Great Migration, and had thereby been emboldened to demand his rights.⁶⁴ The New Negro phenomenon no doubt accounted for the refusal of a group of male students in 1918 to attend study hall until treated like men by McKenzie. For their assertiveness, they were promptly expelled.⁶⁵

More trouble erupted after 1920 as more students who were war veterans enrolled in Fisk and resented its restrictive policies. The *Christian Index*, a Black newspaper associated with the CME Church in Jackson, Tennessee, warned whites in 1919 that they must now “take into account the aspirations for citizenship with all that the word connotes on the part of the younger generation of Negroes.”⁶⁶ This meant that Fisk students would demand dignity and respect from white authority figures at the university in the mid-1920s.

Students began exerting demands for dignity and respect in 1924 over McKenzie’s restrictions on students and his refusal to hire Black office staff and department heads. During the November Founder’s Day activities, a committee of seven students presented their grievances to the Board of Trustees which recommended concessions on McKenzie’s part. The students’ demands were bolstered when DuBois publicly criticized McKenzie for failing to resolve the issue. In a half-hearted gesture, McKenzie announced a minor adjustment to the dress code, but rejected the remaining grievances. His rejection of rather modest demands seemed more galling to the Black community due to the heightened racial tension at the time. In 1924,

⁶⁴ David Leverling Lewis, in his biography *W.E.B. DuBois: The Fight for Equality and the American Century, 1919-1963*, (New York: Henry Holt and Company), 2000, explains the significance of Locke’s pivotal book, *The New Negro*, which is widely credited with popularizing the phrase the “New Negro” and explaining the social forces behind the emergence of this radicalized Black person, pages 163-66.

⁶⁵ Lamon, 233

⁶⁶ Ibid.

several racial crimes went unpunished, including a white saloonkeeper who shot a Black businessman, a white policeman who killed a local Black minister, and a Black youth who was taken from a local hospital and lynched.⁶⁷

The epidemic of racial violence made Black Nashville inordinately agitated and the subsequent developments on Fisk's campus in early 1925 must be considered in this context. Shortly after McKenzie's rejection of the students' requests, the students staged a minor protest on February 1, 1925, that consisted of yelling, beating ashcans, and breaking a few windows. In response, McKenzie, claiming to fear for his safety, called in the police and gave officers the names of the seven students who had presented grievances to the Board. The seven were charged with a felony, prompting students to declare a general strike against classes.⁶⁸

Opinion about the strike generally fell along racial lines with the white community staunchly behind McKenzie. Black Nashvillians gave their support to the students in light of McKenzie's decision to involve the police in a minor campus fracas at a time of heightened racial tension. As the *Nation* magazine editorialized in its March 18, 1925, edition, "to Black Nashville, [P]resident McKenzie has become a symbol of white domination."⁶⁹

Demands for the removal of McKenzie grew loud and nearly universal in Black Nashville. Walter White of the NAACP opined that "unless McKenzie is removed from the presidency of Fisk University, it is going to mean the end of the school's usefulness." In the face of such opposition, McKenzie submitted his resignation in April 1925. In the wake of his removal, the Board of Trustees granted many of the students' requests and began scouting for Negro deans and faculty. Although there was hope for a Black president among Black Nashvillians and Fisk students, the Board selected Quaker sociologist Thomas Elsa Jones as the

⁶⁷ Ibid., 233-36

⁶⁸ Ibid., 236-37.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 239-40.

next president in February 1926. Jones was the last white president of the university and restored amicable relations with the local Black community.⁷⁰

Fisk University students did not become a major voice in racial issues again until the emergence of the sit-ins. However, they, along with those at Roger Williams University and Central Tennessee College displayed a proclivity for racial protest starting in the 1880s. In the cases of Roger Williams and Fisk, the students and the local Black community clearly responded to insults to their dignity on the part of white university administrators. The 1880s were a decade of Black institution building and self-help, activities that naturally involved full expression of racial pride. At the same time, a Black Talented Tenth was emerging who vigorously defended the race and claimed leadership in the racial struggle. Black colleges were at the center of this development, producing a new generation of graduates who played a key role in negotiating and defining the terrain of Black freedom. As Darlene Clark Hine points out in her textbook, *The African American Odyssey*, “freedom and education were inseparable.”⁷¹ The 1880s also represented a decade lauded as the “prelude to a Movement” by writer Paula Giddings, meaning this period witnessed the beginning of the Black Women’s Club Movement, a movement designed to uplift the race from the bottom.⁷² The early Black educational institutions previously mentioned produced a core of Black elites, a group sensitive to racial affronts. Perhaps no person better depicts this legion of educated Black Americans than W.E.B. DuBois, who arrived at Fisk in the 1880s and who entangled himself in the McKenzie controversy. This racial pride was

⁷⁰ Ibid., 242-44.

⁷¹ See chapter 12 of Hine’s book, *The African American Odyssey*, third edition, (Saddle River, New Jersey: Pearson Prentice Hall), 2006, for a discussion of the centrality of education in the lives of newly minted free Blacks. The quote was taken from page 298.

⁷² See Paula Giddings’ *When and Where I Enter: the Impact of Black Women on Race and Sex in America*, (New York: Bantom Books), 1984. Giddings, in chapter four entitled “Prelude to a Movement,” lays the foundation for the Black Women’s Club Movement which emerged in the mid-1890s because of the efforts of women such as Ida B. Wells Barnett, Josephine St. Pierre Ruffin, and Mary Church Terrell. Deborah Gray White offered a complete study of the National Association of Colored Women (NACW), the centerpiece of the Club Movement, in *Too Heavy a Load: Black Women in Defense of Themselves* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company), 1999.

infused with a strain of militancy after World War I, producing a fairly large-scale racial conflict in Nashville in 1924. Black Nashville in particular had shown itself by this time to be aggressive in addressing racial affronts. What was also apparent was that the local Black community considered Fisk to be its university and established a pattern of uniting behind students when they defended the honor and dignity of Black people. The crisis precipitated by McKenzie was not simply about restrictions placed on students, but cut more deeply into issues of proper relations between Black and white elites in Nashville. Obviously, Black Nashvillians decided that McKenzie had crossed the bounds of acceptable behavior.

Not only did Fisk students hold the line of racial dignity, but the university became the vanguard of southern race relations with the establishment of the Race Relations Department under the directorship of Charles S. Johnson. Sr., who later became the first Black president of Fisk, further solidifying the school's "long tradition of student and faculty activism regarding civil rights and the promotion of better race relations."⁷³ The Race Relations Department began with Johnson's appointment as a professor of sociology and director of the Social Sciences Department at Fisk in 1928 by President Jones. Early on, Johnson recommended the department select an area in which to concentrate its study and stated that Fisk was the most logical place to study the Negro and race relations in the U.S.⁷⁴

In 1933, Johnson was named Director of Studies of the Swarthmore College Institute of Race Relations where he supervised race relations institutes in the summers while maintaining his faculty position at Fisk.⁷⁵ Throughout the rest of the 1930s and into the 1940s, Johnson built the Social Science Department into a premiere research facility, earning major research grants

⁷³ Keith W. Berry, "Charles S. Johnson, Fisk University, and the Struggle for Civil Rights, 1945-1970 (Ph.D. dissertation, Florida State University, 2005), vii.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 25.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 26.

from white philanthropists such as the Julius Rosenwald Fund and the Laura Spelman Rockefeller Foundation. As Johnson continued to polish his image as a first rate scholar in the field of race relations, Thomas Elsa Jones departed as president and the Board of Trustees elevated Johnson to the post in October 1946 and he assumed the duties in July of the following year.⁷⁶

Johnson assumed the helm of Fisk at a time when far-reaching racial progress seemed possible, changes that men like Johnson had long hoped for. The unprecedented participation of colonized and oppressed people in the obliteration of global undemocratic fascist and racist regimes unleashed a demand for democracy that resonated in high frequency in the U.S. Even before the war ended, Howard University literature professor, Arthur P. Davis, in a speech at Virginia Union University in 1942, declared that “there will be no return to normalcy. For good or ill, the new order will be different.” Even more prophetically, educator Leander Boykin wrote that the Negro college would be in a unique position in the post war world and must be prepared to help facilitate a new racial order.⁷⁷ No doubt, Boykin was thinking of Negro colleges as grounds for fomenting social reform.

Before Boykin’s prophetic statement yielded results nearly twenty years later, Johnson established Fisk as a nationally recognized social science research center with unsurpassed expertise in race relations.⁷⁸ This legacy, the most enduring of Johnson’s career at Fisk, was made possible by the establishment of a Race Relations Department at Fisk by the American Missionary Association (AMA) in 1942, a move orchestrated by the AMA out of fear that the

⁷⁶ Ibid., 27, 33, 37-38.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 40-41.

⁷⁸ Ibid., 51. According to Keith W. Berry, Howard Odum, chairman of the sociology department at the University of North Carolina, founded a highly regarded social science research center at the University of North Carolina, but by the 1930s its research emphasis had shifted from race relations to problems of labor, agriculture, industry, and health issues affecting the South. Odum’s shift left Johnson’s Fisk operation as the king of race relations’ research in the region.

conditions of war would increase racial anxiety and precipitate actual conflicts. After a 1942 meeting of the AMA in Durham, North Carolina, Fred Brownlee, General Secretary of the Association, saw Johnson as the obvious choice to head such an endeavor. In fact, Brownlee once asserted that Johnson was “the best qualified man in the United States in the realm of race and race relations.” With agreement between the AMA and support from the Julius Rosenwald Fund, Johnson relinquished teaching duties at Fisk but remained department chair and became Director of Race Relations for the AMA, effective January 1, 1943. Johnson assumed this duty a full four and a half years before replacing Thomas Elsa Jones as president of Fisk.⁷⁹

The broadly defined goals of the department were formulated before the end of 1943 and included: definition of problems of race relations; development of constructive courses of action that can be carried out in these areas; creation of materials for public education in race relations; development of resource persons who could handle problems; implementation of programs to work in areas of racial tension to prevent overt racial clashes; and, creation of programs for schools, churches, labor groups, youth groups and other institutions to promote racial democracy and understanding.⁸⁰ By hiring expert staff such as sociologist Ira DeA. Reid as associate director, Horace Mann Bond as a collaborator on special projects, and Herman Long as a full-time field worker who became director when Johnson was promoted to president, and by complimenting the high support of Fisk University with the careful selection of powerful and influential white male consultants like Howard Odum and Guy Johnson of the University of North Carolina, Louis Wirth of the University of Chicago, and Ronald Young of the University of Pennsylvania, Johnson positioned Nashville at the forefront of race relations studies.⁸¹

⁷⁹ Ibid., 63-64.

⁸⁰ Ibid., 69.

⁸¹ Ibid., 65-66.

The idea of a scientific approach to the problem of race was not a new concept created by Charles Johnson. Nearly fifty years earlier when W.E.B. DuBois first accepted a faculty position at Atlanta University in 1897, he became director of the Atlanta University Study. The Study was a series of “systematic and thorough investigation[s] of the conditions of living among the Negro population of cities” prompted by Boston philanthropist and Atlanta University trustee George C. Bradford. For more than a decade, DuBois directed a series of sociological studies that included “The Negro in Business” (1899), “The College-Bred Negro” (1900 and 1910), “The Negro Common School” (1901 and 1911), “The Negro Church” (1903), and “The Negro American Family” (1908). These studies put DuBois and Atlanta University at the forefront of American social science research, earning him praise from the highly respected London *Spectator*, the *Publications of the Southern History Association*, and the *American Journal of Sociology*. The annual conference of the Atlanta University Study, held in May of each year, became a magnet for scholars and public figures, even attracting noted German scholar Max Weber to the conference in 1904.⁷⁴ Unlike the initiative at Fisk that emphasized ameliorating race relations, that attempted to prepare the South for desegregation after *Brown*, and that had significant biracial support, the Atlanta University Study collected and analyzed data concerning the conditions of the urban Black masses. Although highly praised in the white academic and philanthropic communities for its groundbreaking academic merit and its biting analysis, the Study received spartan financial support and had no perceptible impact on the condition of urban

⁷⁴ David Levering Lewis, *W.E.B. DuBois: Biography of a Race, 1868-1919* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1993), 198-225. For the original Atlanta University studies, see W. E. Burghardt Dubois, ed., *Atlanta University Publications*, vol. 1 and 2, (New York: Octagon Books, 1968), Special Collections, Robert Woodruff Library, Atlanta University Center, Atlanta, Georgia.

Black people. DuBois's hope that Atlanta would become a center of research never materialized.⁷⁵

By contrast, Fisk University's Race Relations Department approach yielded much more public impact. By 1953, the department had circulated more than 100,000 pamphlets and related materials on race.⁸² It also created quite a sensation with an urban self-study technique used successfully in Minneapolis, Minnesota, from 1946 to 1948, a research methodology in which a community undertakes an introspective analysis of its race relations. As a result of this study, Minneapolis hired its first Black teachers, hired its first Black nurses in local hospitals, opened several residential areas without regard to color, and received the Chattanooga Conference of Christian and Jews National Award for having the most improved race relations. Additionally, because of a study released in 1952 by the Race Relations Department, Senator Hubert Humphrey introduced a bill to desegregate public interstate transportation and the ICC banned segregated interstate transportation and waiting rooms in 1955.⁸³ These efforts by the Race Relations Department firmly established Nashville as one of the South's leaders in race relations, an image that the city's white leaders and boosters carefully cultivated. Reverend C.T. Vivian confirmed Nashville's image-conscious posture when he noted that city leaders considered the city to be the Athens of the South, "that they saw [Nashville] as a central place of civilized Southern manhood...[and city leaders] tried to equate themselves with Greek civilization."⁸⁴ The moniker "Athens of the South" blended well with the city's offering of world class educational institutions such as Peabody College, Scarritt College, and Vanderbilt University in the white

⁷⁵ Ibid., 223-25.

⁸² Ibid., 71.

⁸³ Ibid., 74, 77-78. Ironically, the Race Relations Department report played a role in launching the Freedom Rides with its study and Nashville students played a critical role in sustaining the Freedom Rides in May 1961 when CORE, the original sponsor, pulled out after the riders were mercilessly beaten at the Birmingham bus terminal, a topic that will be explored in-depth in this study.

⁸⁴ Kuhn interview of Vivian.

community and Black institutions such as Fisk, Tennessee A &I, and Meharry Medical College. Added to that was the mixture of religious publishing houses, which according to Vivian, attracted “a great number of intellectual types,” who at least were supposed to give the appearance of a high level of moral leadership, but who as Vivian concludes, “were as racist as the rest.”⁸⁵ Obviously, the image did not meet the reality, especially in the eyes of Black Nashvillians. But to white city leaders, their city was a leading light in the South and the existence of the Race Relations Department only enhanced the imagery.

Beginning in 1944, in an effort to extend the efforts of Johnson and the AMA in the area of race relations, Fisk became the home of the Annual Institute of Race Relations. The Institute was designed to provide practical intensive study of problems associated with race while developing methods to deal with such issues objectively. These interracial annual conferences lasted until 1969 and often stretched from one to three days, although related forums spanned several weeks. Generally held on the Fisk campus, the first Institute, held in 1944, numbered twenty-nine students out of a total of 137 participants. The significance of the forums was noted by the local press when one of the two major dailies in the city, *The Nashville Tennessean*, conceded that the “institute represents one of the most constructive efforts the South has known for an intensive study of the problem in human relations arising from racial differences.”⁸⁶ Interestingly enough, as will be demonstrated later, when the philosophy of nonviolence became the standard methodology and philosophy of the Nashville Movement beginning in the late 1950s, the proponents of nonviolence articulated a need to address the status of Black people as a problem of human relations, albeit a problem with a fundamentally spiritual dimension. Nashville activists such as James Lawson and C.T. Vivian argued that the construction of a

⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁶ Ibid., 84-86.

“beloved community” involved restructuring human relationships. Therefore, as these vanguards of nonviolence saw it, their activism was not so much about gaining rights as it was about restructuring human interaction so that one group would not oppress the other. The new relationship would be based upon getting white people to develop a basic love for all humanity, including Black people. As the thinking went, those who fundamentally loved humanity would treat all people as equals and therefore the rights of Black people would flow from that “right relationship.” Charles Marsh, Professor of Religion at the University of Virginia frames the concept of the beloved community as essentially an “affirmation of human dignity,” a new mode of thinking and action for people taught to hate others based upon skin color.⁷⁹

By 1948, not long after Herman Long replaced Johnson as head of the Race Relations Department, it was clear that Fisk was a national and not simply a regional center of race relations’ research and expertise. Not only did sociologists of all races seek employment there, but nationally prominent Democrats like Hubert Humphrey were perhaps nudged by the work of the Department towards a civil rights platform. At the 1948 Democratic national convention, Humphrey said it was time for the “Democratic Party to get out of the shadows of state s’ rights and to walk forthrightly into the bright sunshine of human rights.” At the time of his remarks Humphrey served on the Race Relations Institute’s Advisory Committee.⁸⁷

The 1949 Institute proved to be controversial, at least locally, when Nashville Vice Mayor Ben West delivered a speech entitled “Progressive Government in a Southern City.” West’s address jolted the local white population with a shockingly candid statement on the often undemocratic treatment of Black people by some of its white citizens. He noted: “By Southern city we could mean any city where certain types of attitudes and practices, undemocratic and un-

⁷⁹ Charles Marsh, *The Beloved Community: How Faith Shapes Social Justice, from the Civil Rights Movement to Today* (New York: Basic Books, 2005), 208.

⁸⁷ Berry, 89-90.

American, are found to exist with the framework of municipal government itself.” He went on to explain that “We find the lot of the Negro one of long neglect” and implied that Nashville should seek the resources to alleviate the neglect. West’s words carried political weight. On the one hand, West helped to change Nashville’s municipal elections to allow representation from single member districts as opposed to at-large seats, eventually facilitating the election of Z. Alexander Looby and Robert Lillard to the city council in 1951, the first Blacks so elected to that body since 1911.⁸⁸ On the other hand, West’s pronouncement earned him political support in the Black community and helped propel him to the mayoralty in 1950.

The eleventh annual Race Relations Institute was held just two days after the *Brown* decision was rendered. In his typically prescient manner, Johnson noted in his opening remarks that he was aware of being in the “stream of history as this conference comes 42 days after the most affirmative and unequivocal national pronouncement in human rights in 91 years.”⁸⁹ Johnson was correct that the *Brown* decision would unleash forces of social change unprecedented in the nation’s history. He also plainly perceived that the opening for racial progress afforded by *Brown* required perhaps extraordinary commitment and work down the road. “There would be no need for this Institute,” intoned Johnson, “if a judgment, an affirmation, a pronouncement could enact itself.”⁹⁰ How right Johnson would be to imply that realizing the promise of the Supreme Court’s dictum would require social activism, but of a nature that Johnson could not have fathomed. And of course he also had no inkling that Nashville would be the epicenter in a few short years of a powerful social tremor. Johnson’s remarks at the eleventh Institute also presaged another critical facet of the impending social

⁸⁸ Ibid., 90-91.

⁸⁹ Charles S. Johnson, “The Future is Here,” Nelson and Marian Fuson Papers, Box 1 Folder 14, Vanderbilt University Special Collections, Nashville, Tennessee. The 91 years mentioned by Johnson was a reference to the time that had elapsed since the enactment of the Emancipation Proclamation.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

upheaval. He told the audience that ending racial discrimination was not “merely a minority problem of acquiring a status to which it has been clearly entitled; it is a problem of what British analyst, Prof[essor] D.W. Brogan calls ‘the great American case of conscience.’”⁹¹ In a similar vein, the nonviolent activists of Nashville later articulated, the problem of racial discrimination in the city and the nation was not a legal issue, but a moral one. For them, nonviolence was designed to “challenge a system of evil”⁹² on moral grounds rather than to compete for political power.

By the mid-1950s, the Race Relations Department’s work intersected with the emerging civil rights struggle, although to a limited degree. During the July 1956 Institute, Martin Luther King, Jr., spoke on the subject of the Montgomery Bus Boycott and was, coincidentally, nearly arrested for breaching the white waiting room at the Montgomery train station on his way to Nashville.⁹³ In September 1955, Herman Long led an effort to enroll Black children in Glenn Elementary School in Nashville, but was turned away by the principal. More indirectly, the Institute helped shape the legal strategy and broadened the thinking of the NAACP as Charles H. Houston and Thurgood Marshall attended the Institutes annually. The forums provided information and opportunities to sound out ways of achieving the organization’s goals.⁹⁴

Fisk’s Race Relations Department and Institute seemed to reach their peak in the 1950s and became too conservative and too slow in pace as nonviolent direct action became the new mode of activism. When the 1965 Institute was evaluated by L. Alexander Harper, of the United Church of Christ Council for Christian Social Action, he noted that the format for the program

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² “Anatomy of a Demonstration,” CBS documentary, 1960, Nashville Public Library.

⁹³ King was admonished by police that they would “let me have it” for any such future infractions and allowed to continue his journey. See David J. Garrow’s *Bearing the Cross: Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference* (New York: William Morrow and Company, 1986), 79.

⁹⁴ Berry, 95.

had not changed in twenty years. More important, Harper commented, was the “disturbing conservatism about the pace, urgency, and methods of the revolution for racial justice which underlies countless decisions in the planning of this Institute.”⁹⁵ Harper hit on a fundamental problem in Johnson’s race relation’s model: meaningful change in the status of Black people in the South required more radical measures that could ensure immediate changes that Johnson’s strategy could not supply. Johnson and his generation preferred “good race relations” which stipulated more gradualism in its interracial work. By necessity, this was a non-confrontational tact that yielded limited results without much threat to the racial status quo. Consequently, the emergence of nonviolent direct action spelled doom for the Race Relations Department and Institute which shut down in 1969.⁹⁶

The demise of the Race Relations Department and Institute does not negate its accomplishments in the quest for racial equality. In fact, this body of work at Fisk softened the ground for a more aggressive push and was a necessary step in the racial progress of Black people. Johnson and his colleagues’ work, according to Leslie Collins, a longtime Fisk faculty member and resident historian, was a “candle in the seeming darkness of the long night of racial strife....”⁹⁷ It demonstrated that deliberate, methodical, and measured action by Blacks and whites committed to improved race relations could do two things: 1) give some Black people hope and limited means to create a better future, and; 2) push a small number of modestly influential whites to at least open dialogue in their communities about a new order. Taken together, these developments made it possible to publicly question what most southern whites considered a birth right—white supremacy by way of racial segregation and discrimination.

⁹⁵ Ibid., 97.

⁹⁶ Ibid., 98.

⁹⁷ Ibid., 98-99.

Taking the long view, it is no surprise that Nashville became an early hub of civil rights activism with a very pronounced religious bent. From its inception in the late eighteenth century, the city had a substantial Black population that grew rapidly and whose free members modestly prospered and established a corps of elites who created their own institutions by the antebellum period. These institutions included churches, religious publishing houses, denominational conventions, and institutions of higher education. Most importantly, the colleges and universities established a record of advocacy for racial justice as early as the 1880s, made possible by Nashville's moderation on race relations in a part of Tennessee not driven to extreme exploitation of Black labor on the order seen in western Tennessee, a tier of the state dominated by "king cotton." Later on Nashville packaged itself as the "Athens of the South," a label intended to depict the city as a progressive, civilized, modern city distinct in character from the typical southern city, especially in the area of race relations. The presence of white institutions of higher education such as Vanderbilt, Peabody, and Scarritt only added to the mystique.

In this environment, Fisk University took the lead in preparing the ground in the city and perhaps the region for changing the racial status quo.⁹⁸ In the 1920s, a collaboration of students and community leaders forced the resignation of Fisk's white president which ultimately led to the selection of Charles S. Johnson as the first Black president of the university, both a milestone for Fisk and Nashville. Because of Johnson's singular expertise in race relations research, Fisk University and Nashville became the unchallenged leaders in the field. The Race Relations

⁹⁸ In Monteagle, Tennessee, a community roughly ninety miles south of Nashville, Myles Horton and Don West established the Highlander Folk School in the 1930s. It served as a training ground for Southerners of all races who sought technical assistance and other support in order to reform their communities. In contrast to Fisk's Race Relations Department and Institutes, Highlander was purposely action-oriented rather than an academic enterprise and therefore targeted a different audience with a different message. While Fisk brought in "experts" to intellectualize about racial problems and solutions, Highlander brought ordinary people together in a collaborative environment which featured these same people as the experts with the solutions to their own problems, with assistance by Highlander's staff. See John Glen's book *Highlander: No Ordinary School: 1932-1962* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1988) for a full discussion of the role of Highlander as support institution for local activists.

Department and Institutes were looked to for guidance for nearly twenty years until the emergence of nonviolent direct action.

The primarily academic approach to segregation and racial discrimination gave way to a more direct and aggressive method of achieving equality that broke the old pattern of racial interaction. In the hands of student activists guided by adult mentors, nonviolent direct action discarded the traditional genteel habit of Black and white, mostly male, established elite leadership quietly working out racial problems behind the scenes. Such interaction excluded the masses of Black people and allowed white leaders to decide whom to recognize as legitimate representatives of the Black community, a mode of engagement that likely weeded out anyone considered too radical and unpredictable. The generation of Charles S. Johnson took the struggle as far as they could, and even though this generation laid claim to mortally wounding de jure segregation with the *Brown* decision, they could not kill off segregation, and therefore Black people could only claim a condition of “almost freedom” in which freedom was near yet so far. But before this traditional pattern of racial interaction could be broken and freedom could be tangible, a corps of fresh, youthful leadership was needed. Their task would be to take advantage of Nashville’s institutional assets and atmosphere of racial moderation in order to make Nashville a city that would, as Julian Bond put it, “love segregation to death.”⁹⁹ Beginning in the early 1950s, while the race relations work was still robust, a group of key leaders made their way to Nashville and in doing so forever changed the city and the nation. These new leaders took up a

⁹⁹ Berry, 120. Berry’s dissertation captured Bond’s attempt to compare the Atlanta civil rights strategy to Nashville’s. Bond, a student at Morehouse College when the sit-ins began, noted that Atlanta was a mercantile city dominated by business interests and financial considerations, so the city’s activists tried to use economic leverage against the white business community, much in contrast to Nashville’s more religiously oriented approach. Although Bond is right to discern the differences in the character of the two cities’ movements, and by implication signal the competition between them for the title of most dynamic student movement, his analysis oversimplifies and misses the influence of economic leverage also employed in the Nashville Movement. As Chapter Five will demonstrate, one of the primary factors bringing resolution to the sit-in dilemma and an early victory for the Nashville Movement when it desegregated six downtown lunch counters by May 1960 was the use of an Easter season boycott.

gauntlet first thrown down by early Black churchmen who created independent Black religious institutions out of a desire for freedom and human dignity. In exercising their leadership they formed a necessary partnership between the Black church and Black colleges that became the key to civil rights success in Nashville and the nation. The emergence of a strong Nashville Movement was a product of vibrant Black religious and educational institutions in the city.

CHAPTER 3: THE “MISFITS” COME TO TOWN: THE CONVERGENCE OF KEY ACTIVISTS UPON NASHVILLE IN THE 1950S

Nashville’s Black institutions helped set the stage for a tradition of opposition to racial oppression, especially among its historically Black colleges and universities. As early as 1911-1913 the city boasted about its straightforward civil rights institutions like the NAACP, chartered in January 1919 by James Carroll Napier, a prominent local Black businessman who became register of the U.S. Treasury 1911-13.¹ But the focus in this chapter is the convergence of key leaders from other locales who settled in Nashville between 1951 and 1959 and made the city the most organized and disciplined in the region. Central to their coming is the background of each activist. In every case, they were prepared from childhood to become social change agents. Just as important, in most cases they were also influenced by the Christian concept of providence where divine authority designates one for a special role in human history.² Combining special preparation and providence, these activists aligned themselves with pre-established institutions, created new ones, and helped change American race relations.

The assemblage of a corps of outstanding leadership was primarily based in Black churches and on college campuses. This leadership was a combination of seminary students such as John Lewis, James Bevel, and Bernard LaFayette; regular college students, particularly Diane Nash; and, an assortment of ministers, including Kelly Miller Smith, C.T. Vivian, and James M. Lawson. More than any other individuals, this group accounted for conceiving, planning, developing and executing the major facets of the early phases of the Nashville movement; giving

¹ Lovett, *The African American History of Nashville*, 77, 33.

² Sandy Dwayne Martin, “The Formation of the Black Christian Conscious,” in Quinton Hosford Dixie and Cornel West, editors, *The Courage to Hope: From Black Suffering to Human Redemption* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1999), 41.

the local movement its distinctive Gandhian-inspired Christian nonviolent character; and fashioning a unique leadership development model through nonviolent workshops that allowed Nashville to become arguably the most dynamic movement center of the early 1960s. These factors made it possible for the city's student leadership to go forth and share their expertise with others around the region, thereby playing a major role in every major civil rights development that took place from 1960 to 1965.³ In addition, the leadership training received by the Nashville students allowed them to ultimately shape the character of some of the civil rights organizations like the Southern Christian Leadership Conference and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee. Without these leaders, the Civil Rights Movement would have steered a different course.

An obvious question emerges from any serious investigation of the Nashville movement. How and why did such a stellar group of activists all converge upon the same city at the same exact time? Part of the explanation may be coincidence, but another part of the explanation is religious in nature. Reverend Kelly Miller Smith wrote in the late 1960s, upon reflecting upon the struggles of the modern civil rights era and the "legacy of power" bequeathed to Black people by preacher-activists such as Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr., that King "had power that was divinely sanctioned."⁴ And the same could be said for the assemblage of John Lewis, James Bevel, and Bernard LaFayette in Nashville in the late 1950s: it was an act that they believed was sanctioned by a divine authority. Of the seven people heretofore referred to as a "leadership corps," all but Diane Nash were associated with a seminary in Nashville; Lawson was enrolled at Vanderbilt Divinity School, Vivian attended American Baptist Theological Seminary (ABT) and Smith taught there, and Lewis, Bevel and LaFayette were ABT students in the late 1950s. John

³ As subsequent chapters will demonstrate, these Nashville activists played a major role in the sit-in movement, the formation of SNCC, the Freedom Rides, the Birmingham campaign of 1963, and the Selma voting rights battle.

⁴ Kelly Miller Smith Papers, Box 27, Folder 5, "Legacy of Power."

Lewis, Bernard LaFayette, and James Bevel enrolled at ABT because of a special divine calling placed upon them. In his memoir, Lewis referred to this spiritual phenomenon as the “Spirit of History.” In Protestant Christianity it is known as providence, a circumstance in which God directs specific individuals in order to influence human history.⁵

The gathering of this particular group was the final component necessary to set the stage for Nashville to become the most important movement center of the early phase of the movement. It can be said that collectively, they represented a band of “misfits.” Reverend Smith used the term “misfits” when referring to a newspaper photograph of students in the early 1960s standing in line at a segregated movie theater under a marquis featuring the title of a film then playing called “The Misfits.” Smith noted that the image was uniquely descriptive of this group of students whose presence was a protest against the status quo. He wrote that “they made a statement that they were no longer willing to fit into a slot set aside by an evil society.” Smith also quoted a great apostle who said “adapt yourselves no longer to the pattern of this present world.” More importantly, Smith proclaimed that Christianity was “not an accommodationist faith, but a disruptive faith. Its adherents don’t fit well into an evil system. Jesus and the apostles were true misfits . . . We need misfits who can rescue us and who can ‘discern the will of God,’ and who ‘know what is good, acceptable, and perfect.’”⁶ It was in the 1950s that this group of misfits came to Nashville, unwilling to conform to the evil system of segregation.

Reverend Kelly Miller Smith was the first misfit to arrive. He was born to middle class parents Terry Monroe and Priscilla Anderson Smith in the all-Black community of Mound Bayou, Mississippi, on October 28, 1920. His parents named him after the Black intellectual, Kelly Miller, dean and professor at Howard University, who argued that Black people must resist

⁵ Martin, 41.

⁶ Ibid., Box 27, Folder 6, “The Misfits.”

segregation in order to maintain their self-respect. Specifically, Miller called for the collective protest of Black radicals and conservatives to foster change in the oppressive conditions endured by African Americans.⁷ There is no way to discern any direct influence upon Smith by his namesake, but Smith certainly made a career of resisting segregation.

Smith was also influenced by his upbringing in Mound Bayou, a historically all-Black town which limited his contact with white people. Mound Bayou was one of more than fifty all-Black towns created between 1865 and 1920 which gave African Americans an opportunity to practice autonomous local self-government and thereby avoid much of the daily indignities of racial subordination. Just as significant in Smith's evolution as a misfit was his grandfather and father's participation in the Mississippi Knights of Tabor, a fraternal organization that encouraged homeownership, morality, an alcohol-free lifestyle, education, and Christianity. Smith's grandfather, R.D. Smith, and his father both were officers in the Knights of Tabor, allowing young Kelly to witness as a child a tradition of family activism on behalf of African Americans.⁸

Smith's racial outlook was significantly shaped by an incident he witnessed at age nine. One day a gang of white men descended upon Mound Bayou searching for a Black man to lynch. As a sensitive child, Smith watched in horror as they sought out their victim. Somehow the Black man, a doctor, turned the mob away, but Smith was forever haunted by the incident. His eventual wife, the former Alice Mae Clark of Jackson, later recalled that the averted lynching "helped [to] shape his future. He always remembered that lynch mob in his hometown and would often tell people about it." Smith himself once said about his Mississippi upbringing:

⁷ Leila A. Meier, "'A Different Kind of Prophet': The Role of Kelly Miller Smith in the Nashville Civil Rights Movement, 1955-1960" (Masters thesis, Vanderbilt University, 1991), 2; Linda T. Wynn, *Kelly Miller Smith, Sr., (1920-1984)*, <http://www.tnstate.edu/library/digital/smithk.htm>.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 3-4.

I think my most important education was not necessarily in institutions where I received my formal education, but growing up in Mississippi. I think that taught me an awful lot about what pertains to living and the problems of society.⁹

Even more significant in his childhood was a prophecy declared by the family's pastor. In Mound Bayou, the Smith family attended First Baptist Church, whose pastor one day said that this child, Kelly Miller Smith, would become a minister.¹⁰ This was perhaps the first indication of the influence of divine providence at work on Smith's behalf. According to Sandy D. Martin, Professor of Religion at the University of Georgia, this prophecy is what Christian theologians refer to as "divine providence," a phrase referring to "an expression of God's purpose, [that] denotes the Almighty's sovereignty, wisdom, control, and concern for the world, and interprets people's place in God's universe." Providence, Martin explains, "says that God is in control of the universe and people of God play instrumental roles in God's effecting the divine will among humanity."¹¹ As this chapter will demonstrate, divine providence primarily manifested itself in two ways. First, for children too young to understand the meaning of a prophetic vision, providence provides a third party who can interpret the prophecy for the child. In other instances, one receives a direct revelation at a point when he could understand the spiritual forces guiding his actions.

The concept of divine providence is a well-established tradition among African American Christians. Princeton University professor Albert J. Raboteau says Black Christian Americans embrace the notion of providence, applying it to their particular sociocultural circumstances. Since the enslavement of Black people in America, Black Christians believed they "were the

⁹ Smith Papers, Box 16, Folder 21, Dwight Lewis article "Memory of Lynch Mob Shaped Minister's Life," *Tennessean*, 23 February 1986.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, Box 16, Folder 20, "A Memorial to the Life and Ministry of Kelly Miller Smith, Sr.," *The Nashville Spotlight*, 30 July, 1984.

¹¹ Martin, 41.

chosen people expecting God's deliverance from bondage, freeing them to share with the world insights into religion and democracy gained from the crucible of oppression."¹² Divine providence also means that African Americans are often centrally located in the vortex of human history because, according to the *Encyclopedia of Christian Theology*, providence involves the "idea that history has a true purpose. Providence creates a framework within which the real history of nations unfolds."¹³ This explains what John Lewis referred to as the "Spirit of History," a theory he began to affirm in the early days of his tenure at ABT, before the sit-ins began. Lewis revealed that:

It was at this time that I began believing in what I call the Spirit of History. Others might call it Fate. Or Destiny. Or a Guiding Hand. Whatever it is called, I came to believe that this force is on the side of what is good, of what is right and just. It is the essence of the moral force of the universe, and at certain points in life, in the flow of human existence and circumstances, this force, this spirit, finds you or selects you, it chases you down and you have no choice; you must allow yourself to be used, to be guided by this force and carry out what must be done.¹⁴

This Spirit of History or providence helps, in their minds, to explain how Nashville became such a dominant presence in the early phase of the Civil Rights Movement. Kelly Miller Smith, C.T. Vivian, James M. Lawson, Jr., John Lewis, Bernard LaFayette, James Bevel, Diane Nash, and many others came from religious backgrounds; all but Nash, who was a Catholic, came with future plans for a career in the ministry. Because most of these individuals not only understood the concept of providence but also hoped for careers in the ministry, their activism should be considered in that context and should be evaluated as intertwined with and guided by forces they considered beyond their control. And as will be demonstrated, many of the primary

¹² Ibid.

¹³ *Encyclopedia of Christian Theology*, p. 1310, <http://www.books.google.com>.

¹⁴ Lewis, *Walking with the Wind*, 73.

activists understood that their vocational choice and/or journey to Nashville was part of some master plan for their lives. Therefore, they believed they were simply following the “Spirit of History.”

Recognizing the manifestation of the “Spirit of History” was critical because it gave the Nashville movement’s primary leadership a sense of power and helped fortify their nerves. It is no wonder then that Lewis, Vivian, and Nash earned reputations for legendary fearlessness. It is difficult, if not impossible, to deter one who feels that he is acting out of destiny.

It is not possible to discern whether or not Smith veered away from his destiny when he first ventured to Nashville in 1938 to study music at Tennessee A & I after graduating from Magnolia High School in Vicksburg, Mississippi. But, after two years there, he was called into the ministry and transferred to Morehouse College in Atlanta where he completed a double major in both music and religion in 1942.¹⁵ It appears that the transfer to Morehouse was a function of both spiritual and social forces in Smith’s life. Spiritually, it fulfilled the prophecy of his family’s pastor. Socially, it reflected the class orientation of his family who named him after a leading Black intellectual and made it possible for him to attend college during the Great Depression. Morehouse comported with his middle class upbringing and, no doubt, attracted Smith with its aura and mystique. African American men who graduated from Morehouse became “Morehouse Men,” young men cultivated to be social and civic role models in their communities. The Morehouse model gained even more currency under the leadership of Benjamin E. Mays who was president of the school while Smith was there and who shepherded the school to international prominence.¹⁶ Smith’s grandfather and father had already

¹⁵ Ibid., 4; Wynn, “Kelly Miller Smith, Sr., (1920-1984).

¹⁶ Taylor Branch, *Parting the Waters: American in the King Years, 1954-1963* (New York: Touchstone Books, 1988), 30; Interestingly, John Lewis too felt the pull of the aura and prestige of Morehouse College. While in high school in Alabama, Lewis heard a radio sermon by Reverend Martin Luther King in early 1955. He recalled in his

demonstrated this ethos and Morehouse only reinforced what was already Smith's family legacy. After completion of his undergraduate studies, Smith earned a masters degree in 1945 from Howard University Divinity School and then the following year settled in as pastor of Mount Heroden Baptist Church in Vicksburg where he remained until 1951. While pasturing Mount Heroden he also headed the religion department at Natchez College from 1946 to 1948 and served as an extension teacher at Alcorn College during the 1949-50 school term.¹⁷

Reverend Kelly Miller Smith's legacy as a minister and social activist was established at First Baptist, Capitol Hill, in Nashville, a church located at 319 Eighth Avenue, North, within walking distance of the downtown shopping district, a factor that later helped make First Baptist a logical launching point for the numerous protests that besieged the city in the early 1960s. Smith returned to Nashville in March of 1951 to become pastor of First Baptist, where he mostly remained until his death in 1984.¹⁸ In only a few short years, Smith quickly rose to prominence as a Baptist minister and community leader. In the July 1954 issue of *Ebony* magazine, Smith was cited as one of the country's "ten most outstanding Negro preachers." To his church members he was "a man who has exemplified before us the Christian qualities of patience, humility, faith, and love. Slow to anger, governed by prayer, a genuine friend of all mankind."¹⁹

memoir that "I was on fire with the words that I was hearing." At the end of the broadcast, it was mentioned that King attended Morehouse College and Lewis decided then that Morehouse was where he would attend college. However, the cost of tuition later proved beyond his family's means and he ended up at American Baptist Theological Seminary where one could work on campus for the cost of tuition. For a detailed account of Lewis' educational experiences, see chapter three of his memoir, *Walking with the Wind: A Memoir of the Movement* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1988). See page 56; For a brief account of Benjamin E. Mays' tenure at Morehouse College, see <http://www.morehouse.edu:16080/about/bio-bmays.html>.

¹⁷ David E. Sumner, "Kelly Miller Smith, Sr., (1920-1984), <http://tennesseeencyclopedia.net/imagegallery.php?entryID=s052>; Smith Papers, Box 16, Folder 22, "Biographical Data, Kelly Miller Smith, Sr."

¹⁸ See Bobby L. Lovett's *The Civil Rights Movement in Tennessee: A Narrative History* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press), 181, for a brief discussion of Smith's short separation from First Baptist. According to Lovett, some in Nashville charged that Smith left the city for a brief three-month stint at a Cleveland, Ohio, church in late 1963 to allow some militancy to invade the movement without damaging his reputation of peaceful leadership.

¹⁹ "Great Negro Preachers," *Ebony*, July 1954, 26-30; Lovett, *The Civil Rights Movement in Tennessee*, 120.

By 1954 he had already mastered the expectations of outstanding pastoral care and esteemed civic leadership in his new-found home of Nashville.

In the 1950s, a crop of young Black ministers—mostly, but not exclusively southerners, emerged who devoted themselves to the demise of Jim Crow. The list is quite extensive and includes, but is not limited to: C.K. Steele in Tallahassee, Florida; Ralph Abernathy in Montgomery; Fred Shuttlesworth in Birmingham; Douglas Moore in Durham, North Carolina; Wyatt T. Walker in Petersburg, Virginia; T.J. Jemison in Baton Rouge, Louisiana; Samuel W. Williams in Atlanta, Georgia; C.A. Ivory in Rock Hill, South Carolina; B. Elton Cox in High Point, North Carolina; and, Grady Donald, Andrew White, J. Metz Rollins, and Kelly Miller Smith in Nashville. Many of these ministers were well educated, were exponents of the theology of the Social Gospel, and were urban-based. The Social Gospel compelled adherents to apply the Bible’s teachings to earthly problems and issues confronting a particular community or society. This popular theological perspective was developed by the German theologian and philosopher Walter Rauschenbusch. In his seminal work, *Christianity and the Social Crisis*, a work generally regarded as jumpstarting the Social Gospel movement in the United States, Rauschenbusch rejected the usual focus on piety, metaphysics, and the supernatural and instead saw Christian ministry as an extension of the Old Testament prophets. This meant that the job of the minister was “to apply the teaching function of the pulpit to the pressing questions of public morality.” This interpretation of the ministry diverted Christianity from an otherworldly eschatology toward an obligation to make the fight for social justice the closest human approximation of God’s love.²⁰

Rauschenbusch’s Social Gospel theology is clearly reflected in Kelly Miller Smith’s conceptualization of his duty as a minister of the Gospel. Although it is not certain whether or

²⁰ Taylor, 73.

not Smith studied Rauschenbusch while at Howard, Smith did drink heavily from the cup of the Social Gospel. In his articulation of the role of the Black preacher in times of social chaos, Smith penned a treatise, *Social Crisis Preaching* in which he wrote that “there is a Christian imperative that requires believers to initiate action regarding social conditions. From its inception Christianity was concerned with social problems. Christianity has a special interest in the oppressed.” Smith went on to note that one of the greatest contributions made by Martin Luther King, Jr., was that he broadened the concept of ministry by helping ministers of all faiths to see that social activism was consistent with and not contradictory to the ministry.²¹

Smith’s full acceptance of this theological perspective, one tailored to a Black context since Rauschenbusch and other white Social Gospelers failed to address racism as a social condition in need of attention, is further confirmed by his occasional teaching of a course on the renowned Black theologian Howard Thurman and the philosophy of social activism of the Negro church. Such a course was offered while Lewis, Bevel, and LaFayette were ABT students.²²

Reverend Smith used the Social Gospel to good effect in Nashville, evidenced by his reputation as the most prominent civil rights leader in Nashville. Not only did he make his church available for strategy meetings, mass meetings, and training sessions, but he also made First Baptist the primary launching site for most of the protest that targeted segregated establishments in downtown Nashville. In addition, he combined his social conscience with an acute ability to appeal to a constituency of educated Black Nashvillians who ultimately constituted the local movement. Reverend Smith’s ministerial greatness is also confirmed by

²¹ Kelly Miller Smith, *Social Crisis Preaching: The Lyman Beecher Lecture Series*, (Macon, Georgia: Mercer University Press, 1984), 11. As the title implies, *Social Crisis Preaching* was the published version of remarks delivered by Smith as the lecturer for the 1982-83 Lyman Beecher Lectureship on Preaching at Yale University Divinity School, a lecture series created in 1871 to honor Beecher, a Congregational and Baptist who served as the first president of Lane Theological Seminary in Cincinnati, Ohio. Beecher was also the father of Harriett Beecher Stowe, the author of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1852), a novel often credited with turning the North against the Southern myth that slavery was a benign and benevolent institution for those in bondage.

²² Lovett, *The Civil Rights Movement in Tennessee*, 120.

John Lewis, who sometimes attended services at First Baptist. By the time Lewis arrived in Nashville in the fall of 1958 to attend ABT, Reverend Smith had “established himself as a progressive force in Nashville” and was “committed as much to the needs of the community around him as to the disposition of the souls of his congregation,”²³ wrote Lewis. Lewis confessed that each Sunday the old wooden pews of First Baptist were filled “to hear the words of one of the most impressive speakers I had ever listened to.” By the time Lewis and other future student activists arrived in Nashville, First Baptist was already the church of the Black elite, drawing members from lawyers, healthcare professionals, businesspeople, faculty and students at the local colleges and universities, and others considered well-to-do. Even Dr. Walter S. Davis, president of Tennessee A & I, a school with many more working class students than Fisk, attended First Baptist. Reverend Smith’s erudite, sophisticated, and dignified preaching style was particularly suited to the tastes of elite Black Nashvillians.²⁴ It is therefore no surprise that local college students found First Baptist a willing partner in the struggle to defeat Jim Crow. Reverend Smith’s theological foundation matched perfectly with the social class orientation of students from Fisk and Meharry in particular, institutions whose student bodies generally drew from the Black elite who expected that the *Brown* decision would create new opportunities never before available to America’s educated Black people. Reverend Smith therefore proved to be intellectually and temperamentally well-suited to lead the Nashville Movement.

The presence of Social Gospelers like Reverend Smith was critical in the emergence of Nashville’s indigenous movement, but it also gave way to tension. Not only did the Social Gospel compel Black ministers like Smith to commit themselves to a career of social change, but

²³ Lewis, 82.

²⁴ Ibid., Bobby L. Lovett, *The Civil Rights Movement in Tennessee: A Narrative History* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2005), 119. According to Lovett, Reverend Smith was dean of the chapel at Tennessee A & I.

by the 1950s it also produced a rift in the Black church and helped to mark some churches as “activist” churches with troublemaking pastors while others became viewed as more traditional congregations whose pastors often avoided controversy by focusing primarily on evangelizing. Such divisions were played out even among young seminarians at ABT just as the sit-ins were about to unfold in Nashville. As the analysis of the Nashville sit-ins will reveal, the question of the role of ministers in social change struggles initially divided some of the young seminarians. John Lewis recalled a dormitory debate during his freshman year when the discussion turned to the subject of Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr., a man whom Lewis held in the highest esteem for his application of the Gospel to the earthly realm. Lewis remembered that many of his cohorts did not share his enthusiasm for King. In fact, during one particular bull session, James Bevel suddenly turned to Lewis and queried, “Lewis, why you always preaching this social gospel and not the *Gospel* gospel?” When Lewis responded that he thought one needed to be less concerned with getting people to the gold-paved heavenly streets and more concerned with reaching the people on the streets of Nashville, another student responded in dismay, shaking his head and saying, “John, you gotta stop preaching the gospel according to Martin Luther *King* and start preaching the Gospel of Jesus *Christ*.” Lewis acknowledged that a significant number of religious people felt that King was creating tension, conflict, and chaos that were seen as incompatible with biblical teachings. The prevailing view was that if something were to happen on earth, then God would make it happen, not King.²⁵ But proponents of the Social Gospel believed human action sanctioned by God would change the world. The result of such action would be a social upheaval that would not only re-order racial relationships, but force many Black churches to reconceptualize the role of the Black church during times of social crisis, something ministers like King and Smith had already done. Employing the Social Gospel at a

²⁵ Lewis, 74.

time when it was not fully accepted no doubt placed Reverend Smith in the category of “misfit,” even among some of his colleagues in the ministry.

Smith’s pre-Nashville years were crucial to his civil rights career. As a child he was set upon a path to the ministry, leading to his ascendancy as the most important Black churchman in Nashville and one of the most dynamic Black Baptist preachers in the country by the 1950s. Smith’s church became the nerve center of the Nashville movement while he functioned as the driving force. Therefore, he and First Baptist Church became a force around which the local civil rights movement coalesced.²⁶ As far as the record shows, Reverend Smith was not schooled in the philosophy of nonviolence before he arrived in Nashville, although it is possible that he was introduced to it at either Morehouse or Howard. It was not necessary that he have such a background anyway; that was the role reserved for James Lawson. Smith’s main purpose in Nashville from 1951 to 1958 was to lay the groundwork for the movement that was to come. In 1955, Smith joined twelve other Black parents in a lawsuit to force the Nashville public schools to implement the Supreme Court’s ruling in the *Brown* decision. From 1956 to 1959 he served as president of the Nashville branch of the NAACP. In 1957, he was one of several ministers who co-founded the SCLC and in 1958 he established the first SCLC affiliate, the Nashville Christian Leadership Council (NCLC).²⁷ The NCLC sponsored what became one of the unique features of the local movement: workshop on nonviolence led by James Lawson. Reverend Smith then is the starting point for what became the Nashville Movement and created the social space for other activists to exhibit their tendencies as “misfits,” spiritual activists who refused to coexist with the evil of racial discrimination.

²⁶ Meier, “A Different Kind of Prophet,” 1.

²⁷ Smith Papers, Box 16, Folder 22, “Biographical Data, Kelly Miller Smith, Sr.”; Smith Papers, Box 28, Folder 7, unfinished manuscript “Pursuit of a Dream: The Nashville Story,” chapter 2, pages 6-7.

Smith acquired more company in the misfit club with the arrival of the Reverend C.T. Vivian and his wife, Octavia, in 1955, coincidentally the same year as the beginning of the Montgomery Bus Boycott and the Nashville school desegregation battle. Vivian was one of several Nashville-based activists born outside of the South. He was born Cordy Tindell Vivian on July 28, 1924, in Boonville, Missouri, a small town about half way between Kansas City and St. Louis. He was the only child of Robert Cordie and Euzetta Tindell Vivian.²⁸

Young Vivian showed signs of social consciousness long before adulthood. While a student at Lincoln Grade School in Macomb, Illinois, he protected weaker students from the bullies. Vivian recalled later that “those incidents [at Lincoln] meant nobody was going to mess with me and I could be free, in fact [I] could use [my] position to free other people.”²⁹ Vivian also began his understanding of nonviolence in grade school. While in the fourth grade, a classmate, Eugene Lee, gave him what Vivian called “an N-word Valentine” containing numerous racial insults and stereotypes. Young C.T. cornered Eugene after school that day and tried to make him fight, but as Vivian recalled, “no matter what I did to him, he wouldn’t fight ... I could push him, I could call him names ... but I could not make him fight ... And he looked so puzzled ... That was very important for all my future. That was the beginning of my understanding of nonviolence.”³⁰ Vivian’s grade school days were also an early sign of his misfit proclivities

²⁸ Pam Adams, “Changing the Nation,” *Peoria Journal Star*. On October 29, 1999, the *Peoria Journal Star* profiled the life and legacy of Reverend Vivian in a special online section known as The Legacy Project, an endeavor featuring people with central Illinois roots who have made significant national or international contributions in their fields. See

<http://web.archive.org/web/2007101404311/http://pjstar.com/services/special/legacyproject/vivianindex.html>.

²⁹ “Vivian, C.T. (1924–) Minister, civil rights activist, becomes an active participant for equality and justice, becomes part of America’s second reconstruction, chronology, joins Nashville’s civil rights movement, leaves Nashville; joins King’s SCLC staff,” <http://encyclopedia.jrank.org/articles/pages/4492/Vivian-C-T-1924.html>.

³⁰ Ibid.

In 1942, Vivian graduated from Macomb High School and enrolled in Western Illinois University. While a student there, he had a direct encounter with overt racism. Vivian started out as a social science major, but switched to English in order to escape the department's racism.³¹ However, he soon found that the racial climate in the English department was even worse; the chair refused to allow him to join the English Club and threatened to block future employment opportunities of the ten white students who threatened to resign from the club in protest.³²

While college gave Vivian a rude awakening in terms of racism, it was in Peoria, Illinois, where he began to try to do something about it. In the early 1940s he moved to Peoria to take a job as the boys and men's director at the Carver Community Center. In 1944, Vivian took part in his first act of nonviolent direct action. A white minister, Barton Hunter, obtained a pamphlet on nonviolence from CORE, then known as the Committee on Racial Equality. Jim Farmer and CORE had used nonviolent sit-in techniques in Chicago in 1942 and published a how-to booklet used by Vivian and his colleagues in Peoria. Hunter obtained a copy of the CORE booklet and asked a Black man who occasionally attended his church, Ben Alexander, to do something with the material. Alexander came to Vivian with the idea of a sit-in.³³

Before long, an integrated group of about twenty young people went to Bishop's Cafeteria on Main Street in Peoria, a popular meeting spot, and demanded service.³⁴ They sent in ten couples and if service was refused, a spectacle was created that could drive away business and damage the restaurant's public image. This approach allowed the group to force Bishop's to integrate and according to Vivian, all of Peoria's lunch counters opened up as a result. These

³¹ Ibid.

³² According to the Pam Adams profile in the *Peoria Journal Star*, the ten white students told Vivian of the threats by the chair, reaffirmed their support for him, but decided not to challenge the chair on this issue because of the fear of upsetting their parents who were financing their education.

³³ Ibid; Kuhn interview of Vivian.

³⁴ Ibid.

early sit-ins had very little impact beyond the local level and was no real threat to segregation as a whole because, as Vivian said, “we really didn’t know what else to do with it.”³⁵ There was no follow up plan and no way to export the initiative to other places due to a lack of strategic grassroots organizing that will be seen in the early 1960s. The other factor to consider is that segregation was still legal in the 1940s and Peoria was a northern city where segregation was not so much a way of life as it was in the South. Vivian recounted that nonviolence “in the North ... was a technique ... It was a means of getting to an end ... In other words, we didn’t have to give non-violent direct action serious concern.”³⁶ Later on in Nashville, of course, a great deal of attention would be paid to understanding nonviolence as a philosophy and not just as a tactic.

There were other sit-ins prior to 1960, none had the potential to constitute a movement. Many of the pre-1960 sit-ins were outside the Deep South and occurred before the *Brown* decision. Anti-segregation protests had little chance of success as long as segregation was legal. Prior to the mid-1950s, there were very few people in the South who had practical knowledge about principles of nonviolence. When the Peoria group targeted Bishop’s Cafeteria, both Martin Luther King, Jr., and James M. Lawson, Jr., were still teenagers and Kelly Miller Smith was not quite out of college. No one was yet sure how to apply nonviolent direct action to de jure segregation and by the late 1950s when most of Nashville’s primary civil rights activists were in place, Reverend Vivian was one of a few who had had experience with nonviolent direct action.

Peoria was also the city where Reverend Vivian met his wife, the former Octavia Geans.³⁷ Coincidentally, while a high school student, Octavia also participated in sit-ins. One day some time in 1945 or so, she and a group of other students were taken to a diner known as Ted’s Trailer by a Reverend Parker after a full day of writing down the names of Black people

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Adams.

eligible to vote. Ted's usually served Black customers at the drive through window, but for some reason Reverend Parker decided to go inside for service. It is apparent that this surprise sit-in caught the restaurant owners and the other customers off guard because Mrs. Vivian recollected that "the people [the white customers] probably didn't care [that we demanded service inside]. It was probably the restaurant owners who were afraid they'd [the white customers] care."³⁸ What is most important here is the fact that both of these young African Americans brought to their relationship and eventually to Nashville a body of common protest experience that would be tapped into, refined, and developed, thereby contributing to the dynamic evolution of nonviolent direct action.

Peoria was the place where young C.T. Vivian began to develop as an activist. In the late 1940s, he became associated with a Black union organizer, Ajay Martin, who became president of the local United Farm and Equipment Workers union. He assisted Martin in an effort to bring Paul Robeson to town in April 1947.³⁹ By this time, Robeson was already a controversial figure in the eyes of many white Americans and was under investigation for his political activities by J. Edgar Hoover's FBI. Two days before a scheduled concert in Peoria, Robeson and nearly one thousand others were cited by the House Committee on Un-American Activities (HCUA) for "supporting the Communist Party and its front organizations." Peoria's officials prevented Robeson from performing at City Hall and other private facilities were closed to him as well, forcing Robeson to meet with a handful of people, including Vivian, in the living room of Martin.⁴⁰ Vivian went to the train station with Martin to pick up Robeson. The timing of Robeson's appearance in Peoria made his presence a dangerous undertaking, placing Vivian in harm's way. As they made their way from the train station, the three men saw armed American

³⁸ Bennett interview of C.T. and Octavia Vivian.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Martin Bauml Duberman, *Paul Robeson: A Biography* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1989), 317-18.

Legion members patrolling the streets⁴¹, whipped into a state of paranoia by the Cold War rhetoric of American foreign policy makers.

Vivian's association with the very controversial Paul Robeson took his nascent activism far beyond the benign act of sitting-in or defying a racist college professor. Perhaps for the first time in his activist career, Vivian put his safety in jeopardy and began to understand the relationship between oppression and power in the United States. One of the reasons why Robeson was so feared was that he used his celebrity to speak out in meaningful ways against discrimination and to defy the tenets of American foreign policy which employed a rigid anti-Soviet doctrine. Not only did Robeson picket segregated performance venues, but he also visited the Soviet Union many times before and during the Cold War. In fact, during a visit in 1949, he declared "I was, I am, always will be a friend of the Soviet people."⁴² This 1949 defiant embrace of the Soviet people came after Robeson had been denounced by the HUAC in 1947 for his radical politics. Robeson's activism struck at the core of white power in America: dominance of the postwar world internationally and continued subjugation of its Black citizens. Vivian demonstrated, through his open association with radical misfits such as Paul Robeson and Ajay Martin, that he liked to keep the company of radicals and was willing to pay the price to do so. As the Civil Rights Movement unfolded, Reverend C.T. Vivian established himself as one of the most fearless activists and pronounced misfits on the scene. His actions in Peoria bear this out. When asked about having a fear of consequences due to his Peoria activism, Vivian responded:

. . . There was no hesitation on my part. Let's go do it. If we go to jail, we go to jail. Whatever we have to do, let's do it, but we have to at least not [be] passive and we did stand up and we did . . . affirm our identity and our personhood and our sense of dignity⁴³

⁴¹ Adams article, *Peoria Journal Star*.

⁴² Duberman., 352.

⁴³ Adams.

Vivian's fearlessness was an important commodity in the Nashville movement and in the larger context of the Black struggle. This fearlessness was a quality also shared by many of the city's activists; John Lewis and Diane Nash were particularly noted for displaying this trait. One of the reasons why "Negroes" in the South found segregation so difficult to overcome, even after the *Brown* decision, was that many of them failed to challenge the system of oppression because they feared the consequences of defiance. The young activists like Vivian who descended upon Nashville in the 1950s helped the Black South rid itself of the paralysis of fear. Once "Negroes" overcame this affliction, they could force whites to accept them on new terms and begin the process of becoming "Black", a state of existence in which a group of people can hold their heads high in dignity, self-respect and without fear.

Not only was Peoria the place where young C.T. Vivian began to transform into a steely civil rights misfit, but it was the city where he formally made two life-long commitments: marriage and ministry. On February 23, 1953, Vivian married Octavia Geans; they became parents of six children. A year later, while working at the Foster and Gallagher mail-order company, he pondered starting a mail-order business geared toward African Americans. As he walked across the warehouse floor to the offices, Vivian remembered that "suddenly, the sky opened, I mean there was an opening and I heard . . . the Lord saying to me, 'Work for me 10 to 12 hours a day.'" Even though years later he admitted that on that day it was not the Lord crying out to him, but him crying out to the Lord, the encounter was no less divine and it seemed that the events which followed appeared to be directed by the providential hand of God.⁴⁴

Not long after the "divine encounter," Vivian delivered his first sermon at Peoria's Mount Zion Baptist Church and found himself telling his wife, who was expecting their second child, that he must go to seminary. Mount Zion and his employer raised funds for him to fulfill his

⁴⁴ Ibid.

calling and by January 1955, he was in Nashville, enrolled at ABT.⁴⁵ By the time Reverend Vivian arrived in Nashville, Reverend Smith was already well established, the Race Relations Institute at Fisk was thriving, and the *Brown* decision was already on the books. Vivian immediately settled into Black Nashville by becoming a pastor at First Community Church and working as an editor at the National Baptist Sunday School Publishing Board of the National Baptist Convention. He quickly revealed his renegade pedigree by resigning from the Publishing Board when it refused to publish a twenty-four page article that he wrote after interviewing Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr., who had successfully led the Montgomery Bus Boycott. Vivian self-published the interview and distributed it.⁴⁶

Even though Smith and Vivian represented a powerful duo of “misfits,” the contingent of activist ministers was incomplete without Reverend James M. Lawson, Jr. Next to Smith, Lawson was the most important figure in the Nashville Movement. Nashville’s fight against segregated facilities would not have gained the renown and success that it did without the presence of Lawson. While Reverend Smith was the driving force of the Nashville Movement, Reverend Lawson was responsible for providing the philosophical foundation for the assault on racial segregation. He also brought to the table the ability to integrate nonviolence philosophy with Christian principles and to translate that into useful protest tactics. He used this knowledge to train an army of student and adult activists. No one else in Nashville, including Reverend Smith, could have accomplished this feat.

James Morris Lawson, Jr., was born on September 22, 1928, in Uniontown, Pennsylvania, but grew up in Massillon, Ohio, a Cleveland suburb, where his father served as the pastor of St. James AME Zion. Besides being a religiously devout family, the Lawsons were also

⁴⁵ Ibid; According to Vivian in his interview with Kathy Bennett, Octavia remained in Peoria until June when she joined him.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

politically active and proud of the family legacy of fighting racial injustice, a quality that James, Jr., apparently acquired. Young James was especially proud that his paternal great-grandfather had escaped slavery and fled to Guelph, Ontario, with his son, Henry Davenport Lawson, by way of the Underground Railroad, where James, Sr., was born in 1884.⁴⁷

The senior James M. Lawson placed education and faith high on his priority list. While still in Canada, he was one of the first Blacks to attend McGill University. When he immigrated to the United States he started in the AME Church, but became an itinerate Methodist pastor, founding new congregations along the way. It was in Jamestown, New York, where he married Philane Cover, a native of St. Anne's Parish, Jamaica.⁴⁸

The elder Reverend Lawson advocated racial pride and contributed to the family legacy of political activism established by his grandfather's Underground Railroad flight to Canada. While stationed in Sharon, South Carolina, he stopped a group of white men from beating up a Black boy and took the child home to his family. In addition, he organized and founded both NAACP and Urban League chapters wherever he pastored,⁴⁹ an obvious model for James, Jr., or "Jimmy" as he was called.

As a child in Massillon, Jimmy sometimes traveled with his father when he preached at various churches. One of the most memorable experiences occurred when they journeyed to the church of Reverend Dr. James Lincoln, pastor of St Paul AME Zion Church in Cleveland, Reverend Lincoln always sat Jimmy in the pulpit in a large preacher's chair too high off the floor for his feet to touch the ground. It was an experience that Lawson never forgot. He loved the rich emotions of the congregants in that church. He could feel that something powerful was taking

⁴⁷ David Halberstam, *The Children* (New York: Random House, 1998), 28; Interview of James M. Lawson, Jr., by William L. Barnes, October 21-22, 2002, for Nashville Public Library Oral History Collection.

⁴⁸ Halberstam, 28-29; Barnes interview of Lawson.

⁴⁹ Halberstam, 29-30.

place all around him. Lawson later recalled that the St. Paul experiences “had a huge impact on me,”⁵⁰ and likely made him comfortable in Black churches and helped persuade him to follow his father’s footsteps into the ministry.

Although it is clear that Lawson’s father was a major influence on his career path and activist tendencies, it was his mother who steered him onto the road of nonviolence. In fact, Lawson revealed that his parents were polar opposites on the issue and the senior Lawson even carried a pistol at all times. As a preacher’s child, Jimmy was always harassed at school. In the first and second grades at Lorin Andrews Elementary School, he frequently fought and often won, prompting other children to encourage the neighborhood bullies to fight him. One day on the way home for lunch, a boy challenged him to fight, but Jimmy ignored it. When he arrived home, the elder Lawson heard the commotion and Jimmy confessed that he had refused to fight. His father forced the boys to battle until they were both exhausted. Mrs. Lawson strongly objected to such conduct.⁵¹

But another incident of violence forever changed Jimmy’s perspective on violence. When he was either in the fourth or fifth grade, Mrs. Lawson sent Jimmy on an errand after school. As he passed a car parked on Lincoln Street, a white boy in the car yelled “Nigger,” and young Lawson slapped the offender as hard as he could and then finished his errand. Jimmy returned home and proudly told his mother about the incident. Philane Lawson, in a very clear voice, asked, “What good did that do, Jimmy?” He was completely stunned by her response, but remained silent as she continued the instructive, life-altering, yet loving rebuke:

We all love you, Jimmy, and God loves you, and we believe in you and how good and intelligent you are. We have a good life and you are going to have a good life. I know this Jimmy. With all that love, what harm does that stupid insult do? It’s nothing, Jimmy, it’s empty. Just ignorant words from an ignorant child. Who is

⁵⁰ Barnes interview of Lawson.

⁵¹ Ibid.

gone from your life the moment it was said. That child is gone. You will never see him again. You do not even know his name.⁵²

Those words were powerful and represent one of the most critical moments in his life. Years later, when he spoke about his conversion to the philosophy of nonviolence, he acknowledged that moment as the beginning of a monumental transformation. Right then he made a vow never again, if possible, to hit another person. This was a *numinous* moment, a mystical experience, one so special that it carried a special sense of illumination and enlightenment.⁵³

This numinous moment had other implications for young Lawson. It caused him to interpret Jesus and the New Testament in new ways. He saw Matthew 5:38-48 as pointing toward another way to resist, as an “invitation to fight with the best in your life, not with the worst.”⁵⁴ It reads:

You have heard it said, ‘Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth.’ But I tell you, Do not resist an evil person. If someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also and if someone wants to sue you and take your tunic, let him have your cloak as well. If someone forces you to go one mile, go with him two miles.

Verses forty-three through forty-eight cover the subject of loving one’s enemies:

You have heard that it was said, ‘love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I tell you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be sons of your father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? And if you greet only your brother, what are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that? Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.⁵⁵

This portion of Matthew is especially important for advocates of the philosophy of nonviolence. In fact, these verses constitute the very core of the rationale for activists absorbing

⁵² Barnes interview of Lawson.

⁵³ Halberstam, 31-32.

⁵⁴ Barnes interview of Lawson.

⁵⁵ *Holy Bible*, The New International Version.

blows from their opponents without retaliating. It also emphasizes the concept of Christian love, what Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr., often referred to by the Greek term *agape*, or the love of humanity itself, a love that King said required “you love every man because God loves him.”⁵⁶ Agape love is the most difficult kind of love for human beings to express, yet it was the basis for Mrs. Lawson’s admonishment of her son for his violent retaliation. She told him, “We all love you, Jimmy, and God loves you . . . With all that love, what harm does that stupid insult do?”⁵⁷ When Lawson landed in Nashville in 1958, he translated that lesson to a cadre of student activists, some who initially expressed skepticism about the voracity of nonviolence as more than a tactic, but who in many cases ultimately accepted it as a way of life and were transformed by it. This means that Lawson moved beyond the problem encountered by Reverend Vivian in his application of nonviolence in Peoria: that nonviolence was only a tactic with little room to grow.

Lawson’s embrace of nonviolence grew as he matured. While still in high school, he was exposed to the teachings of Mohandas K. Gandhi through editorials in Black newspapers such as the *Cleveland Call and Post* and became much more politically conscious when he heard about the use of atomic bombs during World War II. The more Lawson learned about the event, the more a cloud of darkness seemed to envelop the world and the more relevant a path toward pacifism seemed to him.⁵⁸

In the late 1940s, Lawson graduated from high school and enrolled in Baldwin-Wallace College in Berea, Ohio, where his understanding of Gandhian philosophy and nonviolence matured. He eagerly devoured the works of Richard Gregg, E. Stanley Jones, and John H. Holmes, all acquaintances or friends of Gandhi who wrote about Gandhi’s philosophy. These individuals helped Lawson to better appreciate the true meaning of Gandhian nonviolence,

⁵⁶ Branch, *Parting the Waters*, 773-74.

⁵⁷ Halberstam, 31.

⁵⁸ Barnes interview of Lawson; Halberstam, 35.

particularly Gregg's *The Power of Nonviolence*, which detailed the steps in the Gandhian process. Lawson credited this book with having a "big impact on me. I learned nonviolence was a form of power, a form of social political action. It's not an acquiescence."⁵⁹ This understanding later became an important component of Lawson's nonviolence pedagogy in Nashville when he became the primary teacher and facilitator of a series of workshops on nonviolence. One of the primary challenges faced by proponents of nonviolence as they sought to spread it was the perception that nonviolence was surrendering to one's opponents or was an expression of weakness in the face of daunting and overwhelming force. In fact, the application of nonviolence could be quite aggressive and provocative as Lawson found out in the 1950s when some Quakers and Mennonites accused him of being too aggressive and militant to be a follower of Jesus.⁶⁰

College also exposed Lawson to the teachings of Abraham Johannes (A.J.) Muste, a Dutch-born minister and activist who was a leading pacifist, union organizer, and noted advocate of nonviolent direct action. Muste is most remembered for his association with the Fellowship of Reconciliation (FOR), an interfaith organization founded in Europe in 1914 to prevent the onset of war and devoted to the promotion of nonviolence. The American branch was established in 1915 and Muste joined its ranks the following year and became its national secretary in 1940.⁶¹ FOR is known mostly for its pacifist philosophy⁶²—and for sponsorship of the April 1947 Journey of Reconciliation, a test of the Supreme Court ruling that outlawed segregated interstate transportation⁶³. The Journey of Reconciliation served as the forerunner of the more famous

⁵⁹ Barnes interview of Lawson.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ "Abraham Johannes Muste," <http://www.bookrags.com/biography/abrahamjohannes-muste/>

⁶² For a thorough discussion of FOR's Journey of Reconciliation, see chapter one of Raymond Arsenault's *Freedom Riders: 1961 and the Struggle for Racial Justice* (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2006).

⁶³ Robert L. Holmes, ed., *Nonviolence in Theory and Practice* (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing Company, 1990), 114. Holmes defines pacifism as the belief that war is morally wrong.

1961 Freedom Rides, sponsored by the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), an organization that, in 1942, grew out of James Farmer's work at FOR.⁶⁴

Muste and FOR are important because they influenced Lawson and his generation. Muste's 1952 anti-war polemic, "War Is the Enemy," served as a rallying cry for anti-war activists in the 1960s with its argument against cooperation with the United States' Selective Service Act.⁶⁵ Muste was also one of the few people in the 1940s who publicly condemned America's use of nuclear weapons against Japan in World War II and who asked who would teach America truth and humility after it had annihilated Japan, sentiments that Lawson lamented were rarely expressed.⁶⁶ Muste's unequivocal opposition to nuclear weapons helped Lawson to solidify his own anti-nuclear position, leaving him with a sense of foreboding after the nuclear destruction of Nagasaki and Hiroshima. FOR is important because it set the climate for a body of pacifists and radicals like Muste and Bayard Rustin, who was later a field secretary for the organization and who ventured to Montgomery during the bus boycott to train King in nonviolence.⁶⁷ Lawson was so profoundly influenced by such an atmosphere that by the 1950s, he had become a conscientious objector and served eleven months in a federal prison for refusing to register for the draft during the Korean War. Beside its influence on his pacifism, FOR is also the organization responsible for planting Lawson in Nashville in 1958. While he was working on a masters degree in theology at Oberlin College in 1957, he met Reverend King, Jr., at a reception following a lecture he had given on campus. King urged him to come South immediately to lend a hand to the racial struggle. Lawson's initial response was "I'll come as

⁶⁴ A brief history of CORE can be found on its website at <http://www.core-online.org> and in chapter one of Arsenault's book on the Freedom Riders.

⁶⁵ See pages 310-339 of Staughton Lynd's edited volume, *Nonviolence in America: A Documentary History* (Indianapolis, New York: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1966).

⁶⁶ Barnes interview of Lawson.

⁶⁷ See pages 168, 173-74, and 178-80 in Taylor Branch's *Parting the Waters* for details of Rustin's role in Montgomery.

soon as I can.” Soon after that encounter, he decided to follow through on his promise and called Muste who was by then a friend and mentor and told him of his decision to go South. Muste arranged for Lawson to become a southern field secretary for FOR.⁶⁸

Lawson’s eventual move to the South was a culmination of many factors. It began with his growing awareness of the power of nonviolence, his conclusion that African Americans were far too docile, and his observation of liberation movements around the world, particularly the one in India. This growing awareness caused him to ponder one day working in the South. As he put it, “So I felt a call to work in the South or overseas. The call South was due to the segregation being there.”⁶⁹

James Lawson was one of several activists who felt “called” to Nashville in the late 1950s. But before Lawson kept his providential appointment in Nashville, he had more preparation to undergo. One of the first opportunities that he had to employ his new-found understanding of nonviolence came while he was still in high school. One day he and his debate team partner held an impromptu sit-in at The Sugar Bowl, a local diner in Massillon. Although they were never served, the incident served as a start to a long career of social protest. A few years later as a college student, Lawson also sat-in at several drugstore soda fountains in Indianapolis during a Methodist conference. By this time Lawson seemed to be acting upon both his theoretical understanding of what Gandhi referred to as an “experiment,” that was compelling him to seek a “path of wonder and truth.” This social “experiment” was also fused with his own interpretation of the meaning of the life of Jesus. Lawson felt that he had to defy segregation because “I also realized this was the Jesus way.”⁷⁰

⁶⁸ Barnes interview of Lawson.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Barnes interview of Lawson.

Landing at Baldwin-Wallace College was perfect for Lawson's maturation as a nonviolence proponent. It was, as he put it, part of the "process of becoming." This was the postwar world, one that slowly consented to grapple with the burgeoning cries for freedom by nonwhite peoples around the world. At Baldwin-Wallace Lawson found kindred spirits who embraced his own political inclinations and embryonic misfit tendencies. The college had a very active FOR chapter and Lawson became a member in 1947.⁷¹

The year 1947 was also when Lawson first met A.J. Muste at a FOR-sponsored event on campus. Besides his mother, Muste became the second most influential individual in Lawson's nonviolence odyssey. Muste pointed Lawson to a solid intellectual and historical basis for what he already believed. He helped convince the impressionable Lawson that pressing postwar questions such as oppression and racism could only be addressed through the teachings of Jesus Christ, particularly his strictures on Christian love. For Lawson, Muste seemed to be saying "You will love the Lord, you will work actively for him, and thereby, because His belief is love and His life is love, you will end up seeking a concept of greater social justice and a more just (and peaceful) country and planet." Muste helped Lawson merge his political dissent with religious convictions. This meeting forever changed Lawson's life. Muste's kind, gentle, and compassionate nature helped mold Lawson into the gentle Black middle-class Christian radical that he became.⁷²

Lawson's connections to Muste led him to relationships with other major pacifists such as James Farmer, Bayard Rustin, and Glenn Smiley. (It will be Smiley who convinced Lawson to select Nashville after his appointment as Southern Field Secretary of FOR.) These associations likely further radicalized Lawson's thinking. Evidence of this radicalization can be seen in

⁷¹ Halberstam, 36-37.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 37-38.

Lawson's stance on military service. When he was a freshman, Lawson, like other young men his age, registered for the draft. However, by his junior year he decided he could not serve in the military and realized that he might have to go to prison for his beliefs. Lawson's connections this body of radicals helped him develop into a person who by the end of his college career was in complete opposition to the accepted norms of American political life. Therefore, it was easy to reject military service and other aspects of Cold War politics.⁷³

The onset of the Korean War was a pivotal time in Lawson's life. On the one hand, it caused him to reveal himself as a misfit to his local draft board. Lawson did this in a way that surely caught the board off guard and cleverly registered opposition to classifying American citizens by race, a practice that disadvantaged Black people. In 1949 when Lawson filled out the draft registration form, rather than designate himself a "Negro," he instead substituted the phrase "human race."⁷⁴ With one seemingly small gesture, Lawson both defined conventional practice concerning racial identity and reclaimed his humanity.

On the other hand, the outbreak of the Korean war forced Lawson to keep an earlier promise to choose prison over military service. In 1949, he was sent a draft classification certificate informing him that he was classified 1-A. Lawson returned the certificate and noted his opposition to the draft. In August of 1950, the local draft board mailed him form 150, a questionnaire for those seeking conscientious objector status. Rather than completing the form, Lawson drafted a letter explaining his decision to resist the draft. He wrote:

There seems to be a real need for an application of Christian ethics to this area. In thinking such of our dynamic movement, on the part of all who call themselves Christians, will stop the present drift of humanity to utter destruction. Because of my endeavor to be a Christian in belief I cannot

⁷³ Ibid., 38.

⁷⁴ "'Trial of James Morris Lawson,' records of case #20286 on file in U.S. District Court, Northern District of Ohio, Cleveland," James G. Stahlman Papers, Box V-29, folder 14, Vanderbilt University Special Collections, Nashville, Tennessee.

co-operate in any way with the present hysteria to launch the entire world in another war. I am therefore returning the sealed questionnaire and classification.

Thereafter, Lawson refused the order to report for a physical and for induction in the fall of 1950 and was indicted October 31, 1950, for violating the Selective Service Act.⁷⁵ Lawson had begun a life-long mission of sacrificing himself for what he perceived to be the greater good and trying to live “the Jesus way.”

The eleven months that Lawson spent in prison were a time of growth and of testing his nonviolence convictions. While in solitary confinement at Mill Point work camp in West Virginia, there was plenty of time for study, meditation, and personal reflection. Lawson read as much as he could from the prison library about others who endured prison for reasons of conscience. He learned from his study—and from talking to other pacifists like Bayard Rustin before he began his sentence—to develop routine spiritual habits.⁷⁶ This became a valuable lesson during the civil Rights Movement when activists employ the jail-no-bail-tactic, a strategic move designed to overburden the local penal systems. Students who volunteered to be arrested confused their white jailers as they transformed jails from places of shame to abodes of triumph when they sang freedom songs, prayed, and fasted. Lawson’s commitment to nonviolence was tested when in late 1951 he and other prisoners who were considered troublemakers were transferred to Ashland, Kentucky, where they were housed in the maximum security cell block with the most dangerous inmates. Not long after he arrived, several Black prisoners decided to make Lawson a queen, a prison sexual object. One night he woke up to find one of the men who had threatened to “queen” him leering at him outside of the cell. The only option seemed to be to

⁷⁵ “Transcript of Evidence, United States Of America, Plaintiff–U.S.–James Morris Lawson, Defendant, in the District Court of the U.S., Northern District of Ohio, Eastern Division,” Stahlman Papers, Box V-29, folder 14.

⁷⁶ Barnes Interview of Lawson; Halberstam, 44.

fight back, but that meant reneging on his personal vow of nonviolence and therefore failing as a Christian. Suddenly, he heard a voice call out to him, making the decision perfectly clear. It said:

If something happens to you, it's not you causing it . . . You are responsible for only one thing—above all you must not violate your own conscience. If something happens, it is because of them . . . That makes it one more thing you have to endure in order to be true to Him. It is part of the test He set out for you.

That voice removed the fear and Lawson prepared himself for the worst, but he was never assaulted nor threatened again.⁷⁷

Prison further confirmed Lawson's allegiance to nonviolence. It became a stepping stone to the final stage in his preparation for becoming the most knowledgeable practitioner of nonviolence in the South. Lawson was paroled in May 1952 and offered a chance to do missionary work in India, a dream-come-true opportunity to get close to Gandhi.⁷⁸ India allowed Lawson to ponder larger ethical questions outside of an American context. If he truly wanted to walk behind Jesus, he needed to experience life outside of a rich, white, industrialized nation, he thought. The more time he spent in India, the more his admiration for Gandhi grew. For him, Gandhi was perhaps the one human being who best exemplified the virtues of Jesus Christ.⁷⁹

Lawson was still in India when the Montgomery Bus Boycott began in December 1955. As spring of 1956 rolled around, his missionary stint in India came to an end and was followed by a trip to Africa⁸⁰ on the eve of a wave of decolonization that began in sub-Saharan Africa in 1957. At this moment it seemed that the totality of all of Lawson's previous experiences with nonviolence and his faith—the numinous experience with his mother, the exposure to nonviolence philosophy, his mentorship with Muste, the prison time and the great test of his

⁷⁷ Halberstam, 44-46.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 47.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 48-49.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 49.

commitment to nonviolence, and his trip to India and Africa—were converging to propel him into the next step as a guru of nonviolence. By the time he reached Nashville, he had moved from a student to an instructor of nonviolence.

The opportunity to get to Nashville materialized because of a conversation with Reverend King, Jr., who urgently beseeched him to forestall the completion of his degree that was interrupted by prison and bring to the South his unique expertise in the area of nonviolence. Lawson eagerly recognized that this “was nothing less than a call[ing]”⁸¹ Initially, Lawson thought of going to Atlanta where he could attend Gammon Theological Seminary. Muste urged him not to rush and mentioned a possible appointment with FOR in the South. Glenn Smiley, national field director of FOR, called and offered him a position as southern field director. Lawson accepted the offer, but Smiley was not sold on Atlanta as a base of operation. Despite Atlanta’s image as a progressive city, Smiley worried that Atlanta was located in a state swarming with powerful white supremacists who openly opposed the *Brown* decision, making its politics dominated by segregationists. The city was modern and upbeat, but Smiley did not feel that its establishment leadership was ready to inaugurate a new direction in race relations.⁸²

Nashville, on the other hand, seemed a much better choice. Tennessee’s moderate political climate seemed much more likely to provide Lawson a safe haven for his base where he would face less racial hostility. Tennessee defeated the poll tax in the 1940s and by 1958, Nashville already had two Black city councilmen, Z. Alexander Looby and Robert Lillard, both elected in 1951.⁸³ Nashville was also a center of secular and religious education. This meant that

⁸¹ Ibid., 17.

⁸² Both of Georgia’s U.S. senators, Richard Russell and Walter George, signed the Southern Manifesto, a declaration of opposition to the *Brown* decision. Its governor, Marvin Griffin, visited Little Rock in the summer of 1957, helping to kindle resistance to the desegregation of Central High School in September 1957 and precipitating an ugly showdown between the federal government and the state of Arkansas. See page 19 of Halberstam’s *The Children*.

⁸³ Halberstam, 111-112.

Lawson could potentially rub elbows with young moderate or liberal churchmen who might be sympathetic colleagues. Vanderbilt Divinity School was an especially encouraging asset for Lawson as it halfheartedly desegregated in the fall of 1953 with the enrollment of a Black minister, Reverend Joseph A. Johnson, who became the first Black graduate in June 1955. The Divinity School was a place where Lawson might continue his seminary studies, an important consideration in selecting a base of operation.⁸⁴

Together, Lawson and Smiley decided that Nashville was a more suitable field of operation, a conclusion that Lawson confided was “a providential decision because I would have been crucified in Atlanta by the Black establishmentarian leadership.” In hindsight, he realized that “we could not have done in Atlanta what we did in Nashville.” Lawson noted that he learned from Reverend King, Jr., that starting civil rights action in Atlanta was next to impossible because of the opposition of the established Black leadership, the same group who was constantly embarrassed by King’s presence after his return home in early 1960 as co-pastor of Ebenezer Baptist Church. Much of the problem was that the leadership that included Reverend Martin Luther King, Sr., and his generation had their own ideas about the “proper pace” of change.⁸⁵ And as historian Benjamin Houston contends, Dr. King’s approach was too confrontational. It violated the “nature of racial etiquette in the South” in which leaders from

⁸⁴ Ibid., 22-23; “Present Status of This problem,” James G. Stahlman Papers, Box V-29, folder 7, Vanderbilt University Special Collection, Nashville, Tennessee; Robert McGaw, “A Policy the University Can Defend,” Stahlman Papers, Box V-29, folder 8. According to alumnus Robert McGaw, Vanderbilt, in the late 1950s was not fully desegregated. Only the graduate and professional programs admitted Black students, as long as there was not a comparable program at a nearby institution. This meant that the undergraduate program was still segregated. Reverend Johnson actually graduated in August 1954 but did not receive his diploma until June 1955. See article in the Nashville *Banner* dated September 19, 1956, “VU Admits Negroes to Law School.”

⁸⁵ Barnes interview of Lawson; In addition to Martin Luther King, Sr., other members of the established Black Leadership that Smiley warned Lawson about include Reverend William Holmes Borders, pastor of Wheat Street Baptist Church, Cornelius A. Scott, editor of the *Atlanta Daily World*, and Dr. Rufus Clement, president of Atlanta University. For a more detailed treatment of established Black leadership in Atlanta, see, Barry E. Lee, “Sam Williams the Activist: The NAACP, School Desegregation and the Student Movement,” in “‘Bridge Over Troubled Waters’: Samuel W. Williams and the Desegregation of Atlanta” (Masters thesis, Georgia State University, 1995); See page 123 of *Bearing the Cross* for a discussion of King’s decision to leave Montgomery and return to Atlanta.

both races treated each other cordially and Black leaders presented their grievances in private, ever mindful not to demand too much too fast.⁸⁶

Lawson made Nashville his new home in January 1958 and enrolled in Vanderbilt's Divinity School the following year. From the start, Nashville seemed promising for Lawson's new mission as FOR's field secretary, a job which slated him as a regional troubleshooter who helped local communities address racial troubles. The city was also promising because it was the home of the first affiliate of the SCLC, the Nashville Christian Leadership Council (NCLC), and the residence of other activist ministers such as Reverend Andrew White, as well as community leaders such as Delores Wilkerson, all of whom were associated with NCLC.⁸⁷

Nashville was also quickly becoming the home of a small group of seminarians called to become activists themselves. The first to arrive was James Luther Bevel, in January 1957. He was born on October 19, 1936, the thirteenth child of Dennis and Illie Murff Bevel, both Mississippi natives. James was reared in Itta Bena, a small Delta town approximately eight miles west of Greenwood. At some point, Mr. and Mrs. Bevel divorced and James remained with his father, known by all as "Old Crazy Dennis Bevel" because of his reputation for assertive behavior, even with white people. James recalled an instance when a white farmer attempted to compel him and one of his brothers, Charles, to go chop cotton when they were about ten or twelve years old. When Dennis Bevel learned about this, he immediately set out to "tell this

⁸⁶ Taken from a lecture by Benjamin Houston entitled "The Nashville Way: A Southern City and Racial Change, 1945-1975," at the Southern Labor Archives at Georgia State University on November 19, 2008.

⁸⁷ Barnes interview of Lawson; It should be noted that although the SCLC was the parent organization of the NCLC, they had different membership structures. The SCLC was an organization composed of representatives of affiliated organizations such as the NCLC and Reverend Fred Shuttlesworth's ACMHR. The SCLC did not solicit individual memberships. The NCLC, on the other hand, although an affiliate of the SCLC, was composed of individual local members. Part of the rationale for this affiliated structure on the part of the SCLC was to minimize conflict and competition with the NAACP, an organization that depended upon individual memberships at the local level. See chapter two of David Garrow's *Bearing the Cross: Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference* for details about the founding of the SCLC and the conflict with the NAACP.

white guy he cannot be doing anything to my sons,” as James recollected.⁸⁸ Boldness in defiance of the racial status quo was a trait that James apparently inherited from his father. James Bevel earned a reputation for unparalleled boldness also. Unfortunately, Bevel also learned his misogynistic ways from his father. He recalled that Dennis Bevel often complained that Black men were “oppressed by women and white people” and that a Black man should never “fall under the administration” of either one. James found truth in his father’s words, going so far as to give Dennis Bevel’s pronouncements the weight of a godly mandate. According to James, “If my [D]addy agree[s] with it, it means God agreed with it . . . and God will back you up.” In a rather perverted way, Bevel used his father’s reasoning to both fuel his resistance to white supremacy and to justify the sexual promiscuity that was part of his lore.⁸⁹

Such logic perhaps explains Bevel’s tragically troubled relationships with women, including his first wife, Diane Nash, who divorced him as result of his flagrant philandering, behavior he justified in political and theological terms. He reasoned that monogamy was an unnatural existence which caused the white men who controlled America politically to be “pinched up” sexually. Therefore, if Americans could live sexually free lives, then the country could be opened up politically.⁹⁰ The eventual breakup disbanded one of the most dynamic and prolific husband-wife strategy teams of the entire Civil Right Movement.

One of the most important developments in Bevel’s life as a young man came while in the Navy during 1954—1955. At the time he considered it his patriotic duty to fight against the

⁸⁸ “Celebrating the Life of Rev. James Luther Bevel, October 19, 1936 – December 19, 2008,” funeral program for James Bevel, December 22, 2008; Halberstam, 94. Kathy Bennett Interview of James Bevel, Bernard LaFayette, and Rip Patton, Nashville Public Library Civil Rights Oral History Project, January 13 and 17, 2003, Nashville, Tennessee.

⁸⁹ Bennett interview of Bevel, LaFayette, and Patton.

⁹⁰ Halberstam, 501.

forces of communist totalitarianism.⁹¹ An encounter with an older Black seaman with a Ph.D. who served as a lowly cook began to dramatically shift his thinking. When asked why he toiled as a mere cook, he explained that every man should serve, but ought not kill other people. Bevel, still a Cold Warrior, rejected such reasoning, so the cook gave him a copy of one of Leo Tolstoy's books, which turned out to be the most compelling writing on Christianity he had ever read. After digesting Tolstoy, Bevel concluded that without exception, a Christian could not kill another human being and remain true to the faith.⁹² Like Lawson's numinous moment with his mother, Tolstoy became an epiphany for Bevel. He decided to leave the Navy at once, an early indication of his proclivity to be a "misfit." He was so adamant that continuing his military service was a violation of his convictions that a somewhat dismayed commander released him from the Navy within a few weeks.⁹³

After his release, Bevel moved to Cleveland, Ohio. There he found work as a bricklayer as he pursued his dream of a music career. The mid-1950s were a time when Black music, rhythm and blues, was beginning to break into the American cultural mainstream. On weekends three of the Bevel boys—James, Charles, and Victor—known as the Bevellers, often performed in clubs around Cleveland like the Copa Club, an establishment on the city's outskirts. One Sunday morning after a late night of singing and drinking at the Copa, Bevel's godmother, Mrs. Beatrice Bates, "persuaded" the young singer to accompany her to Unity Baptist Church.⁹⁴

That Sunday's service represented another life-altering moment for Bevel. When the pastor read from the sixth chapter of Isaiah, it was as if he heard God speaking directly to him with a compelling question: "If you do not come with us, who will? If you do not take up the

⁹¹ Ibid., 99.

⁹² Halberstam, 100. Halberstam does not specify which work by Tolstoy Bevel read, but it could have been *The Kingdom of God Is within You* (1951).

⁹³ Ibid.

⁹⁴ Ibid., 96.

challenge, who will?” It was a voice that he could not escape, and that forced him to look beyond his self-centeredness. The voice seemed to be telling him that if he did nothing about the lives around him wasting away in pool halls, juke joints, drug dens, and other unsavory places, then no one else would. Everywhere he went, this voice haunted Bevel. When he turned on the faucet, the water seemed to talk and when he entered his bedroom, the door appeared to speak to him. Bevel finally took heed to the voice when his sister suggested that the voice might be God calling him into the ministry,⁹⁵ a providential development.

Bevel had another divine encounter that reinforced the direction of his life. As he remembered the incident, it was an “argument with God” about what he would study if he entered the ministry. Bevel said, “Well, I would need to know what Moses knew. Moses just used a stick. What was going on in the world . . . that this man could use a stick and free people?” Then he said to himself, “I need to know what Solomon knew. How can you tell who is telling a lie? You know, Solomon could listen and he knew who was lying and who was telling the truth. So the Spirit said, ‘Well, you should go study in theology.’”⁹⁶

It was clear that answering the call to the ministry required a seminary education and in 1956, Bevel earned extra money at the steel mill where he labored as a bricklayer. By January of 1957, he had accumulated more than \$1,000, a large sum by 1950s standards. He had heard of a school with a good reputation in Nashville, ABT, that was not very expensive. At about the same time, Bevel heard Reverend James Blake and was impressed with his message. When Bevel learned that Blake taught at ABT, he applied and was accepted for the spring semester of 1957.⁹⁷

James Bevel arrived in Nashville in January 1957 at the age of twenty, the senior of two of his future classmates and activists, Lewis and LaFayette, who would arrive later and become

⁹⁵ Ibid., 96-97.

⁹⁶ Bennett interview of Bevel, LaFayette, Patton.

⁹⁷ Ibid., 97.

his closest companions, and much younger than many of the other American Baptist students who were adults in their thirties, forties, and beyond.⁹⁸

Settling down in Griggs Hall, Bevel established himself as the oddest of all of the social misfits who would come to dominate the Nashville movement and profoundly shape much of the national movement as well. John Lewis recalled his first impressions of Bevel:

This person was like no one I had ever met before. Wild. Crazy. Nuttier than a nut. Brilliant. Passionate. Eccentric. A man who revered women as much as he revered the Scripture . . . A man who in his own words, set about becoming the classic ‘chicken-eating, liquor-drinking, woman-chasing Baptist preacher.’⁹⁹

Bevel used these attributes to become a legend in Civil Rights Movement circles and to facilitate his own self-destruction. He proved to be a peerless movement organizer and strategist at the same time that he also flashed signs of instability and irrational behavior. Bevel revealed himself to be supremely self-confident, a gifted preacher who used the gift to offer the movement some of its most memorable mass meeting sermons, and a provocateur who loved an argument, seldom losing. Lewis remembered that “he loved nothing more than stirring the pot, rubbing somebody the wrong way just to see what would happen. He loved nothing better than a good argument and it didn’t really matter what it was about.”¹⁰⁰

Eight months after the arrival of Bevel, came John Robert Lewis, born February 21, 1940, in a three-room shotgun house on a small farm in a section of Pike County, Alabama, known as Carter’s Quarters. Lewis’ parents, Willie Mae and Eddie Lewis, were initially sharecroppers, but managed to acquire a one hundred and ten acre farm with a three-room house

⁹⁸ Lewis, *Walking with the Wind*, 69.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 70.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 71.

for the tidy sum of \$300 cash in 1944. This was the first land that anyone in the Lewis family had ever owned.¹⁰¹

Farm life also helped shape the character of John Lewis the activist. The depressing economics of sharecropping helped reveal the “misfit” lurking within young John Lewis, known simply as Robert by his family. Of all the children of Willie Mae and Eddie, Robert was the only one who seemed to question and resent their plight and who was willing to say so. But education offered a way out of the trap and it was clear early on that Robert longed to become the first college graduate in his family.¹⁰²

By elementary school, it became clear to Robert that only Black children’s education was interrupted by farm work. It also became evident—through conversations overheard between his parents—that “there were certain things you did and didn’t do around white people. . . You must be very careful not to get out of line with a white person.” Young Lewis learned these realities himself as he ventured into the town of Troy to attend segregated movies, taking his seat in the section for Blacks, the “Buzzard’s Roost.” Lewis recalled that, “I hated it. I didn’t go to too many movies before I decided I would never go again. It was an insult to have to sit up there. I felt it intensely. To this day I rarely go out to the movies. The memory of sitting up in that balcony is just too strong.”¹⁰³ Ironically, the Nashville student activists targeted segregated movie theaters in the early phase of their movement in 1960 and perhaps Lewis’ sentiments were common among his movement cohorts.

Other recollections of segregation evoked similar disgust in Lewis as a child. In particular, the exclusion of Black people from the public library grated on his sense of dignity:

There was the public library, where I longed to go, but through whose

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 28, 27, 13.

¹⁰² Ibid., 46.

¹⁰³ Ibid., 46, 48.

doors I was not allowed to set foot. That killed me, the idea that this was a *public* library, paid for with government money, and I was supposedly a U.S. citizen, but I wasn't allowed in. Even an eight-year-old could see something terribly wrong about that.¹⁰⁴

John Robert was having a coming of age experience. Around the age of eight he discovered that his skin color mattered a great deal to white people and defined the contours of his life. He found such realities distasteful, unbearable, and worthy of calculated resistance. It became very evident that Lewis was different from most boys his age and was willing to pay whatever price was required to hold true to his principles. This quality was most evident when his parents pulled their children out of school to tend to the family crops. John Robert treasured every moment in school and saw it as “a way out of the world I saw around me.” His parents knew the value of an education and always counseled him to “get an education so you won't have to do what we're doing.” Yet basic survival overrode dreams of a better life and as much as they regretted it, his parents pulled him out of school. At age eight, John Robert exhibited a trait that became a fixture of his character. He recalled what occurred one day when he did not want to miss school to go to the field:

And so I'd hide. I would get up and eat breakfast, not saying much. Then, as others made their way out toward the fields and the day's work, I would slip around the front of the house, duck under the front porch and wait there, . . . After a while I would hear my mother calling, and still I'd stay put. When I could hear the familiar whine and groan of the approaching bus, I'd dash out, climb on and be off.

When I got home my father would be furious, but he never whipped me. I always expected that . . . but he never did, not over that. He scolded me, just reamed me out, told me to never do it again. I did, of course, and he would scold me again. But deep down inside I think he knew there was no stopping me, that this was a decision I had made about my life and that once I had made a decision, it was just about impossible to turn me away from it. That's something that would remain true about me my entire life . . .¹⁰⁵

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 48.

Significant to Lewis' coming of age process was the reaction of white Mississippi to *Brown II*, the Supreme Court's implementation ruling, issued one year after the original desegregation order. The defiant rhetoric of racist political leaders such as Mississippi's James Eastland and South Carolina's Strom Thurmond helped to generate a very tense racial atmosphere throughout the South, precipitating the conditions that led to the murder of Emmett Louis Till. Lewis was shaken by the tragedy, noting that, "He could have been me. *That* could have been me, beaten, tortured, dead at the bottom of a river." Much like Moody, Lewis was angered and frustrated by the murder:

By the end of the year, I was chewing myself up with questions and frustration and yes, anger—anger not at people in particular but at the system that encouraged and allowed this kind of hatred and inhumanity to exist. I couldn't accept the way things were. I just couldn't . . .¹⁰⁶

It was later on that same year when Lewis, like Bevel and Lawson, had a life-altering moment. As Lewis recollects it, "With all that I have experienced in the past half century, I can still say without question that the Montgomery Bus Boycott changed my life more than any other event before or since." Montgomery was only fifty miles away and many of Lewis' teachers and his pastor lived there, creating a connection between Troy and Montgomery, and prompting him to follow the boycott intently. Young Lewis was drawn to the highly dignified and peaceful mode of resistance employed by Montgomery's 50,000 Blacks citizens. For him, "There was something about that kind of protest that appealed to me, that felt very, very *right*. I knew

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 52-53.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 57-58.

nothing about the philosophy of nonviolence or passive resistance . . . but I'd always had a visceral aversion to violence of any sort . . .”¹⁰⁷

It should be noted that each of the activists individually descending upon Nashville in the late 1950s appeared to arrive at a personal embrace of nonviolence by different means. Unlike Lawson who claimed nonviolence because of disappointing his mother or Bevel who was converted because of an intellectual encounter with Tolstoy, Lewis apparently had a natural proclivity for nonviolence. His claim as a naturally nonviolent person seems bolstered by his childhood experiences, especially his unusual concern for his flock of chickens.¹⁰⁸ The protest methodology of the Montgomery Bus Boycott, therefore, only reinforced what seemed natural to Lewis, causing him to follow its every turn and pulling him into the aura of Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr.

Before Lewis heard of King, he had entertained thoughts of becoming a preacher. As a child his family began calling him “preacher” because he preached to his chickens and performed various ministerial services for them. At age four, an uncle gave him a Bible for Christmas and by age five he could read it for himself. As a teenager, Lewis was pulled closer to the ministry as a vocation after hearing the inspirational Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., on the radio during the bus boycott. By age fifteen his sights were clearly set on the pulpit when he preached his first trial sermon at Macedonia Baptist Church.¹⁰⁹

All of this led to the most fateful decision of Lewis’ life—to attend seminary at American Baptist. To Mr. and Mrs. Lewis, it was obvious that their son was not destined to take up farming

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 59.

¹⁰⁸ According to Lewis’ memoir, as a child he was given responsibility for caring for the family’s sixty-odd chickens. He became so attached to the birds that he refused to eat chicken at meals and even performed burial rites and eulogies for deceased flock members. Rather than view the chickens as lowly, smelly, dumb farm animals suited only for providing eggs and meat, Lewis saw them as graceful, dignified, innocent animals in need of protection. This attitude toward chickens was the first sign of what Lewis said “would shape my character and eventually guide me into the heart of the civil rights movement . . .” See pages 36-40.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 39, 61.

and that the ministry was a likely vocation, one that required college. Schools like Morehouse College, Lewis' first choice, were beyond his means. Alabama State College (now university) in Montgomery was close to home, but its reputation for offering a sub-par education, eliminated it from consideration as. Lewis' less than outstanding academic record put him out of contention for scholarships, further narrowing his options.¹¹⁰

But as in the case of James Bevel and James Lawson, divine providence intervened. One day Mrs. Lewis came home with literature that she saw at her part-time job, an orphanage in Troy. The orphanage was operated by the white Southern Baptist Convention, which operated ABT jointly with the Black National Baptist Convention. ABT, a small school, with no more than seventy students, offered the many economically strapped students an opportunity to attend seminary. There was the Interdenominational Theological Center (ITC) in Atlanta, and the school of divinity at Howard University, all of which were beyond the means of the Lewis family. ABT became even more attractive when the literature brought home by Mrs. Lewis revealed that no tuition was required to enroll.¹¹¹ With no money for tuition, ABT in Nashville became Lewis' default destination.

This young, motivated, seventeen year-old arrived in Nashville in September 1957 aboard a Greyhound bus.¹¹² Lewis immediately settled into his room on the second floor of

¹¹⁰ Lewis, *Walking with the Wind*, 63; Archie Allen interview of John Lewis, February 19, 1969, Atlanta, Georgia, *John Lewis Interview Transcript*, v. 2, Nashville Public Library, Nashville, Tennessee.

¹¹¹ There is some confusion about the type of document that Mrs. Lewis brought home that day. Lewis' memoir says it was a brochure (see page 63). David Halberstam's book says that it was an article about ABT in a journal published by the Alabama Baptist Convention. An interview of Lewis by Archie Allen on February 19, 1969, in Atlanta says that Lewis learned about ABT from a Southern Baptist Convention program featuring an article entitled something like "Theological education for Negroes." Since Halberstam did not meticulously document his sources, it is not possible to discern the source used by him for that bit of information. It seems that Lewis definitely learned about ABT from some sort of Baptist literature rather than from a brochure, which implies that it could have been an ABT document. The 1969 interview seems to be the most reliable source of information. There is also a minor discrepancy about whether or not the student work program paid room and board as well as tuition. Lewis' memoir says it paid both (page 63) while the 1969 interview says it paid only tuition.

¹¹² See chapter eight of *Walking with the Wind* for more details on the Freedom Rides. Ironically, a Montgomery Greyhound terminal in May 1961 was where he experienced the worst beating of his life during the Freedom Rides.

Griggs Hall where he first met James Bevel who instantly sized him up. Standing there in the hallway, “buck naked” and dripping wet from a shower, Bevel’s first words to Lewis were “Can you *preach*, boy?”¹¹³

Bevel’s question to Lewis was an obvious one for one seminarian to pose to another. While ministerial students like Bevel displayed great oratorical skills and even a booming singing voice, used quite effectively to make him an early leader, Lewis was more reserved, bashful and had difficulties with articulation. Lewis’ speech pattern, attributed mostly to his rural Alabama upbringing, is one of the things most people notice about him, but was never an obstacle nor diminished his effectiveness as a leader. His personal attributes and character more than made up for his inarticulation. Angeline Butler, a Fisk student and a key movement leader, remembered her first impression of Lewis as a shy young man who seemed to “stutter slightly, and had trouble finishing certain words.” But she liked him immediately because he was not like most college men, especially Fisk men, who were preoccupied with social status, wealth, and self-centeredness. “There was something strong and good inside him, and he was filled with dreams about what things might one day be . . . ,” Butler fondly recalled.¹¹⁴

Lewis’ flawed speech became irrelevant at ABT where his budding affinity toward social justice was fired and tempered and where he discovered his relationship to the Spirit of History. It was in Professor John Lewis Powell’s class where he, in Hegelian terms, discovered “Segregation . . . is a thesis. Its antithesis would be the struggle to destroy segregation. Out of that struggle would come the synthesis: integration . . . Out of a creative conflict—a creative schism, a division and a tension between what is and what should not be—comes the process that results in what *should* be.” Hearing these words made the Gospel come alive and confirmed what

¹¹³ Lewis, 71.

¹¹⁴ Halberstam, 66-67.

King said over the radio during Lewis' high school years. This revelation helped him see the “philosophical and theological underpinnings for what I'd sensed and deeply felt all my life—that there was a contradiction between what was and what ought to be.”¹¹⁵

It was at ABT where Lewis “began believing in . . . the Spirit of History,” a divine force that he said “would place me in the center of the crucible of the struggle for civil rights.”¹¹⁶ This concept of providence is important to understand as it relates to the Nashville Movement for it becomes a driving force and the basis for actions taken by the core group of leaders in the city on behalf of others. Individuals who feel driven by a spiritual force of destiny cannot be easily dissuaded from their divine appointment. The firm conviction that their cause was a just one and their acceptance of personal risks that were inherent in the pursuit of these divinely ordained missions gave these activists a unique power that they seemed to fully understand.

By the time that Lewis arrived in Nashville, he was ready to accept whatever role the Spirit of History assigned to him, something that could also be said for many of his colleagues. Lewis's childhood stewardship of the family chickens can be viewed as early leadership training which taught him responsibility and accountability for the welfare of others. He supplemented this early training with more philosophical and tactical training under the guidance of James Lawson, who equipped him to become an apostle of nonviolence. Lewis' rise to prominence parallels many biblical tales of improbable individuals who rose from obscurity to places of important leadership. The stories of David and Jeremiah come to mind. David, according to the sixteenth chapter of the first book of Samuel, was anointed as a lowly shepherd boy to succeed Saul as king of the Jewish people. Similarly, Jeremiah was chosen by God as his prophet at a young age to warn the errant people of the two Jewish kingdoms of Judah and Israel to repent or

¹¹⁵ Lewis, 72-72.

¹¹⁶ Ibid., 73.

face the wrath of God.¹¹⁷ In both cases, the least likely individuals were selected by divine authority for historic roles at a very young age. Lewis and his student activist colleagues had to also overcome the disadvantage of age, a handicap they minimized once the sit-ins began. In addition, Lewis had to overcome a speech impediment, an obstacle that seemed irrelevant by 1963 when he rose to the chairmanship of SNCC and was the only student speaker at the March on Washington.

One year after Lewis' arrival at ABT in September 1958 came Bernard LaFayette, Jr., a "misfit" from Tampa, Florida, who became Lewis' best friend. Bernard was born July 29, 1940, to Bernard, Sr., and Verdell LaFayette. Bernard, Sr., grew up in Key West, but migrated to Tampa as a teenager where he apparently met Verdell. The junior Bernard spent his entire childhood in Tampa except for two years in Philadelphia. Ironically, the time spent in Philadelphia influenced his notions about race and his self-identity as a young Black person more than his experiences living in segregated Tampa, as seen white teachers affirmed and nurtured his intellectual talents and made him feel that America was his country too by selecting him instead of a white girl to deliver the sixth grade promotion speech. Growing up, he was considered the smartest boy around and became the pride of the neighborhood Missionary Baptist church, a congregation largely founded by his maternal grandmother, Rozelia Forrester. Naturally, this obligated Bernard, Jr., to take part in every church program that featured youth and he was expected to honorably represent the family. Church was a central facet of life in the LaFayette family.¹¹⁸

Besides church, learning racial pride and how to not offend white people were key elements of young Bernard, Jr.'s, childhood. His father sounded a constant yet seemingly

¹¹⁷ See the first chapter of the book of Jeremiah for the details of his anointment as a child prophet.

¹¹⁸ Lewis, 87-88; Halberstam, 412-13. LaFayette became vice president of academic affairs at ABT in 1987 and then president in 1992. See pages 687-88 of Halberstam's book.

contradictory theme to him. On the one hand he commanded that Bernard, Jr., “always stand up for your rights and don’t let anyone walk over you and don’t ever be afraid.” And in the next breath he warned him with “don’t get in any trouble with white folks.”¹¹⁹ This schizophrenic advice helps to explain his mother’s reaction when she later learned of her son’s arrest in Nashville in 1960. She wrote him a letter saying that he should not hurt people who were the ones trying to help Black people. As far as she was concerned, he was only causing a disturbance, sentiments that hurt the budding young activist who could only respond that “she doesn’t understand.”¹²⁰

Verdell LaFayette’s reaction to social activism was a fairly common perspective held by Black southerners born before World War II. They had been conditioned to not “mess with white folks” because it could only lead to trouble. Even John Lewis’ parents were ambivalent about Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Montgomery Bus Boycott. As Lewis recounts, “my parents would talk about ‘that young preacher’ who was leading this thing, and I could sense a mixture of both awe and disapproval in their voices.” When Lewis became involved in the Nashville sit-ins, he did not tell his parents because he knew “their reaction would have been I shouldn’t have been doing this. Leave the whites alone.” In the eyes of many in that generation, the willful defiance of white authority was unacceptable behavior.¹²¹ The risk was too great. Such was the mindset of most southern African Americans who were dependent on white employers. It took Bernard, Jr.’s, generation to break this fear.

Before Bernard LaFayette, Jr., could help destroy de jure segregation and other forms of white supremacy, he had to learn the rules of racial etiquette such as to avoid bumping into white

¹¹⁹ Halberstam, 413.

¹²⁰ “NBC White paper #2: Sit-In,” 1960, in Nashville Public Library, Civil Rights Room, Nashville, Tennessee.

¹²¹ Lewis, 59; Allen interview of Lewis; Lewis, 78.

children on the sidewalk and being careful about how one looked at white people.¹²² The age of eight seemed to be a period when many Black youth began to understand the perils of being Black. John Lewis understood the trap of sharecropping by that age and Anne Moody began to understand how blackness made her different from white children.¹²³ When LaFayette was about eight he violated the racial code of conduct when he accidentally struck a white man with a makeshift football. The offended white man and his companion chased him home. His grandmother immediately recognized the potentially dangerous situation and latched the door behind him as he ran into the house. In a masterful placation of the white man's racial pride, she scolded Bernard in a voice he was unaccustomed to. She shouted "I'm going to kill you, boy! How many times have I told you not to do that! I'm going to give this boy a spanking he'll never forget! This boy ain't ever going to give no one no problems after this!" When the men left, she turned to her grandson in hilarious laughter.¹²⁴ In one brilliant stroke she preserved the white man's racial pride, mocked it with laughter after he left, rescued her grandson from near certain harm, and taught him a lesson about southern race relations.

Forrester turned out to be one of the most significant influences on his life by helping to prepare him for a leadership role in the Civil Rights Movement. She was responsible for giving him adult responsibilities as a child and for exposing him to the art of community organizing. Around the age of twelve, Bernard, Jr., was sent to take care of Forrester, who was ill and lived alone in Tampa. Because of her infirmity, he learned carpentry, became a landlord for her rooming house and apartments, intervened in tenant domestic disputes, took care of shopping

¹²² Halberstam, 414.

¹²³ See chapter three of Moody's autobiography in which she describes a Saturday encounter with her white friends at the movie theater. When she tried to sit downstairs with them, her mother scolded her without a word of explanation, prompting Anne to seeking on her own what made white people more special than Black people. For the first time she saw herself as Black and white people as white.

¹²⁴ Halberstam, 413-14.

and cooking duties, maintained the grounds and gardens, and handled any other jobs related to the family's real estate holdings. He did all of this while still remaining a student in good standing. In addition to these adult obligations, Bernard, Jr., also became a make shift father to his two younger sisters who were sent back to Tampa to live.¹²⁵ Such adult experiences at a young age forced him to miss much of his childhood and to mature at a faster pace.

As young Bernard managed and maintained his grandmother's rental property, he also accompanied her when she performed church duties. The LaFayette family belonged to a local Missionary Baptist church whose congregation fractured when the pastor married a member. Ms. Forrester began organizing women's circles in the community for Bible study and prayer meetings. Bernard, Jr., recalled:

One week, you'd go to this person's home, and one week, you'd go to another. Then we started doing it two days a week . . . Then what they would do is start coming together as a group on Sunday. So by organizing these circles, it created an affinity. A body. They felt close to each other . . . They felt they could call a minister, then . . . Well, the church now is over 2,000 people. That same church that she built.¹²⁶

The church started by Forrester was called New Hope and was the church that he grew up in. She continued her active role within New Hope and assumed leadership of the Mission Board. It was in this capacity that she utilized more of her valuable organizing skills and modeled for Bernard, Jr., something that Reverend James Lawson, Jr., also modeled in Nashville: a youth leadership training framework. In hindsight, he clearly understood the impact of his grandmother's special gift to him and other young people:

So she became the head of the Mission Board in the church, and she would organize these young women and teach and train them, and she had a very good set of skills to help young people grow

¹²⁵ Findlay interview of LaFayette; Interview of Bernard LaFayette by Clifford Kuhn, Atlanta, Georgia, May, 1981.

¹²⁶ Ibid.

and develop . . . That's what I observed, and that's what she did for me. The leadership development. She had a sense of how you have an agenda.¹²⁷

It is obvious that LaFayette at age twelve or thirteen, did not recognize that his grandmother was preparing him for a future as an activist, but it is clear that his childhood was a time of preparation for important work down the road. Such experiences help account for the high quality of leadership and extraordinary commitment to social justice causes that came to define the life of LaFayette.

While the experiences of caring for his grandmother, managing her property, being tutored in her youth leadership program, and helping to raise his sisters prepared him well for future civil rights leadership, the two years that he spent in Philadelphia significantly shaped his understanding of and perspective on race relations. As a student in Tampa, he attended segregated schools where students were taught to address all adults as “sir” and “ma’am,” a practice that both respected African American adults who never received such courtesies from whites and that satisfied white southern racial etiquette. However, in Philadelphia Bernard, Jr., attended his first integrated school and was taught by white teachers for the first time. In this new environment, he became the object of ridicule because of his southern accent and mannerisms. He recalled the reaction of his classmates when he addressed adults with the usual southern titles of respect: “You had to speak with, ‘Yes, Sir,’ and ‘No, Sir’ . . . And that’s one thing they used to tease me about in the [N]orth. If the teacher would say something to me, I’d say, ‘Yes, Ma’am,’ and ‘No, Ma’am,’ and they’d just have a field day with that.”¹²⁸ The less rigid racial order made an immediate impression upon him as did his white teachers’ attention to his

¹²⁷ Ibid.

¹²⁸ Ibid.

intellectual promise and academic deficiencies,¹²⁹ something that would not have occurred in Tampa.

More important to his evolving understanding of race relations was his selection over a white girl as the sixth grade promotion speaker, an occasion when he delivered an address entitled “Living and Working Together.” The speech previewed a world that he would work to create. It reflected an adolescent optimism about a future when citizens could get along despite racial and religious differences.¹³⁰ It also meant that for the first time Bernard, Jr., felt America was his country too¹³¹, a feeling rarely held by southern Black youth. By the time he returned to Tampa, he had a high degree of self-worth. This sense of belonging and self-esteem meant that when he reached Nashville as a young adult, he possessed a self-confidence that informed his social justice inclinations.

The importance of racial self-confidence and a sense of belonging cannot be underestimated in its effects on Black youth. Anne Moody’s experiences are instructive on this account. Unlike LaFayette’s childhood, her upbringing did not affirm her as a poor, Black, and female child of the South. With a few exceptions, most of her encounters with whites devalued her as a human being and excluded her from most of the benefits of American citizenship. As a result, when she entered Tougaloo College, she lacked self-confidence to the extent that she did not at first think she could measure up to the academic standards of her white professors even though she had always performed well in school. In tandem with her diminished self-esteem, her negative encounters with southern racists nurtured anger toward whites and complacent African

¹²⁹ Halberstam, 415; Findlay interview of LaFayette. According to the Findlay interview, even though LaFayette was a very bright student, he initially struggled in school in Philadelphia due to the lower quality of education offered in Tampa. In fact, when he first enrolled in Philadelphia in the fourth grade, he was held back a semester because of inadequate academic preparation. In the Philadelphia schools, LaFayette noted that algebra was taught starting in the fourth grade but in the Tampa schools, it was not taught to Black students until the tenth grade. In order to help him improve, some of his white teachers tutored him on the weekends.

¹³⁰ Halberstam, 415.

¹³¹ Ibid.

Americans that she used to fuel her passion for civil rights activism.¹³² This stands in stark contrast to the experiences of Bernard LaFayette who appeared not to harbor bitter resentment toward whites, who entered movement life with an intact self-esteem, and who instead was introduced to another model for human interaction besides segregation, shaping his vision of a better world.

Less significant than the identity-affirming experiences in elementary school in Philadelphia was Bernard, Jr.'s, gangster-style civil rights activities. In the early 1950s, he was pressured into joining a street gang. When local civil rights activist Reverend Leon Sullivan announced a boycott of the products of the Tasty Bread and TastyKake Company, a bakery that refused to hire African Americans, the gang decided to help enforce the boycott. According to LaFayette, they vowed that, "In our neighborhood we are going to make sure that nobody buys. We weren't trained in nonviolence and we had no skills . . . so we had to devise our own methods. So we'd send people into the store to observe someone buying Tasty Bread or Tasty bakery products, they'd give a signal to the fellows outside . . . So they'd run in and they'd pop the groceries [out of the customer's hands onto the ground.]"¹³³ Not exactly in line with Gandhian methods or Christian principles, but an indication of a concern for social justice. LaFayette's actions not only displayed his budding social consciousness, but more importantly demonstrated as such a young age the capacity to address injustices. It is clear that the two years spent in Philadelphia played a significant role in preparing Bernard, Jr., to debut as a "misfit" in Nashville.

LaFayette's sojourn to Nashville, like his movement colleagues, involved providential motives. As a youngster, it was always expected that he would go into the ministry. While

¹³² See parts one through three in Moody's *Coming of Age* for details of her negative racial experiences and how she came to dislike and distrust white people as well as Black people who were afraid to stand up for themselves.

¹³³ Findlay interview of LaFayette.

growing up in New Hope Missionary Baptist Church, he was expected to participate in church programs featuring the youth. According to Halberstam's, *The Children*:

When there was a Tom Thumb wedding for the young people, he would wear his white suit and play the part of the minister. On Mother's Day, when only one member of the church's youth organization was allowed to make a speech in honor of motherhood, it was usually Bernard LaFayette.¹³⁴

In reflecting upon his life in a 2003 interview, LaFayette explicitly recognized the role of his grandmother as an agent of providence in his decision to attend ABT. He confided that "In looking back it doesn't make sense at all, except in the context that I was destined to follow the path that I followed," and that his grandmother "saw the mark on my forehead. And I used to look in the mirror, but . . . I saw the chicken pox. That's all I could see. But she saw it, and other people [saw it.]¹³⁵

Thus, by the time Bernard, Jr., became a senior in high school, his plans to pursue a career in journalism were derailed. He knew deep down that, "I thought I was going to be called into the ministry."¹³⁶ His efforts to avoid his "calling" had to do with a four-year journalism scholarship awarded by Florida A & M as the top Black high school newspaper editor in the state in 1958. In fact, Bernard, Jr., was all set to attend Florida A & M and had visited the campus during the summer of 1958, going so far as to meet with the journalism faculty in excited anticipation of enrolling in the fall. "But for some reason," he recalled, he could not follow through on plans to attend Florida A & M nor find an acceptable alternative until others intervened on his behalf and paved his way to enrolling at American Baptist Theological Seminary. As LaFayette recollected it,

¹³⁴ Halberstam, 413.

¹³⁵ Bennett interview of Bevel, LaFayette, and Patton.

¹³⁶ Ibid.

I could not move forward with it. It was much more of a psychological thing that would not free me to do it . . . But my grandmother said, ‘We have to get you in college, boy.’ So that summer, I went to Vacation Bible School . . . So at first, Dr. Martin—G.T. Martin was the fellow who was running it, he was very educated. My grandmother took me to him and said, ‘We have to get this boy into school.’ So he said, ‘OK.’ She said he thinks he’s going to be called to preach . . . So he [Martin] started contacting Talladega and he contacted Tuskegee . . . and it was too late. They weren’t accepting anymore applications. So he kept running around, and they said American Baptist College, which is supported by the Southern Baptists [and the National Baptists] . . . And so he got the application and everything, and he said, ‘Well, they can get him accepted. In fact, they can get him a [Southern Baptist] scholarship.’¹³⁷

With the a great deal of family and community assistance, Bernard LaFayette, Jr., arrived in Nashville as an ABT student in the fall of 1958 ready to join the other “misfits” already assembled there. It did not take long for him to meet John Lewis and James Bevel, two young men he became very close to and roomed with in Griggs Hall. Right away, Bevel took him under his wing and mentored him. LaFayette immediately identified with the Social Gospel faction on campus, feeling comfortable with a theology calling for a more practical Christianity which emphasized treating others with dignity and respect.¹³⁸

His misfit tendencies were less pronounced than those of Lewis, Bevel, and Lawson, partly due to the less racially hostile environment of Tampa. Yet he had strong leanings in the direction of social justice nurtured by his experiences in racially integrated Philadelphia and by his grandmother’s tutelage.

When LaFayette joined Lewis and Bevel at ABT, all of the major misfits were in place, with the exception of Diane Judith Nash. She was the last to arrive when she transferred from Howard University to Fisk in the fall of 1959. Nash was born May 15, 1938, on the South Side of Chicago to middle class parents, Leon and Dorothy Bolton Nash. Both parents were from the

¹³⁷ Findlay interview of LaFayette.

¹³⁸ Ibid.

Deep South: Leon Nash from Canton, Mississippi, and Dorothy Nash from Memphis. They made their way to Chicago during the late stages of the Great Migration and prospered; Nash's father was a dentist and her mother a keypunch operator. The couple divorced after World War II and Dorothy Nash then married John Baker, a Pullman Porter.¹³⁹

It is in this middle class cocoon that much of Nash's character was shaped. Her family escaped the economic strictures of the segregated South and found Chicago much like the pro-Great Migration propaganda many southern African Americans absorbed from the Black press. Tens of thousands were lured north by newspapers such as the *Chicago Defender*, which according to Theodore Korweibel, Jr., "after 1915, exhorted blacks to leave the hated South for new freedoms and economic sanctuary in northern cities."¹⁴⁰ In Chicago, the Nash family became what David Halberstam termed one of the "least radical Black families;" they lived "as if race in America did not really exist because they willed it not to exist." The family was very patriotic, exhibited by her father, two uncles, and an aunt serving in the armed forces during World War II and in Halberstam's estimation, accepting "the idea that America was freer for blacks than it really was."¹⁴¹ It is no small irony that Diane Nash became one of the most radical activists of the early 1960s and explicitly refuted her family's assumptions about the degree of Black freedom.

The racial reality crafted by the Nash family meant for Diane a diet of white elite values and blissful ignorance about the realities of racism. Her maternal grandmother, Carrie Bolton, who lived with and helped to raise her, worked as a domestic for a wealthy white physician while growing up in Memphis. Bolton was quite taken with the luxury and refinement of her

¹³⁹ Halberstam, 147.

¹⁴⁰ Theodore Korweibel, Jr., "Blacks and the First Red Scare," in *Civil Rights Since 1787: A Reader on the Black Struggle*, eds. Jonathan Birnbaum and Clarence Taylor (New York and London: New York University Press, 2000), 201.

¹⁴¹ Halberstam, 147.

employers, and being very bright, the white family took an interest in her. The idea was planted in her head that she was “different” from other African Americans. Bolton internalized the implication: that most Black people are defective due to personal failures and that with only a few exceptions, blackness equals “inferiority.” As a result, in her adult life, she taught her family to accept this myth as truth.¹⁴²

Diane Nash never appeared to accept the myth of Black inferiority nor the diminished self-esteem that often accompanied such mythology. The primary reason for this must be attributed to her grandmother. Ironically, Ms. Bolton apparently inculcated within young Diane a sense of self-worth that must have been founded upon her very light complexion. Since Ms. Bolton prized light skin and white values and Nash has very light skin, it is safe to conclude that her grandmother prized her complexion and this factored into Ms. Bolton’s great love for her granddaughter. This love was displayed through a game they played. Ms. Bolton took the child into her arms and said, “You’re more precious to me than anything in the world.” The child said, “More precious than one hundred dollars?” Ms. Bolton replied, “That isn’t even close.” To which Nash replied, “Two hundred dollars?” “Not even close,” her grandmother intoned. “More precious than five hundred dollars?” “Not even close.” By the end of the game, Nash wound up more precious than any amount of money.¹⁴³ Ms. Bolton taught her one of the most valuable lessons a Black child could learn in a world characterized by white supremacy—self worth—a lesson paramount in the youth of Bernard LaFayette but missing in the experiences of Anne Moody. By the time she reached Nashville, she was full of self-esteem and overt racism was offensive to her person. It is obvious that Nash’s sheltered life and her grandmother’s self-esteem

¹⁴² Ibid.

¹⁴³ Ibid.

building game played a significant role in making Nash a “misfit” like her movement colleagues, a person unwilling to accept the racial limitations imposed on Black people.

Diane Nash’s misfit tendencies were also nurtured by life in the urban North where she was often isolated from the daily insults of racism. Her family’s pretensions that the North sheltered African Americans from the horrific realities of discrimination made Nash unaccustomed to blatant racism of the kind found in the South where she eventually attended college. That she was shocked at blatant discrimination is revealed in her reaction to her first encounter with racism in the South. Before coming to Nashville, she had never ventured to the South before and therefore had not been insulted by overt manifestations of Jim Crow such as “colored” and “white” signs in public facilities. What this meant for Nash was that she only had an intellectual understanding of segregation. As she put it, “. . . I had never traveled to the [S]outh at that time. And I didn’t have an emotional relationship to segregation. . . . I understood the facts, and the stories, but there was not an emotional relationship.”¹⁴⁴

Nash’s “emotional relationship” with segregation came almost immediately upon transferring from Howard University to Fisk in the fall of 1959. Her childhood and teenage years molded her into what she described as “being a real person, and I was very much aware of it, and I was looking forward in college to really expanding myself, and growing . . . And that played quite a part, when I got to Nashville, and why I so keenly resented segregation, and not being allowed to do basic kinds of things like eating at restaurants, in the ten-cent stores. So I really felt stifled.” When she arrived in Nashville, she found that the dignified, self-assured, and self-loving person whom she had been nurturing within herself was incompatible with the dictates of southern racial customs. Nash recalled:

¹⁴⁴ Teacher’s Domain interview of Nash. November 12, 1985, www.teachersdomain.org/assets/wgbh/im104/im104_doc_fullnash/im104_doc_fullnash.pdf.

When I actually went South, and actually saw signs that said ‘white’ and ‘colored’ and I actually could not drink out of that water fountain, or go to that ladies’ room, I had a real emotional reaction. I remember the first time it happened, was at the Tennessee State Fair. And I had a date with this young man. And I started to go[to] the ladies’ room. And it said, ‘white and colored’ and I really resented that. I was outraged.’¹⁴⁵

This misfit’s reaction to racism was cultivated not only by her grandmother’s self-esteem lessons, but by two particular coming-of age experiences before she arrived. Just after entering high school, she responded to an advertisement in a local paper about a charm school for teen girls. The charm school was seeking potential models to whom it would teach make up application, hair preparation, and proper walking techniques. Nash immediately called the number listed on the advertisement and encountered an initially friendly white male voice who beckoned her interests with, “Well, you seem like just the kind of young woman we’re interested in.” However, upon recognizing from her address that she lived in a predominantly Black neighborhood, the friendly voice evaporated to a crushing insult of, “Well, dear, we don’t have a facility for colored students.”¹⁴⁶

The pain of that incident was likely not as intense as that stemming from the murder of Emmett Till in 1955, just two years after the charm school insult. Nash likely felt a special connection to Till because he too was a Chicago native and was only a couple of years younger than Nash. More significant for Nash was the photograph of his mutilated body that she saw in *Jet* magazine, an image so shockingly powerful that she confided in a 1985 interview that, “Even now, . . . I have a good image of that picture that appeared in *Jet* magazine, of him.”¹⁴⁷

In addition to these negative racial experiences, Nash also followed the saga of the desegregation of Little Rock’s Central High School on the radio and was aware of efforts of

¹⁴⁵ Ibid; It should be noted that the historical record does not address why Nash transferred from Howard University to Fisk University in 1959.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid.

¹⁴⁷ Teachers’ Domain interview of Diane Nash.

Autherine Lucy to be the first Black student at the University of Alabama in early 1956.¹⁴⁸ No doubt Nash could identify with the trials and travails of Elizabeth Eckford, who faced an angry white mob alone on the day of the desegregation of Central High School, and with Lucy, who was denied entry and ultimately expelled from Alabama's flagship university in the wake of riots by segregationists.¹⁴⁹ Here were two African American young women, like herself, attempting to make something of themselves and stymied by racial discrimination. No longer could Nash hide behind her family's fantasy about the insignificance of race.

As the Nashville movement will reveal, Nash converted her outrage into an unparalleled career of activism, placing her in the ranks of Fannie Lou Hamer, Ella Baker, and Daisy Bates. Her outrage at segregation was conditioned by her grandmother's self-esteem games, by her isolation from the worst aspects of racial discrimination while growing up, by her limited encounters with northern racism, and by national racial dramas in the South including the murder of Emmett Till and the desegregation efforts at Central High School and the University of Alabama. Her "real person" was allowed to develop before she had to encounter Jim Crow strictures in Nashville, ensuring that racial segregation and the person of Diane Nash would be perfect misfits, irreconcilable to each other.

The convergence of a cadre of misfits upon Nashville was one step in a multi-stage process. As Chapter Two illustrated, the first step was the emergence of Nashville as a center of Black southern religion and education. The next step was the journey of a leadership corps to the city. However, this was no ordinary group of leaders. They felt divinely compelled to come to

¹⁴⁸ Ibid; Lewis, 61.

¹⁴⁹ For more details on the experiences of Elizabeth Eckford and the Little Rock Nine, see Daisy Bates' *The Long Shadow of Little Rock* (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 1987), chapter five. Several texts give brief references to Autherine Lucy's episode, including: Alton Hornsby, Jr.'s, *Chronology of African American History: Significant Events from 1619 to the Present* (Detroit: Gale Research, 1991), 103-04; Taylor Branch's *Parting the Waters: America in the King Years, 1954-1963*; and, Andrew Manis' *A Fire You Can't Put Out: The Civil Rights Life of Reverend Fred Shuttlesworth* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1999), 89-90.

Nashville at a particular point in the history of the Black freedom struggle. They came after the religious, educational, and community support infrastructure had been put in place.

Only then did the hand of providence intervene in the lives of Kelly Miller Smith, C.T. Vivian, James M. Lawson, James Bevel, John Lewis, and Bernard LaFayette. Diane Nash is not mentioned among the divinely inspired only because the historical record does not yet support the claim. It is likely though that she too was similarly sequestered to Nashville by the Spirit of History given her monumental role in the local movement. After all, she was a devout Christian and the only Catholic among this tight-knit leadership group.

The divinely inspired actions of this band of misfits follows a longstanding Black Christian theme found in Psalms 68:31 which says: “Princes shall come out of Egypt; Ethiopia shall stretch out her hands soon unto God.” According to Charles R. Price, an anthropologist at the University of North Carolina who wrote an article, “‘Cleave to the Blacks’: Expressions of Ethiopianism in Jamaica,” biblical references to Ethiopia have historically been interpreted as alluding to Black people in general. In addition, says Price, Ethiopia has also been the symbolic home of Black people and the root of their cultural and historical legacies. Consequently, Black activists have for two hundred years called upon these connections to Ethiopia and to the God of Jacob in the midst of their freedom quests. For example, Revolutionary War hero and slavery opponent Prince Hall drew upon verse thirty-one of Psalms when he implied that based on the outcome of the Haitian Revolution, the dark hour of bondage in America was about to end. He wrote in 1797 that

My brethren, let us not be cast down under these and many other abuses we at present are laboring under, for the darkest hour is just before the break of day. . . . [L]et us remember what a dark day it was with our African brethren, six years ago, in the French West Indies. . . . Hanging, breaking on the wheel, and all manner of tortures were inflicted upon these unhappy people. But, blessed be

God, the scene is changed . . . Thus doth Ethiopia stretch forth her hand from slavery, to freedom and equality.¹⁵⁰

Early Black feminist and abolitionist Maria Stewart evoked similar sentiments in a speech she delivered on February 27, 1833, to a male audience in Boston at the African Masonic Lodge. She implied that enslaved Black people would also extend their hand to God and he would respond on their behalf:

She [America] is indeed a seller of slaves and the souls of men; she has made the Africans drunk with the wine of her fornication; she has put them completely beneath her feet . . . But may powerful son and daughters of Africa shortly arise, who will rise . . . and declare by Him that sitteth upon the throne, that they will have their rights . . . I believe that the oppression of injured Africa has come up before the majesty of Heaven; and when our cries shall have reached the ears of the most High, it will be a tremendous day for the people of this land; for strong is the arm of the Lord God Almighty.¹⁵¹

The core Nashville activists continued this long-established tradition of taking inspiration and direction from a divine power. This time, through providence, God extended his hand to “Ethiopia” and selected a group of youth and adults to shape human history. In return, they built a movement based on Christian principle and faith in God. This development casts a different light on the role of Christianity in the Civil Rights Movement. Much of the literature focuses on the Black church as a provider of ministerial leadership, monetary and human resources, and other quantifiable of resources. Seldom does the literature address religious motivation, particularly providence, as a basis for activism.

At the same time that these activists were being guided by divine forces, they were also in preparation for their roles as social misfits. The details of each of their experiences indicates

¹⁵⁰ Prince Hall, “Thus Doth Ethiopia Stretch Forth Her hand from slavery, to Freedom and Equality,” in Manning Marable and Leith Mullings’, eds., *Let Nobody Turn Us Around: An African American Anthology*, 2nd edition, (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2009), 17.

¹⁵¹ Maria Stewart, “On African Rights and Liberty,” in Jonathan Birnbaum and Clarence Taylor’s, eds., *Civil Rights Since 1787: A Reader on the Black Struggle* (New York: New York University Press, 2000), 52.

that each activist became a misfit by way of their own unique set of experiences. In the cases of John Lewis, Bernard LaFayette, Kelly Miller Smith, and James Lawson, the preparation began at a fairly early age, especially for Lewis who evidenced signs of rebellion after being given responsibility for the family chickens at age five. In the cases of Diane Nash, C.T. Vivian, and James Bevel, the record seems to indicate that they assumed misfit characteristics between the teenage years and early adulthood.

Not all of these misfits were groomed for their roles in the Deep South. Although LaFayette spent most of his early years in Tampa, his sensitization to racial injustices came mostly during his time in the racially integrated northern environs of Philadelphia. Similarly, both Diane Nash, C.T. Vivian, and James Lawson also honed their understanding about American racism while spending time in the North. In fact, all of the core Nashville activists had their racial perspectives finely tuned by experiences in the North except for Reverend Smith. In ways small and large, these experiences outside the South helped shape them into “misfits” who became committed to deconstructing segregation and replacing it with what they later termed “the beloved community,” or God’s kingdom on earth where humans treated each other with love and respect. The Northern experiences made it clear that segregation was a contrivance that was neither normal nor universal and raised questions about why many Northern whites could intermingle with Black people in ways that most southern whites would not. Once a person experiences racial integration it is difficult to accept the “southern way of life.” In addition, it is crucial that Lewis, Bevel, Nash, and LaFayette formed their visions of what the world should be in a post-World War II atmosphere that challenged assumptions about white domination. These young people formed their self-images in the cauldron of such fundamental changes and a

thorough review of their upbringing demonstrates how they were individually affected by these trends as well as how they were molded into activists.

Only two of these misfits were exposed to the philosophy of nonviolent direct action before settling in Nashville. Both of the Vivians took part in sit-ins while still in the North yet they had no fundamental understanding of the potential of nonviolence to destroy segregation. Reverend Lawson obviously procured the most extensive knowledge base on the philosophy of nonviolence and also had the most circuitous route to Nashville. Lawson's early preparation in nonviolence is with good reason for he was the most important member of the nonviolent band of misfits that gathered in Nashville. No one else needed beforehand expertise. As the teacher/mentor, his preparation for his particular role was more time-consuming and intense than his mentees. As far as can be determined, he was the only one who had his Christian faith tested before he arrived in Nashville. The near-sodomozation that occurred while he was in prison proved that he was truly committed to nonviolence, a necessary qualification before he could assume the role of the Black guru of nonviolence. Lawson could not convince others of the voracity of the philosophy if he had any doubts about it himself. The jail test turned out to be the most crucial test of Lawson's faith in nonviolence prior to his arrival in Nashville. It gave him the confidence in the philosophy that he needed in order to authentically and passionately teach it to others.

The upbringing of the activists highlighted here demonstrates that many social activists are people who do not make hasty decisions in moments of crisis. Instead, they have been prepared for activist careers by the circumstances of life, by key mentors and guardians, and even by spiritual forces such as providence. Smiley's advice to Lawson about Nashville as a base of operation is evidence of such mentoring and guidance and was one of the most salient pieces

of advice given in the early days of the Civil Rights Movement. Without Smiley's wisdom, Lawson may well have ended up in Atlanta or some other place unsuitable for his talents. Although it is most probable that Nashville would have had a movement anyway, the character of it would have been markedly different without someone there to germinate and develop the seeds of nonviolent direct action. When all of these factors are considered together, the why and how of the Nashville movement seems fairly plain. Hardly any of it was coincidence, but was instead a convergence of factors that made Nashville primed to be the most dynamic movement center of the early years of the movement. By the fall of 1959 the city had all of the institutional assets in place along with the core leadership to stage an assault on segregation. The only missing component was a way to convert all of the potential activists into a disciplined band of warriors ready to risk everything for a cause they believed in. Nashville developed a unique way to do this that constituted the third step in an ongoing process—nonviolence training workshops.

CHAPTER 4: JAMES M. LAWSON, JR., AND THE DISCIPLES OF NONVIOLENCE: THE NASHVILLE LEADERSHIP TRAINING MODEL

From the very beginning, the Nashville sit-in movement proved to be the most organized, disciplined, and effective sit-in campaign in the entire nation. As testament to this fact, Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr., came to Nashville on April 20, 1960, and addressed an overflow crowd at the gymnasium of Fisk University and said that the Nashville Movement was “the most organized and the most disciplined in the Southland.” Giving Nashville his highest praise, King said, “I came to Nashville not to bring inspiration, but to gain inspiration from the great movement that has taken place in this community.”¹

Reverend King’s words were no exaggeration. By far, Nashville’s sit-in movement had no peer, thanks to the nonviolence training workshops sponsored by the NCLC. As this chapter will demonstrate, the workshops not only allowed the Nashville movement to eclipse all others in the first years of the 1960s, but it produced the most talented corps of youth leadership in the nation’s history who played critical roles in the development of early SNCC in its early years, the Freedom Rides, the Albany Movement, the Birmingham campaign, the emergence of SCLC as a contending direct action protest organization, and the Selma voter registration drive.

Reverend Kelly Miller Smith paved the way for these workshops and enabled Reverend Lawson to institutionalize and perfect the philosophy of nonviolence in Nashville. As a result, John Lewis, James Bevel, Diane Nash, Bernard LaFayette, C.T. Vivian and others were able to propagate their knowledge regionally and nationally and thereby help spread the movement. The Nashville workshops also aided in the construction of bonds between the students and the adult Black community who helped to minimize much of the generational conflict seen in other

¹ Lewis, 117.

movement centers such as Atlanta. Nashville's early success with the sit-ins is partly attributable to this intergenerational spirit of cooperation fostered by the workshops. The student-adult cooperation is foremost a product of elite Black Nashville's historic sense of ownership of its Black institutions of higher education and of a series of strategic mistakes by white leaders as they responded to the winds of racial change.

Beyond Nashville, the workshops served as a forerunner to the training offered by the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) in preparation for Freedom Summer in 1964. Freedom Summer was a frontal assault against Black disfranchisement in Mississippi that involved bringing in hundreds of mostly white college students from around the country to register Black voters and to establish "freedom schools" as a bulwark against the inferior schools so common in the state. In preparation for such a risky and massive undertaking, SNCC offered training sessions at Western College for Women in Oxford, Ohio, a ratification of the paradigm of strategic leadership developed by way of training in nonviolence.²

The genesis of the nonviolence workshops began with the formation of an emergency organization called into being in early 1956 after the lynching of Emmett Till. New York attorney Stanley Levison, Congress of Racial Equality co-founder Bayard Rustin, Black labor leader A. Philip Randolph, Reverend Dr. Harry E. Fosdick of New York's Riverside Church, and veteran grassroots organizer Ella Baker formed In Friendship to raise money in support of victims of segregationist vigilante violence, mostly in Mississippi, but also including the Montgomery boycotters.³

Ultimately, In Friendship was unable to sustain itself as large organizations stepped in to provide funds and Baker, Rustin, and Levison began to redirect their energies from fundraising

² Clayborne Carson, *In Struggle: SNCC and the Black Awakening of the 1960s* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981), 111.

³ Branch, 38-39, 209.

to direct consultation with movement leaders, particularly Reverend King and the nascent SCLC. Baker in particular was eager to be closer to the action, confiding to her friend and pastor Reverend Thomas Kilgore of Friendship Baptist Church in Harlem that she was, “chafing at the bit to be down there as a part of the struggle.”⁴

She and Rustin traveled to the South in January 1957 to help organize the founding meeting of SCLC, an organization founded in the wake of the Montgomery Bus Boycott. Baker saw in Montgomery political developments that she hoped would become a new wave of activism for Black freedom and the formation of a new protest organization that could take advantage of the grassroots energy seen in Montgomery.⁵

Many of the activist ministers who began to coalesce into an informal network after the success of Montgomery were veterans of local protests on a smaller scale. Reverend T. J. Jemison of Baton Rouge, Louisiana, is a good example. He led a bus boycott that predated Montgomery’s and became in many ways a model for that city’s boycott.⁶ Others such as Reverend Samuel W. Williams of Atlanta were longstanding acquaintances of the King family⁷ and offered encouragement to King during the bus boycott. For activists like King, Baker, and Jemison, the problem was that there was no formal organization to link the various individual

⁴ Barbara Ransby, *Ella Baker and the Black Freedom Movement: A Radical Democratic Vision* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003), 164, 168.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 170.

⁶ See chapter two of Aldon D. Morris’ *Origins of the Civil Rights Movement: Black Communities Organizing for Change* (New York: The Free Press) for a discussion of the precedent set by the Baton Rouge boycott. Also see Adam Fairclough, *Race and Democracy: The Civil Rights Struggle in Louisiana, 1915-1972* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2008), for a thorough treatment of the movement in Baton Rouge.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 172; David Garrow’s *Bearing the Cross: Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference* (New York: William Morrow and Company, 1986). Garrow says that Williams was a close family friend of the Kings and was one of two Morehouse professors who attended Martin, Jr.’s, ordination on February 25, 1948, at Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta. See page 38.

and disparate local groups together, to sustain or to propagate the movement after the end of the Montgomery boycott in late 1956.⁸

The notion of a regional organization is difficult to attribute to any one group or individual. According to Barbara Ransby, the idea for such an organization “germinated in different quarters simultaneously.” It appears to be a product of both southern Black ministers strategizing about succeeding steps as well as a blueprint developed by the In Friendship trio of Baker, Rustin, and Levison. Baker recalled that she and her two colleagues spent many hours discussing ways to “enlarge upon the gains of the Montgomery bus boycott.” Rustin and Levison then related those discussions to King and other ministers, urging them to call a regional meeting to advance the idea.⁹

Nashville’s Reverend Kelly Miller Smith was invited to the founding meeting held in Atlanta on January 10, 1957, at Ebenezer Baptist Church. Smith was among numerous ministers from the South who gathered under the banner of the Southern Leadership Conference on Transportation and Nonviolent Integration. (The name was later changed to the Southern Christian Leadership Conference.) Smith, rather modestly “wondered how I happened to be included” among such an august group of activist ministers who hailed from cities with graver racial problems than Nashville. After all, Nashville’s buses were already desegregated, it had enjoyed two Black city councilmen since 1951 and its municipal airport was already desegregated, Scarritt College and Vanderbilt University already had African American students, the city had chapters of the American Association of University Women and the United Church Women which publicly urged interracial dialogue and interaction, and the Race Relations Department of the American Missionary Association was headquartered at Fisk University, an

⁸ Ransby, 173.

⁹ Ibid.

enterprise long recognized as the regional leader in race relations work.¹⁰ Smith, then, had every reason to wonder why Nashville was included among cities with more intransigent race problems.

But after further reflection, Smith realized that Nashville had its own racial problems. While Vanderbilt had a few Black students in the late 1950s, African Americans were barred from the medical school and the undergraduate program¹¹ and Black students were excluded from private schools such as the Tennessee Preparatory School. Even though Nashville had a reputation for racial moderation with many whites affiliated with the NAACP and the Tennessee Council on Human Relations, the city also was home to the segregationist Tennessee Federation for Constitutional Government. On the employment front, there were no African Americans employed in white collar jobs by the municipal government. Most galling of all was the fact that a lawsuit was required to force compliance with the *Brown* ruling in terms of school desegregation, and in the late 1950s virtually all downtown facilities such as lunch counters, public restrooms, movie theaters, and restaurants were segregated or excluded Black people entirely.¹²

From Smith's perspective, his city was one that boasted of its glory, yet simultaneously, because of segregation and discrimination, was also a city "enshrined in shame."¹³ His presence at the founding meeting, therefore, was not so improbable. After all, Reverend Smith played a leading role in the school desegregation battle, shared the aura of being a "Morehouse Man" with

¹⁰ Smith Papers, , Folder, "Pursuit of a Dream: The Nashville Story," unfinished manuscript, chapters 1 and 2, Box 28.

¹¹ Stahlman Papers, "A Policy the University Can Defend ," Box V-29, Folder 8.

¹² Smith Papers, "Pursuit of a Dream," chapters 1 and 2.

¹³ Ibid.

King, and was recognized by *Ebony* magazine in 1954 as one of the “ten most outstanding Negro preachers” in America.¹⁴

At the January 10th meeting, Smith recalled that he asked King several questions about how other activist ministers advanced their movements and what mistakes were made along the way. Feeling inspired by the dialogue, he told King that he intended to return to Nashville and establish a MIA-style organization because the NAACP chapter, of which Smith was president, was incapable of mounting a protest campaign. King’s response was indicative of his sensitivity, even at this early stage, of the NAACP’s territorial jealousy. He told Smith that he hoped the NAACP would not think he was setting up a competing organization.¹⁵

What Reverend Smith had in mind was what Aldon D. Morris calls an “organization of organizations,” a group designed to combat the divisive and competitive relationship among local civil rights organizations in southern cities. The United Defense League (UDL) was one of the first such organizations, established in Baton Rouge in June 1953 because the churches and other institutions were too numerous, too preoccupied with other matters, often had leadership economically dependent on the white community, and lacked the solidarity necessary to execute a successful boycott. Therefore, Baton Rouge leaders created the UDL.¹⁶

The Montgomery Improvement Association (MIA) was an intentional mimic of the UDL and a critical factor in the success of the Montgomery boycott because it addressed the same factionalism found in Baton Rouge. Before the MIA there was the Progressive Democrats headed by E.D. Nixon, the Women’s Political Council led by Mary Fair Burks and Jo Ann

¹⁴ Smith and King’s time at Morehouse did not overlap. As noted by Taylor Branch in *Parting the Waters*, King attended Morehouse from the fall of 1945 until the spring of 1948. Smith graduated from Morehouse in 1942; “Great Negro Preachers,” *Ebony*, July 1954, 26-30.

¹⁵ Smith Papers, “Pursuit of a Dream,” chapter 2.

¹⁶ Aldon D. Morris, *The Origins of the Civil Rights Movement: Black Communities Organizing for Change* (New York: The Free Press, 1984), 19, 22.

Robinson, and the NAACP under the stewardship of R.L. Matthews. African Americans in Montgomery attempted to unite themselves, but were unable to until the formation of the MIA.¹⁷

Of course, Rosa Parks' arrest created the conditions favorable for the formation of the MIA. In Nashville, Reverend Smith's vision of a MIA-style organization was inspired by a number of factors, including the Montgomery boycott, the SCLC, and by his experiences with the NAACP's handling of the desegregation of Nashville's public schools and the white resistance that resulted. The NAACP was notoriously loyal to its legal strategy and in the case of Nashville's school desegregation ordeal, Reverend Smith followed the NAACP model in 1955 when the national headquarters ordered local branches to petition school boards. Black Nashville attorneys Avon Williams and Z. Alexander Looby, under NAACP sanction, filed *Robert W. Kelly v. Nashville Board of Education*. The case led to a gradualist plan of desegregating a grade a year¹⁸, designed to minimize Black enrollment and to buy time to obstruct the intent of the *Brown* ruling. This obstruction of the legal remedy to segregated schools was one of the factors that for Smith that "underscored the need for an organization that would supplement and complement the NAACP."

Smith was also motivated to advance the civil rights agenda forward via new mechanisms because of the violence that attended the school desegregation process in Nashville. His daughter, Joy, became the first Black child to enroll at a white school on September 9, 1957, only a few days after the Little Rock Nine. Smith and his wife Alice, a biology instructor at Tennessee A & I, wrestled with the decision to expose Joy to potential danger, especially after the bombing of Hattie Cotton Elementary School just after midnight on September 9. Adding to

¹⁷ Ibid., 42-43; See Jo Ann Robinson, *The Montgomery Bus Boycott and the Women Who Started It: The Memoir of Jo Ann Robinson* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1987), 22, for the story of the founding of the Women's Political Council.

¹⁸ Lovett, *The Civil Rights Movement in Tennessee*, 54.

the potential for violence was the presence of Fredrick John Kasper, a self-styled executive secretary of the White Citizens Council from New Jersey who came to Nashville in early August 1957 just as the city was about to desegregate its schools. Before arriving in Nashville, Kasper had stirred up trouble in Clinton, Tennessee, where racial bombings took place over the school desegregation.¹⁹

The violence that accompanied school desegregation in Nashville and other locales was one of many factors in Reverend Smith's decision to launch what became known as the Nashville Christian Leadership Council (NCLC). Influencing Smith's thinking was the example of Montgomery, the spiritual element of seeking Black freedom represented by the SCLC, and the need for a new organization unfettered by the limits of existing methods. Smith explained the impulse to found the NCLC this way:

Because 1957 showed Nashville could be as violent as other places and because of the insights gained from the Montgomery experience and the collective thinking of SCLC members, it became clear that in Nashville: 1) we needed a new organization; 2) such a group should be structured to take into account the spiritual implications of the struggle; 3) this needed to be a group that would get at the grassroots of the community, especially Negroes; 4) the group needed independence of action that would permit use of methods never tried before.²⁰

Item four is especially noteworthy and perhaps presages what was on the horizon for Nashville: a series of nonviolent direct action tactics undergirded by a corresponding philosophy rooted in New Testament scripture. Beginning in 1960, Nashville activists showcased methods that included sit-ins, stand-ins, sleep-ins, freedom rides, jail-ins, or other forms of direct confrontation to segregation. Although none of these methods were new, perhaps with the exception of jail-ins, what gave them new power was their re-introduction after the *Brown*

¹⁹ Ibid., 44-47.

²⁰ Smith Papers, "Pursuit of a Dream," chapter two.

decision; their deployment by an army of students who felt they had nothing to lose by giving structural support to the philosophy of nonviolence. Item four also indicated a willingness on the part of Smith to upset traditional cordial race relationships whereby elite Black leadership avoided offending their white elite counterparts. Such an attitude would give student activists critical adult support and more leeway in their tactics and strategies, an important factor in the trusting relationship between students and adults of the developing Nashville movement.²¹

Reverend Smith used the kick-off of the SCLC's Voters' Crusade on February 12, 1958, as the perfect opportunity to launch this new community-based organization. Letters were sent out to all Negro ministers in the city asking for a meeting on January 18 at Capers Memorial CME Church²² to organize for the Voters' Crusade. Smith generated strong attendance by advertising the presence of Reverend King at the January gathering. At the meeting, Reverend Smith was elected president of the newly formed NCLC²³. This development made Nashville the site of the first SCLC affiliate and, ironically, its activities soon made it arguably a more relevant agent of change than the parent SCLC.

As a new organization, the NCLC focused on voter registration, an emphasis borrowed from the NAACP and the SCLC's Voters' Crusade. At this stage then, the organization was grasping for a method and a strategy to achieve its objective, which was to focus on the SCLC's

²¹ *Will the Circle be Unbroken? An [A]udio [H]istory of the Civil Rights Movement in [F]ive Southern [C]ities and the [M]usic of [T]hose [T]imes*, episode 22, The Atlanta Student Movement, 1960-61," Southern Regional Council cassette tape. Comparatively speaking, many Black adult leaders in Atlanta were not so willing to voluntarily endanger race relations in that way, a fact testified to by Julian Bond's recollection that Black adult leaders considered the student leaders "rabble-rousers."

²² There is some inconsistency in the record about the location of the founding meeting of the NCLC on January 18, 1958. Reverend Smith wrote in chapter two of "Pursuit of a Dream: the Nashville Story," that it took place at Capers Memorial CME Church. Bobby L. Lovett, on the other hand, wrote on page 120 of *The Civil Rights Movement in Tennessee* that it took place at Gordon Memorial CME Church. Lovett's essay on sources for the chapter on the founding of the NCLC notes that he used the Smith Papers as his source as well.

²³ Smith papers, "Pursuit of a Dream," chapter 2.

goal of creating the “beloved community” and to transform Nashville into a “city without a color line.”²⁴

Smith had a vision for a new Nashville, one without a color line that was part of the beloved community, but he had no concept of how to transform the city. It just so happened that Reverend James M. Lawson had arrived in the city in early January 1958 and took up residence on South Street near Vanderbilt University.²⁵ Lawson’s arrival was fortuitous because Nashville had practically every other ingredient for a movement except for a strategy, a protest method that could produce significant change, and a philosophical foundation that could give such an endeavor potential power to transform the community and the people in it. Reverend Smith, because of his association with the SCLC, was well aware of the philosophy of nonviolence, but had no true understanding of it nor how to apply it to Nashville’s racial problems. In fact, Smith wrote in the early days of the NCLC, that “Nothing was said about nonviolence. None of us knew enough about it to discuss it meaningfully.”²⁶ Even the SCLC’s understanding of the philosophy of nonviolence was still in the elementary stages. During the early days of the Montgomery Bus Boycott, King was in the habit of employing armed bodyguards at his home until Bayard Rustin made it clear, via FOR, that nonviolence required a *total* commitment, thus eliminating the use of armed self-defense.²⁷ And even as King prepared his manuscript for what

²⁴ Lovett, *The Civil Rights Movement in Tennessee*, 120.

²⁵ Ibid; Barnes interview of Lawson.

²⁶ Smith Papers, “Pursuit of a Dream,” chapter 2.

²⁷ On pages 174-180 of *Parting the Waters*, Taylor Branch goes into detail about how Bayard Rustin came to Montgomery on his own in February 1958 as one of the first outsiders to make contact with the leaders of the boycott. He came at a time when the white officials issued mass indictments of the boycott leaders and planned wholesale arrests as a means of intimidating them and therefore killing off the leadership. When Rustin learned that white officials planned to use mass arrests of boycott leaders as a tool of intimidation, he suggested that the “MIA leaders might be making a tactical mistake by waiting anxiously for the deputies to come after them. Such behavior reinforced the psychology of the crusading lawmen and the skulking criminal.” This advice led to the ministers all eagerly turning themselves in and catching the white lawmen off guard, thereby subverting the jail as a place of shame and fear and converting it into a place where Black courage was on display. Rustin also realized that the Montgomery leaders were novices in nonviolence, evidenced by a pistol he saw lying on the couch in Reverend King’s home. Aware that ignorance of nonviolence was a liability in Montgomery, Rustin phoned John Swomley,

became the story of the Montgomery boycott, *Stride Toward Freedom* (1958), he relied on a speech given by Washington, D.C. lawyer and special assistant to President Kennedy Harris Wofford at Howard University entitled “Non-violence and Social Change” for his discussion of nonviolence and civil disorder in the book.²⁸

The period from March 1958 to February 12, 1960, was one of preparation and practice for the launching of the Nashville sit-in movement.²⁹ The most important development within this time frame was the nonviolence workshops, led primarily by Reverend Lawson. The workshops introduced Nashville leaders in a methodical and practical way to the philosophy of nonviolence. (This development ultimately put the city on the leading edge of the nonviolent phase of the Black freedom struggle, at least until the end of 1961.) As stated elsewhere, Lawson was only one of a few people capable of teaching this experimental new philosophy.

Lawson’s association with the Nashville workshop stemmed from his role as Southern Field Secretary of FOR. In that position, he served as a troubleshooter for cities considered hotspots for racial conflict. Even before arriving in Nashville, Reverend Lawson began traveling to cities such as Birmingham, where he visited Reverend Fred Shuttlesworth while he was recovering from an attack that resulted from attempting to enroll his daughter in a white school in the fall of 1957, and Little Rock, where he met with Daisy Bates and the Little Rock Nine. Lawson also attended SCLC’s meetings such as one in Columbia, South Carolina, where King declared to a gathering of hundreds that Lawson’s presence in the South was very important to SCLC and the movement. At the Columbia meeting, Lawson led a session, presumably on

executive director of FOR, and told him the MIA needed someone to teach them about nonviolence. Because Rustin was on his way out of Montgomery after officials discovered his homosexual lifestyle and radical leftist politics. Consequently, Glenn Smiley came to Montgomery to conduct nonviolence training.

²⁸ Clayborne Carson, *The Papers of Martin Luther King Jr: Symbol of the Movement, January 1957—December 1958*, Vol. IV, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 32; In the early 1960s, Harris Wofford became a special assistant to President John F. Kennedy.

²⁹ The sit-ins began February 13, 1960.

nonviolence, and later recalled that King helped him gain respect in movement circles as an expert in the field. Lawson said King “made a big deal about me leading a session at the SCLC meeting in front of the whole conference. Thereafter, several hundred people were at the workshop and I became well known.”³⁰ Lawson’s South-wide troubleshooting made evident the existence of regional networks between Black leaders, a web of contacts that helped proliferate nonviolence as a mode of social protest and that helped local movements gain inspiration from each other later in the 1960s.

While traveling to the various hotspots gave Lawson a sense that an embryonic civil rights struggle was taking shape, he seemed anxious to start something in Nashville and was also groping for the next step in the emergent Civil Rights Movement. It should be recalled that one of the reasons Lawson left India when he did was because he sensed that the Montgomery boycott was an opportunity to move against segregation. In fact, when Lawson first read about it in the local Indian newspaper, the Nagpur *Times*, a colleague found him early in the morning “in a fit of shouting and clapping and foot-stomping,” a rare tide of exuberance for a man known more for his calm, cerebral personality. Lawson told his Methodist missionary colleague, a man known as Theopolis, that this was the beginning. This was what he had been dreaming about, what he had gone to prison for, what he had come halfway around the world to find at its source.³¹

It is likely that as Lawson traveled the South in the late 1950s that he was still energized by the possibilities he sensed when the Montgomery boycott first began and was impatient that by early 1958, nothing significant was happening in the South. Even though the Little Rock Nine’s ordeal was underway, it did not seem to set off movement fires in the region. It was at

³⁰ Barnes interview of Lawson.

³¹ Branch, *Parting the Waters*, 143.

some point between January 18 and late March 1958 that Lawson had a conversation with Glenn Smiley about what to do next. As he remembered it:

One day I told Glenn that I should not travel around but do something about Nashville and I was struggling with what's the next step for the movement. There was a sense that crisis scenes were not what we could rely on. We sensed we had to plan an effort from the grassroots. So Glenn and I agreed I'd be part of the NCLC. I had met with Reverend Smith and he asked me to be the action program chair of the NCLC and then we sponsored some workshops.³²

The combination of King's certification of Lawson as an expert in nonviolence and Smith's drafting of him to chair the action program committee of the NCLC were important credentialing events in Lawson's activist career. As he acknowledged, King gave him instant celebrity status among the fraternity of Black activist ministers at the regional level. And just as important, Reverend Smith, as the leading Black minister in Nashville, helped Lawson gain acceptance into local elite Black circles of Nashville. Such *carte blanche* allowed Lawson to avoid the struggle of how to become connected and respected by other Black leaders locally and regionally. This is especially important since Reverend Lawson had never lived in the South before and likely may have been viewed with suspicion by other Black leaders, a circumstance that could affect his ability to organize in Nashville. This is a reality that Bayard Rustin had to contend with when he first came to Montgomery in February 1956 without proper introductions. When Rustin first appeared on the doorsteps of Reverend Abernathy and E.D. Nixon, he tried to ingratiate himself by dropping names of references, but received less than a full embrace by Abernathy. Admittedly, Abernathy brushed him off in part because of the crisis of the mass indictments of

³² Barnes interview of Lawson.

boycott leaders. But the other problem was his lack of proper introduction. He fared much better with Nixon when he revealed that they both shared a common mentor, A. Philip Randolph.³³

While Lawson's entrée into the inner sanctum of Nashville's leadership circle was facilitated by Smith, his ultimate acceptance was likely facilitated by his "outsider" status as well as his personal attributes. Much like Dr. King's outsider quality made him an attractive choice as head of the MIA in Montgomery and Reverend Jemison "newcomer" profile made him ideal to assume leadership in Baton Rouge, so too could have Lawson's acceptance by other Nashville leaders been a result of his recent arrival in the city. With no ties to any particular faction in Nashville, Lawson may well have been welcomed as a neutral voice by the existing Black leadership. In terms of his individual qualities, John Lewis remembered the first time that he met Lawson. He recalled that "He just had a way about him, an aura of inner peace and wisdom that you could sense immediately upon simply seeing him."³⁴ If these attributes won over Lewis, then they probably helped make him acceptable to others in Nashville. In addition to Lawson's outsider status and quiet charisma, his resume as a representative of the long-established FOR, his refusal to serve in the military, and his study of nonviolence in India set him apart from the other leaders in the city. Lawson had a rare set of leadership assets possessed by no one else in Black Nashville, a fact that made his presence more acceptable.

With the way made smooth by Reverends King and Smith, and with his unique credentials as a Black man schooled in Gandhian nonviolence in India, Reverend Lawson only needed an opportunity to put his credentials to use. That opportunity came in late March 1958. One Sunday, Reverend Smith announced to his congregation that Reverend Lawson would

³³ In Taylor Branch's chapter on the Montgomery Bus Boycott (pages 168-179), he details Rustin's sojourn to and rapid exodus from Montgomery, showing the significance of social contacts among movement activists.

³⁴ For a discussion of the phenomenon of a "newcomer" as a key local civil rights leader, see page 20 of Aldon D. Morris, *The Origins of the Civil Rights Movement*. See *Walking with the Wind* page 85 for Lewis' first impression of Lawson.

conduct evening workshops at Bethel AME Church.³⁵ Apparently, Lawson and Smith were both contemplating how to move Nashville forward on the racial front. The workshops could be a way for Lawson to satisfy his impatience with the lack of racial progress. For Smith, it was a way to meet the NCLC's challenge of building the beloved community and making Nashville a city without a color line."

The first workshops at Bethel, March 26, 1958, were jointly conducted by Lawson, Smiley, and FOR member Anna Holden and were entitled a "Workshop on Christian Nonviolence and Love," sponsored by the Reverend Smith and the NCLC. According to Lawson, initially the sessions were "an exhaustive effort to talk about nonviolence" where he gave biblical sketches of nonviolence that focused on the nonviolent dimensions of Jesus Christ. As far as Lawson was concerned, "Jesus was a nonviolent warrior." There were also parts of the training led by Smiley that elaborated on the history of nonviolence. On some occasions, Lawson too emphasized the history of nonviolence, such as when he detailed the saga of the first freedom riders who in the 1840s rode trains across Pennsylvania and the Northeast to protest discrimination and the antislavery activism of Universalist minister, Adin Ballou who called his protest activity "nonresistance."³⁶

Other workshops often featured the case of Mary Dyer, a Quaker hanged in Boston Commons³⁷ in June 1660 for heresy. Lawson obviously used Dyer's martyrdom as a parallel example of the suffering and sacrifices that people of conscience have to make in order to remain

³⁵ Lovett, *The Civil Rights Movement in Tennessee*, 121.

³⁶ Barnes interview of Lawson.

³⁷ According to the website Rootsweb.com, Mary Dyer was executed after repeatedly returning to the Massachusetts colony after she had been banished for defying a law passed in 1656 and 1657 making membership in the Society of Friends (Quakers) and other religious sects outside the Puritan Church illegal. She started out as a Puritan, but converted to the Quaker faith. Dyer also gave birth to a deformed stillborn child that was buried without proper notification of colonial authorities, an act that was used to confirm her "illegal" acts of heresy. When Dyer returned to Massachusetts in April of 1660, she was arrested and later executed. Dyer and others hanged in this episode were later referred to as the Boston Martyrs. For more details on Dyer, see <http://www.rootsweb.ancestry.com/~nwa/dyer.html>.

true to their convictions. Dyer was well aware that her deliberate defiance of the laws against Quakerism could lead to her death, but she nevertheless chose to risk all. As the movement will demonstrate later, civil rights activists who embraced the philosophy of nonviolence were forced to also take life-threatening risks on behalf of principles of justice and equality.

The Dyer martyrdom also served another purpose. It highlighted the incongruent tension between the American ideal enshrined in documents such as the Declaration of Independence and the U.S. Constitution and the reality of the nation's past as a slaveholding regime, America's decimation of Native Americans, and its horrible record of sexism.³⁸ It has been a tradition in this nation to teach that colonial America, particularly the New England region, was founded in part on the principle of religious freedom and the case of Mary Dyer does not meet such criteria. In fact, while the Preamble to the U.S. Constitution speaks of "establishing justice" and "securing the blessings of liberty," grand precepts in place long before the formal founding of the nation, Dyer's case and the historical experiences of Black people and native Americans directly contradict the Preamble's claims. It is inconceivable that Lawson and his students missed such obvious realities and failed to compare Black people's racial persecution under Jim Crow to the religious persecution of Mary Dyer.

The use of both biblical and historical narratives of nonviolence was strategic on Lawson's part. This double narrative allowed for a fusion of the religious and historical currents of African American experiences in the South. Black people could place their suffering and the responses to it in a religious framework which allowed them to craft a biblically based response to the suffering, just like Jesus did when he submitted to the Roman cross. Black people could, by historical examples of using nonviolence, place themselves in the biblical narrative and also understand that they were following long established methods of protest connected to their faith.

³⁸ Barnes interview of Lawson.

Lawson's workshop pedagogy of merging secular and sacred history also laid a foundation for the role of the Black Church as an agent of social change. This is very important because of the raging debates in the late 1950s and 1960s about the role of clergy and the Black church in social protest. As pointed out elsewhere, activists such as John Lewis faced opposition from ABT faculty and students who believed ministers should focus solely on saving souls as opposed to addressing social ills and engaging politically. It is conceivable that Lawson anticipated some opposition from theologically conservative workshop participants and therefore emphasized the biblical and historical traditions of nonviolence. Lawson's theological perspective lined up perfectly with what Reverend Smith called his "social crisis preaching," an updated version of the Social Gospel that included racism as a social ill worthy of attention by religious leaders. Smith's entire career as a minister was defined by this brand of theology. For him and for Lawson, politics and ministry were not conflicting social entities but co-dependent social structures in necessary relationship with each other.

It was a conservative theological perspective that kept the largest Black Baptist organization, the National Baptists Convention (NBC), on the sidelines of the Movement. Under Joseph J. Jackson's presidency, the NBC objected to street protests and Jackson publicly criticized the student sit-ins. Such conservatism led to opposition to Jackson's leadership within the NBC. Dr. King, a vice president of the organization, joined a group of progressives led by Reverend Gardner Taylor of Brooklyn, New York. Because the NBC had more than five million members and in excess of twenty thousand preachers, numbers that dwarfed the NAACP and the SCLC, Dr. King hoped to convert the organization into a reform vehicle. The battle to unseat Jackson began when he reneged on a promise to step down in 1957. At the NBC's 1961 national convention, young progressives nominated Taylor as an alternative to Jackson. Taylor was a

close friend of King and an active civil rights proponent. Naturally King endorsed Taylor, precipitating an uproar. At the height of the commotion, a Jackson supporter, Reverend Author G. Wright collapsed and died of a heart attack. Jackson and his faction publicly blamed King for the death of Wright and for the challenge to his leadership. In the end, King never commandeered the NBC as a Movement ally and the Taylor faction split off to form the Progressive National Baptist Convention.³⁹ Jackson's opposition to young progressive ministers like King and Taylor indicated that a significant segment of Black ministers clung to the notion that the Black church was no place for politics.

There were other battlefronts, this time within Movement ranks. The workshops on nonviolence not only revealed a theological conflict within Black Protestant Christianity, but also indicated a secular territorial and ideological struggle taking shape between the NAACP and emerging organizations such as the SCLC and its local affiliates, including the NCLC. In the 1920s, the NAACP began to formulate and implement a legal strategy to address racial discrimination. In cooperation with its El Paso branch, it filed a lawsuit against a Texas law excluding Black voters from the Democratic primary. This legal challenge led to a successful outcome in *Smith v. Allwright* (1944) in which the Supreme Court struck down the white primary. From the 1930s through the mid 1950s, the NAACP also won significant victories against discriminatory admissions policies in state-owned institutions of higher education, most notably *Gaines v. Canada* (1938), *Supiel v. Board of Regents of the University of Oklahoma* (1947), *Sweatt v. Painter* (1950), and of course *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954).⁴⁰ Consequently, NAACP officials considered their organization the leading champion of Black rights and legalism the only viable strategy. As Reverend Lawson noted then, the NCLC was

³⁹ Garrow, 165-66; *Parting the Waters*, 228.

⁴⁰ See Patricia Sullivan, *Lift Every Voice: The NAACP and the Making of the Civil Rights Movement* (New York: The New Press, 2009), for details of the NAACP's legal strategy.

considered the “new kid on the block” who was usurping the NAACP’s rightful monopoly on leadership in the civil rights struggle. In rather mild terms, Lawson described the relationship between the two organizations as “antagonism between the NAACP and the NCLC.” What is both ironic and an encouraging omen is the fact that Reverend Smith, according to Lawson, “didn’t countenance that.”⁴¹ Instead, Smith served as president of both organizations simultaneously; he was the NAACP’s president from 1956 to 1959 and the NCLC president from 1958 to 1963.⁴² Although there is no evidence to suggest that Smith relinquished his NAACP post for ideological reasons, it is certain that he put racial progress ahead of petty squabbles between civil rights organizations. The fact that by the 1960s Smith had aligned himself more closely with the methods and strategies of the NCLC reflected his emerging realization that nonviolent direct action held out more potential for social change, an idea reflected at the founding meeting of the SCLC where Smith told Dr. King that a new organization was needed in Nashville “because the NAACP was not equipped to do the whole job.” As a Social Gospeler, clinging to the NAACP legal strategy when better options existed would have muted his theological mandate to alleviate social ills. Following a strictly legal approach would also have negated the belief that Christian activists must often suffer the consequences of their religious convictions, especially when these convictions conflicted with the laws and customs of society. Conscientious Christians may be compelled to defy the law and suffer injury, social isolation, imprisonment, or even death. By doing so, one practiced the act of “redemptive suffering,” a staple of nonviolence philosophy, in which the willing submission to the consequences of defying oppression could redeem the soul of one’s oppressor. The NAACP’s purely legal

⁴¹ Barnes interview of Lawson.

⁴² David E. Summer, “Kelly Miller Smith Sr. (1920-1984),” <http://www.tennesseeencyclopedia.net/imagegallery.com>

approach required one to give priority to secular laws over one's Christian convictions. Such a mandate was unthinkable to Christian soldiers like Reverends Smith and Lawson.

Reverend Smith's role in establishing the NCLC was revealing. It demonstrated some degree of dissatisfaction with the NAACP's legal strategy. As president of the local NAACP chapter, his association with a NAACP rival signaled the need for new brand of activism. Not only was the legal strategy inherently slow and costly, it also ignored needs and priorities at the local level, a fact enunciated by Williams in 1957 when he declared that Nashville needed a new organization that had "independence of action that would permit the use of methods never tried before."⁴³ The articulation of a need for independent action and a willingness to experiment with new protest methods was an indictment of the NAACP's one-dimensional legal strategy and a sign that perhaps Nashville was ready to pioneer new approaches in the Black freedom struggle.

When the workshops were initially launched, there were no students involved. Reverend Smith noted that, "At this time it was all adults. There were no students involved anywhere and the thought of students hadn't really entered our minds at that time." It would not be until the fall of 1958 when students became involved in the workshops. In the meantime, the adults carried on and at some point began holding what Reverend Smith called "coffee sessions," a series of gatherings that took place between the spring and fall of 1958. These coffee sessions were instrumental in determining the initial direction of the Nashville movement. Smith said that, "At these coffee sessions we discussed the problems of Nashville and which problems we could best approach. And having adopted the nonviolent methodology, we had to think in terms of the kind of project which would lend itself to nonviolent demonstrations and which could also serve as an

⁴³ Smith Papers, "Pursuit of a Dream," chapter 2.

opening wedge for other things. And it was after a good deal of discussion, independent of any other community, that we arrived at the matter of lunch counters.”⁴⁴

The record does not make clear whether the coffee sessions were distinct meetings apart from Lawson’s workshops. In his recollection of the genesis of the idea to hold lunch counter demonstrations, Reverend Lawson outlined a similar process of community input, but a process that unfolded within the workshop setting. According to him:

. . . We had a series of workshops at Bethel on Saturday morning about . . . ‘What is the situation [with] Negroes in Nashville?’ We did not bring in experts, but had people in workshops saying what they thought the situation was. . . I’ll never forget the way some of the Black women said in the workshops ‘You men don’t know what it’s like because you don’t do the shopping for the family and you’re almost never downtown. You’re never downtown dragging your children from store to store, trying to buy them a pair of shoes.’⁴⁵

Lawson indicated that the experiences of Black women shopping downtown made it inevitable that the eventual protest target would be downtown lunch counters:

That description of their plight struck me boldly. They told of how they and their children were exhausted and had no place to stop, except to sit down in the street. They talked about how painful it was to be in the children’s clothing floor at Harvey’s where there was a carousel where children could play while mothers had coffee. They talked about having to tell a child you can’t play on that but they see other children on it. And so as a result of those descriptions, I knew by the end of the workshops we had to go after downtown and we had to begin with pulling down those signs and with restaurants and lunch counters.⁴⁶

⁴⁴ Robert Penn Warren interview of Kelly Miller Smith, File 1, part of series for book *Who Speaks for the Negro?*, February 13, 1964, <http://whospeaks.library.vanderbilt.edu/search.php?record=39>.

⁴⁵ Barnes interview of Lawson.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

It is possible that the conversations recollected by Reverends Smith and Lawson took place in both coffee sessions and workshops. More than likely, multiple layers of discussions were taking place in several pockets within Black Nashville. The real significance here is that the decision about the priorities and direction of the city's racial struggle was a collective, indigenous, community-based decision tailored to the needs of the people. This grassroots decision-making process is critical to giving the Nashville sit-ins its cohesive nature. The sit-ins, therefore, were not some spontaneous action by a group of outsiders or transient students who were not locally connected. Instead, the Nashville sit-ins represented the brainchild of local adults, a fact that has largely been overlooked. It is rare that the historiography of the sit-ins includes adult action at the conceptual level. The Nashville movement, then, explicitly demonstrates how the sit-ins were the result of the efforts of various constituents, each playing specific roles. The adults, especially the women, were the conceptualizers and supporters while the students were the logistical planners and the foot-soldiers who executed the plans.

It was in the fall of 1958 that students first participated in Lawson's workshops. John Lewis was one of the first students to attend. Nonviolence became the primary means by which the divine providence that brought all of the social "misfits" to Nashville began to unfold. The workshops were the final stage in the preparation of Lewis, Nash, Bevel, LaFayette, and others for the battles that lay ahead. Lewis found his way to Lawson by way of Reverend Smith, who was his homiletics instructor at ABT⁴⁷. Lewis admired Smith and began attending First Colored Baptist in the fall of 1958 where Smith announced that workshops would be held in his church starting in September. The first workshop took place on a Sunday evening at 6:30. Lewis wrote

⁴⁷ According to *Webster's Dictionary*, homiletics is the art of writing and preaching a sermon.

in his memoir that he “took a seat along with seven or eight other young men and women, all of us college students, all of us black,” with him being the only ABT student.⁴⁸

According to Lewis, the Sunday evening session at First Colored Baptist was more of an introduction where Lawson gave an overview of world religions—Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam, Christianity, and Judaism—suggesting that they shared a common tenet of justice. The theme of justice would be the topic explored in a new series of workshops taking place every Tuesday at Clark Memorial United Methodist Church, located only a few blocks from Fisk.⁴⁹ There is no question that the choice of Clark Memorial was strategic. First of all, it gave other churches a central role in the emerging movement and built a sense of camaraderie across denominational lines. More importantly, its location near Fisk gave adult leaders easy access to students and made it convenient for some students to participate.

The decision to include students reflected the strategic brilliance of Reverend Lawson. As chair of the NCLC’s action committee, it was his responsibility to manage the workshops and devise projects for the organization. In a 1964 interview, Reverend Smith told Robert Penn Warren:

Jim came to me one time, as I was president of the organization and asked us what about getting some students to become involved in that [the workshops]. I told him I thought it would be a very good idea. So he said we’ll do the recruiting. And so he did and got students and the thing that surprised us, although we shouldn’t have been surprised but we had no precedent upon which to depend, was that the students became very interested and outnumbered the adults quickly and easily and became part of the workshops, training, and the sit-ins actually became a student affair[,] it was so many of them.⁵⁰

⁴⁸ Lewis, 83.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Warren interview of Smith.

The significance of Lawson's strategic foresight in recruiting students cannot be overestimated. It is one factor that separated the Nashville sit-ins from others. Nashville adult leaders made a conscious choice to include students, unlike leaders in movement centers such as Atlanta. By planning for the inclusion of students, intergenerational conflict was minimized, the probability of success increased, and maximum movement cohesion resulted. There was no anxiety that the students were usurping or undermining adult leaders. Therefore, as chapter four will detail, the adults came to the students' rescue when trouble arose. In the case of the Atlanta sit-ins, the student protests became a contentious issue. Whereas Nashville adult leaders like Smith and Lawson worked to include students, Atlanta Black adult leaders like Warren Cochrane and Martin Luther King, Sr. viewed the students as competition. In an interview for the Southern Regional Council's audio history of the Civil Rights Movement, Atlanta student leader Lonnie King, who attended Morehouse in the early 1960s, told an interviewer that when Atlanta University Center students began their movement in the spring of 1960, the adult leaders:

. . . Saw themselves being replaced. That, I think, caused a great deal of problems. You had old guard Black leadership who were upset about these young upstarts who were coming in here threatening to make gains in a year or less [on things] that they had been working on, as they saw it, for thirty or forty years. And then of course the whites who were in power did not want to give up anything without you just taking it from them.⁵¹

Julian Bond, also a Morehouse student at the time, confirmed King's recollection and added that although the adult Black leaders supported the students and even bailed them out of jail, they became rather irritated and defensive when the students insisted on continuing their protests. Bond says that the adult reaction was:

Gee, that's great that you've done this thing. Now that you've done it, you don't have to do it again. Let us handle it. We can deal with

⁵¹ *Will the Circle Be Unbroken?*, Episode 22.

it. We have relationships with the white power people downtown. Let Black power and white power get together and work this out. That's the way we've always done it, and that's the way we'll do it now.⁵²

The Atlanta Black leadership style was based on longstanding relationships between Black preachers, businessmen, academicians, and professionals and the white business community which saw racial conflict as bad for business. Consequently, an arrangement was made in which racial conflict was settled through “quiet compromise and private negotiations.” The role of Black leaders, according to Warren Cochrane, a member of Atlanta’s old guard and director of the Butler Street YMCA, “was to keep the rabble-rousers out.” When the students disturbed the gradualist style of leadership in Atlanta, they became rabble-rousers, and when the established Black leadership could not seem to control them, the white business leaders stepped in, as was seen in the case when Richard Rich, owner of Rich’ department store, had Herchelle Sullivan and Lonnie King delivered to the police station for a tongue-lashing after disturbing commerce in his store in the fall of 1960.⁵³

The generational split had serious consequences that almost destroyed the Atlanta movement. White business leaders were able to isolate the student leaders at police headquarters and pressure them to accept a compromise not endorsed by community consensus. The Black community wanted immediate desegregation of downtown lunch counters, but under pressure from white business leaders, the Black old guard convinced King and Sullivan to accept a compromise that called for an end to the boycott in exchange for downtown desegregation in the fall when the public schools began desegregating. This compromise caused an uproar because it meant the lunch counters remained segregated until the fall and it made Black boycotters feel

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Ibid; “Diversity Matters: African-Americans at the University at Albany,” http://www.albany.edu/news/feature_1058.html.

their efforts were in vain. As a result, a very contentious mass meeting took place at Warren United Methodist Church, where a crowd of 2,000 booed “Daddy” King and other old guard leaders. Many students called for Lonnie King’s resignation.⁵⁴ Atlanta’s compromise was possible because of the generational divide in leadership; such a scenario would not have developed in Nashville. The NCLC reorganized in order to accommodate student input, largely because of the presence of Lawson who was only thirty two years old and because of the leadership style of Reverend Smith who practiced broad-based inclusion of various community constituencies. As a consequence of the consciousness of Nashville’s primary adult leadership, the city had an unusually cooperative adult-youth relationship.

During the first series of workshops, Reverend Lawson devoted considerable time to the philosophical basis of nonviolence, using everything from Reinhold Neibuhr’s philosophy of nonviolent revolution, to ancient Chinese thinkers like Mo Ti, to Henry David Thoreau, to Mohandus K. Gandhi. Complimentary to the foundation of nonviolence being laid was the concept of redemptive suffering, a Christian belief that intentional human suffering is a means by which an individual unites with Jesus who committed the ultimate act of suffering on behalf of humanity by dying on the cross. This act allowed human sins to be forgiven through his suffering. Jesus’ suffering serves as a model for how humans should treat each other. Some Christians believe they can redeem the misdeeds of others by suffering at their hands. For activists, it meant that the soul of one who commits acts of hatred and violence against a demonstrator or other innocent person can be redeemed by the victim who willingly absorbs the physical punishment without exhibiting reciprocal hatred or retaliatory violence. This act of Christian love could create a crisis of conscience and change the heart of the other person. This idea reminded John Lewis of his Christian upbringing. Lawson’s instruction allowed Lewis to

⁵⁴ *Will the Circle Be Unbroken?*, episode 22.

connect his understanding of Jesus' sacrifice on the cross to concrete, everyday acts of suffering by ordinary people. He began to understand that unearned suffering not only changed the sufferer, but also those who witnessed it. The act of suffering opened up a vein of compassion in the human spirit.⁵⁵

Lawson made it clear that redemptive suffering had no meaning unless combined with acts of forgiveness and agape love. He taught his charges how to find compassion for someone seeking to do physical harm to them by urging them to imagine the attacker as a pure, innocent baby, allowing the practitioner to understand that the person bloated with rage and hatred was just as much a victim as the person being attacked. When a person under attack could ascend to that level of compassion and understanding, he was on the road to a nonviolent way of life.⁵⁶

For Lawson, and eventually for others like Lewis, Bevel, Nash, and LaFayette, nonviolence did become a way of life. It is important to understand that there were two concepts of nonviolence during the movement. One concept can be termed "philosophical nonviolence" in which the adherent accepts it as a way of life, as did the core leaders profiled here. The individuals in this group saw themselves engaged in a struggle for the soul of individuals and the nation. Many of these individuals studied under Lawson or someone else thoroughly schooled in the philosophy and became apostles of nonviolence who proliferated it and remained committed to the principles for life. The second approach can be described as "tactical nonviolence." The proponents of this application believed that it was simply a tactic useful under certain conditions, but subject to reconsideration when conditions changed. There was no commitment to the guiding principles of nonviolence and these tacticians saw themselves involved in a political struggle rather than a battle for the souls of individuals or the nation. This ideological division

⁵⁵ Lewis, 85; The definition of redemptive suffering was taken from an article by Father John J. Lombardi entitled "Why Do People Suffer?" at http://www.emmitsburg.net/grott/father_jack/2002/why_do_people_suffer.html.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

among activists is best captured by the sentiments of James Forman, who became the executive secretary of SNCC in 1961. In his autobiography, Forman wrote, “But I saw both violence and nonviolence as just different forms of struggle. At various points in a people’s struggle they will use one form and then another. So as long as one did not advocate nonviolence dogmatically, to be used at all times and all places, I could work with it.” Many others who followed this line of reasoning were non-southerners like Forman, who was from Chicago, and included Stokely Carmichael a Howard University Student, and Ivanhoe Donaldson from Michigan State University.⁵⁷ The list also included southerners such as Cleveland Sellers, Bill Ware, and Worth Long, all of whom were affiliated with SNCC. Individuals in this group generally had not been trained in nonviolence by a guru like Reverend Lawson and later aligned themselves with Black Power, renouncing nonviolence in the mid to late 1960s. None of Lawson’s core students embraced Black Power as an alternative to nonviolence, they remained true to the philosophy.

What Lawson did in the fall 1958 workshops was to equip activists to put the Social Gospel into action, to give Christian love its full power, to energize what Lawson referred to as “soul force.” A group of Christians were being trained to confront a social evil with nothing more than their capacity to love, to forgive, and to endure unearned suffering, all without nurturing an ounce of bitterness or revenge. This soul force was at the center of what Lawson’s workshops attempted to impart into its participants. It was also at the center of the ultimate goal of activist ministers—the beloved community. Workshop participants, said John Lewis, were taught that believers in this goal were compelled to “insist that it is the moral responsibility of men and women with soul force, people of good will, to respond and to struggle nonviolently against the forces that stand between a society and the harmony it naturally seeks.” Proponents of

⁵⁷ James Forman, *The Making of Black Revolutionaries* (Washington, D.C: Open Hand Publishing, 1985), 158-59; *Parting the Waters*, 470; Carson, 80.

the beloved community believed, according to Lewis, that they were fulfilling an act of human destiny in which humanity inched toward a process of community building that was much like “the flow of a river toward the sea.” It was an inevitable tract.⁵⁸

There seemed to be something magical about Lawson’s Tuesday evening sessions and about Lawson himself in the estimation of Lewis, who described the concepts espoused there as “eye-opening stuff” and “incredibly powerful ideas” whose beauty lay in “that they applied to real life, to the specifics of the world we worked in.” Lewis’ initial impression of Lawson at the first workshop at First Colored Baptist gave clues to his compelling and awe-inspiring presence. Lewis wrote in his memoir that, “Even before he began speaking, I could see that there was something special about this man. He just had a way about him, an aura of inner peace and wisdom that you could sense immediately upon simply seeing him.”⁵⁹ Lewis was describing a powerful intellectual and charisma that attracted young college students who were already primed for roles as misfits. It is likely that the combination of Lawson’s aura and wisdom is what attracted others to the workshops.

Workshop attendance was also increased because of the recruitment efforts of Lewis, Nash, Barry and a Fisk student, Angeline Butler. According to Lewis, this small group “started going out trying to recruit other people to attend the workshops and started really preaching on the campus and telling people about it. At ABT I guess we had the most difficult time. People thought we were crazy, going down and encouraging people to attend the workshops. That we were going to have a big movement, get people to sit-in and all that.”⁶⁰

Partly as a result of such recruitment efforts, a considerable increase in student attendance became evident in the fall of 1958. Among some of the new student attendees were Bernard

⁵⁸ Lewis, 86-87.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 83.

⁶⁰ Allen interview transcript of Lewis, 39.

LaFayette and James Bevel. LaFayette and Lewis were much more excited by the ideas floated in the workshops than was Bevel who was still not a convert to the concept of marrying the church to social activism. Bevel still clung to the notion that Christian ministry was solely about saving souls. In fact, according to author David Halberstam, Bevel initially felt the workshops were a big mistake, just one more instance of ministers in training straying away from their true purpose for being at ABT, which was to study Jesus' teachings so that they could better pass them on to their future congregations. As far as Bevel was concerned, classmates who were attending Lawson's workshops were too politically focused.⁶¹ But Bevel's assumptions would be seriously challenged by a weekend retreat held at a center for social activism in the mountains of Tennessee, Highlander Folk School, established in 1932 by Don West and Myles Horton. Lewis and LaFayette were eager to sign up for this retreat held in early fall 1958.

Myles Horton was a white man born in Savannah, Tennessee, in 1905. He and Lawson both practiced what can be called the "pedagogy of social change," the art of teaching ordinary people how to change society by directly challenging unjust and inequitable social structures. At the heart of the program created by Highlander was a belief in the power of education to change society. Horton and the Highlander staff operated on the premise that through an education based on the experiences of grassroots leaders, Highlander could empower poor people in Appalachia and across the South in general to take control of their lives and solve their community's problems. Horton arrived at this educational philosophy as a result of several influences, including a family tradition of helping the less fortunate regardless of race, experiences as a Bible school teacher in rural Tennessee in the late 1920s, a formal education at Union Theological Seminary and the University of Chicago graduate school of social work, and a year spent in Denmark visiting and studying rural folk schools at the beginning of the Great

⁶¹ Halberstam, 72.

Depression. It was after the trip to Denmark that Horton, in partnership with Don West who had similar ambitions, established Highlander in November 1932 in Monteagle.⁶²

Highlander started with programs to educate rural and industrial workers so that they could establish labor unions designed to redress intolerable working conditions and low pay. By the early 1940s, Highlander was the most radical voice in the southern labor movement, aligning itself with the CIO as the primary southern institution teaching CIO workers to organize themselves. In the 1940s, Highlander also experimented with collaboration between industrial workers and farmers, but found the initiative lacking in its ability to affect the most fundamental problem in the South: race. Consequently, in late 1952, Horton and Highlander's executive council decided to shift the organization's programmatic focus. George Mitchell of the Southern Regional Council, who was chair of the executive council, told Horton that Highlander's staff should work on the broadest and most significant problem facing the South, giving the school "a new vitality" and creating "something new for the people of the South, a movement of the people."⁶³

As Highlander geared up for a push on the racial front, it also touted itself as a place where the races could meet on an integrated basis. Highlander's sessions had long been integrated, a source of consternation for local segregationists and the reason behind a FBI investigation in 1950. The organization's defiance of segregation not only earned it the ire of white supremacists, but gained it the respect of the people in the South pushing racial equality. According to John Glen, in 1952 Black journalist Carl Rowan credited Horton with being one of the few white southerners willing to "go further" than "the Southern liberals, the 'freedom-for-

⁶² See chapter one of John Glen's *Highlander: No Ordinary School, 1932-1962* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky,) for full details of the development of the educational philosophy employed at Highlander.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 127. Chapter three of Glen's book gives full details of the early work of Highlander and chapter six chronicles the transition from labor union organizing to civil rights work.

you-sometime-soon' gradualists," and to pronounce racial segregation as the "root and perpetrator of all evils" haunting the modern South.⁶⁴

It is evident that the new direction taken by Horton and Highlander in the early 1950s was sensitive to the winds of change generated by World War II. In his autobiography, Horton expounded on the importance of being able to anticipate a social movement. He wrote that if one anticipated correctly, "then you'll be on the inside of a movement helping with the mobilization and strategies, instead of on the outside jumping on the bandwagon and never being an important part of it."⁶⁵ Taking such a strategic approach allowed Highlander to position itself at the front end of the coming Civil Rights Movement and offer relevant workshops for community leaders, including college students.

Because of his relationships with Thurgood Marshall and South Carolina federal district judge J. Waring Waites,⁶⁶ Horton began workshops in the summer of 1953 entitled "The Supreme Court Decisions and the Public Schools," anticipating a ruling in favor of school desegregation and designed to prepare communities for a drive to remove racial barriers in the South. The year 1953 was also the year that Highlander began including college students as workshop participants, a development that led to an annual series of sessions specifically for college students.⁶⁷

Highlander's shift to the desegregation issue helped it to become what Aldon Morris called a "movement halfway house," an "established group or organization that is only partially integrated into the larger society because its participants are actively involved in efforts to bring about a desired change in society." Movement halfway houses tend to be relatively isolated from

⁶⁴ Ibid., 122, 129-30.

⁶⁵ Horton, 84.

⁶⁶ Walter Edgar, *South Carolina: A History* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1998), 527.

⁶⁷ Glen, 130, 146. Judge Waites was one of three judges ruling in *Briggs v. Elliott*, which was one of five foundational cases comprising *Brown*.

the larger society and lack a mass base, making wide-scale dissemination of their views a great challenge. What such groups offer instead is a portfolio of social change resources that include skilled activists, tactical knowledge, media contacts, workshops, knowledge of past movements, and a vision of a future society. For Highlander in particular, it provided valuable resources that allowed the Civil Rights Movement to rapidly develop the internal structure required to sustain collective action.⁶⁸

Highlander's value is most explicitly evident in its role in creating the Citizenship Schools, a program started on Johns Island, South Carolina, in 1957 to remove illiteracy as a deterrent to the franchise. Between 1957 and 1961, the Citizenship Schools, under the direction of Septima Clark, who joined Highlander in 1956 after being fired from her public school teaching job because of her NAACP membership, became Highlander's most successful program ever and was eventually turned over to the SCLC in 1961.⁶⁹ Its value was also seen in the series of desegregation workshops that began in 1953. During the summer of 1955, Rosa Parks attended a two-week workshop at Highlander that focused on how to push local school districts to move forward on desegregation in the wake of the *Brown* decision. Parks and many of the fifty workshop participants were encouraged by the ruling but fully aware of the difficulties of actually desegregating school. She left Montegale unsure about her next move, however, she later recounted the impact of her Highlander experience:

At Highlander, I found out for the first time in my adult life that this could be a unified society, that there was such a thing as people of different races and backgrounds meeting together in workshops, and living together in peace and harmony. It was a place I was very reluctant to leave. I gained there the strength to persevere in my work

⁶⁸ Morris, 139-40.

⁶⁹ See chapter seven of Glen's *Highlander: No Ordinary School* for a full narrative of the Citizenship School. Also see Jacqueline A. Rouse's "Connecting the People's Needs with the Movement's Objectives: Septima P. Clark and Community Empowerment," in *The International Journal of Africana Studies*, vol. 13, no.1, Spring/Summer 2007, 68-82.

for freedom, not just for Blacks, but for all oppressed people.⁷⁰

It was only a few months later that Parks sparked one of the most significant social movements in American history. Although there is no straight line between Parks' dramatic stance on December 1, 1955, and her attendance at the Highlander session, the workshop became part of a complex of personal experiences that culminated in her participation in the first massive application of nonviolent direct action in the U.S. As will be demonstrated in Nashville, workshops geared toward social change advocacy can help prompt individuals to rebel against injustice. As her words indicated, Parks found the resolve to mobilize herself in the quest for human freedom. She also recognized that the structure of the Highlander workshops with its racially integrated staff and participants offered a model for an integrated society. The Highlander experience, combined with her years of affiliation with the local NAACP, and the constant humiliation of segregation, helped exhaust her tolerance of second-class citizenship. The Nashville workshops will also help activists envision a remodeled society, one that they called the beloved community.

Parks' action also point to the critical role that educational models such as the one developed at Highlander or the less formal one created in cities like Nashville played in developing cutting edge leadership in the arena of social change. Many of the Civil Rights Movement era's most significant leaders were involved with some variety of formal training related to social change tactics and/or philosophy, either as teachers, students, or both. Among these are Bayard Rustin, Ella Baker, Septima Clark, James M. Lawson, Jr., Kelly Miller Smith, Rosa Parks, Diane Nash, Bob Moses, Marion Barry, Bernice Robinson, Curtis Murphy, Martin Luther King, Jr., Jim Peck, John Lewis, James Bevel, C.T. Vivian, Bernard LaFayette, Catherine

⁷⁰ Horton, 149-50.

Burks, Paul Brooks, nearly all of the Freedom Riders who participated up to the arrival of Riders in Montgomery, a large number of the participants in the Birmingham campaign of 1963 including the children, nearly all of the Freedom Summer volunteers, and many more. It appears that movement halfway houses, at least initially, are central to the educational process that movement leadership must undergo in order to be most effective in positions of influence. Of course, as the movement developed, core civil rights organizations like SNCC and SCLC fashioned their own capacities to train activists in the basics of nonviolent direct action. Therefore, Aldon Morris is precise in his assertion that movement halfway houses “assisted in disseminating the tactic of nonviolent direct action.”⁷¹ However, his analysis should go further by noting that in the case of the role of FOR and James Lawson, the nonviolence offered was of a philosophical nature, which incidentally has tactical implications. In other words, if an activist has a philosophical aversion to the use of violence to achieve a social goal, then the tactics used to achieve the goal will necessarily be nonviolent. Bernard LaFayette said it best: “. . . We were trained in Nashville from a philosophical basis. So whatever method we used would come out of the philosophy. It was a matter of the goal.” Diane Nash confirmed LaFayette’s sentiments by noting that in a beloved community relationship, the means and ends had to be compatible, that one could not achieve moral ends by using immoral means.⁷² What Lawson modeled in Nashville proved that nonviolence was more than a superficial, situational tactic to be discarded when conditions changed. Instead, he offered nonviolence as a way of life that could change society by altering a person’s relationship to other human beings.

Nashville’s developing leadership found its way to Highlander. The fall 1958 weekend training attended by soon-to-be Nashville Movement leaders was significant for several reasons.

⁷¹ Morris, 140; Teachers’ Domain interview of Nash.

⁷² Bennett interview of Bevel, LaFayette, and Patton.

First, as John Lewis recounted, it pushed James Bevel closer to a commitment to social activism. Up to this point, he had resisted attending any of Lawson's workshops, but was cajoled into attending the Highlander sessions by Lewis. Bevel still viewed the Social Gospel and nonviolent revolution as nonsense. According to Lewis, Horton was able to "bring Bevel around to the point where he actually listened, where he actually reconsidered a lot of these ideas."⁷³ Bevel had a reputation for expertise at verbal sparring and was accustomed to holding his philosophical ground against all comers, but Horton penetrated this philosophical bravado.

Highlander's student workshops were significant in another respect. For southerners like Lewis who had limited exposure to and interaction with white people, the experience of engaging with a racially mixed group was profound. Lewis stated, "This was the first time in my life that I saw black people and white people not just sitting down together at long tables for shared meals, but also cleaning up together afterward, doing the dishes together, getting together late into the night in deep discussion and sleeping in the same cabin dormitories . . ."⁷⁴ Like Rosa Parks' experience, a Highlander weekend demonstrated to Lewis that new social configurations and interactions were possible.

Even more significantly, Horton planted a seed that became one of the defining features of student activism. Before the Nashville students departed, Horton delivered a warning that Lewis says "turned out to be very wise, very prophetic." He insisted that the youth should never allow any organization or group to capture their spirit nor permit themselves to be controlled by any of the older, established civil rights organizations. Lewis' attribution of this sage advice to Horton counters the prevalent notion that it was Ella Baker who first offered this counsel in 1960. Ella Baker's biographer, Barbara Ransby, is one of many scholars who report Baker's

⁷³ Lewis, 88-89.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*,

disgust at attempts by SCLC to corral the students gathered at Shaw University during SNCC's founding conference and detail her corresponding insistence that the students remain independent.⁷⁵ Both she and Horton understood how critical youth militancy and independence were to the emerging movement. The difference here is that Horton had a chance to offer the advice to students first and the advice becomes a reinforcing agent when repeated during the formation of SNCC. Implicit in Horton's advice is the possibility that the roots of student organizational independence were perhaps planted a year and a half before the formation of SNCC, and as chapter four will explore, the Nashville students will model many of the features that became part of SNCC's signature, including a fierce independence from adult control, an adherence to nonviolence, a group centered decision-making process, and a bold frontal assault against segregation. What will distinguish Nashville's student movement from many others is the close collaboration with adults combined with the tight discipline gained from extensive training.

After the close of this Highlander student workshop, the Nashville students returned to campus on fire. Adding to this energized atmosphere was the fact that the NCLC was also very active. Reverend Lawson continued his workshops and the NCLC encouraged adult leaders such as Mr. J. F. Grimmet, Mrs. C.H. Fitzgerald, Reverend C.T. Vivian, and Mrs. C.M. Hayes to attend the workshops and discuss some of the racial problems confronting the Black community.⁷⁶

There is no question that Reverend Smith was strategically building up a corps of leadership among both students and adults. Reverend Vivian's testimony confirms Smith's desire

⁷⁵ Barbara Ransby, *Ella Baker and the Black Freedom Movement: A Radical Democratic Vision* (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 2003), 243-44. Baker and Horton were aware of each other and both of them urged student activists to remain independent of adult civil rights organizations. For a detailed account of Baker's efforts to prevent adults from capturing the students at SNCC's founding conference at Shaw University, see pages 241-44 of Ransby.

⁷⁶ Lewis, 90.

to harvest a crop of community leaders. Vivian recalled that as Reverend Lawson worked with the students in workshops, Reverend Smith worked with the ministers. He stated,

So you had Kelly working with ministers. You had the work with students through Jim Lawson. So . . . out of that work came [the fact that] everybody was working together, ministers and students. So we were able to develop community leadership and *followership* [emphasis added] of students—that was the workforce. As soon as the action started, the ministers brought in their people too, so you had something really effective and meaningful.⁷⁷

Not only was Reverend Smith building up local leadership, but he was also creating community cohesion that would be needed during the sit-ins. He did this by adding a new element to the city's leadership development model: the training of ministers. The benefits of such an enterprise are obvious. It gave the city an unparalleled level of readiness in 1960 and guaranteed a high degree of community support when the protests began. Ministers who had signed on to Reverend Smith's training were committed and no doubt encouraged their congregations to participate in and to support the local movement. It should also be noted that there are very few examples, if any, of other ministers being trained for future civil rights action. This fact further confirms Nashville's dominance in the arena of movement leadership development and is confirmed by Reverend Vivian's statement that, ". . . When you look today there's three quarters of a dozen people still active in one way or another that grew out of the Nashville movement, more than any other place in the country. I don't think that's an accident . . . It speaks to a great sense of training."⁷⁸

There is no known evidence of the subject matter taught by Reverend Smith in his preacher workshops, but it is logical to assume that some aspect of nonviolence and its

⁷⁷ Kuhn interview of Vivian.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

connection to biblical principles marked the sessions. It was essential that Smith sought out his ministerial colleagues this way because of the raging theological debate among Black ministers generated by the Social Gospel movement. At ABT, where Smith taught part-time, he pushed his version of the Social Gospel and as late as the end of the decade, some seminarians such as Bevel still rejected it. It is not inconceivable then, that many of Smith's ministerial colleagues also rejected it as well and offering training was one way to breaking down resistance. That such resistance existed is indicated by Reverend Vivian's recollection of an incident involving a Reverend Porter of Pleasant Green Baptist Church. Apparently, Reverend Porter withheld his church's initial support from the movement because he disapproved of nonviolence as a proper means of ushering in social change. Vivian recalled the moment when Porter confessed his initial reluctance and pledged his congregation's support going forward:

A Reverend Porter, at one of the churches there . . . did not see. I remember when he came up one day after the middle of the action . . . We were all sitting up in the pulpit area and he leaned over Kelly's shoulder . . . and he said I just want to let you know that I didn't understand, but that I do now and that Pleasant Green Baptist Church . . . will give you full support for anything that you do now.⁷⁹

In the year 1959, Lawson's workshops became even more important as Nashville moved toward a movement. As the year progressed, developments indicated that sit-ins were on the horizon. Some time early in the year, Reverend Smith led a group that approached white downtown department store owners about opening their lunch counters to Black customers. Although compliance was not anticipated, the request set in motion events that led to the sit-ins and gave the workshops a concrete focus.⁸⁰

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Lewis, 90.

Lawson's workshops gained more intensity and notoriety in the fall of 1959, with the Tuesday evening workshops now attracting about twenty participants. Students from all of the Black colleges, including Fisk, Tennessee A & I, Meharry Medical College, and ABT as well as a few from Vanderbilt became regulars.⁸¹

The reason for the upsurge in attendance is only partially clear. One reason is because of the NCLC and Reverend Smith who contacted people to encourage their attendance. In addition, Smith knew Lewis, Bevel, and LaFayette as students from ABT and made sure they attended. Another reason is because by the fall of 1959, all of the key student leaders were in place as well as several secondary leaders such as Paul LaPrad and Angeline Butler, both students at Fisk. These students helped recruit other students to the workshops. Paul LaPrad was an important recruiter. He enrolled at Fisk in September 1959 as a white exchange student from Manchester College, a small school in North Manchester, Indiana. Before coming to Nashville, LaPrad spent five months in Chicago where he attended the Church of the Brethren, a congregation associated with pacifism and racial equity. In addition, LaPrad registered as a conscientious objector before coming to Nashville, a fact that made him a natural for Lawson's workshop. And just before he left Chicago, LaPrad asked a Mennonite pastor if he knew anyone in Nashville interested in nonviolence and was given Lawson's name.⁸²

LaPrad contacted Reverend Lawson upon arriving in Nashville. Some time later in the fall of 1959, Lawson asked LaPrad if he knew any students interested in nonviolence as a means of social change. This query indicates that Lawson was intentional in his recruitment efforts and it gives further explanation for the upsurge in workshop attendance. One of the names that LaPrad recommended to Lawson was Diane Nash. (In a 2003 interview, LaPrad admitted that he

⁸¹ Ibid., 91.

⁸² Halberstam, 131; Telephone interview of Paul LaPrad by Kathy Bennett, March 17, 2003, for Nashville Public Library Oral History Collection.

introduced Nash to Lawson's workshops.) At the same time, he indicated that her introduction was not just coincidence, but divine providence. In response to the interviewer's question about how so many people came to Nashville at that time, LaPrad said, "Well, one could say that, if you take a heavenly perspective, you could say some things were kind of in place, you know, for other things to happen."⁸³

Nash became a key convert for Lawson and the workshops seemed to offer a solution to the racial affront she had experienced at the state fair. Many of the students attending in the fall of 1959 seemed to expect Lawson's workshops to resemble the emotionally charged sermons common in southern Black churches. Instead, they encountered a subdued, cool, and reserved mannerism purposely calculated to avoid touching the chords of human emotion. This approach was employed so that participants would not make emotional decisions that could lead to physical harm, but would make a deliberate commitment to nonviolence based on much reflection and pondering.⁸⁴

One of the most important lessons that Lawson wanted to convey at this stage was that there was great power in a righteous idea such as ending segregation. Lawson sensed that most of his students doubted that they could successfully challenge Jim Crow, particularly because the number of workshop attendees was too small to successfully challenge the powerful forces arrayed against them. But Lawson responded to this doubt with, "Your idea is not small . . . and because your idea is not small, your numbers will not be either." He admitted that initially their numbers would be few and their names unknown, but if they sacrificed and paid a price on behalf of others, it would be difficult for others to sit on the sidelines, and in the end their ranks would swell. What Lawson attempted to convey was the notion that ordinary people who acted

⁸³ Bennett interview of LaPrad.

⁸⁴ Halberstam, 60.

on principle and took great risks not only were themselves transformed, but also transformed others. He believed that activists who accepted abuse and arrest in the name of basic human rights would not only become heroes, but would cause city officials to unwittingly recruit others to their cause by abusing and arresting them. In this way, the activists would do just as Jesus and Gandhi did in their day: attract a huge following. Often when Lawson reached this point in the session, he posed key questions that evoked a commitment to nonviolence: “Was it just to deny black people such basic human rights?,” he would ask. “Was it fair that their parents had always been treated all their lives as second-class citizens?”⁸⁵ (As the Nashville sit-ins demonstrated, the vision articulated by Lawson in these workshops proved to be prophetically accurate. The sit-ins swept the South like a swarm of locusts.)

For Diane Nash, the workshops were filled with purpose. Not only was she able to meet new people who had misfit tendencies like her, but the sessions allowed her to constructively channel the outrage she felt when confronted with segregation. Others at the workshops, like Bernard LaFayette and Marion Barry, a graduate student in chemistry at Fisk, had also felt the sting of racial discrimination and were on fire to change society. Barry, a native of Itta Bena, Mississippi, like Bevel, did his undergraduate studies at LeMoyne College in Memphis where he led a daring challenge against a white segregationist member of the college’s board of trustees in 1958, a daring act in the Deep South at that time.⁸⁶

In a sense, what Lawson was doing at this stage was laying the foundation for the beloved community. Under construction was a community of activists slowly committing themselves to nonviolence and in doing so, vowed not to harm other human beings, even if others sought to do them harm. They would practice the art of Christian love which meant loving

⁸⁵ Ibid., 61-62.

⁸⁶ Ibid., 63.

others simply because they were children of God. Every act of hatred inflicted upon them would be returned with an act of understanding and compassion, not retribution, revenge, and retaliation. Diane Nash confirmed this ideal when she said, “We aspired . . . to the redeemed community or, as we frequently called it, the beloved community. We defined beloved community as a community that gave to its citizens all that it could and allowed its members to give back to the community all they could. Our goal was to reconcile, to heal, and to rehabilitate, to solve problems rather than gain power over the opposition . . .”⁸⁷ Many of the students in Lawson’s workshops became key players in building this beloved community and later joined forces with the SCLC, an organization also committed to building the beloved community.⁸⁸

Lawson recognized that the task of preparing his pupils to tackle the seemingly intractable force of segregation seemed impossible, especially to many of the college students under his tutelage. In fact, Lawson could see the doubt and uncertainty inscribed on their faces. And some of them, like Marion Barry, also had serious doubts about the efficacy of nonviolence as a vehicle for social change. Barry had a definite affinity for Lawson’s workshop group, but at the beginning was not sure that nonviolence was more than a shrewd and valuable tactic.⁸⁹ Lawson revealed himself here to be a very realistic activist and teacher, understanding that it would take time and patience to undermine generations of white racial dominance and all of the customs and privileges attached to it. And furthermore, it seemed even more ludicrous that a small band of college students and a few adults sitting in a room discussing social protest theory and Christian principles had any realistic chance of forcing the South to give up its cherished

⁸⁷ Cherly Lynn Greenberg, ed., *A Circle of Trust: Remembering SNCC* (New Brunswick, New Jersey, and London: Rutgers University Press, 1998), 18.

⁸⁸ SCLC’s commitment to the beloved community is outlined in an excerpt entitled “SCLC and ‘The Beloved Community,’” found in Jonathan Birnbaum and Clarence Taylor’s edited volume *Civil Rights Since 1787: A Reader on the Black Struggle* (New York and London: New York University Press, 2000), 461-63. Chapter five of this work will discuss the connection between Nashville’s activists and the SCLC.

⁸⁹ Halberstam, 61, 63.

racial prerogatives. Thus, Lawson knew that he had his work cut out for him, that he was preparing his students for something truly radical, an undertaking that required a drawn-out process of indoctrination. This is why he constantly reiterated important concepts like, “Your idea is not small . . . and because your idea is not small, your numbers will not be either.”⁹⁰

Some time in the fall of 1959, Lawson sensed that he was making headway in his efforts to convert his pupils to his vision of a dynamic social movement based upon the philosophy of nonviolence. During one of the sessions he noticed that Diane Nash nodded her head in agreement with something he said. At that point Lawson decided that Nash was a sure convert⁹¹. Lawson’s workshops became important for Nash because they tapped deeply into her natural inclinations as a misfit who detested segregation and who was longing for some avenue through which she could foment change.

In addition to solving a dilemma for Nash, Lawson’s workshops highlight an important class dynamic in the late 1950s and partially explain why such a small, impoverished school such as ABT could provide a disproportional number of high quality student leaders. It is quite remarkable that a school with no more than one hundred students provided three of the most capable students leaders of the entire movement. Among the four institutions of higher education in Nashville, ABT stood behind Fisk, Meharry, and Tennessee A & I in terms of the social prominence of its student body. As a matter of fact, ABT served students who often had no other educational options. More tellingly, the school was not even an accredited institution. Hence, in the eyes of elite Black Nashville, ABT students hardly measured up socially to the students at Fisk where light skin, fraternity and sorority membership, material wealth, and social ranking mattered a great deal. Lawson’s workshops not only became a place where budding misfits were

⁹⁰ Ibid., 61.

⁹¹ Ibid., 62.

nurtured and comforted, it was also a place of acceptance for students like John Lewis, James Bevel, Bernard LaFayette, and Marion Barry who were from poor and working-class families. To these young men, according to Halberstam, “the world of Fisk seemed very distant and almost unreachable . . . not the least because of its wealth . . .” But the workshops acted as a social leveling agent where “wealth, social status, and skin color meant little . . .”⁹²

This characteristic of Lawson’s workshops has important implications for the development of the student movement emerging in 1960. One of the most noted features of SNCC is its egalitarian nature. Students who affiliated themselves with the organization were valued for their talents and dedication, irrespective of social class background. This helps explain why activists such as John Lewis, who not only lacked pedigree and was also rather inarticulate, but nonetheless rose to prominence purely on the strength of his character and abilities. Lawson’s workshops allowed ordinary individuals without social connections to discover, develop, and utilize their hidden talents in the name of the advancement of Black people. John Lewis described the fire within himself that was lit by Lawson’s workshops:

Those Tuesday nights in the basement of Clark [Memorial United Methodist Church] became the focus of my life, more important than even my classes. I’d found the setting and subject that spoke to everything that had been stirring in my soul for so long. This was stronger than school, stronger than church. This was the word made *real*, made whole. It was something I had been searching for my whole life.⁹³

As the workshops in the fall of 1959 progressed, the more the discussion moved from pure theoretical nonviolence to practical application. One of the most important elements of practical application was role-playing. In these sessions participants took turns playing

⁹² Ibid., 64, 68.

⁹³ Lewis, 84.

demonstrators and antagonists.⁹⁴ The role-playing was perhaps the most important single activity that prepared students for a successful outcome on the frontlines of an actual protest. According to Diane Nash, “Role-playing was designed [to condition one] to resist the impulse to run or fight back.”⁹⁵ It took special effort and a deliberate process of unlearning socially conditioned and naturally reflexive responses to assaults and other forms of abuse in order to line up one’s behavior with nonviolence philosophy. In some cases, activists may have had a tendency to respond to violence with rage or bravado, as in the case of Meharry student Rodney Powell. At a stand-in⁹⁶ at a local restaurant, Powell violated the principles of nonviolence by angrily staring down a white bouncer who futilely tried to shove him from the protest line. He explained how Reverend Vivian’s quick action prevented a potential disaster and gave him an opportunity to recommit to nonviolence.

And Rev. Vivian came over to me and said, ‘Go back to the church and renew yourself to nonviolence.’ And I realized that my commitment to nonviolence up to that point was very much a strategy, but philosophically, I guess I was experiencing a lot of rage. And I’m sure it was the adrenalin rush that caused this huge guy not to be able to move me one way or the other . . . But I’m grateful that C.T. Vivian did that, because had I exploded into a violent counter-rage, that would have discredited the Movement . . . And philosophically, I have much more understanding and sustained commitment to nonviolence, not just as a strategy, but as a way of life.⁹⁷

It was obvious that Powell had not absorbed Lawson’s often-repeated insistence that it was not enough to resist the urge to strike back at an assailant. According to John Lewis, Lawson warned

⁹⁴ Ibid., 92.

⁹⁵ *Nashville: We Were Warriors*, 33 min., Films for Humanities and Science, 1960, Nashville Public Library, Civil Rights Room, Nashville, Tennessee.

⁹⁶ According to Rodney Powell’s interview on March 29, 2005, with Kathy Bennett of the Nashville Public Library, a stand-in is the practice of standing in line at a place of business in order to block access to the facility by other patrons. Although he was not sure of the location of this particular stand-in, Powell believed that it took place at the local Tic Toc Restaurant.

⁹⁷ Ibid.

that, “That urge can’t be there. You have to do more than just not hit back. You have to have no *desire* to hit back. You have to love that person who’s hitting you. You’re *going* to love him.”⁹⁸

Powell’s lapse in discipline magnifies the importance of Lawson’s role-playing routine as a necessary component of the training. During these dramas, students simulated sit-ins and others protests with Lawson urging them to “try to feel the person you’re playing.” In one video-taped exercise, a group of five students pretended to be sit-inners while a group of nine played the role of white thugs who called them names such as niggers, nigger-lovers, monkeys, and jungle bunnies, and who blew cigarette smoke in their faces, pulled them off their lunch counter stools, dumped ashes in their hair, and cursed them.⁹⁹ Workshop participants repeatedly role-played these scenarios so that they could respond appropriately under the pressure of an actual protest, thereby avoiding the mistake made by Rodney Powell.

After the role-playing exercises, Lawson and the students analyzed what happened. This analysis allowed participants to learn from their mistakes and to clarify any confusion about acceptable behavior under the confines of nonviolence. Lawson also stressed that one had to be creative under certain circumstances because real-life scenarios could occur that had not been anticipated. As an example, Lawson told of an Alabama friend who was beaten by the Klan and was about to be shot when, thinking under pressure, he asked for and was granted a prayer request and prayed that he had no hatred for his tormentors despite their hatred for him. As a result of this prayer, the Klan descended into a frenzied debate over killing him and ultimately set the man free.¹⁰⁰ This act of creative nonviolent compassion by the victim caused a crisis of conscience among the perpetrators, one of the ultimate goals of nonviolent direct action. This

⁹⁸ Lewis, 93.

⁹⁹ L. Douglas Edwards, narrator, *Anatomy of a Demonstration*, 30 min. CBS documentary, 1960, Nashville Public Library, Civil Rights Room, Nashville, Tennessee.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*

example not only demonstrated the degree of creative freedom available to every nonviolent practitioner, but it reinforced the power of nonviolence to touch the conscience of even some of the most hateful and violent individuals.

The role-playing exercises and other forms of group interaction served important functions necessary for a sustained and successful protest campaign involving a large number of participants, as was the case in the Nashville Movement. Lawson knew the numbers would be small in the beginning, but predicted that their ranks would eventually swell. Therefore, the training model that he designed had several considerations built into it beyond concerns about the numbers of protesters. Such intentions are evident when Lawson said, “You have to have a common discipline when you have twenty-five people on a protest. A protest cannot be spontaneous. It has to be systematic. There must be planning, strategy.”¹⁰¹ In his own words, Lawson revealed his vision for a struggle that required a common group ethos, conditioned responses that comported to nonviolence principles, and a strategic and systematic approach to social change that accommodated a large group of activists. And consequently, all of these facets were built into the training model. The emergence of the Nashville sit-ins revealed the prophetic nature of Lawson’s training paradigm, a model that ensured that Nashville’s activists were the best prepared in the nation when the sit-ins commenced.

But there were still months to go before the protests commenced. The period of October through late December 1959 represented a critical phase for Lawson and his pupils. At the end of October, the workshops students formally organized the Nashville Student Movement (NSM), perhaps one of the first student protest organizations in the South.¹⁰² This development is

¹⁰¹ *Nashville: We Were Warriors*.

¹⁰² Lewis, 93; The Atlanta Student Movement did not emerge until March of 1960. For a detailed study of the Atlanta Student Movement, see Vincent D. Fort, “The Atlanta Sit-In Movement, 1960-1961: An Oral Study,” in David Garrow, *Atlanta, Georgia, 1960-1961: Sit-Ins and Student Activism* (New York: Carlson Publishing, 1989).

significant because it challenges the prevalent historiographical notion that the April 1960 founding of SNCC at Shaw University was the first sign of such student organizational activity related to the Civil Rights Movement. Furthermore, the NSM served as a prototype for what became SNCC a few months later. The NSM had several features that SNCC became noted for, including: student-based leadership; group-centered leadership focused around a decision-making core known as the central committee; and, leadership rotation designed to prevent the accumulation of leadership in the hands of one individual. When SNCC formed in the spring of 1960, it adopted these features.¹⁰³

Several factors account for the emergence of the NSM. Foremost among them were Lawson's workshops. After months of weekly sessions, the students began to see themselves as a cohesive unit with a purpose. More importantly, By late 1959 it was apparent to the students that if the racial status quo was going to change, they would have to become the change agents. The formation of a student-led organization such as the NSM would facilitate the social change envisioned by these students. In addition, sage advice from Myles Horton at a fall 1958 workshop warning the students to never become captive of any adult civil rights organization only reinforced their nascent self-confidence as formidable and independent change agents.¹⁰⁴

The period of October through December 1959 was critical for another reason besides the formation of the Nashville Student Movement. It was during this stretch of time that Lawson emphasized the proper response to physical and verbal abuse, a sure sign that some sort of protest action was on the horizon. The example of Rodney Powell's lapse justifies Lawson's prioritization of this component of the training. Reverend Lawson knew at some point his charges would face physical opposition and they therefore needed, as David Halberstam noted,

¹⁰³ Ibid; See chapters one and two of Clayborne Carson's *In Struggle: SNCC and the Black Awakening of the 1960s* for a thorough outline of the early organizational structure and character of SNCC.

¹⁰⁴ Halberstam, 73.

“a bedrock of inner strength and confidence, and the capacity to turn away from taunts and to know that those who taunted them were revealing no strength and superiority but weakness and fear.” Clearly Rodney Powell had not reached this stage of development. Lawson’s teachings sought to reverse generations of accumulated feelings of shame, fear, and vulnerability holding many African Americans captive. This meant that the workshop attendees not only had to exude self-pride, but simultaneously rise above the hatred and anger of others and believe in their own capacity to remake the world according to a new vision. In the process of this self-transformation, a concerted effort was made to destroy the cruel power of the word “nigger.” Nigger was used to not only evoke shame, but to provoke anger in Black protesters.¹⁰⁵ The strategic success of nonviolence depended on activists training their emotions and not being manipulated by racial trigger words.

Concurrently, Lawson introduced the beloved community concept, an idea that was especially striking to John Lewis and James Bevel. In his memoir, Lewis revealed that discussions centering on the creation of this beloved community, the literal creation of the kingdom of God on earth, was “eye-opening stuff for me.” For Bevel, the concept meant the struggle they were engaged in was not one centered on the acquisition of civil rights or focused on race relations. As Bevel understood it, “. . . We were not in the traditional civil rights argument of black and white. That wasn’t our discussion. How can Christian people claim to be Christians and treat people like this? . . . So our issue was not the race argument as the traditional civil rights people meant. It was the beloved community. How do we . . . create the beloved community [?]” Bevel also noted that these discussions were duplicated at Highlander

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 77.

workshops, in theology and classics classes at ABT, and in casual discussions among the students themselves.¹⁰⁶

By November 1959, all the elements were in place to launch a protest movement except for the formal selection of a target. Lawson's earlier revelation that downtown lunch counters had to be the target was about to come true. The selection of this target was only possible as a result of Lawson's training. The workshops made it possible for a group of like-minded people to gather to study social change theory, to commiserate about common racial insults and other related problems, and then to conceptualize how to practically apply the theory while acting it out in role-playing exercises. The next obvious step after role-playing was testing the simulated scenarios on a potential target. The selection of lunch counters as a suitable target was reinforced by a small group of adult leaders as Reverend Smith who began to negotiate with department store owners about desegregating their lunch counters and hiring Black white collar employees. As Reverend Smith recalled, such an idea was considered ridiculous at the time. He said, "In some instances, the people we went to see considered this a frivolous thing. You couldn't be serious about it, you must be kidding."¹⁰⁷ The failure to take the grievances seriously made protest action against lunch counters even more likely.

The most important part of the negotiation phase was a unique feature of the Nashville movement, not found in other movement centers. On the last Saturday of the month, November 28, roughly a dozen veterans of the workshops gathered at First Baptist, Reverend Smith's church, and led a test-sit-in on Harvey's Department Store, one of the most popular shopping venues in the city and one known for its courtesy toward Black patrons. In simple fashion, well-

¹⁰⁶ Barnes interview of Bevel, LaFayette, and Patton.

¹⁰⁷ Warren interview of Smith.

dressed testers planned to enter the store, request service, and if refused, to leave without confrontation, an act designed to establish lunch counter desegregation as an issue.¹⁰⁸

On the appointed day, the testers, a group that featured John Lewis, Diane Nash, Marion Barry, and about nine others including a few whites, entered the store, made purchases to establish themselves as legitimate customers, and took seats at the lunch counter. When the white waitress noticed their presence, she politely uttered, “I’m sorry. We can’t serve you here.” The group spokesperson, Diane Nash, responded, “May we speak to the manager?” After the manager repeated the store policy of not serving Negroes at the lunch counter, the group departed and returned to First Baptist to debrief.¹⁰⁹

The next few days became preparation time for a second test sit-in set for Saturday, December 5th. Cain-Sloan was the target this time, a store more hostile to the idea of desegregated lunch counters. Not only were Cain-Sloan officials adamantly opposed to desegregating eating facilities, but Lawson recalled that owner John Sloan and his management team even refused to discuss the matter at all. It was no surprise then that the December 5th test sit-in at Cain-Sloan earned a curt refusal of service.¹¹⁰

The December 5th test was the last one, but was the beginning of something that would soon take the South by storm. Locally, the end of the test sit-ins marked the end of the negotiation phase and then denoted the public protest phase. Regionally and nationally, because Nashville’s Black community prepared itself systematically to mount a sit-in campaign, the city can be considered not the chronological but the philosophical start of the sit-in movement. Journalist Fred Powledge put it best when he wrote that, “Although literally the sit-ins began in

¹⁰⁸ Lewis, 94.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 94-95.

¹¹⁰ Ibid., 96-97.

Greensboro and this was a chronological aberration, the sit-ins actually began in Nashville because their planning started in 1959.”¹¹¹

It is Lawson’s workshops that forced a reconsideration of the role of Greensboro in the sit-ins. No longer can Greensboro be the only city involved in an analysis of the origins of the sit-in movement. Nashville is the only movement center known thus far to have mapped out a sit-in blue print prior to the spark lit by the Greensboro Four. Only Nashville had a leader with the knowledge, experience, and strategic vision to prepare a city to lay siege to segregated public eating facilities in the South. Few southern cities had a churchman like Reverend Kelly Miller Smith who appreciated and supported the development of youth leadership as an integral part of a community’s social change portfolio. Those two factors, when combined with the moderate racial temperament of Nashville, equipped the city to rush to the forefront of the sit-in movement when it formally began in February 1960. The months of workshop preparation gave Nashville an insurmountable advantage over every other movement center.

Reverend James Lawson’s nonviolence workshops represent the single most important local development in Nashville prior to 1960 and perhaps the third most important regional development after the *Brown* decision and the Montgomery Bus Boycott. Lawson’s workshops helped to make 1960 the most active protest year up to that point in the history of the Black freedom struggle. As a result of the emergence of the sit-in movement, the Civil Rights Movement found new momentum. And although this momentum has been heretofore attributed to four Greensboro students, the record must now reflect the role of Nashville in laying a solid foundation on which a sit-in movement could be built. While Greensboro could spark a sit-in movement, only Nashville could provide a sophisticated model of how to successfully execute a

¹¹¹ Powledge, 203. As Powledge implies, the facts surrounding the workshops in Nashville problematize the chronology and the assumptions attached thereto concerning the origins of the sit-in movement.

sustained sit-in movement that could serve as a blueprint for other movement centers to follow. Nashville's sit-in expertise was only possible because of the workshops. While numerous scholars hail the role of Greensboro, few seem cognizant of Nashville's workshops as a cornerstone of the sit-in movement.

Nashville's prominence in this regard is confirmed by Bernard LaFayette, who revealed in a January 2003 conversation at a civil rights conference with Ezell Blair, one of the original Greensboro Four. LaFayette's recollection speaks directly to the place of Nashville in the sit-in movement's historiography.

It's fair to say that when you put Nashville in the context of history, it was a laboratory . . . I was with Ezell Blair . . . this past Sunday. And he was so enamored of me and the other students from Nashville. And so I explained to the audience that it was his group . . . that sort of became the impetus for moving ahead, and sparking the Sit-In Movement . . . But he, of course, insisted that what we did in Nashville made it nationwide, because we had a larger number of students sitting-in . . . Because then, of course, once we kicked off, there were then other larger student groups . . . that participated.¹¹²

But, of course, it was the Lawson workshops that made it all possible. Never would the Nashville students have gained the focus, vision, knowledge, discipline, and self-confidence to pull off the sit-ins so expertly without the training and planning afforded by Lawson. As the next chapter will reveal, Lawson's premonition that, "Your idea is not small . . . and because your idea is not small, your numbers will not be either,"¹¹³ was about to prove true, not only for Nashville, but for the entire sit-in movement in general.

In analyzing the role of Lawson's nonviolence workshops in the evolution of the sit-in movement, it is tempting to label John Lewis, Diane Nash, Bernard LaFayette, James Bevel and others as disciples of Reverend Lawson, much like the twelve men who studied directly under

¹¹² Bennett interview of Bevel, LaFayette, and Patton.

¹¹³ Halberstam, 61.

Jesus in the New Testament. But to draw such an analogy would be simplistic and misleading. Lawson was not a messiah and his students were not his followers. More accurately, they were not selected by Lawson the way Jesus hand-picked his pupils. Lawson's students came to Nashville already primed to resist the racial status quo and he simply helped them recognize that nonviolence, when put in the context of Black Christianity, could transform the world. By no means then was Reverend Lawson messianic. He was instead prophetic in bringing forth a new vision for social change.

Lawson's training made Nashville unique in the ranks of civil rights movement cities. The workshop became a magnet for many of the social misfits who had gathered by in Nashville and also served as a trigger mechanism in launching a massive assault on segregation. Without yet recognizing it, the Nashville workshops also set the stage for something profoundly significant in the 1960s. They paved the way for warfare against the institution of segregation, a battle that many Lawson-trained Nashville activists never gave up on until Jim Crow was buried. Bernard LaFayette's recollection perfectly captured what Lawson's training did for the participants. He said, "We had the spiritual and psychological resources to do a movement. We had a nonviolent academy equivalent to West Point. We knew how to organize a community, how to negotiate. We were warriors."¹¹⁴ For the Nashville activists, the workshops prepared them for social warfare and the sit-ins would make them into true warriors.

¹¹⁴ "Nashville: We Were Warriors."

CHAPTER 5: “WE WERE WARRIORS”: THE SIT-INS, NASHVILLE STYLE

Bernard LaFayette’s statement that the Lawson workshops transformed Nashville’s student activists into warriors was profound. In a literal sense, John Lewis, Diane Nash, James Bevel, Bernard LaFayette, Marion Barry, Curtis Murphy, Gloria Johnson, Rodney Powell, Paul LaPrad, Jim Zwerg, Angeline Butler, Katherine Burke, Paul Brooks and others were readied for battle largely as a result of Lawson’s mentoring. And when the sit-ins followed quickly upon the heels of the training, these activists made expert use of their workshop lessons.

Not only did Lawson’s workshops prepare them for battle, but they also made Nashville’s activists the most disciplined, the most organized, and the most capable activist cohorts in the country by 1960. Consequently, when word of the Greensboro sit-ins reached Nashville, the students were ready to mobilize. As this work posits, the Nashville foot-soldiers developed into a superb regiment of social change agents. The experience gained in the sit-ins translated into an expanded assault on segregation in general, incorporating a number of protest tactics including sleeps-ins, pray-ins, stand-ins, and economic boycotts. Additionally, the experience gained from these protest activities, resulted in widespread recognition of Nashville as the foremost expert in sit-in methodology; high public praise from Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., for Nashville as the best organized movement in the nation;¹ the positioning of Nashville student leaders to shape the direction and character of SNCC in its early years; and, preparing Nashville’s student leaders to assume national leadership by way of command of the Freedom Rides after CORE abandoned them following the severe beatings in Birmingham. The combination of training and experience

¹ Both NBC and CBS sent film crews and reporters to Nashville in 1960 to chronicle the sit-ins, resulting in three documentaries. CBS produced a 30 minute documentary entitled *Anatomy of a Demonstration*. NBC produced *NBC White Paper #2: Sit-In* and *The Nashville Sit-In Story*. Dr. King’s remarks were made in April 1960 on the campus of Fisk University.

on the frontlines of the Nashville movement gave its student activists the knowledge and confidence to step into the void created by CORE when it abandoned the Freedom Rides. There was no other group of students who could have done it.

The performance of Nashville's student activists in the sit-ins was critical. The early success in desegregating the downtown lunch counters in major department stores in May 1960 was a major milestone and a dramatic victory that put Nashville on the map as the most sophisticated sit-in movement site. The media were drawn to the city, enhancing its reputation even more, and as Bernard LaFayette previously suggested, inspiring other student groups to attempt to replicate the success and scope of Nashville's sit-ins.

Because of the sit-ins, the Nashville student activists left another legacy: the imprint upon SNCC. Not only did they help establish the organization's philosophical foundation of nonviolence, they also provided leadership to SNCC in the persons of Marion Barry, Diane Nash, and John Lewis.² Thus, the year 1960 established Nashville as the most important movement center in the nation, a fact that can be primarily attributed to the work of James Lawson and Kelly Miller Smith.

When the fall semester of 1959 ended and the Nashville students departed for Christmas break, they had no idea that the year 1960 would be such a watershed for student activism, yet there was a sense that something new was on the horizon. John Lewis wrote in his memoir, "January 1960 was not just the beginning of a new year, it was the start of a new decade. And America as a whole seemed to feel that freshness, that optimism that comes with turning a corner and taking a new direction." Lewis was not just referring to the end of the earlier McCarthy era

² According to Clayborne Carson's *In Struggle*, Reverend Lawson was responsible for influencing SNCC general bent toward nonviolence (see page 23). Carson also notes that Marion Barry was elected chair of the newly created temporary Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (see page 24) and that Nash became director of its direct action wing in 1961(see page 42). Lewis' memoir details his tenure as SNCC's chair.

and the potential for fresh start that could be brought by the Kennedy administration, he was also suggesting the time was ripe for radical social change. “That term ‘movement,’” Lewis recalled, “was beginning to look as if it might actually apply to American society at large, to the nation’s attitude about and response to the struggle for racial equality.”³

As the spring semester of 1960 began, a sense of anticipation and purpose seemed to hover over students like Lewis. In January, Lawson’s workshops resumed with attendance swelling. This time the numbers included more white students and more Meharry students, necessitating a larger meeting space at Clark Memorial United Methodist Church and an occasional extra meeting day on Thursdays to supplement the regular Tuesday evening session.⁴

At the end of January, there were no specific plans to launch any protest actions. And then everything changed on Monday, February 1, 1960, when four North Carolina A & T students, Joseph McNeil, Ezell Blair, Jr., Franklin McCain, and David Richmond, unleashed a wave of protest activity that had never been seen before in the nation that would come to engage a whole generation of Black and white students. The historical record is consistent on the point that the Greensboro Four committed an act of defiance without elaborate preparation. Yet it is clear that Clayborne Carson’s contention that the Greensboro sit-ins grew out of a bull session involving a small group of “politically unsophisticated” southern students who had only planned their protest the previous night is not sustained by the facts. More precisely, the Greensboro Four had engaged in political discussions among themselves about the intolerable conditions of Black people and the need to take corrective actions. They had also read the writings of Langston Hughes, Ralph Bunche, and W.E.B. DuBois. Discussions about the past contributions of these leaders precipitated debate on what to do in the present to achieve freedom. Their many

³ Lewis, 98.

⁴ Ibid., 99.

deliberations were reinforced by conversations with others in Greensboro with experience in freedom fighting. Joseph McNeil was inspired by a North Carolina A & T library worker, Eula Hudgens, who had told him of her participation in the 1947 Journey of Reconciliation. Ezell Blair, Jr., recalled living in a home with a father who “was very strong on civil rights . . . If anyone did him wrong because of his race or color, he stood up.”⁵ These influences gave the actions of the Greensboro Four an obvious political undercurrent.

Even with the political influences present, the Greensboro sit-ins stand in sharp contrast to its Nashville counterpart. There is no indication that the students’ actions were connected to any coordinated community-based initiative to contest segregation. The four Greensboro students had not been schooled in the philosophy of nonviolence and there does not appear to have been in place any local movement structure that could sustain what the students initiated, as was the case in Nashville.

Word of the Greensboro sit-ins reached Nashville on Wednesday, February 3, via an article in the *Tennessean*. John Lewis recollected that he first read about it in the morning paper. Word of the sit-ins became national news and prompted round-after-round of sit-ins across the South. The sit-ins demonstrated, according to a special Southern Regional Council report, that, “Negroes in the South saw in its example a means for release from discrimination and [racial] slight.”⁶ This realization on the part of Black college students in the South helps explain the rapid spread of the sit-in movement. What Nashville contributed to the sit-ins was the ability to show the rest of the nation how to plan and successfully execute sit-ins on a grand scale. Initially, it appeared that North Carolina would become the center of the sit-ins movement

⁵ Carson, 9; William H. Chafe, *Civilities and Civil Rights: Greensboro, North Carolina, and the Black Struggle for Freedom* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980), 112-114.

⁶ Southern Regional Council document, “Special Report: The Student Protest Movement,” Winter 1960, Constance W. Curry Papers, Box 11 Folder 2, Emory University, Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Books Library, Atlanta, Georgia.

because of Greensboro and because of the rapid succession of sit-ins other cities across North Carolina: Winston Salem and Durham on February 8; Raleigh on February 10; and Charlotte, Fayetteville, High Point, Elizabeth City, and Concord at the end of the week of February 8 through 14.⁷ However, because of the training provided by Reverend Lawson, Nashville quickly eclipsed the activism in North Carolina.

Like other southern cities, Nashville was energized by the Greensboro sit-ins. A Methodist minister in Greensboro, Reverend Douglas Moore, a friend of Lawson and an adviser to the North Carolina students, telephoned Lawson with a plea, unaware that Lawson had been training students for this very moment. “We need to get these [sit-ins] to spread. So how soon can you get Nashville going?”⁸

According to Lewis’ memoir, the call from Reverend Moore came on Wednesday, February 3, and that same evening, Lewis says, a mass meeting was convened in Fisk’s chemistry building where over 500 students assembled to hear Reverend Lawson announce upcoming sit-ins at the downtown department store lunch counters and that volunteers were needed. Three days later on February 6, a group of approximately forty-five students staged a “sympathy sit-in” as a show of support for Greensboro, but an act of sympathy seemed insufficient. By Bernard LaFayette’s recollection, several students insisted on mounting their own sit-in campaign rather than a sympathetic response to the protests of others. The idea seemed to catch on and during the following week a series of abridged trainings began that focused on the basics of nonviolence. Students were given some rudimentary standards of conduct, told how to dress, advised to bring books to study, and warned that arrests might occur.⁹

⁷ Carson, 10-11.

⁸ Halberstam, 93; Barnes interview of Lawson.

⁹ Interview of Bernard LaFayette by Clayborne Carson, September 30, 2009, Leadership Center at Morehouse College, Atlanta, Georgia; Halberstam, 93; Lewis., 100.

Another meeting with students took place, on February 10, at Fisk. This time there were about seventy-five in attendance, mostly veterans of previous workshops. The purpose of this meeting was to nail down a start date for Nashville's own sit-ins. Also in attendance was Reverend Kelly Miller Smith who questioned the general consensus to launch the sit-ins on February 13, a Saturday. Reverend Smith argued that the NCLC had a paltry \$87.50 in the treasury, hardly sufficient to cover the bail of those who were bound to be arrested. Other NCLC members voiced concerns that such a quick launch of the sit-ins left little time to anticipate problems that were sure to follow. But the students were unmoved by the adults' arguments for delays.¹⁰ As a result of months of preparation coupled with the urgency and excitement created by an embryonic sit-in movement, the Nashville students felt ready to move.

On February 12, the evening before the planned start of the Nashville sit-ins, a mass meeting was held at First Colored Baptist Church. Nearly six hundred students and adults comprised an overflow crowd. Much trepidation filled the sanctuary as news of bomb scares and Klan intimidation in Raleigh and Greensboro reached Nashville. Again, Reverend Smith and many of his NCLC colleagues pleaded for a delay. Even Reverend Lawson cautioned that too few had been trained for what was about to transpire the next day. But the students were adamant about proceeding with the sit-ins. They were ready for warfare, especially James Bevel, who ironically now seemed to push hardest for immediate action. In classic Bevel fashion, he countered the adults' caution with, "If you asked us to wait until next week, then next week something will come up and you'd say wait until the next week, and maybe we'd never get our freedom." Bevel went on to remind the adults that they had waited already and that the Greensboro students had already moved, a group far less prepared who acted on impulse rather than training. As Bevel's argument climaxed, he hit upon a fundamental point: that action now

¹⁰ Halberstam, 94; Barnes interview of Lawson.

would remove all questions about what might happen as a result of their activism. They would know if Nashville authorities would arrest them or not. They would know if injuries were consequences. Implicit in Bevel's logic was a basic rule undergirding the entire movement for the next few years; further progress required more risk. Bevel's argument ended all discussion about delaying the beginning of the sit-ins¹¹

Saturday morning, February 13, brought not only the first round of the sit-in campaign, but six inches of snow. Yet the 124 activists who assembled at First Colored Baptist Church were unfazed by the weather. The mood was intensely calm and sober. At the appointed hour of eleven o'clock, they left the church, walking in pairs headed toward Fifth Avenue where all of the downtown department store lunch counters were located. Activists were divided into groups of twenty five or so, each assigned to a specific department store and each led by a designated spokesperson. Among the business establishments targeted this day were Woolworth, McClellan, W.T. Grant, and Kress.¹²

Nothing out of the ordinary occurred on the first day of the Nashville sit-ins. There was the typical "We don't serve niggers here," expressed by a white waitress at the Woolworth's lunch counter where John Lewis' group sat-in. Shortly thereafter, white customers left the lunch counter and a crude, handwritten "COUNTER CLOSED" sign appeared on the counter and the lights were cut off. This scene was replicated at the other sit-in sites, minus the crude signage.¹³

Although white Nashville was stunned, there was great relief in the Black community that the sit-ins had gone according to plans and that there were no casualties or arrests. Back at First Colored Baptist, the students felt a sense of exhilaration. Lewis recounted the post-sit-in

¹¹ Ibid., 94, 102.

¹² Lewis, 102-103.

¹³ Ibid.

scene at the church as “like New Years’ Eve—whooping, cheering, hugging, laughing, singing. It was sheer euphoria, like a jubilee.”¹⁴

The successful execution of the first round of sit-ins and the large contingent of volunteer demonstrators indicate the significance of Reverend Lawson’s training regimen. The activists had anticipated every scenario and nothing went awry. Even when white bystanders said to John Lewis’ group at Woolworth’s, “*Niggers*, go home. What are ya’ll doing here?”, there was no response and the white men soon left. Only expert training and coaching by Lawson could have produced such a nearly perfect outcome. In fact, according to Diane Nash, whose sit-in group visited McClellan’s department store, the white waitresses and a few patrons were the main ones shaken by the sit-ins. Not only did a McClellan’s waitress become unnerved by protesters and drop dish after dish, but two other female demonstrators told her of an encounter in the “whites only” restroom with two elderly white women who exclaimed, “Oh! *Nigras everywhere!*” before fleeing.¹⁵

The obvious success of the first run of the sit-ins and the subsequent white reaction prompted a series of additional sit-ins. Exactly five days later, on Thursday, February 18, approximately 200 staged a second sit-in, again eliciting a minimal response from lunch counter employees and white bystanders. When a third round of sit-ins took place two days later with a contingent of 340 strong, the mood in the white community shifted. Not only did some whites begin to complain about having no place to eat lunch, but that night store owners asked for a reprieve, promising a “proposal”¹⁶ to end the crisis.

¹⁴ Ibid., 103.

¹⁵ Ibid., 103-104.

¹⁶ Ibid., 105. Sit-in leaders believed that the “proposal” promised by the white merchants was only a delaying tactic designed to buy time and take the momentum out of the sit-ins. No such “proposal” was ever offered.

At this point in the Nashville movement, there had been few if any consequences for the student activists or their adult supporters. However, the stakes were raised substantially. As the sit-ins developed and no progress was made toward desegregation of the lunch counters, adult leaders from the NCLC attempted to gain an audience with Major Ben West, but he refused to see them. The snub was due to the pressure placed on West by department store officials who wanted an end to the demonstrations rather than negotiations. Therefore, instead of the mayor meeting with protest leaders, Police Chief Douglas Hosse convened several protest leaders on Friday, February 26, one day before the next scheduled sit-in. Lawson attended the meeting and recalled that Chief Hosse warned that there would be trouble.¹⁷ Hosse also sent word to the students that they would be arrested if more sit-ins occurred. In addition, there were rumors of planned attacks from white thugs, assaults that the police intended to ignore, hoping to discourage and intimidate the activists.¹⁸ Up to this point, the police and store managers had prevented violence against the protesters, but the tactics shifted as white attitudes began to harden.¹⁹

These were warriors prepared for battle, and rather than be intimidated, the students and their adult collaborators steeled themselves for combat. By this time, a very important development had taken place: the creation of the Central Committee, the decision-making body of the Nashville Student Movement. The Central Committee was formed in order to coordinate, develop, and implement movement strategy. Reverend Lawson, who played a key role in the creation of this infrastructure, envisioned the Central Committee as instrumental to nurture a culture of nonviolence in the Nashville movement. He insisted that the leaders who constituted the Central Committee use it as a vehicle to continue to learn about the philosophy of

¹⁷ Barnes interview of Lawson.

¹⁸ Lewis, 105.

¹⁹ Barnes interview of Lawson.

nonviolence.²⁰ This meant that training workshops would continue and nonviolence would be institutionalized in Nashville. And more importantly, the Central Committee served as the seed for the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee.

Lawson used the Central Committee to not only establish nonviolence as an institutionalized component of the Nashville movement, but also to advance the concept of decentralized leadership. He did not believe in hierarchical leadership and, therefore, the Central Committee consequently became a rather large body of activists who decided on protest actions. Its meetings were open to all and on occasions, up to forty students showed up. In the final analysis, a core group of about a dozen members were the most committed and made most of the decisions.²¹

Reverend Lawson's imprint upon the Central Committee had important consequences in shaping the character of SNCC when it emerged in April 1960. Although Ella Baker has been rightly credited with being a significant catalyst for the emergence of what scholars Barbara Ransby and Carol Mueller term "participatory democracy," a radical political paradigm which allows marginalized, disfranchised, silenced, and oppressed voices to be heard and empowered, credit should also accrue to Lawson regarding this development. Baker was not the only adult mentoring student activists in this direction. Because of Lawson's workshops and guidance during the early phase of the Nashville movement, the student activists had already institutionalized this mode of leadership by the time Baker convened student sit-in leaders for the founding conference of SNCC. Consequently, both Baker and Lawson should share the credit for

²⁰ Ibid. The Central Committee was composed of students from each campus as well as a few adults. Lawson recalled that Reverend C.T. Vivian and perhaps Reverend Andrew White, who later replaced Reverend Smith as president of the NCLC, were members of the Committee. The fact that adults were members further demonstrates the close collaboration between students and adult activists in Nashville.

²¹ Halberstam, 128.

seeding non-hierarchical leadership structures within the student movement.²² The Central Committee served as a prototype for SNCC.

The existence of the Central Committee allowed for precise planning for the scheduled February 27th sit-ins²³. When the students received word that the Nashville police intended to arrest protesters and to allow thugs to rough them up, John Lewis and Bernard LaFayette drafted a list of basic guidelines for sit-in conduct that they handed out to participants. Although many of the students to take part in the next sit-ins had already been trained, most of the new students eager to sit-in had not been.

Lawson's guiding hand was evident that day. He ensured that this round of sit-ins mimicked Gandhi's assault upon the British salt factories in the 1930s when the first wave of nonviolent protesters who were attacked and arrested were replaced by wave-after-wave of protesters all day long. Similarly, in Nashville on February 27, a day that Lawson later described as "Big Saturday," when the sit-in demonstrators were attacked with insults and shouts of "Go home, nigger!" and "Get back to Africa!", were punched and shoved from lunch counter stools, had lit cigarettes pressed against their backs, and were ultimately arrested by police, a new wave of students replaced them immediately. And when the replacements were abused and arrested, a

²² See chapter 8 of Barbara Ransby's book, *Ella Baker and the Black Freedom Movement: A Radical Democratic Vision* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003), for a thorough discussion of Baker's influence upon SNCC. Carol Mueller's article "Ella Baker and the Origins of 'Participatory Democracy' in *Women in the Civil Rights Movement: Trailblazers and Torchbearers 1941-1965*, eds. Vicki L. Crawford, Jacqueline Anne Rouse, and Barbara Woods (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993) explores Baker's role in the development of the concept of participatory democracy.

²³ Lewis, 105. The list of conduct rules drafted by Lewis and LaFayette was simple. It mandated demonstrators *should not*: "1) strike back nor curse if abused; 2) laugh out; 3) hold conversations with floor walker; 4) leave your seat until your leader has given you permission to do so; 5) block entrances to stores nor the isles inside." It also mandated that sit-in participants *should*: "1) show yourself friendly and courteous at all times; 2) sit straight [,] always face the counter; 3) report all incidents to your leader; 4) refer information seekers to your leader in a polite manner; 5) remember the teachings of Jesus Christ, Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King. Love and nonviolence are the way." The last line of the instructions read: "MAY GOD BLESS EACH OF YOU!" According to an Archie Allen interview of Lewis, these instructions were borrowed from Martin Luther King, Jr.'s, *Stride Toward Freedom*. See Archie Allen, *John Lewis Interview Transcript*, v.2, interviewed May 28, 1969, Atlanta, Georgia, transcript in Nashville Public Library, Civil Rights Room, Nashville, Tennessee.

new group replaced them. In his memoir, John Lewis wrote that the extraordinary preparation for this round of sit-ins not only allowed the students to face the threat of violence and not be tempted to retaliate, but it also allowed southern-bred Black students like him to cross a social threshold and commit a huge social sin: court trouble with the law. All of his life, Lewis' parents told him that, "only bad people go to jail."²⁴ His decision to violate this sacred code of conduct was an important indication that Lewis' generation was ready to break with the old regime's traditions of racial etiquette that were so important to his parents' generation and were also part of the reason why not much racial progress had been made, at least in the eyes of many young activists. One of the reasons why Chief Douglas Hosse threatened to arrest sit-in demonstrators on February 27 was because he knew how intimidating the prospect of arrest was to most African Americans. Not only was it extremely risky, but it also conferred a badge of shame and disgrace upon the individual and his or her family. Lewis' act of defiance not only helped initiate new rules of interracial interaction, but also began the process of dissolving the fear that prevented many adults from challenging segregation and discrimination. The social terrain had now begun to shift dramatically. Lawson's workshops fortified these young activists so they could reshape racial relationships and overcome generations of fear. As the Nashville activists gained more prominence, they helped Black southerners gain new self-confidence and an attitude of defiance.²⁵

²⁴ Ibid., 107.

²⁵ This new attitude of defiance was seen by 1963 in the Birmingham campaign when thousands of young people defied Bull Connor and his police dogs and fire hoses. On page 387 of Diane McWhorter's *Carry Me Home: Birmingham, Alabama, the Climatic Battle of the Civil Rights Revolution* (New York: Simon & Schuster), 2001, a protester, Charles Billup, told Captain Glenn Evans of the fire department as he pointed a fire hose at him, "We're not turning back. We haven't done anything wrong. All we want is our freedom. Turn on your water, turn loose your dogs, we will stand here till we die."

Lawson's strategy of sending wave-after-wave of volunteers willing to be arrested paid off. All of the targeted lunch counters were shut down and 81 arrests were made.²⁶ The tide of those ready to be jailed was so strong, as Lewis remembered, that, "They [the police] couldn't deal with the numbers they were facing. And there was no more room at the jail."²⁷ In fact, according to Reverend Lawson, when the police halted the arrests, there were still 500 foot-soldiers back at First Colored Baptist ready to be arrested.²⁸ The sit-ins of February 27 introduced a protest element that the student movement later established as a staple: turning an act of intimidation into momentum for the movement.

For the students, going to jail gave them a "great feeling," recalled John Lewis. "It was a feeling that you were caught up in something very noble and holy. It was a sense of movement . . . a great deal of joy in knowing that you were being arrested for the first time in your life and you were arrested . . . for a good purpose." The feeling of exhilaration was not diminished by the conditions in the Nashville jail. Lewis recollected that approximately thirty to fifty students were overcrowded into one room and according to Lawson, jail officials ran short of food and staff in the sudden onrush of prisoners. Despite these conditions, the students expressed joy and jubilation, feelings exhibited mostly in what later became known as "freedom songs." Among the songs that emerged as early favorites was "We Shall Overcome," an old spiritual given new words and popularized by Guy Carawan who was in Nashville during the sit-ins. Another popular early freedom song used by Nashville activists was "I'm Going to Sit at the Welcome Table, a tune especially prevalent during the sit-in campaign. Although freedom songs did not

²⁶ Barnes interview of Lawson; "Seize 20 Students On State Count," Nashville *Banner*, 4 March 1960, n.p.

²⁷ Lewis, 108. Lewis was one of the 81 arrested on "Big Saturday."

²⁸ Barnes interview of Lawson.

begin to emerge as part of the repertoire of civil rights activists until the fall of 1960, the Nashville activists began singing freedom songs from the moment they were first arrested.²⁹

The students had a short stay in jail on their first arrest and were bailed out for the most part within one day. It became evident that the Nashville police, downtown merchants, and elected officials had been caught off guard both by the students' gleeful response to being arrested and by the large numbers willing to be arrested. It seemed that the pattern of flat-footed response to Big Saturday would continue on the part of local officials, a response that led to a new battle front. Mayor West was on the defensive, having failed to relieve the white merchants of the sit-in pressures and having angered Black leaders who helped elect him to office. The next move created an even larger crisis that put Reverend Lawson at the uncomfortable center of attention and framed the moral issues that undergirded the sit-ins.

The next day, on Sunday morning, a group of Black ministers convened and decided to send an irate telegram to Mayor West, berating his earlier refusal to meet with them and demanding that he appear at First Colored Baptist at 11 a.m., Monday the 29th. Reverend Lawson was one of only a few selected to speak for the group of roughly 200 people present. His task was to articulate the purpose of the sit-ins and to question West about his decision to arrest the students while not arresting the white thugs who assaulted them. In defense of his actions, West told the assembled crowd that the protesters were law-breakers and that everything would be done to find and arrest the white ruffians.³⁰

Reverend Lawson's response to West's assertion that the students were criminals changed everything and ultimately led to his expulsion from Vanderbilt Divinity School and his

²⁹ Allen interview transcript of Lewis, 45-6; "Nashville: We Were Warriors;" Side one of *Nashville Sit-In Story: Songs and Scenes of Nashville Lunch Counter Desegregation*, directed by Guy Carawan, Folkways Records FH 5590A, 1960.

³⁰ Ibid.

temporary departure from Nashville in June 1960. Although there are various versions of Lawson's retort to Mayor West, the Nashville *Banner*, the more conservative of the two local papers, reported that Lawson criticized West on the decision to arrest the students and vowed to continue to advise the students "to violate the law" in future sit-ins. In a separate *Banner* article published the same day without a byline, it was written that Lawson "admits to being a leader in the sitdown demonstrations."³¹

The above statements attributed to Lawson by the *Banner* generated a controversy that gripped Nashville and became a national story referred to as "The Lawson Affair." The most incendiary aspect of the "affair" was the allegation that Lawson counseled his social warriors to "break the law," a charge used to discredit Lawson and to torpedo the local movement. James G. Stahlman, owner and publisher of the *Banner* and a member of the Vanderbilt University Board of Trust, was central in the controversy. Although there is no conclusive proof that Stahlman orchestrated Lawson's expulsion from Vanderbilt, many African American leaders and their white allies believed that Stahlman was the puppet master in this controversy. Reverend C. T. Vivian's assessment that Stahlman and his newspaper were viewed as anti-Negro was a commonly held opinion in Black Nashville.³²

³¹ Pinckney Keel, "Judge Warns Lillard on Contempt: Leader Says He'll Advise Group To Break Law," Nashville *Banner*, 1 March 1960, n.p. "Lawson Focal Point In City Court Trials," Nashville *Banner*, 1 March 1960, n.p.

³² According to Robert Churchwell, the first African American reporter hired by Stahlman, he was brought on board the paper in February 1950 in order to improve the *Banner*'s circulation in the Black community. Churchwell was reluctant to accept the position because of Stahlman's racist reputation, but was persuaded to take the job by Black local attorney Coyniss Ennix who proclaimed that Churchwell could become the Jackie Robinson of journalism by becoming the first African American reporter employed by a white Southern daily newspaper. The experiences revealed by Churchwell lend credence to charges that Stahlman was a racist. When he first started, the newsroom was still segregated, compelling Churchwell to work at home and supply his own typewriter. In addition, he was not invited to office parties, and was unable to get most of his stories published, especially those related to the movement. Churchwell confirms the prevailing sentiment that Stahlman was behind the expulsion of Lawson from Vanderbilt. See the Robert Churchwell Papers, transcript of interview by Dwight Lewis, recorded December 6, 2002, for Nashville Public Library Civil Rights Oral History Project, Box 3 Folder 16, Emory University, Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Books Library, Atlanta, Georgia.

Lawson's recollection of the February 29th meeting at First Colored Baptist Church with Mayor West differs from that reported in the *Banner*. In fact, while the *Banner* credited Lawson with being the leader of the Nashville sit-ins, the more racially moderate *Tennessean* reported that Lawson "vigorously declared he was not the 'leader' of the student demonstrations." Moreover, said Lawson, "There is not a leader as such. For one thing, the responsibility among the students is passed from person to person, according to the situation, according to the need."³³

In a 1964 interview with Robert Penn Warren, Lawson gave his own account of what transpired at the meeting with West. He recalled that he responded to Mayor West's assertion that the sit-ins constituted criminal trespassing. In rebuttal, Reverend Lawson said:

I took the stand . . . answering . . . that human rights took precedence over any other kind of right. He [West] stressed the fact that this was breaking of the law. Then I went on to suggest and to say rather where the law was an impeding law, where the law was used simply to oppress people, then it wasn't really a law. It wasn't justice, it wasn't consistent with democratic thought and it certainly was inconsistent with Christian thought. I used a statement such as this, that the arrests occurred not because the law was an effort to preserve the finest values of our society. But in this instance, the law was a gimmick to intimidate, harass and if possible, halt a legitimate movement of social concern.³⁴

The fact that white officials attempted to tag Lawson as the "leader" of the sit-ins and tarnish his reputation by accusing him of encouraging student law-breaking represents a fundamental misunderstanding of what was unfolding in Nashville by some white leaders. First of all, the West administration, white merchants, and the police were unfamiliar with the decentralized leadership structure that guided the sit-ins. Therefore, they concluded that if they could decapitate the head of the movement, Reverend Lawson, then it was doomed. The reality was that there was no head to decapitate since leadership was shared and responsibilities shifted

³³ James Talley, "Minister Draws Students' Ire," *Tennessean*, 2 March 1960, n. p.

³⁴ Robert Penn Warren interview of James Lawson for the book *Who Speaks for the Negro?*, Vanderbilt University Special Collections, digital collection, <http://whospeaks.library.vanderbilt.edu>.

occasionally. Secondly, white Nashville did not realize the degree of preparation invested in the student foot-soldiers and the determination they had to destroy Jim Crow. This meant that once they launched the sit-ins, there was no turning back and because of their training, they felt capable of running their own operation. Lawson had helped give them an unshakable confidence that nonviolent direct action could conquer the evil monster of segregation. Once such a social change philosophy took hold among Nashville activists, there was nothing that local whites could do to counteract it. Thirdly, the white community failed to detect the high degree of support brewing within Black middle class Nashville. Many adults who shopped downtown, as previously stated, shared the students' disdain for the segregated eating facilities and were overjoyed that something was being done about this insulting custom.

Because white Nashville failed to grasp these realities, a hapless initiative to exile Lawson from the city gained momentum and led to his expulsion from Vanderbilt. The head of this initiative was *Banner* publisher James G. Stahlman who relentlessly attacked Lawson on the editorial page as an outside agitator in sympathy with the communists. The paper also raised the question that sealed his fate: How did Vanderbilt permit him to be there? The editorials asserted that Reverend Lawson "had been using Vanderbilt as a nefarious base of operation from which [he] was trying to subvert" [law and order].³⁵

The acerbic tone of the editorials helped generate a flood of alumni reaction, much of it anti-Lawson. One alumni, Dr. Jesse C. Burt, Jr., likened Lawson and his colleagues' action to a communist threat by quoting J. Edgar Hoover. Burt said that, "The illustrious head of our FBI

³⁵ Ibid.

stated that ‘the seeds of communism are to be planted in the fertile areas of unrest, dissention, and strife.’³⁶

The alumni pressure, combined with Stahlman’s seat on the Board, appear to be the primary cause of Lawson’s dismissal, an episode labeled by *Time* magazine as “the worst ruckus in Vanderbilt’s 87-year old history.”³⁷ Lawson recalled that, “. . . the chancellor Branscomb then began to receive all kinds of pressure questioning my responsibility [for the sit-ins], my integrity as a student . . . , my motive for being at Vanderbilt. These pressures were reflected in the dean [J. Robert Nelson]. In fact, . . . the dean of the Divinity School was ordered Monday night [February 29] to get a statement from me on Tuesday denying what the mayor had said about me, and denying that I was all of these things.” Therefore, on Tuesday morning, March 1, Lawson proceeded to Dean Nelson’s office immediately upon reaching campus and in collaboration with the university’s publicity director, began drafting a statement in response to the allegations.³⁸

The statement crafted by Lawson turned out to be insufficient and yet another one was drafted the next day. On Wednesday night, Dean Nelson visited Lawson at home and informed him that Chancellor Branscomb asked Lawson to either withdraw or be expelled.³⁹ Of course, Reverend Lawson refused to withdraw because doing so impugned his personal integrity and implied that the sit-ins lacked moral standing. Hence, in short order, Chancellor Branscomb called a meeting of the Divinity School’s faculty and student body on Thursday morning at about 10 am, March 3, and publicly announced the expulsion of James M. Lawson, Jr.

³⁶ James G. Stahlman Papers, “Address by Dr. Jesse C. Burt, Jr., to Sam Davis Memorial Association, 9 June 1960, Box V-29 Folder 14, Vanderbilt University Special Collections, Nashville, Tennessee.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ Warren interview of Lawson.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

The Lawson Affair took another turn when Reverend Lawson was arrested on March 4 on charges of conspiracy to violate the state's trade and commerce laws. The arrest took place at First Colored Baptist while he was meeting with a group of ministers. Lawson anticipated that he would be arrested as soon as he was expelled. It appeared that some coordination of his fate was taking place between Vanderbilt University officials, the West administration, and the police department. This is evident in Lawson's assertion that "leaving him as a student at Vanderbilt Divinity School . . . would further embarrass the city if I were arrested as a student of the Divinity School . . . Simply by getting me kicked out of the school or away from the school with no attachment, then . . . the arrest would be easier."⁴⁰ The fact that Lawson was enrolled in the Divinity School made his expulsion especially tricky for the university's officials. It forced Vanderbilt to justify its actions on both academic and moral grounds. In the end, Vanderbilt did a poor job of defending its position and nearly wrecked the Divinity School in the process.

The reaction to Lawson's expulsion was swift, strong, and added a new dimension to the local movement: Vanderbilt's self-anointed position as the most racially enlightened private southern university was called into question by some of its own faculty. The reasoning behind Lawson's expulsion was articulated by Chancellor Harvie Branscomb: "There is no issue involved of freedom of thought, or of conscience, or of speech, or of the right of protest against social custom. The issue is whether or not the university can be identified with a continuing campaign of mass disobedience of law as a means of protest."⁴¹ Many if not most of the Divinity School faculty rejected this logic and, consequently, eleven of the seventeen Divinity School

⁴⁰ Mac Harris, "New Charges Filed Against Sit-in Students," *Tennessean*, 5 March 1960, n.p.

⁴¹ Jack Setters, "Vanderbilt Dismisses Lawson," *Nashville Banner*, 3 March 1960, n.p.

faculty submitted resignation letters, including Dean J. Robert Nelson. In addition, seventeen white divinity students left Vanderbilt in protest over Lawson's removal.⁴²

For the Divinity School faculty, one of the problems with the handling of The Lawson Affair was that the Board of Trust intervened in an issue that should have been handled by the faculty. Ordinarily, since the faculty was responsible for his admission, then it was also responsible for any necessary disciplinary action. The faculty considered the Board's action a violation of academic freedom. Such a heavy-handed usurpation of the faculty's prerogative created a deep and wide breach in the relation between the faculty and the administration.⁴³

The faculty and the administration attempted to close the breach. Chancellor Branscomb implied that the crisis could be resolved by having Lawson reapply to the Divinity School. Branscomb attempted to end the crisis in other ways. He declined to accept the divinity faculty resignations and hired Walter J. Harrelson to replace Nelson as dean. Harrelson stipulated that he would take the job only if Lawson was reinstated, the faculty resignations were voided, and Nelson remained on the faculty.⁴⁴

In the end, no compromise was reached. Although the faculty readmitted Lawson, Branscomb vetoed their decision. Consequently, Branscomb accepted Nelson's resignation, and Harrelson declined the appointment. James D. Glasse, one of the faculty members who resigned, best summarized the sentiments of the disgruntled faculty and exposed the weakness in Vanderbilt's leadership in race relations:

When an injustice is committed against a person, a man you've taught, a human being you respect, one who brought credit to the University, well it's too much. It's an outrage. I don't even have the satisfaction of feeling

⁴² Stahlman Papers, "More Students Quit Vanderbilt," *New York Times*, 1 June 1960, n. p., Box V-29 Folder 15; "Upheaval at Vanderbilt," *Newsweek*, 13 June 1960, Box V-29 Folder 15.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, Claude Sitton, "Vanderbilt Split Is Growing Wider," *New York Times*, 12 June 1960, Box V-29 Folder 15.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, "Upheaval at Vanderbilt," *Newsweek*, 13 June 1960, Box V-29 Folder 15.

clean after performing a ‘self-righteous’ act. I feel, I suppose I just feel sad.⁴⁵

Glass also opined on the real reasons for Lawson’s expulsion and why Chancellor Branscomb and the Board so swiftly expelled Lawson without a hearing or an appeal process. Glasse concluded that:

It occurred to me that Lawson had been a marked man ever since he had the gall to play on the intramural football team, to attend University concerts and eat in the University dining hall with whites. If he had brought his lunch in a paper bag and eaten it in one of the basements or if he had been such an egghead that he kept himself hidden in the library, he would have been acceptable. He was clearly the wrong kind of Negro for the University. He was, however, the right kind of man for the Divinity School. The best thing that could have happened here was that he came here and was thrown out. His presence raised important issues.⁴⁶

Glasse’s comments about Lawson being “the wrong kind of Negro for the University” confirms his status as a social “misfit,” a person willing to defy social norms for the sake of a Christian-based crusade. Lawson confirmed this in a statement he made in June 1960 to a Fisk audience:

The sit-in movement, which speaks in terms of human dignity, of faith, has something more profound to say than ‘integrate those lunch counters.’ The sit-ins are primarily not a protest, but are an action of the heart, an action of love . . . There can be no justice until somehow the whole concept of love as described in the life of Christ is applied.⁴⁷

Here, Lawson articulated several important aspects of the Nashville sit-ins. First, he made it clear that nonviolent direct action was not simply about the act of protesting, or about a political goal, social integration. Instead, it was about instituting agape love, a genuine act of respecting all

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Ibid., W.R. Cole, Jr., submitted a typed document, apparently to Stahlman, using an article from *Jet* magazine by Alex Poinsette entitled “Why Dixie Profs Quit in Defense of Negro: Vanderbilt Scholars ‘Outraged’ by Injustice to Minister,” published 6 June 1960. In the heading of this document, Cole wrote that the *Jet* article was a lurid, inaccurate, warped, and deplorable attack on Branscomb by an associate of James Glasse.

⁴⁷ Ibid., taken from undated anonymous document with the heading “The following is from a *news* article in the Nashville *Banner*, Nashville, Tennessee, June 24, 1960, and is not taken out of context. It concerns Lawson.” See Box V-29 Folder 15.

humanity, irrespective of artificial differences created by other human beings that separate the human family. Ella Baker has been credited with understanding a deeper purpose for the movement. In a May 1960 article she stated, “The Student Leadership conference made it crystal clear that current sit-ins and other demonstrations are concerned with something much bigger than a hamburger or even a giant-sized Coke.”⁴⁸ Lawson largely has not been credited with articulating a more significant purpose for the movement than the superficial goal of desegregation of public facilities when, in fact, he was one of the primary agents of the notion that the movement sought to build the beloved community. This theme was explicitly articulated in the workshops. The Baker-Lawson articulation of the larger purpose of the sit-ins indicates multiple strands of influence contributing to this important movement theme.

Secondly, Lawson made it clear that the foundation of the Nashville movement was spiritual. As Aldon Morris pointed out, the Nashville movement was “a well-developed, church-based movement center headed by the Reverend Kelly Miller Smith” that was given life in the late 1950s and anchored in First Colored Baptist Church. Much of the planning and nonviolence training took place there. The ties between student activists and the local churches went even deeper when one considers that many of the primary leaders such as Lewis, Vivian, Bevel, and LaFayette attended ABT where Reverend Smith was one of their professors. In making the connection, James Bevel recalled that, “the First Baptist Church basically had the Baptist people who went to Fisk and Meharry and Tennessee State, and the seminary were basically members of his church.” Therefore, according to Morris, attending First Colored Baptist inevitably meant being introduced to the movement⁴⁹ and by extension being indoctrinated to its spiritual nature as

⁴⁸ Ella Baker, “Bigger Than a Hamburger,” *The Southern Patriot*, May 1960, <http://www.crmvet.org/docs/sncc2.htm>. The Student Leadership Conference was the meeting organized by Baker at Shaw University from April 15 through April 17, 1960, that led to the formation of SNCC.

⁴⁹ Morris, 205; Bennett interview of Bevel, LaFayette, and Patton; Morris, 174-76.

a result of exposure to Reverend Lawson's teachings. Baker's influence upon the student movement was less philosophical and ideological, and instead was more structural and procedural. She once noted that she was not "an advocate of nonviolence in the true sense."⁵⁰ Baker was more concerned about maintaining an authentic, independent student-led movement than about a specific belief system that might influence the tenor of student activism. This meant that the Nashville activists, particularly Reverend Lawson and his protégés, were free to push nonviolence at SNCC's founding conference. And push it they did, making nonviolence one of the most significant imprints left upon SNCC by the Nashville cohorts when it was formed in the spring of 1960.

Just like the sit-ins, The Lawson Affair took on a life of its own. Not only did Lawson's dismissal, subsequent arrest, and rejection of his re-admission application create a crisis, but it put Vanderbilt in a negative spotlight. In addition to the questions of racism at Vanderbilt, there were also moral issues raised. Were the sit-ins legitimate? Do individuals affiliated with the Divinity School have the freedom to act on their moral conscience?⁵¹ To Lawson and those who left Vanderbilt due to the crisis and to those who supported the sit-ins, Vanderbilt's actions meant a resounding no to those fundamental questions. Had Lawson submitted to the ultimatum that he either renounce his advice to the protesters or withdraw from school, he would have repudiated his entire activist career and violated foundational principles of nonviolent direct action that he had spent more than a year teaching his pupils. Foremost among them was the obligation to defy unjust laws and to willingly accept whatever punishment results from such action, a principle established by Mohandus Gandhi beginning in the late nineteenth century in

⁵⁰ Joanne Grant, *Ella Baker: Freedom Bound*, (New York: John Wiley and sons, Inc., 1998), 128.

⁵¹ Marion and Nelson Fuson Papers, J. Robert Nelson, "The Lawson-Vanderbilt Affair: Letters to Dean Nelson," August 1960, p. 4, Box 1 Folder 15, Vanderbilt University Special Collections, Nashville, Tennessee.

South Africa.⁵² Though Vanderbilt's decision to expel Lawson aligned the university with the pro-segregationist forces, it was contradictory with the emerging social trend toward integration that the university said it was proudly leading. Just as importantly, Vanderbilt's actions seemed to violate a primary dictum of Christianity: that an individual must not violate his moral conscience. These actions were problematic for the Divinity School since it was supposed to be the university's moral standard-bearer. By refusing to withdraw or renounce the sit-ins, Lawson put himself in the shoes of the early Christians who were often persecuted for their beliefs. Lawson's protégés adopted this frame of mind and carried it with them for the rest of the Movement. As James Bevel told a white Mississippi judge who threatened him with prison time in 1961, "See, all the early Christians went to jail and got killed and all that stuff, and so we are no different. They all went to jail."⁵³

Lawson's decision to continue his support for the students' sit-in actions and his refusal to withdraw from school was vindicated by the outcome of the sit-in campaign against downtown lunch counters. On the steps of afternoon of May 10, 1960, the six targeted lunch counters desegregated for the first time in Nashville's history.⁵⁴ The immediate end of segregated downtown lunch counters seemed to have undermined the university's rationale for dismissing Lawson.

But the desegregation of the lunch counters did not save Vanderbilt from its actions against Lawson. His dismissal reverberated across Vanderbilt and the academic community at large for some time. Approximately one quarter of Vanderbilt's more than four hundred faculty signed a statement saying, "We are distressed that recent actions by Vanderbilt University may

⁵² See pages 88-90 of Allister Sparks' *The Mind of South Africa*, (New York: Ballentine Books, 1990), for a brief description of the incidents which led Gandhi to develop his philosophy of nonviolent resistance.

⁵³ Bennett interview of Bevel, LaFayette, and Patton.

⁵⁴ Lewis, 117.

be interpreted as condoning the denial of rights of Nashville [N]egroes to speak and act lawfully in their cause.” There were other indications that the Lawson affair provoked anger outside of the Divinity School. An anonymous science professor confided that, “There is absolutely no question that most of us will leave if this situation is not settled to the satisfaction of the Divinity School faculty.” This professor worried that among those threatening to leave were scientists who brought more than \$1,000,000 in research grants to the school. Another faculty member fretted about the university’s future. “Not only will we be losing top-flight scholars, but there is serious question . . . that the university will be able to replace them even with second raters. Who wants a job in a place where a problem like this is allowed to arise?”⁵⁵

The most important consequence of the Lawson Affair for Vanderbilt was the threat to the Divinity School’s accreditation. In June of 1960, the American Association of Theological Schools, the accrediting body for graduate professional theology schools, appointed a committee that visited Vanderbilt on November 12 and 13, 1960. In the first week of December, the Association issued its findings. The Divinity School was placed on probation for a year, beginning December 2, 1960, after which time its status would be reevaluated. Probation resulted from the Association’s concerns about the relationship between the Divinity School and the central administration as well as the growing decline in faculty morale.⁵⁶ One positive outcome was the implementation of formal procedures for handling future student disciplinary actions that included a faculty trial and review and an appeal and review process.⁵⁷ Though the Lawson Affair was a publicity disaster for the university, it became a boost for the movement. Lawson’s

⁵⁵ Stahlman Papers, “Upheaval at Vanderbilt;” Wallace Westfeldt, “Sit-Ins Stir Crisis at Vanderbilt U: 25 More on Faculty May Quit in Row Over Expulsion of Negro,” *New York Herald Tribune*, 6 June 1960, n.p.

⁵⁶ Harvie Branscomb Papers, Erwin Knoll, “Emotion Took University That reason Fled,” *Washington Post*, 28 August 1960, E2, Box 4 Folder 34, Vanderbilt University Special collections, Nashville, Tennessee.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, J.A. Jones, “Letter from the American Association of Theological Schools to Branscomb,” December 2, 1960. Jones was president of the Association.

expulsion led to the Nashville Movement gaining national notoriety and exposure. Major media outlets such as the *Washington Post*, the *New York Herald Tribune*, *Time* magazine, and the *New York Times* routinely published feature stories on the episode, turning it into a national debate on civil rights, academic freedom, and moral issues. As Erwin Knoll wrote in his article of August 28, 1960, “Lawson’s expulsion drew immediate protest from the divinity faculty and gained national attention. It was seen as a civil rights issue, a question of clergymen’s conscience, and a matter of academic freedom.”⁵⁸

After hearing that many medical school faculty might resign, Chancellor Branscomb recognized the magnitude of his error by privately admitting that it was a mistake to turn the matter over to the Board. He also attempted to end the controversy by allowing the divinity faculty to rescind their resignations and announcing that Lawson could receive a Vanderbilt degree based on transfer credits from another institutions or a make-up exam at Vanderbilt. While most of the divinity faculty resignations were withdrawn with the exception of Nelson and Glasse, Lawson transferred to Boston University’s divinity school on June 3, 1960, and received his degree there.⁵⁹ The fact that the Lawson Affair produced such powerful social and political tremors is a testament also to the power of the convictions of the activists who precipitated the crisis and the righteousness of their cause. For months, Vanderbilt officials were beset with controversy over the expulsion of Reverend Lawson. They failed to understand the moral dimensions of expelling a divinity student for following his Christian principles. Additionally, Vanderbilt officials failed to perceive that their actions made a mockery of academic freedoms

⁵⁸ Stahlman Papers, “Vanderbilt Acts to Replace Dean in Protest Over Barred Negro,” *New York Times*, 4 June 1960, n.p.

⁵⁹ Branscomb Papers, Erwin Knoll, “Emotion Took University That Reason Fled.” Lawson’s exploits became so admired outside the South that he received offers to enroll at several university-based divinity schools, including those at the University of Chicago, Drew University, and Yale University. See Curry Papers, Kyle Haselden, “The Lawson-Vanderbilt Story,” *The Christian Century*, 23 March 1960, page 342, Box 1 Folder 4.

and jeopardized the university's leadership position in race relations. More important, Lawson's actions revealed that Vanderbilt was not ready to accept the demands made by the Nashville warriors.

While the Lawson Affair was still unfolding, the sit-in drama continued to unfold. The abuse and arrest of demonstrators on Big Saturday changed the dynamics of the Nashville sit-in movement. Recognizing the flimsy nature of the charges of trespassing and disturbing the peace, law enforcement officials dropped these charges the first week of March and instead instituted state charges of "unlawful conspiracy to commit acts injurious to public trade and commerce."⁶⁰ This state action indicated that both local and state officials began to take the sit-ins more seriously and began to worry about the outcome. Since the threats of arrest did not deter the activists, white officials decided to play hardball. The activists arrested on February 27th were initially required to post a bond of \$100, but because the police wished to rid themselves of the protesters, the bail was dropped to a nominal \$5, still the students refused to pay. John Lewis wrote in his memoir, "We were in jail because of racial segregation in Nashville. Until that segregation was ended, we had nowhere else to be—we *belonged* nowhere else—but in those lunch counters seats or behind bars."⁶¹ These sentiments translated immediately into a "jail no bail" strategy for the student movement. Consequently, when the students were summarily convicted and fined, they refused to pay, opting to serve their sentences instead. The municipal court gave the students thirty days in the workhouse where they were compelled to shovel snow and pick up trash, prompting both local and national outrage. Telegrams expressing support for

⁶⁰ Wallace Westfeldt, for the Nashville Community Relations Conference, "Report on Nashville," 4, date unknown, Nashville Public Library, Civil Right Room, Nashville, Tennessee.

⁶¹ Lewis, 108-9.

the jailed demonstrators poured in from influential figures such as Harry Belafonte, Ralph Bunche, and Eleanor Roosevelt.⁶²

The combination of the state charges of illegally obstructing commerce and the humiliating spectacle of forcing the students to shovel snow in the cold represented another serious mistake on the part of white officials, thus giving new momentum to the sit-ins. The new charges, carrying potentially stiffer sentences and fines, appeared to be a heavy-handed attempt to suppress and punish dissent rather than to enforce the law, a point made earlier by Lawson. The snow shoveling detail sought to publicly humiliate the Black community and therefore galvanized the community behind the students. As a result, the NCLC treasury ballooned overnight with donations, as witnessed by receipts from the mass meetings. For the period March 1 to May 27, the NCLC's bank account rose from a paltry \$87.81 to total of \$22,370.13.⁶³ This impressive sum demonstrated broad and in-depth support across Nashville. Because of The Lawson Affair and the punitive work detail imposed upon the jailed activists, significant donations from around the nation also reached the NCLC. For instance, in April of 1960, Oberlin College established a "Fund for Nashville" and raised more than \$2,500.⁶⁴

Perhaps the most important signal from the overwhelmingly successful fundraising campaign was that the adult community was behind the students and did not feel threatened by their bold initiative. Not long after the students were first arrested, Dr. Stephen Wright, president of Fisk who had previously been cautious about the sit-ins, gave a whole-hearted endorsement of the students at a Sunday morning chapel service on campus on February 28. In his remarks, Dr. Wright told the large chapel audience that he and many others in the established

⁶² Ibid., 110.

⁶³ Fuson Papers, "Summary Financial Statement of the Nashville Christian Leadership Council, March 1-15, 1960," "Summary Financial Statement of the Nashville Christian Leadership Council, March 1-May 27, 1960," Box 2, Folder 1.

⁶⁴ Curry Papers, "Newsletter of the United States National Students Association," April 1960, Box 1 Folder 10.

Black community were with the students. This was a monumental announcement, for Dr. Wright was the first Black college president in the nation to publicly support the sit-ins. In addition to that endorsement, the students also attracted the best Black legal team in the city, Z. Alexander Looby, Avon Williams, and Robert Lillard, who offered to represent the students pro bono.⁶⁵

By the second week of March, white Nashville officials realized they were in trouble and every maneuver that they attempted backfired, adding momentum to the sit-ins. Not only had The Lawson Affair embarrassed the city, but the general uproar caused Mayor West to clumsily try to put a damper on the movement by calling for a moratorium on sit-ins and establishing the “Mayor’s Biracial Committee” in order to resolve the crisis. It was composed of seven prominent local citizens, two of whom were Black: Dr. Wright of Fisk and Dr. Walter S. Davis of Tennessee A & I.⁶⁶

As the Biracial Committee settled into its work, the activists and their supporters did not rest. Perhaps because there was suspicion that the Committee was a device to deflate the momentum of the sit-ins, Black Nashville implemented a new strategy to keep the pressure on downtown merchants while the sit-ins were temporarily suspended. Although the origins are unknown, an economic boycott of downtown stores began in early March.⁶⁷ The idea of a boycott was something that the Central Committee had considered as a next step, but there was no formal decision to implement it. It is likely that the anger generated by the arrest of students

⁶⁵ Lewis, 109. It should be noted that by November of 1960, lawyer fees were paid by the NCLC. These fees became a point of tension between the NCLC and the attorneys as some NCLC members felt the rates were excessive. See Smith Papers, “Minutes of the NCLC Executive Committee,” 2 November 1960, Box 76 Folder 2.

⁶⁶ Westfeldt, “A Report on Nashville,” 4; Halberstam, 163. Halberstam’s text is the only one of the secondary sources used here that gives Davis’ first name. The others, including Lewis’ memoir, simply lists him as Dr. W.S. Davis.

⁶⁷ Local legend says that the boycott began with four women from Reverend Smith’s church who created the idea while playing bridge. As a way to help the students, the women decided to call ten friends and ask them not to shop downtown. They also asked each friend to call ten others with the same message. See Halberstam, page 178, for discussion of this legend. Also see Clifford Kuhn interview of Bernard LaFayette for more details on the evolution of the downtown boycott. It is logical that a boycott started among Black women since they did nearly all of the downtown shopping and were the most likely victims of discriminations in department stores.

and their subsequent punitive work detail may have led to the boycott. Another factor to consider in the genesis of the boycott was the realization by Fisk economist Vivian Henderson that the annual buying power of Black Nashville was approximately \$50 million and represented thirty percent of the sales in downtown stores. In a short period of time, the boycott gained broad Black support and became quite effective. In order to ensure maximum observance, student activist Leo Lillard, son of city council member and attorney Robert Lillard, revealed that there was an “‘Education Committee’ [dispatched] downtown to snatch bags from the hands of people who tried to break the boycott. Soon, word got around not to go downtown.” As a result of this compulsory compliance and the recognition of the power of the boycott to effect change, some Black leaders estimated that the campaign was ninety-eight percent effective.⁶⁹

Whether or not the boycott was that effective, they certainly had a profound effect upon white downtown merchants. Reverend Lawson recalled that merchants began talking to the Black leaders “because the boycott was hurting them.”⁶⁸ There was no sign that the pressure from the Black community would relent. Major West obviously hoped that the Biracial Committee would settle the matter, but such was not the case. After about a month, the Committee issued its recommendations on April 5 that there be a system of “partial” desegregation of the lunch counters, a three-month trial period during which African American customers would be served separately in a designated section of the eatery. For all practical purposes, this meant an altered version of segregation, a proposal totally rejected by the activists. In fact, sit-in leaders, including the students, viewed the proposal as an insult and were especially disappointed that the Black committee members endorsed it. John Lewis wrote “We couldn’t believe that *this* was their proposal . . . Worse than the inability of the white members of that

⁶⁹ “Ain’t Scared of Your Jails,” part of *Eyes on the Prize* series, Blackside Productions, viewed at the Nashville Public Library, Civil Rights Room, Nashville, Tennessee.

⁶⁸ Barnes interview of Lawson.

committee to recognize that ‘partial’ integration was the same as partial *segregation* was the endorsement of the proposal by the committee’s two *black* members—Fisk president [Stephen J.] Wright” and the president of Tennessee State University, W.S. Davis. This felt like a betrayal of sorts to us, more evidence of the differences between the generations.”⁷⁰

Since it is evident that the downtown merchants were not ready to meet the demands of the protesters, the sit-ins resumed before the arrival of Easter weekend⁷¹, a big weekend in the retail business. Obviously, the idea was to increase the pressure on the merchants. Given the failure of the Biracial Committee to resolve the crisis, the NCLC began negotiating directly with the merchants. On the negotiating team were Reverends Smith and Lawson and student representatives Diane Nash and Rodney Powell.⁷² The fact that Nash was one of the negotiators is significant and a harbinger for the future of the Nashville and the general movement. At this early stage, she must have already been identified by others as a key leader. It would have been easy for the negotiating team to have been all men. Nash’s inclusion was not likely a concession to gender equity. Rather, it was an indication that women of talent had room to operate, at least in limited fashion, within the Nashville Movement, especially among the students.⁷³ When SNCC emerged later, it was the only major civil rights organization in which women could assume duties typically performed by men. Nash set the pace for SNCC in making space for

⁷⁰ Smith Papers, untitled document that appears to be minutes of the NCLC, dated 6 April 1960; Lewis, 113.

⁷¹ Easter weekend 1960 took place the same weekend as the founding conference of SNCC, April 16-18. See chapter two of *In Struggle*.

⁷² Smith Papers, untitled document that appears to be NCLC minutes, dated 6 April 1960.

⁷³ It should be noted that according to the NCLC records, women never held top leadership positions within the organization such as president, vice president, or treasurer. The opportunities for leadership by women came on the student side of the ledger. When Diane Nash first became associated with the local movement, she had to overcome assumptions that attractive women lacked substance beyond their appearance. This is seen in John Lewis’ comment that “Early on, everyone wondered why Diane Nash was at these workshops at all, why a beautiful woman like her wasn’t out on a hot date with a rich medical student from Meharry” (See *Walking with the Wind*, page 92). Talented women often assumed leadership positions in the student movement. See Cynthia Griggs Fleming’s *Soon We Will Not Cry* for the ascendancy of Ruby Doris Smith Robinson to the position of executive secretary of SNCC, the highest position held by a woman within the organization.

female leadership talent, but one certainly does see this practice take root in Nashville before the birth of SNCC. At this stage of Nash's activist career, she was still uncertain of her leadership abilities and insecure of her leadership role, but Ella Baker later provided a female leadership role model which helped her to affirm and confirm her abilities.⁷⁴

It took a while for men like Lewis to adjust to Nash's presence, but once the sit-ins commenced, it was clear that Nash was a gifted leader. This was evident by her election as the chair of the Central Committee and by her designation as spokesperson for the arrested students when they went to trial after Big Saturday. In court on Monday, February 29, Nash told the judge, after the students had been convicted and fined, that, "We feel that if we pay these fines, we would be contributing to and supporting the injustice and immoral practices that have been performed in the arrest and conviction of the defendants,"⁷⁵ articulating what eventually became the standard SNCC jail-no-bail refrain. Nash became one of the key framers and practitioners of this strategy, as when she moved her activism base to Jackson, Mississippi, following the Freedom Rides.

April 1960 turned out to be a pivotal month in the life of the sit-ins and the student movement both locally for Nashville and regionally. On April 1, the Highlander Folk School held the seventh annual college workshop entitled "The New Generation Fights for Equality," the first fairly large gathering of sit-in leaders since the spark provided by the Greensboro Four. The workshop, attended by eighty-two participants, seventy of whom were students and half were Black, was a testimony to the leadership prominence of the Nashville students because Marion Barry was one of the students on the workshop's planning committee. There was also key participation on the part of adult Nashville leaders. Herman Long, director of Fisk's Race

⁷⁴ Ransby, 246.

⁷⁵ Lewis, 93, 110.

Relations Institute, facilitated one of the main workshop sessions. Other Nashville leaders, including Lewis, Bevel, and LaFayette also attended.⁷⁶

The Highlander workshop was significant because it helped establish the Nashville activists as the premier sit-in leaders of the sit-in movement. One of the topics at the workshop was the role of whites and adults in the movement. Nashville students and Herman Long argued in favor of the benefits of close ties with the “larger community” that included interracial organizations, a point viewed with skepticism by many of the other students. Long contended that although the sit-ins were actions that were not likely to include adults, it would be wise to develop “ties to the ‘larger community’ and to define your philosophy and goals more clearly.”⁷⁷ This advice gave an early indication of one of the strengths of the Nashville movement, its intergenerational collaboration. Ironically, the response of some students to Long’s advice hinted at issues that later caused strife within SNCC by the mid-1960s: the role of whites in the movement and to a lesser degree, the relationship to adult-led civil rights organizations, especially the SCLC. It should be noted that the primary leaders trained by Lawson, including Lewis, Bevel, Nash, and LaFayette, never expressed antagonistic attitudes toward King and the SCLC. This may be explained by their focus on the moral rather than the political dimensions of the struggle⁷⁸ that characterized Lawson’s teachings and the temperament of the early years of the Nashville movement. In fact, Lewis, Bevel, Nash, and LaFayette all became affiliated with the SCLC in some capacity over time.

The Highlander session also gave Nashville activists an opportunity to showcase nonviolence as practiced by dedicated students and to introduce the concept of jail-no-bail to

⁷⁶ Glen, 146.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 146-47.

⁷⁸ Ibid., 147. At the Highlander workshop, Bevel and Lewis honed in on the “moral principles” of nonviolence which undergirded Nashville’s movement.

other students. It was clear at this stage that Nashville student activists were philosophically light-years ahead of many their peers. Not only did many of the students question nonviolence as a way of life, but many of them were not yet sure that mass demonstrations were an effective tool. In order to develop a student philosophical standpoint, a committee was formed that hammered out a brief, simplistic “philosophy” of the movement. It said: “We believe in democracy. We are Americans seeking our rights. We want to do something. We are using nonviolence as a method, but not necessarily as a total way of life. We believe it is practical.”⁷⁹ Obviously, many of the sit-in leaders had a rudimentary understanding of nonviolence and saw its use in simplistic tactical terms. This philosophical void allowed the Nashville activists an opportunity to fill the gap which they did two weeks later at Shaw University at SNCC’s founding conference.

The Highlander workshop produced another step toward the formation of SNCC. As previously stated, the Central Committee was the first glimmer of what eventually became SNCC. The next step was the establishment of a communications committee at Highlander, a body that proposed the formation of a regional coalition designed to promote, coordinate, and finance the student movement. The Nashville Movement was poised to give the nascent student movement a model of activism to emulate and a philosophical grounding upon which it could anchor itself. The Highlander workshops gave the students their first sense of collective purpose and unity so that by the time of the Shaw University conference, many of the components of a student movement were already taking shape, especially the leadership.

⁷⁹ Ibid. The record should also reflect that the Highlander workshop was where the students were introduced to what later were called “freedom songs.” Guy Carawan and Zilphia Horton introduced the activists to several songs, including “We Shall Not Be Moved,” “Keep Your Eye on the Prize,” “This Little Light of Mine,” and “We Shall Overcome,” which became the anthem of the movement. See pages 147-48. According to Pete Seeger, featured in a Public Broadcasting Association documentary aired on WPBA, June 4, 2009, entitled *Freedom Songs*, SNCC was responsible for popularizing “We Shall Overcome.”

The most significant step in the formation of SNCC was of course the Shaw University “Southwide Student Leadership Conference on Nonviolent Resistance to Segregation,” held April 15-17⁸⁰, a gathering that attracted more than 200 participants, double the number expected by Baker and surpassing the Highlander total. The Shaw conference was a high point for the Nashville students who sent sixteen delegates, the largest contingent there. Hank Thomas, a Howard University student, recalled that the Nashville delegation was the most impressive of all. In his eyes, they carried a swagger and were already famous, having been seen on television and profiled in newspapers. The Nashville students were hands down the most battle-hardened activists present and, consequently, because of their collective experience, battle scars, and warrior mentality, they exuded confidence and trust that were evident to observers like Thomas that made him seek their company over his own Howard colleagues.⁸¹ It is evident that because of Lawson’s teachings, the Nashville activists had already begun to construct the Beloved Community. This is what Thomas observed when he spoke about the trust between them. As SNCC matured, one of the primary characteristics that defined it was the bond of trust between the activists who had endured the struggle together, and SNCC disintegrated when those bonds were broken.⁸² Although it is difficult to measure Nashville’s contribution to this development, it is clear it had some influence in SNCC’s formation. The sophistication of the Nashville students and their influence upon SNCC was evident at the Shaw University conference. In describing the Nashville delegation, Carson wrote:

One of the largest delegations at the Raleigh conference and the one that would subsequently provide SNCC with a disproportionate share of its

⁸⁰ Ransby, 240. Both Barbara Ransby and Clayborne Carson list April 16-18 as the official dates of the conference, but documents from the SNCC Papers list April 15-17 as the dates, Friday through Sunday. One document shows a 7:30 p.m. opening session on Friday the 15th. See the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee Papers, 1952-1972, Microfilm, Reel 11, Woodruff Library, Emory University, Atlanta, Georgia. See page 19 of Carson for date of April 16-18 as official conference dates.

⁸¹ Halberstam, 215-16.

⁸² See *In Struggle*, Part Two for seeds of SNCC’s demise.

leadership, was the Nashville student group. Though coming from varied backgrounds, the Nashville activists shared a commitment not simply to desegregation but also to Gandiism and to the Christian ideal of 'the beloved community.'⁸³

The Nashville group impressed others besides Hank Thomas, who felt that the founding conference was a place where the Nashville delegation came not so much to learn but to teach. Morehouse College student Julian Bond noted that the Nashville students were markedly independent. Even though Reverend Lawson had mentored them and shaped their philosophical outlook, Bond was impressed that they did not defer to him, not a surprising development. As noted in this work, Lawson cultivated a sense of ownership of the Movement within his pupils. This is seen during his expulsion ordeal when he denied charges that he was the leader of the sit-ins. It is also seen in the time and effort Lawson invested in the training process and in his willingness to abide by the decisions made by the Central Committee that decided that Lawson should not participate in the sit-ins, but instead remain at First Colored Baptist to coordinate sit-in activities.⁸⁴ Lawson understood that those taking the risks of public defiance of laws and social customs were the true owners of the Movement and therefore he sought no credit for nor control of the Movement. In order for the Nashville Movement to be successful, Lawson had to play a specific circumscribed role of mentor, coach, and advisor. Consequently, the Nashville students assumed responsibility for and ownership of the sit-ins and were for the most part devoid of oversized egos, with the exception of James Bevel. David Halberstam stated that Hank Thomas concluded that in terms of the presence of inner rivalries and jealousies, "those young people seemed wondrously immune to any of that."⁸⁵ To the Nashville students, the Movement was about the overall goal of creating the Beloved Community and not about individual

⁸³ Carson, 21.

⁸⁴ Bennett interview of Lawson.

⁸⁵ Halberstam, 216.

aspirations or power. The independence exhibited by the Nashville corps became the model for SNCC's independence, one of its defining qualities. Ella Baker cultivated this trait at the founding conference, adding to what Reverend Lawson and Myles Horton had already taught the students at previous workshops. A more accurate historiography of the student movement gives Baker, Horton and Lawson proportionate credit for fostering the students' independent streak rather than Baker alone.⁸⁶

Besides Baker, the most influential individual at the conference was Reverend Lawson, tapped by Baker as the keynote speaker. No other person in the nation had a clearer understanding of the concept of nonviolent direct action and no one else had contributed more to preparing the next generation of young leaders. Lawson had more to do with the impartation of the philosophy of nonviolence upon the student movement than any other individual. This is not to diminish the role of Dr. King in popularizing it, but rather to point out that by 1960 King was still a relative neophyte on the subject while Lawson was a master. King acknowledged Lawson's expertise at the SCLC's annual conference in Nashville in September 1961. In introducing Lawson as the keynote speaker, King said:

It is natural to think of James Lawson as [a] keynote speaker. James Lawson stands out as one of the best interpreters of the philosophy and technique of nonviolence as we can find anywhere in the United States . . . He has stood out as a person familiar with the philosophy of nonviolence in all its dimensions. Some time ago I read that Jim Lawson was a disciple of Martin Luther King on the philosophy of nonviolence. This is very interesting to me because I'm sure Jim Lawson knew about nonviolence before Martin Luther King and he knows more about it than Martin Luther King . . . If anything, I am a disciple of Jim Lawson.⁸⁷

⁸⁶ For a hint of this attitude among student activists, see Julian Bond's comments in episode twenty-two, "The Atlanta Student Movement," in *Will the Circle Be Unbroken?* In his memoir, John Lewis talked about the changes brought forth by the new decade of 1960 and how in Nashville students felt an urge to force changes rather than sit idly to wait for them to come. See chapter six.

⁸⁷ Fuson Papers, audio recording, "September 1961 SCLC Meeting Nashville," Box 4. (Box 4 audiotapes not in a folder.)

Dr. King's assessment of Lawson's role in the development of American nonviolence was not hyperbole or any overly generous compliment of one Black preacher by another. Long before Lawson came to Nashville, while he was still a student at Oberlin College in the fall of 1956, King had urged him to move to the South and join the emerging movement, recognizing then that Lawson had a body of knowledge and experience that no other Black person possessed.⁸⁸

At the Shaw conference, although Dr. King's presence attracted a great deal of attention, he wielded much less influence upon the students than did Reverend Lawson. While King's pre-conference comments presaged the formation of a permanent student organization and identified strategic trends such as voluntary jail time, Lawson's keynote address resonated much more with the new generation of leaders, and as Carson noted, "expressed a visionary set of ideas that distinguished the student activists both from the rest of society and from more moderate civil rights leaders. Lawson insisted that the foundation of the sit-ins were neither legal, sociological, nor radical, but were moral and spiritual. The sit-ins forced the white South to confront its sins and had stripped the 'segregationist power structure of its major weapon: the manipulation of law or law enforcement to keep the Negro in his place'"⁸⁹ These words echoed Lawson's rationale for his actions during the early phase of the Nashville sit-ins when he was expelled from Vanderbilt, a development that no doubt gave him stature and made him a living sacrifice for the very philosophy that he espoused.

The most controversial remarks uttered by Lawson were his denunciation of the NAACP and middle class conservatism. He said the sit-ins were "a judgment on middle-class convention, half-efforts to deal with radical social evil," and that the NAACP deserved specific criticism for

⁸⁸ Halberstam, 13-16.

⁸⁹ Carson, 22-23.

emphasizing “fund-raising and court action rather than developing our greatest resource, a people no longer the victims of racial evil who can act in a disciplined manner to implement the Constitution.”⁹⁰ This statement is significant for two reasons. First, it foreshadows the tendency of the student movement to criticize the conservative nature of adult civil rights organizations. At SNCC’s inception, Lawson sanctioned the right to publicly criticize sister civil rights organizations for ineffective strategies and leadership that inhibited the movement. Unlike King, he was not concerned with cordial relationships with other organizational leaders. His focus was on the advancement of the freedom agenda; organizational affiliations and their attending politics were unimportant.⁹¹ Secondly, and even more important, Lawson’s indictment of the NAACP is a significant component in the shift toward nonviolent direct action and thereby a seismic move away from the NAACP’s legal strategy. At this stage, the SCLC had not yet mounted a direct action campaign. Yet Lawson was already the co-architect, along with Reverend Smith, of a sit-in campaign that was gaining more acclaim with time. Students at the Shaw conference were more impressed with Lawson than with King because he denounced traditional civil rights organizations like the NAACP and their strategies in favor of a more aggressive and confrontational style of leadership. To student activists, Lawson seemed more representative of the new leadership vanguard coming to the forefront in 1960. King and the SCLC seemed to represent a more moderate style of leadership that was less appealing to the students.⁹² Lawson’s bold pronouncements coupled with Ella Baker’s “Bigger Than a Hamburger” speech⁹³ at the Shaw conference gave student nonviolent direct action the purpose, direction, infrastructure, and

⁹⁰ Ibid., 23.

⁹¹ Pages 264-65 of Taylor Branch’s *Parting the Waters* gives a hint of King’s obsession with placating the hyper-sensitive Roy Wilkins at the NAACP.

⁹² Carson, 22.

⁹³ In addition to her published article in *The Southern Patriot*, Baker also gave a speech by the same title at the Shaw Conference. See Lewis, page 114. Interestingly, Lewis recalled the title of the speech as “More Than a Hamburger.”

support systems that it needed to challenge the legal strategy as the most effective or only acceptable form of activism.

The most important imprint that Lawson had upon SNCC was philosophical. According to Constance Curry, who attended the founding conference and along with Baker became an adult advisor, Reverend Lawson issued a call for the new student organization to embrace nonviolence as a way of life.⁹⁴ In the estimation of Clayborne Carson, when a conference delegate suggested that a decision be reached on the “goals, philosophy, future, and structure of the movement,” Lawson insisted that priority be first given to the discussion of the philosophy of nonviolence and then to integration as a goal. This led to the adoption of what became SNCC’s statement of purpose, a statement that Carson says Lawson wrote. The statement has the ring of Lawson’s mature, sophisticated, Christian-inspired, Gandhian-influenced social change philosophy that he had been imparting into students and adults since he first arrived in Nashville in 1958:

We affirm the philosophy or religious ideal of nonviolence as the foundation of our purpose, the presupposition of our faith, and the manner of our action. Nonviolence as it grows from Judaic-Christian traditions seeks a social order of justice permeated by love. Integration of human endeavor represents the crucial first step towards such a society.

Through nonviolence, courage displaces fear, love transforms hate. Acceptance dissipates prejudice, hope ends despair. Peace dominates war; faith reconciles doubt. Mutual regard cancels enmity. Justice for all overthrows injustice. The redemptive community supersedes systems of gross social immorality.

Love is the central motif of nonviolence. Love is the force by which God binds man to Himself and man to man. Such love goes to the extreme; it remains loving and forgiving even in the midst of hostility. It matches the capacity to absorb evil, all the while persisting in love.

⁹⁴ Constance Curry, “Wild Geese to the Past,” in *Deep in My Heart: Nine White Women in the Freedom Movement* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2000), 15; See Mary King’s *Freedom Song: A Personal Story of the 1960s Civil Rights Movement* (New York: William Morrow and Company, 1987), 279, for a brief discussion of the divergent opinions within SNCC over whether nonviolence was a way of life or a useful tactic, an issue King notes was never resolved.

By appealing to conscience and standing on the moral nature of human existence, nonviolence nurtures the atmosphere in which reconciliation and justice become actual possibilities.⁹⁵

In addition to Lawson's influence, the Nashville activists also lent leadership, particularly Marion Barry, John Lewis, and Diane Nash. Barry, who was from Bevel's hometown of Itta Bena, Mississippi, and was a graduate student in chemistry at Fisk, had a charm and natural ease around other people, making him the most naturally gifted politician at the conference. Because Nashville and Atlanta had the largest delegations, the first chair was expected to come from one of these two camps. Accordingly, an unofficial deal was brokered that put the headquarters in Atlanta and gave Nashville the interim chairmanship to Marion Barry of Nashville. Initially, most in the Nashville group thought that widely admired Diane Nash would be nominated. But for some reason, she came late to the election and by the time she arrived Barry had been elected chair, a position held until the fall of 1960. Although there is no way to measure the role of sexism in the election, several of Nash's friends believed that gender worked against her. But Barry was now chair and he held the position until the fall of 1960 when he went to graduate school at the University of Tennessee.⁹⁶

John Lewis was the other Nashville activist who served as SNCC chair, a position held for three years, the longest term of any chair. He was elected chair during a week of chaos and momentous developments. On June 11, 1963, President John Kennedy announced on national television that he was sending to Congress a sweeping civil rights bill that became the Civil Rights Act of 1964. That same day, Governor George Wallace infamously stood in the door at the University of Alabama to block the court-ordered admission of James Hood and Vivian

⁹⁵ Carson, 23-24.

⁹⁶ Carson, 21, 25; Halberstam, 218-19.

Malone. Shortly after midnight on June 12, Medgar Evers was assassinated by white supremacist Byron de la Beckwith. Two days later, Lewis was summoned by SNCC headquarters to an emergency meeting to replace Chuck McDew who was resigning as chair. Rumors swirled that Lewis would replace McDew because McDew had burned himself out under a relentless fund-raising campaign and a more action-oriented chair was needed. Lewis was seen as the ideal replacement. He had been arrested twenty-four times by then and this seemed to carry a great deal of weight with other SNCC members.⁹⁷

Clayborne Carson contends that the Shaw conference “represents the peak of influence within SNCC for Lawson and his Nashville group.” He continued by saying, “As the influence of the Lawson group waned, secular influences grew in importance. Nonetheless, the rhetoric of nonviolent direct action and the moralistic orientation of the Nashville movement continued to pervade SNCC through the early 1960s.”⁹⁸ This argument needs reframing. Carson implies that the gist of Nashville’s influence was religious and moralistic. While Carson’s claim is correct, the influence of the Nashville Movement upon SNCC goes deeper. In a 1969 interview with fellow activist Archie Allen, John Lewis alluded to the pervasive nature of the Nashville movement and its far-reaching impact. “I think what happened in Nashville . . . what influenced the Nashville movement and what made the Nashville student movement also heavily influenced SNCC. Maybe the spirit of Nashville was transferred or injected into SNCC and I think it prevailed with SNCC until, for the most part, until late ’65.”⁹⁹ More than simply imparting spiritual and moralistic values, Nashville activists set a new standard for student leadership that others could emulate. Never before had students led the charge, using new tactics with a determination to proceed with or without adult approval. The students in Nashville were helping

⁹⁷ Lewis, 198-200.

⁹⁸ Carson, 24-25.

⁹⁹ Allen interview transcript of Lewis, 54.

to shape a new protest dynamic that shaped an entire decade of protests. Their influence went far beyond simple religious and moral dimensions. These students articulated the tone and tenor of an entire generation of young people.

The “spirit of Nashville” that Lewis referred to had multiple dimensions that not only included the philosophical, religious, moral, and leadership elements, but also more intangible components such as self-confidence, humility, dedication, and a sense of self-determination that came to define SNCC. Through the sit-ins, the Nashville students best demonstrated what young people could contribute toward Black freedom. In fact, they proved that such freedom was not possible without them. Although all of the students at the Shaw conference and many who were not ushered in a new protest paradigm, it was the Nashville group who most astutely demonstrated the power to begin transforming racial relations and thereby inaugurated an era of nonviolent direct action that came to define the Civil Rights Movement. And that legacy of direct action does not just include the battle against segregation that dominated the scene from 1960 to 1963, but it also includes the period of heavy voter registration initiatives that characterized the years 1964 and 1965.

As Mary King put it, “To the extent that there was an ideological nucleus or nerve center for SNCC in the early years, when a vision of an integrated society achieved through nonviolence still permeated our thinking, it was found in a group of student leaders from Nashville.”¹⁰⁰ It is not so much whether the Nashville group had peak influence at any given point in the life of SNCC or whether a Christian moralistic perspective superseded secular influences or vice versa. The issue is the extent of the influence and the evidence indicates that

¹⁰⁰ King, 277.

Nashville was the pulse of the student movement and left an imprint upon SNCC that remained until 1966.¹⁰¹

Only two days after the Shaw conference, one of the most significant development in the Nashville movement occurred. On Tuesday morning, April 19 at approximately 5:30 a.m., a passing car tossed a bomb through the window of the home of Z. Alexander Looby, the students' lead attorney. Although the powerful explosion nearly completely destroyed the home, the Loobys were not injured.¹⁰² This premeditated act, the first significant violence since the bombing of Hattie Cotton Elementary School in the late 1950s, was a turning point in the local movement. It energized, mobilized, and united the Black community and it set the stage for victory in the downtown lunch counter fight. According to Greenfield Pitts, a manager at Harvey's, the largest department store in town, "the deed was done; it deprived those who opposed the desegregation of the lunch counters of their last remaining social and moral legitimacy."¹⁰³

The powerful blast was heard for blocks and word quickly spread about the incident. The Central Committee and Reverends Lawson and Vivian called a morning meeting at Clark Memorial United Methodist. It was decided to sponsor a march that day to city hall, a development that became the first large protest march of the Civil Rights Movement. Lewis' memoir contends it was the first such mass march in the history of America.¹⁰⁴

¹⁰¹ For a discussion of how Lewis was first re-elected and then replaced by Stokely Carmichael as chair of SNCC, a development that paved the way for SNCC to embrace and popularize Black Power, see pages 363-69 of *Walking with the Wind*.

¹⁰² Halberstam, 228.

¹⁰³ Audio recording, "Democratic Movements," from WRFG, date unknown, Atlanta, Georgia, from the private collection of Clifford Kuhn.

¹⁰⁴ See Kuhn interview of Vivian for assertion that April 19, 1960, march was first large march of the movement. Lewis' more sweeping claim is found on page 115 and is contradicted by the march of the Bonus Army in the spring of 1932 in Washington, D.C., when tens of thousands of World War I veterans and supporters took to the streets demanding that their bonus for service be paid early. See <http://www.eyewitnesstohistory.com/snprelief4.htm>.

If the bombers intended to intimidate movement leaders, they wildly miscalculated. Like the February arrest of the students, April 19 became a defining moment. After meeting with Reverends Lawson and Vivian, students from the Central Committee began rallying the troops at all the Black colleges and the nearby high school. Many in the African American community saw the bombing as part of a pattern of intimidation designed to stop the movement. In Lewis' words, "The intent was clear. At first we students had been a target. But there had been too many of us. Then it was Lawson . . . Now it was Looby." Bernard LaFayette concurred with Lewis, but also added that the bombing triggered the proper response for a social warrior. He said, "But they didn't realize there was a greater force than the legal force . . . and that when we got ready to respond, we responded to that, not by going to get some prosecutor to find the person who bombed it. We decided to respond that day and before the dust cleared from the bombing."¹⁰⁵ The bombers had no idea that they were dealing with a group of warriors who had just been energized by the formation of a new student protest vehicle. At every major juncture of the battle, these foot-soldiers felt justified in their cause. The pro-segregationists forces did not know how inspired these warriors were. They were girded by a faith exemplified in one of James Bevel's commonplace sermonettes that equated their struggle to the biblical exodus. Jim Zwerg, a white exchange student at Fisk and activist, recalled that,

Bevel would frequently give a little sermonette . . . I mean, talking about Moses going up against Pharaoh with all of his armies and all of his horses and all of his chariots and all of his this and that with nothing but a dried up stick. And that stick was his faith in God. And that stick, for us, is our nonviolence. And we can go up against the police with all their paddy wagons and all this . . .¹⁰⁶

The segregationists had no comparable counter-weapon.

¹⁰⁵ Halberstam, 230; Bennett interview of Bevel, LaFayette, and Patton.

¹⁰⁶ Rachel Lawson interview of Jim Zwerg, February 10, 2006, Nashville Public Library Civil Rights Oral History Collection.

The plan was to meet at Tennessee A & I and march to downtown. Reverends Vivian and Lawson had already telegraphed Mayor West alerting him to meet them at 1:30 “beneath your office window.” In order to orchestrate such an undertaking on short notice, the Central Committee decided to pull protesters from the college campuses directly. James Bevel used a little deception in his recruitment. He “went to TSU classrooms and said the president said be under the light at 11:30 ready to march to see the mayor, knowing people would assume I was talking about President Davis when he was really referring to Diane Nash. The whole campus marched downtown.” In addition to Bevel’s deception, Bernard LaFayette, according to Reverend Vivian, pulled more A & I students by using the school’s loudspeaker system and broadcasting word of the march across the entire campus.¹⁰⁷

Once the A & I students were mobilized, the march proceeded toward Jefferson Street and 18th Avenue where Fisk students and Pearl High School students joined in. As the march line made its way toward downtown, the number of demonstrators dramatically increased. Local newspapers estimated the crowd at 2,000 when it reached city hall, but Lewis and Vivian believed that figures of 4,000 to 5,000 were more accurate. Reverend Vivian remembered that it was a silent march with participants walking three abreast, an idea he borrowed from the silent anti-lynching marches of the first decade of the twentieth century. For Lewis, the sight and complete silence of a nearly endless line of Black and white marchers “was a stupendous scene.” It motivated people to leave their homes and join the line. Motorists drove along beside the marchers at the speed of their footsteps. “The last mile or so,” said Lewis, “The only sound was the sound of our footsteps, all those feet.”¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁷ Lewis, 115; Bennett interview of Bevel, LaFayette, and Patton. When Bevel referred to Nash as “president,” he meant that she was president of the Nashville Student Movement, the primary student protest group. The Central Committee was the decision-making body of the Nashville Student Movement; Bennett interview of Vivian.

¹⁰⁸ Bennett interview of Vivian; Lewis, 115.

Even more climatic was the verbal jousting that ensued involving Reverend Vivian, Diane Nash, and Mayor West on the front steps of city hall. The last time that West was summoned to meet movement leaders, he precipitated a crisis at Vanderbilt. This time his pronouncements broke the back of the resistance to lunch counter desegregation and propelled the Nashville movement to national prominence. Reverend Vivian's recollection is that he and Nash tag-teamed West, using the prevailing racial and gender codes to the mayor's disadvantage. The plan was for Vivian to speak first with Nash cornering him if West attempted to duck Vivian's demands. The racial patriarchy would not allow West to be publicly chastised by a Black man, a scene that would imply racial equality. Such a scenario would be a social and political disaster for the mayor personally and a threat to white male patriarchal authority in general. Therefore, West's only option would be to turn to Nash who would continue the verbal assault.¹⁰⁹

The trap laid for West worked much better than anticipated. After verbally jousting with Vivian, the mayor wound up cornered by Nash who asked if he would use his office's prestige to end discrimination. Boastfully he replied, "Little lady, I stopped segregation seven years ago at the airport when I took office, and there has been no trouble since." Nash had her victory when she retorted, ". . . do you recommend that the lunch counters be desegregated?" "Yes," West replied simply.¹¹⁰ In a brilliant way, Nash cornered the mayor in her territory, the moral ground. During this exchange he admitted in response to a protester's question that segregation was immoral. Once that admission was made, he was trapped in a web of inquiry that led to his immortal "yes." Personally for Nash, her successful sparring with West proved her value as the

¹⁰⁹ Bennett interview of Vivian.

¹¹⁰ Lewis, 116; "Scene on the Mayor's Steps," from side two of *The Nashville Sit-In Story: Songs and Scenes of Nashville Lunch Counter Desegregation*.

then lone young female voice in the ranks of movement leadership, a designation that she later enhanced during the Freedom Rides.

Diane Nash almost single-handedly settled the downtown lunch counter dispute by forcing the mayor's hand. Her manipulation of Mayor West, a seasoned veteran of politics, was a masterpiece of maneuvering and quick thinking for an activist so young. The next day's headlines in the *Tennessean* told the whole story: "INTEGRATE COUNTERS—MAYOR." West's words broke a log jam in the negotiations. Store officials, who had grown weary of the sit-ins and were ready to desegregate but hesitated because no one wanted to move first, now they could blame West.¹¹¹

The seismic significance of the events of April 19 was symbolized by the arrival of Dr. King the next day when he addressed a packed house at Fisk's gymnasium. In his trademark ability to articulate the essence of a movement, King said the Nashville movement was "the best organized and the most disciplined in the Southland." He continued by saying, "I came to Nashville not to bring inspiration, but to gain inspiration from the great movement that has taken place in this community." King's words were true because, according to Reverend Vivian, ". . . we were the only trained movement in the nation."¹¹²

Dr. King acknowledged what became evident to the rest of the nation on May 10 when the six targeted downtown lunch counter desegregated. As a result of this breakthrough, a path toward new race relations was forged. In an article for *Presbyterian Life*, John R. Fry wrote, "Securing agreement for the merchants was a major breakthrough for the Negroes in Nashville, and to the South as a whole a clear indication of a brand new social situation." This new social arrangement was indicated by the remarks of a Black busboy in the coffee shop at the local

¹¹¹ Ibid.

¹¹² Ibid., 117; Bennett interview of Vivian.

Andrew Jackson Hotel who said, “We’ve got the white man on the run for the first time, and we’re going to keep him on the run until we get what we want.”¹¹³ These comments not only indicated a new reality for many local whites, but a new attitude about interracial relations and a new confidence and self-worth by young African Americans. The old posture of deference to white preferences was beginning to erode. As confirmation, Fry noted that “Virtually the entire community has participated in the protest movement and has thereby won for itself a new sense of self-respect and power.”¹¹⁴ Fry’s comments touch upon one of the most important contributions that all student leaders made during this era: the removal of fear as a weapon of oppression and the concomitant restoration of Black self-respect. One of the main reasons why the previous generation of leaders had not taken maximum advantage of the opportunities afforded by *Brown* was because they feared the consequences of “asking” for too much too fast. Fear represented an obstacle to further progress. Lawson’s nonviolence workshops helped activists to manage the fear and prevent its paralyzing effects. As Bevel’s sermonette illustrated, the Nashville warriors justified their actions based on biblical narratives which often required them to act out of divine authority without regard for the consequences. Hence, these activists not only accepted the righteousness of their cause, but also vowed to sacrifice their lives if necessary. Bernard LaFayette expressed the commitment when he said, “And that if it meant going to jail, if it meant being beaten, if it meant death, because there was no turning back . . .”¹¹⁵ Attitudes such as the one displayed by both the young man at the hotel coffee shop and LaFayette represented new features of the Black liberation struggle. Nashville represented one of the first seedlings in this direction and their maturation in the area of nonviolent direct action

¹¹³ Stahlman Papers, John R. Fry, “A New Nashville?: The [O]pening of [E]ating [F]acilities to Negroes [S]ignals the [P]ossibility of [N]ew [R]acial [U]nderstanding,” *Presbyterian Life*, 13 June 1960, 11, Box V-29, Folder 15.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁵ Findlay interview of LaFayette.

helped spawn a whole generation of warriors willing to make the ultimate sacrifice for the cause, a fact seen most vividly during the Freedom Rides.

The success of the downtown lunch counter campaign was a direct result of the Lawson workshops and the corresponding relationship with the adult community. The workshops prepared the students for every possible circumstance. Bernard LaFayette told an interviewer in 2002 that the role-playing exercises prepared them for the violence they ultimately faced and for the hardships of jail. In fact, the Lawson training allowed the activists from ABT in particular to both transform the guardians of segregation into people who could see the humanity of Black people and transformed the jails into sanctuaries and badges of honor. As LaFayette put it, “. . . nonviolence is all about taking lemons and making lemonade. And what is designed to cause you to suffer and to humiliate you, you wear with a badge of honor.” When the students were arrested the first time and made to shovel snow, LaFayette said that they “shoveled snow like Toynbee wrote history and Beethoven wrote music and Picasso painted . . .” After finishing one side of the street, they asked if they could shovel the other side as well as the parking lot, and the jailer yelled, “Get back in that jail!” During extended jail stays, LaFayette and his cellmates created a daily routine that included devotion time, a lecture period, and a quiet hour. The activists conditioned the jailers to alter their behavior by not interrupting quiet hour with mail delivery. The jailers agreed to come back after quiet hour ended. LaFayette noted that this example demonstrated that “we had control over our own schedules, and even though we were in jail, we were free.” And at the end of one jail term, according to LaFayette, “. . . the jailer—the warden—stood at the door and shook each of our hands coming out. And he said, ‘You’re the best prisoners I’ve ever had. Please come back.’” LaFayette put the capstone on the jail experiences by noting that, “But when you’re in jail, you have an opportunity to transform.

Because, you see, here's what happens. The place does not make the person, but the person defines the place."¹¹⁶

Besides its transformative powers, the success of the Nashville sit-ins had other important ramifications that elevated the city and its leadership's public profile. One of these ramifications was the media frenzy that descended upon Nashville. Prior to the April 19 bombing or the eventual lunch counter desegregation, both CBS and NBC filmed documentaries featuring the Nashville sit-ins. On March 25, 1960, CBS sent a film crew to shoot *Anatomy of a Demonstration*, which featured Lawson and his workshops. The documentary came at a time when The Lawson Affair was still a hot news item, perhaps adding fuel to that controversy. CBS's treatment of the sit-ins was very sympathetic. The narrator, L. Douglas Edwards, described the student movement as "the beginning of challenging a system of evil."¹¹⁷

The documentary impacted both the state and local leadership. The pro-sit-in orientation of the CBS production enraged Tennessee Governor Buford Ellington who charged that CBS was working with local activists to stage a publicity stunt, an accusation based on the fact that a sit-in occurred on the same day that filming for the documentary began. At the local level, while the documentary was being filmed, the Biracial Committee announced that it was ready to offer a settlement proposal, but refused to do so because of the March 25 sit-in.¹¹⁸ It appeared that Governor Ellington wanted to distract from the issues raised by the sit-ins by making reactionary and inflammatory remarks on behalf of pro-segregationists across the state. The members of the Biracial Committee seemed to follow the governor's lead, hoping for a reprieve from the pressure to desegregate.

¹¹⁶ Bennett interview of Bevel, LaFayette, and Patton.

¹¹⁷ L. Douglas Edward, *Anatomy of a Demonstration*, 30 min., CBC documentary.

¹¹⁸ Fuson Papers, Julia Moore, "From Jubilee Bell Tower," *Fisk News*, Summer 1960, Box 3 Folder 8; <http://www.crmvet.org/docs/sitin/siin-09.pdf>.

More significant were the two documentaries produced by NBC, *NBC White Paper # 2: Sit-In*, that aired in December 1960, and *The Nashville Sit-In Story* that debuted January 1961. *The Nashville Sit-In Story*, combined with the May 10 lunch counter desegregation coup, made Nashville the model sit-in movement city. Unlike the CBS production which featured Reverend Lawson as the guru of nonviolence, the NBC films highlighted student leaders, particularly Lewis, Bevel, Nash, LaFayette, Barry, Angeline Butler, and Paul LaPrad.¹¹⁹ As a testament to the impact that *The Nashville Sit-In Story* had on the nation, Septima Clark recalled that:

Throughout the Southland, we took that movie for them to see how a community rallied around to see suffering inflicted upon these kids, to see the way they were able to take suffering, and leadership developed from this was most marvelous. And it has led to all other things I think—MFD and the great challenge they had . . . I remember being on the West Coast at a school in Pasadena and students there talked about the way girls and boys in Nashville conducted themselves during the sit-ins . . . I remember it really spread and went everywhere. The number of places I carried the film and showed it.¹²⁰

The Nashville Sit-In Story also made a life-altering impression upon Andrew Young, then working in New York for the National Council of Churches. In his autobiography, Young said that the “Nashville students nearly perfected the sit-ins” and that their sit-ins were “also the most comprehensive of sit-ins.” Students from Peabody College, Vanderbilt, Fisk, Tennessee A & I, and from the North participated.” Young also concluded that “elements that came together in Nashville would have a long-term impact on the course of the civil rights movement . . . Powerful forces for change were unleashed through the sit-ins.” Young’s assessment of the

¹¹⁹ Chet Huntley, narrator, *NBC White Paper # 2: Sit-In*, 60 min., 1960, NBC documentary, in Nashville Public Library, Civil Rights Room, Nashville, Tennessee; Andrew Young, *An Easy Burden: The Civil Rights Movement and the Transformation of America* (New York: Harper Collins, 1996), 127.

¹²⁰ Archie Allen, *John Lewis Interview Transcript*, v. 1, interview of Septima Clark, 21 September 1968, Knoxville, Tennessee, transcript in Nashville Public Library, Civil Rights Room, Nashville, Tennessee. In this quotation, Clark was explaining how the staff of the Citizenship School used the documentary on the Nashville sit-ins as a training tool.

significance of the Nashville sit-ins ratifies its role in the vanguard of the Black liberation struggle. He noted that “This was the beginning of the direct action movement and many of us realized this was a crossroads in the struggle to make the South more equitable. These actions transcended the legal action strategy of the NAACP and introduced a new and energetic force into the civil rights movement.”¹²¹

Nashville’s sit-in success helped to prompt Highlander to hold two conferences in the first half of 1961. In February, a meeting entitled “New Alliances in the South,” featuring thirty-one representatives of organizations founded because of the sit-ins, was held for the purpose of studying the lessons learned from the Nashville and Atlanta sit-ins. At the conference, Young recalled that the Nashville leaders were more impressive in person than on television. He also felt that they were the vanguard of a movement that would only grow and strengthen. In April, Highlander held another workshop precipitated by the extraordinary example of Nashville and other sit-in centers. The workshop, “New Frontiers for College Students,” assessed the impact of the sit-ins and discussed future directions. Featured workshop facilitators Reverend Vivian and John Lewis¹²² gave further evidence of Nashville’s leadership prowess. These workshops gave evidence that not only should the civil rights community in general take note that sit-ins were an effective protest method, but also signaled that Nashville was a rising center of the sit-in movement with much to teach other movement centers.

As a result of *The Nashville Sit-In Story* and the Highlander workshops, Young and his wife Jean returned to the South where he accepted a position at Highlander as the director of an adult leadership training program that used literacy as the basis for voter registration drives. This program later became known as the Dorchester, Georgia, based Citizenship School, the most

¹²¹ Young, 127-28.

¹²² Young, 129-30; Glen, 146.

successful training program of the Civil Rights Movement. According to Young, when the program was turned over to the SCLC, *The Nashville Sit-In Story* became a regular part of the training used to demonstrate that people had power and could change things without money and guns, using only the power of their souls.¹²³ Young's statement was Lawson's prophecy come true. In the fall of 1959 he told doubtful students that, "Your idea is not small . . . and because your idea is not small, your numbers will not be either."¹²⁴ Based on the reaction to the Nashville sit-ins, his prediction could not have been more precise.

As Young's comments indicate, the Nashville movement revealed the value of leadership training. Although Myles Horton recognized this long before anyone else in the South, Lawson and Smith tailored a model that perfectly matched the religious traditions and oppressive conditions of a specific community. Horton failed to understand how social action had to be church-based. Additionally, Smith and Lawson sensed that the timing was right, that students were essential to the success of the endeavor, and that the whole community needed to be engaged. And as Andrew Young pointed out, all of the elements came together in 1960 in Nashville to inaugurate a new paradigm in social change practice. The airing of *The Nashville Sit-In Story* not only marked Nashville for greatness, but also gave other activists a visual "how-to" manual for their local movements that accelerated rapidly. This development both helped spread social protest action and contributed to the proliferation of training modules in leadership development and nonviolence by major civil rights organizations such as SNCC and the SCLC.¹²⁵

¹²³ Young, 145.

¹²⁴ Halberstam, 60.

¹²⁵ In addition to the Citizenship School, the SCLC employed Reverend Lawson, Diane Nash, James Bevel, and Reverend Vivian, often using them as nonviolence trainers. See chapter nine of *An Easy Burden* for discussion of the role of Nash, Bevel, and Lawson in training Birmingham activists. See Kuhn interview of Vivian for discussion of his role as trainer.

An assessment of the Nashville sit-ins must also take into account the inspiration and energy that it generated. Most notably, Andrew and Jean Young returned to the South where Andrew began a legendary career of activism. Others were inspired in innumerable ways by the “spirit of Nashville,” including Sue Thrasher, a white student at Scarritt College in Nashville, who came to the city near the end of the first wave of Nashville’s sit-in movement. While there, Thrasher was drawn into the local student activist scene. One day another white student invited Thrasher to attend a mass meeting organized by the NCLC. Initially, she was reluctant to go, but later admitted that the experience changed her forever. “That evening changed me forever. I knew the night was over that I would never go back to being who I was before. It was the first time I had ever heard black people speak for themselves. The first time I got any real inkling about the costs and the pain of segregation. . . . It was my dazzling moment of clarity.”¹²⁶

The success of Nashville’s sit-ins made it obvious that similar tactics involving the physical occupation of a segregated space could lead to desegregation. Of course, Nashville activists realized this fairly early. Even before May 10, students demonstrated at the local bus terminal. In the spring and summer of 1960, leaders began mapping out a campaign to desegregate movie theaters, hotels, and grocery stores. May 1960 saw the emergence of a voter registration campaign that netted four hundred new Black voters. Other campaigns attacked segregated churches and other facilities holding on to Jim Crow policies, using a variety of tactics such as stand-ins, sleep-ins, and pray-ins. As almost a premonition to the Freedom Rides and fueled by the sit-ins, on the way home for Christmas break in December 1960, Lewis and LaFayette rode together at the front of a Greyhound bus and refused the bus driver’s orders to move to the back. Despite threats from the bus driver, the two young men had made up their

¹²⁶ Sue Thrasher, “Circle of Trust,” as cited in *Deep in Our Hearts: Nine White Women in the Freedom Movement* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2000), 221-22.

minds that, according to Lewis, “The last thing in the world we were going to do was move from that seat . . . and we did not budge.” They rode all the way to their destination with their “spirits . . . sky-high” from the year’s sit-in successes.¹²⁷

Nashville’s sit-in success also led to the solidification of broad community support and to more racial progress at the local level. Lewis noted that:

It brought together a coalition of . . . blacks, of liberal whites, particular like the academic community, the religious community—particularly the Jewish women’s group, the United Church Women, and the Unitarian Church. In addition, most of the lunch counters and restaurants in department stores and variety stores were desegregated, as a result of the sit-in movement of 1960 . . . These gains were quite important in solidifying the community and getting the community support because people were able to see tangible results. They saw victories. After one victory, people expected other breakthroughs.

The evidence for this groundswell of support is seen in the large financial contributions given directly to the NCLC beginning in early March and in the attendance at the mass meetings. Lewis recalled that the NCLC had been conducting mass meetings for a long time, gatherings that were rather “dry and somewhat routine” affairs. “But,” said Lewis, “not until the sit-ins occurred did the mass meetings become really mass meetings in the true sense of the word. They took on a religious, revival-type atmosphere which ran through all of the meetings. That was where people came to be inspired, to get information . . .”¹²⁸

The depth of local support and enthusiasm helps account for the sustained nature of the city’s movement. Although there were peaks and valleys, students and adults maintained relentless pressure on segregated institutions for years. The NCLC implemented an “Open City” policy that not only demanded total desegregation but also fair hiring and promotions for African

¹²⁷ Lewis, 96-97, 121-22; Allen interview transcript of Lewis, 60.

¹²⁸ Allen interview transcript of Lewis, 61.

Americans in the public and private sectors. By June of 1963, nearly all downtown hotels, motels, restaurants, and movie theaters had abandoned segregation.¹²⁹

Even though the success of the sit-in campaign stimulated multiple layers of activism, and did much to solidify local support, the role of Reverend Smith must not be neglected. While the Lawson workshops were critical, Reverend Smith's leadership style and personal integrity made the workshops and community cohesion possible. In addition to the training, one of the reasons that student activists were so self-confident was because of Smith's concern for their individual personal growth. He considered them to be thinking, capable young adults, and according to Bernard LaFayette, lavished them with an all-encompassing sense of security that sanctioned their struggle, that confirmed what they were doing was right, and that protected them from the worst abuses of racist white officials. Diane Nash noted that Smith and the NCLC freed the students from worries about funds, anchored their movement with a pre-existing organizational structure, and tied the students into the resources of the city's Black community. In return, Reverend Smith insisted that the student protests not be separate from but rather integrated with a larger local movement that harnessed indigenous energies and resources in the fight against social injustice.¹³⁰

In addition to his unwavering support of the students, Reverend Smith used his clout to marshal support for them among adults, effectively becoming a liaison between the two groups. First Baptist became a regular mass meeting site, serving as headquarters for the local movement, the staging ground for demonstrations, and the location for many strategy sessions. As a result, it did not take long for the community to stand strong behind the students. For sure, there was a substantial conservative Black establishment who questioned the actions of what

¹²⁹ Curry Papers, "News Release, 'Downtown Nashville Desegregates: Students Move on Employment Bias,'" Box 2 Folder 12.

¹³⁰ Meiers, 24-25, 29.

they considered to be an over-exuberant group of students. Reverend Smith skillfully mediated such tensions, as he also maintained movement cohesion during the sit-ins.¹³¹

It is easy to see how the effectiveness and power of the Nashville movement derived, in large measure, from Reverend Smith's leadership. He was the only one in Nashville who could connect all of the components of the movement together: the vision and skill of Lawson, the energy and enthusiasm of the student warriors, and the support of Black Nashville. This is perhaps what Andrew Young meant when he said that in Nashville all of the elements came together in 1960.

Nashville's sit-in movement symbolized the rise of a new leadership paradigm. On the way out was the old model of established Blacks who played by rules benefiting the racial status quo. Emerging was a younger, bolder, cohort ready to make demands without concern about established protocol, tradition, and pre-existing relationships. The old model was slow, dominated by elite men, often compromised away significant changes, and preferred negotiations and legal proceedings as the weapons of choice. The new paradigm demanded immediate change, would not compromise on the demand to end segregation, employed new tactics based on tested social change theory and Black liberation theology, and involved segments of the community traditionally excluded from decision-making.

The Nashville sit-in movement brought other changes related to the question of leadership dynamics. It proved that young people could be responsible, capable leaders with the proper adult support, guidance, and resources. One of the implied elements of the community support garnered by Nashville students is that they earned the trust of the community at-large, no doubt a result of the guidance offered by adults such as Smith, Lawson, and Vivian and because of the students' near flawless decision-making. The Black community came to trust the students

¹³¹ Ibid., 27-28.

because they always seemed to make the right decisions. Of even greater significance was the Nashville revelation that Black freedom struggle could not succeed without trained youth leadership. As Reverend Vivian remarked, what made Nashville such a great movement center was the fact that it was the only trained movement. This fact allowed the city to quickly eclipse Greensboro, lay the foundation for SNCC, become a model for other sit-in movements, and stimulate a tradition of leadership development by civil rights organizations. Obviously, these developments translated into major benefits for the larger Civil Rights Movement and the Black community at-large.

One of the most obvious consequences of the Nashville sit-ins is the emergence of a band of warriors with unparalleled dedication, courage, leadership skills, and longevity in the arena of social change activism. This group includes Bevel, LaFayette, Lawson, Lewis, Nash, and Vivian. All of these individuals collectively played significant roles in every major civil rights campaign up to 1965. John Lewis and Diane Nash emerged as stellar leaders. In the spring and summer of 1960, Lewis traveled extensively as a popular speaker. Septima Clark named Lewis as the “most effective in carrying out the nonviolent techniques in civil rights,” and said that he was one of the “ones who got the whole community of Nashville rallying around them . . .”¹³² It was in Nashville where Diane Nash began gaining confidence in her leadership abilities at a time when no other Black women her age were exhibiting similar high-level leadership. Ella Baker provided a model for mature women’s leadership, but there was no peer model for Nash to emulate. For the most part, Nash began creating the model in 1960. In creating this new space for young, Black female leadership, Nash overcame her own insecurities and became one of the stars of the

¹³² Allen interview transcript of Clark, 3.

Nashville movement, positioning herself to become the first and most outstanding young female leader of national significance.¹³³

The sit-in poised Lewis and Nash for even greater feats of peerless leadership during the Freedom Rides, Lewis as a death-defying warrior ready to die for freedom and Nash as an uncompromising, level-headed, confident strategist and coordinator. Lewis, Nash, and the rest of the battalion were ready for the next challenge. The sit-ins successfully tested Lawson's social change theory and the ability of a group of young warriors to execute a well-conceived plan. The sit-ins also transformed these misfits into a cohesive cadre of warriors ready to take on more substantial challenges in the war against Jim Crow. As the most battle-hardened students leaders, as the next chapter will demonstrate, they were the only ones who had the experience, confidence, and support systems to save the Freedom Rides, and by inference, perhaps prevent the cessation of precious momentum that was building for social change.

¹³³ As Cynthia Griggs Fleming notes in chapter four of *Soon We Will Not Cry: The Liberation of Ruby Doris Smith Robinson* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 1998), Ruby Doris Smith did not begin to gain notoriety until February 1961 when she served thirty days in a Rock Hill, South Carolina, jail as part of a SNCC delegation supporting the jail-in campaign of nine Friendship College students, an episode that incidentally included Nash. Smith only took part in the jail-in by chance because her sister, Mary Ann, was selected to go, but backed out. Up to this point, Smith had never been involved with SNCC. Smith also joined the Freedom Rides in Birmingham after the infamous Mother's Day beating and rode the Birmingham-to-Montgomery leg. Her most noted achievement was her service as the highest ranking woman in SNCC.

CHAPTER 6: WHAT “FREEDOM WILL DEMAND”: THE NASHVILLE STUDENT MOVEMENT AND THE FREEDOM RIDES

In 1947, Bayard Rustin of CORE made a passionate statement that seemed to foreshadow a courage on the part of a small group of Nashville students. That year, he responded to criticism from the NAACP’s Thurgood Marshall about plans for a Journey of Reconciliation, a test of segregated interstate bus and rail transportation in the upper South and border states. Rustin wrote, “At times freedom will demand that its followers go into situations where even death is to be faced . . .”¹ Rustin’s words perfectly articulate the crossroads faced by the Freedom Riders on Mother’s day of 1961 after a severe beating by Alabama Klansmen in Birmingham. Going forward after Birmingham required a group of Nashville students to risk their lives. Had they not done so, the freedom struggle would likely have ground to a halt.

As it turned out, 1961 surpassed the previous year in terms of its heady accomplishments for Nashville activists. Even more significantly, it will be demonstrated that the principled intervention of Nashville students saved the general movement from certain disaster and in doing so opened up new directions for other activists and local movements, creating a cascade of momentum for the Black Freedom struggle. Because of the Nashville activists, the Freedom Rides did something that the sit-ins could not: force the federal government to intervene on behalf of Black people’s rights, a response that helped reveal the limits of white liberalism. As an ancillary note, the action of Nashville students on behalf of the Freedom Rides further illustrates

¹ Raymond Arsenault, *Freedom Riders*, 37.

how the forward progress of the movement was dependent upon student initiative, to a significant extent student leaders in Nashville.

An examination of the Freedom Rides reveals two phases, the CORE Phase and the Nashville Phase. The CORE Phase includes the Rides from Washington, D.C. to Birmingham, Alabama, a period from May 4 to Mother's Day, May 15, 1961. All Freedom Rider activity after May 15 was part of the Nashville Phase. The CORE Phase was terminated by calculated Klan violence. It also failed to reach its objective, involved only about eighteen Riders, represented a failure of Black leadership in a crisis, and did not draw upon direct collaboration with other civil rights organizations. The Nashville Phase, on the other hand, forced the end of segregated interstate travel, changed the Rides to a national, long-term phenomenon, engaged most major civil rights organizations in a joint collaboration, involved over three hundred Riders, injected the Black freedom struggle into Cold War politics, provoked conflict between state and federal authorities, planted colonies of students activists in Albany, Georgia, and Jackson, Mississippi, who had tremendous influence upon the overall movement, and pushed the core Nashville activists out of a local cocoon onto a much larger arena of activism. This can be seen as more proof that Lawson's agenda of producing a cadre of activists trained in nonviolent direct action was a stroke of genius. Specifically, Nash, Lewis, LaFayette, and Bevel demonstrated that they could operate effectively independent of their mentors.

While the Freedom Rides were intended to promote nonviolent direct action, they also provoked direct challenges to the philosophy. The Nashville Phase further established Nashville as the Movement's epicenter, attracting Black and white students from around the nation eager to join a growing army of young foot-soldiers. The new recruits who descended upon the Nashville hub brought new attitudes and ideas that challenged the tight discipline and principles of

nonviolence practiced there. Thus, as early as 1961, some of the seeds of Black Power were planted.

One of the more serious challenges to nonviolence came in Monroe, North Carolina, where local NAACP president Robert F. Williams spearheaded a movement based on armed self-defensive violence. Monroe became the center of a dispute between the advocates of nonviolence and the proponents of armed self-defense when Nashville seminary student Paul Brooks, James Forman and several Freedom Riders went to Monroe at Williams' request in order to help integrate the town's public facilities. Williams hoped to demonstrate the futility of using nonviolence in a violent place like Monroe and prove the worth of self defensive violence. Though his experiment with violent self-defense as a movement strategy failed, it introduced a persuasive argument and a cult figure around whom agents of Black Power such as Malcolm X and James Forman could persuasively repudiate nonviolence.²

Long before Nashville helped provoke challenges to nonviolence, the city had an early association with the Freedom Rides. This association with the Freedom Rides began in the summer of 1942 with Bayard Rustin, an early advocate of nonviolent direct action and a co-founder of CORE.³ That summer, Rustin was beaten and arrested by police in Nashville after he refused to sit in the "colored" section of a bus. Fortunately and ironically, he was soon released due to the apparent refusal of then assistant district attorney Ben West, to prosecute the case.⁴

² See Timothy Tyson's *Radio Free Dixie: Robert F. Williams and the Roots of Black Power* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 1999) for a discussion of Robert F. Williams' position on armed self defense. For Malcolm X's perspective on nonviolence, see his speech, "The Ballot or the Bullet" in Manning Marable and Leith Mullings' (editors) *Let Nobody Turn Us Around: Voices of Resistance, Reform, and Renewal, An African American Anthology* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2000). For James Forman's position on nonviolence, see his memoir *The Making of Black Revolutionaries*.

³ For a thorough assessment of the pre-Civil Rights Movement career of Bayard Rustin, see Jervis Anderson's *Bayard Rustin: Troubles I've Seen* (New York: HarperCollins, 1997).

⁴ Arsenault, 9. This was the same Ben West who was mayor of Nashville during the sit-ins.

Rustin's personal and unscripted "freedom ride" in 1942 figured in the decision to launch the Journey of Reconciliation, the precursor to the 1961 showdown. The Journey of Reconciliation, a 1947 CORE project, was designed to both secure a legacy for the organization in the arena of nonviolent direct action and to help destroy segregated interstate public transportation in the wake of the NAACP's paper tiger victory in the 1944 Supreme Court decision, *Morgan v. Commonwealth of Virginia*. This case resulted from the arrest of Irene Morgan in July 1944 in Virginia for refusing a Greyhound bus driver's orders to relinquish her seat. Avoiding the racial issue at the heart of the case, the Supreme Court ruled that the Virginia law requiring segregated public transportation violated the interstate commerce clause, leaving the NAACP with a hollow victory.⁵

The combination of Rustin's career as an activist and the disappointing outcome of the *Morgan* case made action by CORE a reality. In the summer of 1946, Rustin and a CORE colleague, George Houser, a white northerner and pacifist, held a series of discussions that evolved into the Journey of Reconciliation. The discussions involved the fading expectations that compliance that the *Morgan* ruling would soon occur and concern over recent attacks upon African Americans like Isaac Woodward who had been severely beaten by police in South Carolina for attempting to observe the *Morgan* ruling. These developments indicated a need for action, leading to a plan that again involved Nashville. Word of CORE's plans upset the NAACP's leadership, which was hostile to the practice of nonviolent direct action. In November of 1946, Thurgood Marshall that predicted the Journey of Reconciliation "would result in a

⁵ In the *Morgan* case, the NAACP argued on behalf of Irene Morgan that Virginia's statute on segregated public transportation also violated the Fourteenth Amendment's equal protection clause, infringed upon Congressional authority, and threatened a national tradition of free movement across state lines. Although the ruling nullified the Virginia statute, it did not address the matter of intrastate passengers nor whether its edict applied to other modes of public transportation such as railroads. Besides the high court's sidestepping the racial dimension of the case, Southern defiance and virtually no action by the ICC and the Justice Department rendered the decision a paper tiger. See *Freedom Riders* for a thorough discussion of the details of *Morgan*, pages 11-21.

wholesale slaughter with no good achieved.” Rustin’s response in January of 1947 not only exposed the structural weaknesses of a purely legal strategy, but also presaged the rationale that the Nashville students would use when they saved the 1961 Freedom Rides. He retorted:

I am sure that Marshall is either ill-informed on the principles and techniques of non-violence or ignorant of the processes of social change.

Unjust social laws and patterns do not change because supreme courts deliver just opinions. One need merely observe the continued practice of jim crow in interstate travel six months after the Supreme Court’s decision to see the necessity of resistance. Social progress comes from struggle; all freedom demands a price.

At times freedom will demand that its followers go into situations where even death is to be faced . . . Direct action means picketing, striking, and boycotting as well as disobedience against conditions . . . But if at this date in history Thurgood Marshall believes that the ‘white problem,’ which is one of privilege, can be settled without some violence, he is mistaken and fails to realize the end to which [men] can be driven to hold on to what they consider privileges. This is why Negroes and whites who participate in direct action must pledge themselves to nonviolence in word and deed . . . The simple truth is this: unless we find nonviolent methods which can be used by the rank-and-file who tend to resist, they will more and more resort to violence. And court-room argumentation will not suffice for the activization which the Negro masses are today demanding.⁶

Rustin’s eloquent defense of the Journey’s purpose on the heels of the disappointing outcome of the *Morgan* case set the stage for more direct action. In April of 1947, CORE inaugurated the Journey of Reconciliation, beginning in Washington, D.C., and traversing Virginia, North Carolina, West Virginia, Ohio, Kentucky, and Tennessee. Knoxville and Nashville were the two scheduled stops in Tennessee because of their reputation as racially moderate cities, unlike the more racially hostile Memphis. The Nashville-to-Knoxville leg, though, was not without risk, for it was the first compliance test performed after dark. The Tennessee portion of the Journey added another layer of risk. Rather than traveling from Nashville to Knoxville by bus, the riders attempted “the first train test” not knowing what to

⁶ Arsenault, 37

expect. Other than a threat by the conductor about what would have happened to them if they had tried such a stunt in Alabama, the Tennessee leg was uneventful.⁷

Twelve years later Nashville activists challenged segregated interstate transportation in their own way. In December of 1959, on the way home for Christmas break and just after the conclusion of the test sit-ins, John Lewis and Bernard LaFayette initiated a personal Freedom Ride on a Greyhound bus. The two budding activists sat directly behind the white bus driver who ordered them to the back. Lewis vividly recollected their response. “The last thing in the world we were going to do was move from that seat. We didn’t say a word. And we did not budge.”⁸ LaFayette and Lewis’ defiance indicated that they were ready to challenge segregation wherever they encountered it, confirmation that they were authentic social misfits and were becoming like their mentor, Reverend Lawson, “The New Gandhians.”⁹

Not surprisingly, Lewis, LaFayette, and other Nashville activists targeted public transportation facilities during the 1960 sit-ins. On March 16, Diane Nash and three others used their sit-in strategy at the Greyhound bus terminal¹⁰, demonstrating that the students understood the national significance of the sit-ins a full month before Ella Baker’s “Bigger Than A Hamburger” speech at SNCC’s founding conference. The motivation for the Greyhound sit-in was two-fold. On one hand, the students wanted to keep pressure on white merchants while a moratorium on downtown sit-ins was in place. On the other hand, because of Reverend Lawson’s teachings, the students understood the larger implications of their actions. Contesting segregated public transportation facilities could enlarge the battlefield beyond Nashville, especially in light

⁷ Ibid., 50-51. For a map of the route of the Journey of Reconciliation, see page 43 of *Freedom Riders*.

⁸ Lewis, 96.

⁹ Ibid., 91. Lewis wrote that because of Lawson’s sophisticated understanding and application of nonviolence, Lawson and FOR’s Glenn Smiley were becoming known as “The New Gandhians,” a title that Lawson’s young Nashville pupils soon earned once the sit-ins began.

¹⁰ Ibid., 111.

of a November 1955 ICC ruling that prohibited segregation aboard vehicles engaged in interstate travel. The ruling also applied to waiting rooms at bus terminals.¹¹

A new Supreme Court ruling in *Boynton v. Virginia* in December 1960 and the appointment of James Farmer as the new national director of CORE set the stage for the rechristening of the Journey of Reconciliation, this time with a more aggressive campaign for the Deep South. Farmer, a CORE co-founder, left the organization in 1945 and returned on February 1, 1961, just a few months after the *Boynton* ruling declared segregated waiting rooms, lunch counters, and restroom facilities for interstate passengers unconstitutional. This ruling extended the *Morgan* decision which only applied to vehicles used in interstate travel. After the Supreme Court ruling, the only remaining question was one of enforcement. Then as these new developments unfolded, CORE staff members began discussing the resurrection of the Journey of Reconciliation.¹²

It was the jail-in campaign of students from Friendship Junior College in Rock Hill, South Carolina, that prompted CORE to revive the Journey, this time with a catchier name “Freedom Ride.” Most of the “Rock Hill Nine” as they were dubbed, chose to accept thirty days in jail rather than pay a \$100 fine¹³. They issued a call for other students to join them. In response, SNCC sent four students to join those in Rock Hill: Diane Nash, Charles Jones, Ruby Doris Smith, and Charles Sherrod. Additionally, students in Atlanta and Lynchburg, Virginia, began their own jail-in campaigns in sympathy with the thirteen pioneers in Rock Hill.¹⁴

¹¹ Alton Hornsby, Jr., *Chronology of African-American History: Significant Events and People from 1619 to the Present* (Detroit: Gale Research, 1991), 103.

¹² Arsenault, 93-94.

¹³ According to Arsenault, nine of the ten students chose jail over bail, one of the first strategic uses of the “jail-no-bail” policy, something CORE had long advocated as part of their arsenal of tactics. See pages 94-95 of *Freedom Riders*.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 95.

The enthusiasm generated by the Rock Hill Nine convinced Farmer that the time was right to strike at segregated interstate public transportation again. This time, the Freedom Rides were designed to venture into the Deep South. Starting in Washington, D.C., on May 4 and terminating in New Orleans on May 17, a dozen or so Riders were assigned travel through Virginia, North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia, Alabama, and Mississippi, before reaching its New Orleans' destination on May 17, on the seventh anniversary of the *Brown* decision. Starting in mid-February 1961, CORE proceeded to develop detailed plans for the new venture.¹⁵

As planning for the Freedom Rides began, a few Nashville activists, including John Lewis and Bernard LaFayette, held a conversation about the general direction of the Movement. It was March 1961 and the local movement had just concluded a successful stand-in campaign¹⁶ where students had forced theaters to desegregate. For some reason, Lewis and LaFayette began reminiscing about their December 1959 personal Freedom Ride and how African Americans were treated at various bus stations, particularly in Nashville and Birmingham. This discussion led to the drafting of a letter to Reverend Fred Shuttlesworth in Birmingham proposing a test of the *Boynton* and *Morgan* decisions. They suggested that a group of students ride to Birmingham and test compliance. Reverend Shuttlesworth responded that the situation in Birmingham was too volatile for “outsiders” to stir up trouble.¹⁷

Just as Lewis and LaFayette dreamed of their own Freedom Ride, CORE was actively planning them. Recruitment of volunteers was a big priority, an undertaking aided by SNCC. At an April meeting in Charlotte, SNCC leaders endorsed the Ride in a memorandum sent to all

¹⁵ Ibid., 96-97.

¹⁶ Stand-ins are a tactic that Nashville activists borrowed from students at the University of Texas at Austin in which protesters form a revolving line of pickets in front of a theater and attempt to buy movie tickets. After purchasing tickets, the picketers attempt to sit in the white only section of the theater. See pages 129-32 of Lewis' memoir for a thorough discussion of Nashville's stand-in campaign.

¹⁷ Ibid., 132.

affiliates and published a recruitment advertisement in its newsletter, *The Student Voice*. Some time in April, Reverend J. Metz Rollins, a Black activist minister in Nashville, showed Lewis a copy of the Freedom Rider ad.¹⁸

According to Lewis, the advertisement represented another example of divine providence acting upon his life. When he saw the advertisement, Lewis said, “I couldn’t believe it. This was just what Bernard and I had written to Fred Shuttlesworth about. Somehow, the Spirit of History was putting its hands on my life again.” Not only was John Lewis about to graduate from ABT, but he was also about to graduate to a new level of activism, one more dangerous than the training ground of Nashville and more important than the confines of a local movement. Even though many of his fellow Nashville students felt that joining the Freedom Rides just before graduation was “a crazy thing to do,” he was convinced that “at that particular moment in [his] life, it was important for [him] to go on to Washington and be a participant.”¹⁹ Not only did the act of joining the Freedom Rides jeopardize his future and his personal safety, but it helped to pull his Nashville colleagues more deeply into the struggle with more serious implications.

Lewis joined the racially integrated Freedom Rider group in Washington for several days of nonviolence training that began on May 1. He turned out to be the only Nashville representative when Bernard LaFayette’s application was rejected due to his age and when Reverend Rollins bowed out in late April. Much of the training administered by CORE, particularly the role-playing exercises, were not new to veterans like Lewis. Others like John Moody found the simulated confrontations too intense for him to continue.²⁰

¹⁸ Ibid., 133.

¹⁹ Ibid; Allen interview of Lewis, 67.

²⁰ There is a discrepancy in the lists of Freedom Riders between John Lewis and Raymond Arsenault. Pages 136-37 of Lewis’ book lists himself and twelve others: Albert Bigelow, Jim Peck, Walter Bergman, Frances Bergman, Charlotte DeVries, Genevieve Hughes, Ed Blankenheim, Jimmy McDonald, Elton Cox, Joe Perkins, Hank Thomas, and James Farmer. In chapter three, Arsenault lists all of those named by Lewis except Charlotte, whose last name he spells “Devrees.” He does not list Devrees as a Rider because she was one of several journalists on board. Lewis

On the morning of May 4, the Freedom Riders boarded both Greyhound and Trailways buses, not exactly sure where to expect trouble. There were a few instances of racial hostility in Danville, Virginia, and Charlotte, North Carolina, balanced by unexpected cordial service in Fredricksburg and missing Jim Crow signs in Richmond, two Virginia locales with longstanding reputations for rigid segregation.²¹

The first real trouble came on May 9 in Rock Hill, where the white community was still shaken by the jail-ins only a few months earlier. Not surprisingly, John Lewis became the first Freedom Rider to face violence when he attempted to enter the white waiting room at the Greyhound terminal. Both he and Albert Bigelow, a white Navy veteran who came to his rescue, suffered beatings. Neither man pressed charges and the journey continued the next day.²²

It was at this point that Lewis' plans changed slightly. He left the Freedom Rides for a few days in order to travel to Philadelphia to interview for a foreign service position in India with the American Friends Services Committee. After the interview, Lewis returned to Nashville where he planned to rejoin his colleagues in Birmingham on Mother's Day, Sunday, May 14.²³

What transpired next led to the end of the CORE Phase of the Freedom Rides and began the Nashville Phase. When the Riders reached Atlanta on Saturday, rumors circulated that trouble awaited them in Alabama if they attempted to travel through the state in a desegregated fashion. These were not idle rumors. When the Greyhound bus reached the Anniston terminal, a white mob attacked the bus and punctured the tires. A nervous driver attempted to maneuver the bus safely away, but the bus only traveled a few miles before the flattened tires forced it to the

contents that "DeVries" was in sympathy with the mission and considered her part of the group. It is not clear why the two spell her name differently. Arsenault added John Moody, who dropped out and was not listed by Lewis, and Charles Person, who was not listed by Lewis until later when the Freedom Rides reached Atlanta. Person was a Morehouse student. Arsenault also added other names, including Robert Griffin, Herman K. Harris, Ivor Moore, Mae Frances Moultrie, and Isaac Reynolds, all of whom joined the rides at later points in the journey.

²¹ Arsenault, 109-14.

²² Lewis, 142-43; Allen interview transcript of Lewis, 69.

²³ *Ibid.*, 144; Allen interview transcript of Lewis, 70.

side of the road where the mob firebombed the bus with the passengers still on board. This was the same bus that John Lewis had been aboard. The second bus, a Trailways, reached Anniston where a gang of white thugs boarded and thoroughly pummeled several male Freedom Riders as the bus left Anniston headed for Birmingham.²⁴

All of the Riders from the Greyhound bus were either injured or suffered smoke inhalation. They had to be rescued from Anniston and transported to Birmingham by a group of churchmen from the Alabama Christian Movement for Human Rights (ACMHR), an organization headed by Shuttlesworth. When the Trailways bus reached Birmingham, it was met not by law enforcement officers but by a posse of Klansmen who had been granted fifteen minutes by police to assault the Riders. As soon as the Klan finished its bloody business, Birmingham police arrived, “too late” to make arrests.²⁵

What happened next changed the course of history and compelled the Nashville warriors into action. Word of the bus burning in Anniston reached members of the Central Committee on Saturday night, the same day that Lewis returned to Nashville from his interview in Philadelphia. Immediately, the students began debating whether to send in reinforcements. It was generally accepted among the Nashville activists, especially John Lewis, that the Freedom Riders “were so important and so crucial to the civil rights movement and to the whole country.”²⁶ Word of the burned bus and the Birmingham beating prompted an all-night emergency meeting of the Central Committee and the NCLC at First Colored Baptist, attended by Lewis, Nash, LaFayette, Bevel,

²⁴ Ibid., Branch, 417-19; Lewis, 145.

²⁵ Andrew Manis, *A Fire You Can't Put Out: The Civil Rights Life of Birmingham's Reverend Fred Shuttlesworth* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1999), 265; Branch, 419-22. According to Lewis' memoir, Birmingham Public Safety Commissioner Eugene “Bull” Connor explained the absence of police when the Freedom Riders arrived by saying that it was Mother's Day and many of his officers were given time off to be with their families. See page 147 of *Walking with the Wind*.

²⁶ Allen interview transcript of Lewis, 66-67.

and Reverend Smith. A crucial decision was made: the Freedom Rides could not be halted, lest the entire Movement be jeopardized.²⁷

On Monday morning, Nashville activists heard the news that James Farmer and the injured Riders decided to abort the mission and fly to New Orleans because the risks were too great. John Lewis recalled his reaction.

I couldn't believe it. I understood the thinking behind the decision, but it defied one of the most basic tenets of non-violent direct action—that is, that there can be no surrender in the face of brute force or any form of violent opposition. Backing down in a situation like that means that other values matter more than the issues or principles that are at stake—values such as personal safety. The definition of satyagraha is 'holding on to truth.' Truth cannot be abandoned, even in the face of pain and injury, even in the face of death. Once the truth has been recognized and embraced . . . backing away is not an option . . .²⁸

Lewis articulated the same philosophical position voiced by Bayard Rustin in January 1947, that “At times even freedom will demand that its followers go into situations where even death is to be faced . . . ”²⁹

Not lost on the members of the Central Committee was the fact that the Movement had reached a critical juncture where its future was at stake. A bit mystifying was the fact that CORE officials failed to recognize the basic truth identified by Lewis and the Central Committee. It is noteworthy but perhaps not surprising that Farmer and CORE were rattled by the Klan's actions, even in the face of CORE's desperation to establish itself in the South and its pioneering work in nonviolent direct action.³⁰ Farmer had even told the Riders the night before they left Washington that because of the inherent danger of the mission he was the only “one obligated to go on this

²⁷ Lewis, 147; Halberstam, 256, 267.

²⁸ Lewis, 147-48.

²⁹ Arsenault, 37.

³⁰ See chapters one and two of *Freedom Riders* for a full discourse on the role of CORE and its parent, FOR, in the development and dissemination of nonviolent direct action.

trip” and that there was still time to back out.³¹ Yet when death seemed a reasonable possibility, the courage and the principles defined at the beginning of the venture seemed to evaporate.

A telephone call from Diane Nash to Farmer marked the formal transition from the CORE Phase to the Nashville Phase of the Freedom Rides. She reached him in Washington³² and, as Lewis recalled, she “told” Farmer of the Nashville Student Movement’s decision to continue the Rides rather than seeking his permission to do so. Farmer warned that proceeding invited “suicide” and a “massacre,” but with some reservations, he agreed to support the decision.³³

Farmer’s reservations were not the only ones that had to be overcome. The Central Committee also had to secure support from its adult partner and fiscal sponsor, the NCLC. (It is here that one sees more generational tension.) Although some adults such as Reverends C.T. Vivian, James Lawson, and Alexander Anderson encouraged the students to proceed, others such as Reverend Andrew White expressed caution. Even Reverend Smith seemed ambivalent, apparently caught between his dual role as protective father figure of young people and as the wise, trusted, stalwart activist always expected to make the best decision for the Movement. In this case, there appeared to be an uncomfortable tension between the two responsibilities. Obviously, the best decision for the Movement was for the Rides to continue, but doing so could be a death sentence for students to whom he had grown close. Reverend Smith’s dilemma was evident when he told the students, “I understand the importance of what you want to do. I think some of you are going to die if you go ahead. This is not something to rush into. I want you to think about it more.” Smith’s caution stemmed more from his concern about the students’ safety

³¹ Ibid., 108.

³² According to Taylor Branch, Farmer temporarily left the Freedom Rides in Atlanta to attend his father’s funeral. See page 417.

³³ Lewis, 148.

than from worry about the direction of the Movement. The tight bonds between Smith and the students as well as his role as a mentor meant that he could not bear to send them to their death.³⁴ This generational divide reflected a fundamental philosophical schism between most adult and student activists. The students believed that crossing the threshold of danger was central to their mode of operation. Meaningful change could not be rendered unless activists took extraordinary risks.³⁵ The adults were reluctant to approach this threshold whereas the students used the threat of death to their philosophical and strategic advantage.

The trepidation on the part of some NCLC adults became clear when the time came to replace CORE Riders. In order for Nashville students to resume the Freedom Rides, they needed \$900 for travel expenses from the NCLC. Bernard LaFayette was certain that the NCLC expressed its objection to the students' decision by attempting to hold up the funds for the trip. The NCLC affixed only one signature to a check that required two, hoping that the students would have to wait several days while they search for the second signature. Not deterred though, the students found a local "big numbers man" who cashed the check with no questions asked and secured the missing signature a few days later.³⁶

It was at this point that Diane Nash began to emerge as the coordinator of the Nashville Phase of the Freedom Rides. When the news of violence in Alabama surfaced, she was among those pushing for an emergency meeting to decide how to respond. When NCLC leaders warned about the dangers of resuming the trip, Nash was one of those countering that abandonment would make it more difficult for others to carry forth in the future.³⁷ Nash took responsibility for calling James Farmer with word of the Nashville Student Movement's decision to continue the

³⁴ Halberstam, 275.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 276; Allen interview transcript of Lewis, 72.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 277-79.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 275.

mission. And when he sounded warning bells of eminent danger, she was the one who replied with a simple truth. “We can’t let them stop us with violence. If we do the Movement is dead.”³⁸ When the Kennedy administration learned of plans to continue the Rides, Nash was the one that the Justice Department officials blamed for exposing the Riders to what they considered were unnecessary risks. John Seigenthaler, the assistant attorney general for civil rights, told a Nashville friend, “All hell is going to break loose. She [Nash] is going to get those people killed.”³⁹

While Nash emerged as the key coordinator, Lewis became identified as a rock solid, courageous warrior who was increasingly exerting influence over his peers in Nashville. Although not as articulate as a Diane Nash or a James Bevel, Lewis had an unshakeable commitment to the struggle and its nonviolence principles. Once his mind was made up, there was no backtracking. Reverend Will Campbell, a white minister who had been driven from his position as chaplain at the University of Mississippi in the late 1950s because of his anti-segregation posture, famously failed to dissuade Lewis from continuing a notoriously dangerous nighttime stand-in in early 1961. For Lewis, going to jail or the possibility of injuring or death were not deterrents when a fundamental principle was at stake. Bit by bit, those qualities established Lewis as the anchor of the group.⁴⁰

Nash’s coordination skills, coupled with John Lewis’ steadfast, principled determination, signaled a changing of the guard in Movement leadership. Beginning at the local level, they had started the process of replacing the adults as the vanguards in the struggle. Progress toward freedom required more risks than many adults were capable of and the students knew it. Signs of this generational shift were evident as early as 1960 when Julian Bond noticed the independent

³⁸ Mullins, 47.

³⁹ Lewis, 149.

⁴⁰ Halberstam, 22, 276.

nature of the Nashville students at SNCC's founding conference as evidenced by his comment on their lack of deference to Reverend Lawson. Will Campbell realized this the night he attempted to convince Lewis to abort the nighttime stand-in. David Halberstam wrote, "That was the night Will Campbell had finally realized the leadership of the Nashville wing of the Movement had changed, that the young people had taken over, that a dramatic generational passing of the torch had already taken place, and no one had quite understood it."⁴¹ The comments of Bond and Campbell confirm that the Nashville students became exactly what Lawson intended, a group of independent warriors capable of carrying forth the struggle on their own to places it could not otherwise go without them. Fortunately, the primary adult leaders in Nashville recognized the potential of their protegés and did not try to clip their wings.

The evening of Tuesday, May 16, was important. With the decision to resume the Freedom Rides already made and NCLC funds in hand, choices about whom to send to Alabama had to be made. The Central Committee, then chaired by Bevel, selected John Lewis, William Barbour, Paul Brooks, William Barbee, Allen Cason, Lucretia Collins, Catherine Burks, Jim Zwerg, Salynn McCollum, and Charles Butler.⁴² For some like Lewis, the decision to make the trip was already sealed, but for others like LaFayette, a bit of soul searching was required. He had to be sure that he was ready to die. After much contemplation, LaFayette and his colleagues handed Nash sealed letters with instructions of what to do in case of their death.⁴³

Before the replacement Riders left Nashville, Nash telephoned Reverend Shuttlesworth to inform him of their plans. Because of a need to conceal the specifics of the plan but not the plan

⁴¹ Ibid., 277.

⁴² John Lewis lists a William Butts in his memoir among the first group of replacement Riders from Nashville. See page 149. However, Arsenault names William Butler in the "Roster of Freedom Riders" on page 537 of the appendix. Obviously, they are referring to the same person. The thorough nature of Arsenault's research makes his sources more credible.

⁴³ Allen interview transcript of Lewis, 73.

itself, she and Shuttlesworth developed code words, referring to Riders as a shipment of “chickens” bound for Birmingham on Wednesday, May 17, the day that the Freedom Rides should have ended.⁴⁴

At this point, the character and the purpose of the mission dramatically shift instead. Under the direction of Nash and her fellow warriors, the Freedom Rides symbolized more than a two-week commemoration of the *Brown* decision and testing compliance with *Morgan* and *Boynton*. They turned into an eight-month battle over the future of the Movement that forced the hand of the Kennedy administration during a critical moment in U.S-Soviet Cold War relations.

The Rides also represented a serious threat to southern racial customs. A crumbling wall of segregation could totally collapse unless emergency fortifications were made. It is no surprise then that Alabama Knights of the Ku Klux Klan, a group led by Imperial Wizard Robert Shelton, decided to rudely welcome any “niggers” and “nigger-lovers” who attempted to “violate the time-worn customs and laws of the sovereign state of Alabama.”⁴⁵ For both Alabama Klansmen and the Nashville Freedom Riders, the stakes were very high and neither side was willing to concede ground.

John Lewis and his colleagues understood this all too well. He told an interviewer in May 1969:

That’s why I felt that the Freedom Rides had to continue. It was part of, not just a Southern movement, but a nationwide effort that would not only break down segregation and racial discrimination in areas of public transportation, but it would serve to inspire young people and black people in particular all across the South and all across the country . . . that a movement didn’t have to be just localized, but it could be a Southwide, or nationwide or world-wide movement.⁴⁶

⁴⁴ Lewis, 149.

⁴⁵ Arsenault, 136.

⁴⁶ Allen interview transcript of Lewis, 85.

Lewis recognized that the Rides had the potential to foment rebellion on a large scale, involving people of all races and ages. It was evident that he and his colleagues were looking far beyond Nashville as they defined the realm of their activism.

The stakes were equally high in the eyes of the Kennedy administration whose officials initially trivialized the Freedom Rides. In fact, initially the Kennedy White House took little notice of the Rides. The failure to recognize the gravity of the impending Rides was obvious to Simeon Booker of *Jet* magazine who dropped into the Justice Department on the eve of the Rides to warn of certain trouble. In his brief meeting with Robert Kennedy and John Seigenthaler, Booker recalled that Kennedy's reply to the warning of trouble ahead was a casual "Okay, call me if there is," followed by an added, "I wish I could go with you." Booker left the Justice Department with the impression that Kennedy failed to grasp the potential danger involved in what was about to transpire.⁴⁷

The import of the Freedom Rides resonated with President Kennedy and other officials high in his administration when images of the Klan's handiwork dominated the evening news. For Kennedy, this sort of trouble could not have been more poorly timed. The Freedom Rides not only came swiftly after the embarrassing failure of the Bay of Pigs invasion of Cuba, but came after Kennedy had just agreed to a Vienna summit in June with Soviet Premier Krushchev.⁴⁸ The last thing Kennedy needed was a domestic racial conflict when the U.S. wanted to chastise the Soviets on human rights and the occupation of eastern Europe. CBS reporter Howard K. Smith witnessed the Birmingham beatings and gave a gripping account over the radio. His account helped compound Kennedy's Soviet policy and ensured that he could not ignore the violence associated with the Freedom Rides. Smith reported that "One passenger was knocked down at

⁴⁷ Ibid., 110-11; Branch 413.

⁴⁸ Branch, 385-86; Arsenault, 164.

my feet by twelve of the hoodlums, and his face was beaten and kicked until it was a bloody pulp.” Later in the broadcast, Smith made a statement that made it virtually impossible for the Kennedy administration to ignore the crisis when he noted that the “laws of the land and purposes of the nation badly need a basic restatement, perhaps by the one American assured of an intent mass hearing at any time, the President.”⁴⁹ Violent incidents such as the one described by Smith complicated American foreign policy and forced tough domestic policy choices.

Smith’s words coupled with the determination of the Nashville warriors to continue the Freedom Rides elevated the struggle to a new level of importance. For the first time since the Little Rock crisis, the federal government was forced to intervene in a civil rights crisis. Additional pressure came from the scores of front-page coverage by major dailies such as the *New York Times* and *Washington Post* and even the *Birmingham Post-Herald*. Even before the arrival of the Nashville replacements, Attorney General Robert Kennedy personally contacted Simeon Booker and Reverend Shuttlesworth concerning the Riders’ safety. Kennedy and his staff also made a flurry of calls to Alabama Governor John Patterson who refused to guarantee their safety on the next leg of the journey. Other calls were made to guarantee that the Riders continued on to Montgomery after the Greyhound company had trouble securing a driver. The attorney general told bus company officials, “Surely somebody in this d___ bus company can drive a bus, can’t they? . . . The Government is going to be very much upset if this group does not get to continue their trip . . . Somebody better get in the d___ bus and get it going and get these people on their way.”⁵⁰

The passengers for the Birmingham to Montgomery leg left Nashville early on the morning of May 17. When they arrived at the Birmingham city limits, police officers pulled

⁴⁹ Arsenault, 165.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 171.

them over and took control of the bus. Paul Brooks and Jim Zwerg were immediately arrested under the city's segregation laws because they were sitting together at the front. The remaining Riders were placed in "protective custody" after arriving at the terminal, with the exception of Salynn McCollum.⁵¹

The Nashville Riders were held in "protective custody" from Wednesday night until after midnight Thursday when Bull Connor ordered them taken to the Alabama-Tennessee border and dumped along the roadside. At the time, the Riders were told that they were being returned to Nashville. As it turned out, they were deposited around 3:00 a.m. on Friday near the tiny hamlet of Ardmore, a place that straddled the Alabama and Tennessee state line. It was also a place known for its Klan activity. Fortunately, they located a Black couple who took them in and fed them. Fortunately, the couple had a telephone that they used to call Diane Nash who sent Tennessee State student Leo Lillard to return them to Birmingham. Lillard's rescue allowed them to fulfill a promise Catherine Burks made to Bull Connor when he left them in Ardmore. She said as he departed, "We'll be back in Birmingham by the end of the day."⁵²

As promised, the students returned the same day, boldly defying Bull Connor. They were joined at Reverend Shuttlesworth's home by a second group of ten Nashville Riders that included John Lewis who arrived by train. Dispatching a second group of Riders made it clear that the Nashville Student Movement was calling the shots and that they had increased their ranks. The growing swirl of activity in Alabama increased the obligation of the Kennedy administration to intervene. Robert Kennedy ordered John Seigenthaler to Montgomery to

⁵¹ Allen interview transcript of Lewis, 74; Lewis, 151-52; Kathy Bennett interview of Salynn McCollum, 17 March 2004, Nashville Public Library, Civil Rights Oral History Project, Nashville, Tennessee. In her interview with Bennett, McCollum, a white female, revealed that she was not initially arrested with the others because she was not identified as a Freedom Rider since she had boarded the bus outside of Nashville due to her missing the Nashville departure. The Birmingham police identified the Riders as anyone with a ticket originating in Nashville destined for Birmingham. McCollum was assigned the role of reporting back to Nash with any developments.

⁵² Allen interview transcript of Lewis, 75-77; Halberstam, 293-97.

negotiate with Governor Patterson the safe passage of the Freedom Riders out of the state, a task made more urgent by the increased number of Riders.⁵³ From this point onward, the Freedom Rides grew and assumed more significance.

Amid the high drama festering in Birmingham, Seigenthaler's meeting with Governor Patterson and other high state officials seemingly produced an agreement to protect the Riders. Yet when they arrived in Montgomery on Saturday, May 20, the Riders were again savagely mauled by a mob wielding bats, iron pipes, and other weapons. Some passengers were pelted with their own luggage. A reporter was beaten with his own photographic equipment. The person who endured the worst beating was John Lewis. Not sure if he was hit by the briefcase he was carrying or a wooden soda crate, Lewis was knocked unconscious and left laying in the street. Photographs soon surfaced of Lewis with a gigantic bandage atop his head⁵⁴ like a badge of honor, helping to make him the most revered of all Freedom Riders.

Montgomery turned out to be the scene of the worst beating of the entire Freedom rides. In addition to Lewis' beating, ABT student William Barbee was stomped as he lay on the pavement. John Seigenthaler too was knocked unconscious, as soon as he announced he was a federal agent. (As in Birmingham on Mother's Day, Montgomery police arrived "too late" to prevent bloodshed.⁵⁵)

The Kennedy administration's desire to avoid another public bloodbath and Governor Patterson's political necessity to maintain segregation made Montgomery the site of a tug-of-war between federal and state governments of the entire Civil Rights Movement. All of this was courtesy of a band of warriors insistent upon continuing the Freedom Rides. Montgomery also

⁵³ Halberstam, 299, 305.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 307.

⁵⁵ Allen interview transcript of Lewis, 80.

became the place where many of the most prominent civil rights leaders became involved in the Freedom Rides and where James Farmer attempted to reassert control over the Rides.

As in Birmingham, the issue dividing the federal government and Alabama officials was protection of the activists. Not only had Governor Patterson reneged on a pledge to protect them, but a high level Justice Department official, John Seigenthaler, was seriously injured as a result, an act deemed unforgivable by Robert Kennedy. When the attorney general and his staff received word of the violence, his direct call to Patterson was refused, a snub prompting Kennedy to activate a plan to send in federal marshals,⁵⁶ federal intervention that was distasteful to the White House.

Federal marshals were brought in as a result of a mass meeting called for on Sunday, May 21, at Reverend Ralph D. Abernathy's First Baptist Church. The mass meeting was a result of Diane Nash's efforts to enlist the support of the Reverend King and the SCLC, support that had only recently been earned. Like many adult leaders, Reverend King and his advisors were wary of the Nashville Phase of the Freedom Rides, sentiments expressed at a May 17 meeting at Reverend Shuttlesworth's parsonage. But after the Birmingham beatings, King came to agree with Nash's assessment of the seriousness of the situation. Nash conferred with King and Wyatt T. Walker, SCLC's executive administrator, about holding the mass meeting in order to present a unified front of solidarity and commitment against violence-prone segregationists. The meeting would feature King as keynote as well as Reverend Shuttlesworth as a secondary speaker. In her role as coordinator, Nash also solicited the support of James Farmer who flew into Montgomery.⁵⁷

⁵⁶ Arsenault, 220-21.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 225.

Up to this point, the Nashville Student Movement had successfully maintained its independence from adults while fruitfully collaborating with them at the same time. Although there were moments of disagreement over whether to proceed or to cool off at critical junctures in the Movement, the student-adult coalition had been maintained. The respect that the students had for Reverends Smith and Lawson and the ministers' reciprocating admiration of their mentees had kept conflict to a minimum.⁵⁸

But the dynamics of a new national civil rights battle created risks and a compromise in principles for student leaders like Nash. While collaboration with King earned attention and prestige for the Freedom Rides, it also risked co-optation of the students' initiative and it cut against the democratic ethos characteristic of the student movement. Soliciting King's support endangered the students' grassroots approach and taking advantage of King's celebrity was hardly in line with the ethos of democratic participation. The same risks applied to CORE's re-engagement. Farmer's appearance in Montgomery indicated his desire to reassert control over the Freedom rides. He confirmed this in his autobiography when he acknowledged "Quite frankly, although I welcomed the intervention of SNCC, a concern burned within me. I could not let CORE's new program slip from its grasp and be taken over by others."⁵⁹

Risks posed by adult usurpation of the Freedom Rides and the federal-state tug-of-war all converged at the Sunday mass meeting at First Baptist. By sunset, the church was packed, and an angry mob grew menacingly outside, barely held at bay by federal marshals. By the time that

⁵⁸ It should be noted that tensions flared up between the students and the adults as early as 1960. Adult NCLC members, including Reverend Smith often complained about the students' failure to communicate with the NCLC and about proper protocol in spending funds. Sometimes the students complained about the lack of access to funds in the treasury. For details of these disputes, see Smith Papers, Box 76 Folder 2, "NCLC Minutes August 1960-December 1961."

⁵⁹ Arsenault, 225; James M. Farmer, *Lay Bare the Heart: An Autobiography of the Civil Rights Movement* (New York: New American Library, 1985), 204.

the mass meeting got underway, the hostile whites outside became more dangerous, throwing rocks and Molotov cocktails at the church and setting cars on fire.⁶⁰

The crisis brewing outside the church had several dimensions. For the first time since the inauguration of the Freedom Rides, Diane Nash left Nashville and came to Montgomery. Her presence was an indication of the seriousness of the moment and of her central role in the saga. Nash was there to not only help symbolize the prominent role of students in this phase of the Movement, but to also huddle with other civil rights leaders over strategy. When King arrived in Montgomery the day of the mass meeting, she, Lewis, and LaFayette met with him before making their way to First Baptist.⁶¹

Nash's presence complicated the leadership picture and revealed the risk of her strategic decision to work with Reverend King and the SCLC who were not inclined to respect youth leadership. As the mob gathered outside grew more hostile, attempting to storm the church and launching projectiles through the stained glass windows, King, Abernathy, and Walker took control of the decision-making, mostly to the exclusion of Nash and other students. King in particular became the point of contact between the Freedom Riders and the federal government. As soon as the mob generated panic within First Baptist, King initiated calls to Robert Kennedy pleading for protection, leaving Nash out of the discussion.⁶²

King both respected and subliminally disregarded Nash's role as coordinator. At the start of the mass meeting when the mob seemed homicidal and King telephoned Robert Kennedy, he consulted Nash and Farmer about Kennedy's suggested "cooling off" period for the Rides.⁶³

⁶⁰ Allen interview transcript of Lewis, 81-2.

⁶¹ Arsenault, 229. Chapter six of *Freedom Riders* reveals that Nash was one of the few students at the mass meeting publicly identified as associated with the Freedom Rides because of the fear that Alabama officials would arrest them. As coordinator, Nash did not actually take part in a Freedom Ride.

⁶² Allen interview transcript of Lewis, 81-2.

⁶³ Arsenault, 234.

However, King seemed to naturally assume the right to be the primary spokesperson for the Freedom Riders even though he was not one of them. It was fortunate that Nash was present when the question of cooling off was raised. Farmer endorsed Nash's commitment to continuing the Rides, seeming to gain fortitude from her steely rejection of a reprieve. Nash could not help but wonder what kind of response would have resulted had she not been present. Past experience had taught her that adult leaders sometimes exercised questionable judgment under pressure. Such was the case with James Farmer when he decided to cease the Freedom Rides in Birmingham. In addition, the initial hesitation of adults like Shuttlesworth and Smith in supporting the Nashville Phase gave Nash more reason to worry about the adults.⁶⁴

It seems that as the crisis at First Baptist escalated, the tendency to exclude Nash and her colleagues from decision-making increased. In the other conversations between King and Kennedy that night, Nash was not consulted and there is no indication that the attorney general sought her opinion. After all, the Kennedy administration recognized the legality of the Freedom Riders' actions but thought them inadvisable.⁶⁵ John Seigenthaler had already failed to dissuade Nash from pushing this sort of activism. Student leaders like Nash represented a mode of leadership that was perplexing and unpredictable. Generally speaking, white leaders were accustomed to dealing with their adult counterparts in the Black community. No one, including most adult Black leaders, was quite sure what to make of these aggressive students, especially if they were women.

Although Diane Nash largely removed her ego from her leadership role and this helped make her the ideal leader to many of her colleagues like Bernard LaFayette, she was nonetheless

⁶⁴ Ibid., 235; According to Taylor Branch, when Nash informed Shuttlesworth that Nashville students were continuing the Freedom Rides, he incredulously and condescendingly replied "Young lady, do you know that the Freedom Riders were almost killed here?" See page 430.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 244.

irritated at being excluded from the decision-making by the SCLC preachers. She was irritated that she and her cohorts were the ones who had insisted on pushing forward with the Rides, thereby forcing federal intervention, yet were bypassed when it came time for negotiations. Even more galling was the fact that when called upon to join the Freedom Rides into Mississippi, King begged off, citing the weak excuse of his probation from his arrest during the Atlanta sit-ins.⁶⁶ To Nash and other students, King's refusal to join the Rides indicated that he and the SCLC sought control without taking any risks. And as if to confirm both SCLC's disproportionate dominance of the Freedom Rides and the exclusion of women from the decision-making process, the May 23 press conference confirming the continuation of the Freedom Rides featured only men: Ralph Abernathy, and Martin Luther King, Jr. of the SCLC, John Lewis of the NSM, and James Farmer representing CORE.⁶⁷

The combination of the Alabama beatings and the siege at First Baptist made the Freedom Rides truly a national news item just as television became a dynamic communication medium. Nashville student leaders were at the forefront of recognizing and utilizing the power of media in shaping public opinion. One of the compelling reasons that sit-in participants observed a dress code, took schoolbooks to demonstrations, and behaved in a dignified manner was to gain public sympathy. Halberstam contends that television in particular was a new public relations tool controlled by the students during the Freedom Rides.⁶⁸

Without a doubt, the media attention produced by the Nashville Phase helped eliminate further Alabama-style violence against the Riders. The leg from Montgomery to Jackson was well protected by a collection of law enforcement agents from Alabama and Mississippi. In fact,

⁶⁶ Halberstam, 328; Lewis, 166.

⁶⁷ See photograph on page 253 of *Freedom Riders* for picture of May 23 press conference. On the matter of King's refusal to participate in the Freedom Rides, it was a violation of nonviolence principles to compel a person to take risks they were not willing to take.

⁶⁸ Halberstam, 315.

Mississippi governor and arch segregationist Ross Barnett promised federal authorities that the Riders would “be just as safe as [if they were] in [a] baby crib.”⁶⁹ The Freedom Riders did not know that a secret bargain had been struck between Robert Kennedy and Mississippi Senator James O. Eastland to ensure no more violence. When the Riders departed Montgomery for Jackson, Eastland promised to protect them but warned of mass arrests if they broke the state’s segregation laws, a stipulation to which Kennedy agreed. Kennedy assured Eastland that the federal government’s “primary interest was that they weren’t beaten up.”⁷⁰ Apparently, the Nashville Phase generated so much pressure to protect the Riders that Kennedy secured their safety at a high cost. In exchange for their safety, he consented to their arrest for breaching Mississippi’s segregation policies in bus terminals. This fateful turn undermined the whole purpose of the Freedom Rides and no doubt influenced activists to continue them for the rest of 1961. The arrests of Freedom Riders in Jackson practically guaranteed that the rides would continue until segregated public transportation and related facilities were ended.

The secret deal changed the Freedom Rides in several ways. First, Jackson became the termination point rather than New Orleans. Because the Riders arriving in Jackson were arrested at the terminal, the focal point became Jackson and a large-scale and protracted campaign to flood Jackson with Riders ensued. Second, the Freedom Rides became a national campaign with efforts to recruit Riders from across the nation. Third, Diane Nash resumed her role as primary coordinator of the campaign, a role she shared with Gordon Carey of CORE.

Evidence that Nashville leaders reasserted control of the Rides came when Reverends Lawson and Vivian, James Bevel, and Matthew Walker arrived in Montgomery for the trip to Jackson. Lawson was brought in to prepare Riders with a quick workshop on nonviolence. Many

⁶⁹ Arsenault, 257.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 256-57.

of those at the workshop were familiar with the practical aspects of nonviolence, but Lawson introduced them to nonviolence as a way of life, a perspective that deepened their understanding of the struggle and prepared them for the difficulties ahead. At the workshop, Len Holt, a Black attorney from Norfolk, Virginia, representing the Riders told the group to be prepared for anything because “Although the law is on your side, you don’t have any rights that any southern state is bound to respect. . . . Whatever happens, be firm but polite. Remember you have no rights . . . You can’t fight back.” Holt’s words served as sobering advice and part of Lawson’s training paradigm that offered a life-changing experience. Many Freedom Riders descending upon Montgomery were already veterans of Lawson’s workshops, but many had only rudimentary experience in nonviolence. As a result this added layer of training, several Freedom Riders had their understanding of nonviolence deepened in a way that nothing else had, making them much more prepared for the challenge ahead.⁷¹

Going into Mississippi carried a great deal of symbolic value for both the segregationists and the freedom fighters. Violent segregationists realized that Black people were beginning to lose their fear. For a long time, the threat of violence had inhibited many African Americans from seeking their rights. But now, a group of students from Nashville, because of the training they received from Lawson, demonstrated that defying death was crucial to advance the Black freedom struggle. They showed that they could not be intimidated, a significant psychological boost for Black people and a pre-condition for freedom. Unlike many scholars who contend that the passage of the 1964 Civil Rights Act and the 1965 Voting Rights Act were the most significant gains of the Movement, the contention here is that the most significant outcome was that Black people lost their fear of white people, a development largely initiated by the Nashville

⁷¹ Ibid., 254.

Phase of the Freedom Rides. Black people could not change their circumstances until they refused to be intimidated and were willing to stand up with self-confidence.

Even though the Nashville activists were among some of the first to overcome their fear, they did not make the decision to defy death lightly. It was an agonizing and soul-searching process, as indicated by Reverend Vivian, who recalled how many Nashville activists struggled with the decision to go into Mississippi knowing that the outcome could be fatal.

It was at that meeting that Nashville would go down and keep that movement going. Keep the Freedom Rides . . . We broke up the meeting for a while. People had to go out. We wouldn't force people to do anything, especially [going] into Mississippi. People had to make up their minds whether they would go into Mississippi or not . . . I remember going out under the stars, two or three other people, and we were talking about what it meant to go to Mississippi. There were people who broke down at the thought of going to Mississippi. See . . . Mississippi meant murder.⁷²

Both Reverends Lawson and Vivian joined the students at this juncture. It was a significant gesture because it confirmed the righteousness of the decision to carry forth the Rides; it vindicated Rustin's 1947 declaration that freedom-seekers might have to face death⁷³; and it demonstrated that Lawson and Vivian practiced the principles they preached. Their courage made Dr. King's dodge of the Rides even more suspect in the eyes of the Freedom Riders.

On Wednesday, May 24, the Freedom Riders finally left Montgomery with unprecedented protection. In keeping with the spirit of defiance, the Freedom Riders caught officials off guard when they boarded a second bus to Jackson. For some reason, it was assumed that only one bus was Jackson bound. Nashville veterans John Lewis, Rip Patton, John Lee Copeland, Grady Donald, Clarence Thomas, LeRoy Wright, and Lucretia Collins along with

⁷² Kuhn interview of Vivian.

⁷³ Arsenault, 37.

other activists boarded a Greyhound bus that left without benefit of a protective convoy. Such bold defiance inspired a third group to join the Rides. Four whites from the Northeast along with several Black students boarded a bus in Atlanta with intentions of testing facilities all the way from Georgia to Louisiana. This new development confirmed Robert Kennedy's fear that the Freedom Rides, rather than winding down, were attracting new groups of agitators. Adding to Kennedy's woes was the fact that as Freedom Riders arrived in Jackson, they were arrested. Even though Senator Eastland warned of arrests, somehow federal officials still hoped the Riders would not be molested and allowed to continue on to New Orleans.⁷⁴

At every turn, the Freedom Riders frustrated efforts of the Kennedy administration to end the crisis. Rather than accept bail, the Riders decided to serve their sentences, a move that would surely encourage others to join the cause and further complicate American foreign policy. Robert Kennedy was furious that the continued agitation put the reputation of the U.S. at risk and accused the Freedom Riders of being unpatriotic. His frustration made him desperate to end the drama, prompting him to unsuccessfully plead for Dr. King to intervene on behalf of a cooling off period.⁷⁵

Many of the Freedom Riders arrested in Jackson were taken to the notorious Parchman Penitentiary located in Sunflower County. Parchman was where Mississippi sent its most hardened inmates. The decision to send Riders to Parchman was designed to break their spirits and humiliate them, but in many cases the activists became even more committed to the struggle and used the experience to their advantage: an opportunity to impose discipline and order. John Lewis recalled that they created a rigorous schedule. "We would sing and have certain periods for recreation, [and] we would do our exercises. [We had] a certain period to clean the floor.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 270-71.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 272-75.

Each day we asked for mops and brooms to clean up our cells.” Lewis explained that the order and discipline helped them to cope with the stress of confinement and minimize conflict. With the overcrowded conditions, a rigorous schedule directed energy and time in a positive direction.⁷⁶

In other instances, jailed Nashville Freedom Riders transformed prison by their presence. While in jail in Jackson, Joe Carter, Bernard LaFayette, and James Bevel began singing in order to lift their spirits. The singing was so melodious that jailers thought they had radios. Although at first jailers objected to the singing, they were eventually won over by it and came to the cell block just to hear them sing. One jailer became so taken by the Nashville Riders that he brought them ice cream on hot nights, a gesture of kindness almost unheard of in a jail. LaFayette noted that “the music made a difference in terms of communicating and connecting . . . The music infiltrated the conscious of the people and caused them to relate to us as human beings rather than political prisoners, which we were.”⁷⁷

On another occasion, one of the jailers became very irritated with the singing of Bevel and LaFayette so when they refused to stop, he put them in a cell with very violent inmates whom he threatened were “going to have sex with you guys.” Both Bevel and LaFayette weighed at most 129 pounds while these dangerous inmates weighed up to three hundred pounds. Once in the cell, as LaFayette recalled, “. . . we asked the [guards] to send us some rags and some Ajax. And when they got back, we had these guys wash their clothes, wash the bars, wash the bulkhead . . . the shower.” Frustrated that his intimidation scheme failed, the jailers yelled, ‘get these niggers out of here! They messin’ up my men!’⁷⁸ Lawson’s protégés understood that instead of allowing their circumstances or environment to dictate their behavior, they should transform

⁷⁶ Allen interview transcript of Lewis, 86.

⁷⁷ Bennett interview of Bevel, LaFayette, and Patton.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

their environs to their standards by practicing unconditional love for others and by exerting leadership.

The other advantage of the jail experience was that it often dealt a blow to the gatekeepers of segregation who used jail to discourage civil rights activism. Mississippi law enforcement officials and politicians were eager to lock up the Freedom Riders and expected the jail-no-bail policy to collapse once the activists spent time in some of the state's worst facilities. Although many Riders elected bail over jail, some of them chose to serve their sentence. For many who were committed to nonviolence, there was a seductive power involved in serving an unjust and undeserved jail sentence. In many cases, the harsher the suffering, the more committed some activists became. James Farmer recalled how he and other Freedom Riders used their arrest as a symbol of triumph.

Some in our group swaggered triumphantly, like conquering heroes. We had met the enemies at the dreaded county farm, and they are *ours*. We had survived it with a minimum of brutalization. We had forced them to retreat. Our tormentors were tormented. We had twisted the tail of the lion and lived to tell the story. Even the upstairs fellows were impressed.⁷⁹

Rather than be discouraged by horrible conditions, many activists found renewed vigor in enduring the worst jails. Instead of their spirits being broken, they regaled in the triumph of surviving and found new vigor from the experience.

One of the most significant developments from the Nashville Phase was the creation of a new organization, the Freedom Ride Coordinating Committee (FRCC), designed to sustain the initiative. The FRCC was founded May 26, 1961, at Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta and consisted of representatives from the SCLC, SNCC, CORE, the National Student Association (NSA), and the NCLC. At the founding meeting, it was decided to establish recruitment centers

⁷⁹ Arsenault, 296; Farmer 21.

in Nashville, Atlanta, New Orleans, and Jackson; to coordinate fundraising for a total assault on segregated transportation; to force the ICC and Justice Department to sanction desegregated travel; and to seek a meeting with President Kennedy on the matter.⁸⁰ The FRCC represented an encouraging degree of cooperation among civil rights organizations. Strategic persistence by a group of Nashville students gave activists within these organizations a cause to rally behind.

The formation of the FRCC risked alienating southern white liberals and moderates who supported the Movement, and it signaled a new boldness by activists who were willing to offend white allies. Southern white liberals and moderates embraced Robert Kennedy's call for a cooling off period. To them, the Freedom Riders risked alienating potential allies. A May 26 *New York Times* article written by an anonymous white leader who supported the Movement, supported the call for a cooling off period when it declared that the Freedom Rides seemed "too much like baiting" the segregationists.⁸¹ The preference for "good" public order over the rights of Black people by the Kennedy administration and by southern white liberals and moderates missed the essence of the Nashville Phase. It also failed to grasp the rationale for such aggressive and uncompromising tactics. Unlike previous generations of Black leadership, the young leaders directing the Freedom Rides used strategic unrest to bargain for meaningful social change without fear of offending the status quo. In some cases, white allies feared the consequences of too much change too fast and used the issue of public order to mask such concerns. However, leaders of the Nashville Phase understood that a new boldness was required to push the freedom agenda forward and disruption of the "good" order was part of the strategy. No longer was Black protest constrained by parameters established by white allies. This new boldness was indicated

⁸⁰ Ibid., 282.

⁸¹ Ibid., 283; Claude Sitton, "Dr. King Refuses to End Bus Test," *New York Times*, 26 May 1961, 1, 21. Sitton could be counted among those liberals from the South. According to www.reportingcivilrights.koa.org/authors/bio.jsp?authorid=73, Sitton was born in Atlanta and attended Emory University.

by the FRCC's first press that declared the organization's readiness to "fill the jails of Montgomery and Jackson in order to keep a sharp image of the issue before the public."⁸² In a strident voice, the FRCC defied the violent and repressive segregationists in Alabama and Mississippi, refused to comply with the federal government's call for a cooling off period, and ignored the indignation of white allies. Soon the adults in the FRCC also saw the wisdom of bold action and defiant rhetoric.

As the title indicates, the primary function of the Freedom Rides Coordinating Committee was coordinating Freedom Rides. Although the Committee was a collaboration between several organizations, Diane Nash and her Nashville colleagues played a dominant role. (Archival records often list her attendance at many of the meetings.) In the early days of the FRCC, the organization issued an "Appeal for Freedom Riders" that sounded the themes characteristic of the Nashville Movement. The "Appeal" emphasized the moral aspects of the struggle and cited the Movement's goal of human dignity, two hallmarks of Reverend Lawson's teachings.

The Freedom Riders have reached the stage where 161 have been arrested on trumped up charges of breaching the peace. Only when we citizens stand up to this and show we'll not stand idly by and be apathetic to racial injustice like those in Mississippi, can we expect to win this phase of the struggle for human dignity. We must bear witness to this evil system by going to Mississippi and remaining in jail until the moral weight of the universe is focused on Mississippi and the South.⁸³

The "Appeal" also revealed Nashville influences when it asked for supporters to send contributions to the NCLC office located at 319-8th Avenue in Nashville, the address of Reverend Smith's church. In addition, it gave details of the treatment of Lewis and LaFayette as

⁸² Arsenault, 283.

⁸³ "Appeal for Freedom Riders," n.d., Smith Papers, Box 75 Folder 11.

well as the beating of Reverend Vivian for refusing to say “sir” to the white jailers. The fate of non-Nashville Freedom Riders was not addressed in the “Appeal.”⁸⁴

Once the FRCC was formally organized, an all-out national assault on segregated travel began. Freedom Riders were determined to force the ICC to enforce its 1955 mandate of desegregated interstate travel and to implement new travel rules in accordance with the *Boynton* decision. These objectives forced Robert Kennedy to file a petition on May 29 asking the ICC to adopt “stringent regulations” prohibiting segregated interstate bus travel.⁸⁵

As federal authorities wrestled with their own bureaucratic maneuvers, the Freedom Riders poured into Jackson for the next several months. More than thirty separate Freedom Rides poured into the city between May 24 and September 13, 1961, either by bus, rail, or airplane. (In fact, between May 24 and the end of July, the period that witnessed the largest number of Freedom Rides, Jackson was the predominant destination.) The vast majority of the 436 individual Freedom Riders made Jackson their target.⁸⁶

Jackson was not the only destination of the Freedom Riders. Because of the national dimensions of the Nashville Phase, other cities such as Montgomery, Tallahassee (FL), St. Petersburg (FL), Little Rock, New Orleans, Houston, Shreveport (LA), Monroe (NC), Albany (GA), and McComb (MS) became either destinations or sites for terminal desegregation efforts. The national character of the Rides is even more evident in the fact that participants hailed from twenty-nine states and Washington, D.C. There were even two international Riders, one from British Columbia and another from Munich, Germany.⁸⁷

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ Arsenault, 292.

⁸⁶ According to the “Appendix: Roster of Freedom Riders,” found in Arsenault’s book, the trip from New Orleans to Jackson on September 13, 1961, dubbed the “Prayer Pilgrimage” because its fifteen Riders were all Episcopal clergy, was the last Ride with a Jackson destination. Other Freedom Riders descended upon Jackson’s terminals in November and December to either originate a Freedom Ride or to desegregate terminal facilities.

⁸⁷ Arsenault, “Appendix: Roster of Freedom Riders.”

There were other indications that the Freedom Riders were becoming national in scope. In Chicago, seven former Riders including Walter and Frances Bergman who were on the May 4 inaugural Ride, announced an initiative to recruit an army of new Riders and urged other activists to strike “while the iron is hot.” Following the Bergmans’ lead, a group of Cornell students promised to replace those arrested in Mississippi. Students at Harvard created an Emergency Integration Committee that sponsored “freedom parties” to raise money for CORE. At Yale, 307 faculty and administrators signed a petition supporting the Freedom Riders that was sent to the White House. On the West Coast, a collection of San Francisco clergy announced the formation of “Freedom Writers,” a body created to raise funds and collect a million signatures on behalf of the Freedom Riders to be delivered to the White House. These were signs that rather than losing steam in the face of opposition from segregationists and the Kennedy administration, the Freedom Riders were gaining momentum and national appeal.⁸⁸

The Freedom Rides generated so much momentum that the Justice Department asked an Alabama federal judge, Frank Johnson, Jr., to enjoin the Alabama Klan from molesting the Riders and to order state law enforcement agencies to protect them. Not only did Johnson temporarily restrain the Klan and their allies in various law enforcement agencies, but he also temporarily banned future Freedom Rides until a hearing on June 12. Freedom Riders saw the ruling as an insult. Within minutes of the injunction, Marvin Rich of CORE announced that it would seek a stay in federal court and asserted “Every person has a right to travel on the public highways with dignity.” As the SCLC’s representative on the FRCC, Dr. King initially refused to comment on Johnson’s ruling, but did say that “the ruling would probably not stop the Rides” and “that we have no fear of going to jail and staying to serve time when necessary. We have transformed jails and prisons from dungeons of shame to havens of freedom and justice.” True to

⁸⁸ Ibid., 298-99.

King's prediction, a group of Riders left the Montgomery terminal headed for Jackson despite the injunction. Among this group were two Nashville activists, one a Meharry Hospital nurse's aide, Carolyn Yvonne Reed, and Cordell H. Reagon, a Tennessee A & I student who later became prominent in the Albany Movement.⁸⁹

The staying power of the Freedom Rides and their increasingly national scope prompted Robert Kennedy to try a new strategy to deflate their momentum. Secretly, he mounted efforts to create a tax-exempt organization designed to register Black voters in the South. The attorney general personally enlisted the IRS commissioner, Mortimer Caplan, to secure the tax exemption for the new Voter Education Project (VEP) with the Southern Regional Council as administrator. Kennedy's objective was to persuade all of the civil rights organizations to unite behind the regional initiative, especially those pushing the Freedom Rides, as a way to divert them from the more confrontational and embarrassing direct action campaigns that incited violence.⁹⁰

Kennedy's plan to disrupt the Freedom Rides had significant consequences for the student movement. The introduction of a voter registration campaign exposed philosophical fissures among student activists who nearly imploded SNCC over the issue of voter registration versus direct action. Kennedy's ploy also precipitated conflict over the efficacy of the philosophy of nonviolence. On June 16, Robert Kennedy met with several representatives of the FRCC, including Charles McDew, Charles Sherrod, Charles Jones, Wyatt Walker, and Diane Nash as well as other interested parties such as Gordon Carey of CORE and Washington, D.C. lawyer Belford Lawson. The students involved hoped to win support for the Freedom Rides, but Kennedy had a different purpose. He argued that the Rides had made their point against segregated travel facilities and therefore there was no point in carrying on the demonstrations.

⁸⁹ Branch, 435; Arsenault, 300-1.

⁹⁰ Branch, 479.

Instead, he urged the students to divert their energies toward Black voter registration. If they would do so, Kennedy promised the full support and protection of the federal government. This was too much for Charles Sherrod, who saw the offer as a bribe. Indignantly, he responded, “You are a public official, sir. It’s not your responsibility before God or under law to tell us how to honor our constitutional rights. It’s your job to protect us when we do.”⁹¹

Attorney General Robert Kennedy’s proposed cessation of the Nashville Phase of the Freedom Rides caused momentary trauma within the leadership ranks, both locally in Nashville and at the national level. Only one day after FRCC representatives met with Kennedy, the NCLC held a meeting where serious consideration was given to suspending the Rides, a discussion based upon a recommendation from Reverend Lawson. In addition to the pressure from the Kennedy administration, the NCLC was also moved to such deliberations due to the need to bail James Bevel out of jail. (Those who remained in jail more than forty days lost the chance to appeal their convictions and Bevel was approaching his forty-day limit.) At the national level, the Kennedy proposal general fierce debate among civil rights leaders about continuing the Rides, leading to a report in the *New York Times* that “‘powerful forces’ in the Negro movement for integration have thrown their support behind a proposal to de-emphasize ‘freedom rides.’” Freedom Ride spokesmen such as Gordon Carey were compelled to declare such reports as “grossly in error.” When asked about the report of halting the Rides, Diana Nash, who was not at the NCLC meeting, expressed shock over such news, claiming that she did not “know of any

⁹¹ “Put Votes Ahead of Rides: Gen. Kennedy,” *Nashville Banner*, 20 June 1961, n.p; Branch, 480. Ironically, the failure of the federal government to support the political aspirations of Black southerners and the activists who risked their lives in pursuit of them, played a big role in helping turn many of the activists who initially embraced nonviolence toward the more radical politics of Black Power. As Clayborne Carson points out in *In Struggle*, the disappointment in Atlantic City in 1964 when the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party (MDFP) failed to unseat the all-white Mississippi delegation because of backroom machinations by top Democrats was a turning point on the road to the emergence of Black Power. The irony is that the Kennedy administration attempted to use Black political organizing as a way to blunt radical activism and that same scheme ultimately led to an even more radical form of Black activism: Black Power.

move like that.”⁹² Although no suspension of the Rides ever materialized, the Kennedy plan caused leaders to scramble to head off word of dissent within the ranks.

Beyond rumors of suspending the Freedom Rides, Kennedy’s actions had other ramifications, especially for SNCC. The creation of the VEP led to an intense debate at a SNCC leadership workshop held in Nashville in July 1961 to discuss the issue of direct action versus voter registration. Student activists like Tim Jenkins of the National Student Association argued in favor of shifting the focus to voter registration. Veteran Nashville activists such as Diane Nash, Marion Barry, Bernard LaFayette, James Bevel, and John Lewis were adamantly opposed to the idea. Lewis and his colleagues believed the voter registration scheme “was a trick to take the steam out of the movement, to slow it down.”⁹³

The debate over the Kennedy proposal reached a head at a Highlander conference during the second week of August. Some of the direct action proponents were so opposed to the voter registration proposal that they were prepared to leave SNCC if direct action was ended. The debate became so acrimonious that Ella Baker feared the disagreement could permanently fracture SNCC. Many students felt that the only way both factions could remain true to their convictions was to split the organization. Baker seldom intervened in the students’ deliberations, but on this occasion she felt a split would be detrimental to the Movement’s future. Baker “opposed the split as serving the purpose of the enemy.” Her experience with SCLC’s voter registration efforts in the late 1950s and her previous work on behalf of the NAACP’s voter drives taught her that voter registration work and direct action were not mutually exclusive. Consequently, Baker convinced the students to create two wings within SNCC, one for voter registration and the other for direct action. Nash was named head of the direct action campaign,

⁹² “Freedom Rider Discord Denied.” *Tennessean*, 27 June 1961, n.p; Bennett interview of Bevel, Lafayette and Patton.

⁹³ Lewis, 181.

expanding her profile as a top student leader. Charles Jones of Johnson C. Smith College in Charlotte was elected coordinator of the voter registration initiative.⁹⁴

Not only did the Freedom Rides produce disagreement within SNCC over the future direction of the Movement, it introduced a significant number of non-southerners to the Movement, a development that drastically altered the character of the struggle. Because the recruiting networks of the Nashville Phase extended beyond the South, many Northerners and whites came South to join the Movement. People such as James Forman from Chicago, Tim Jenkins from Washington, D.C. (Howard University), and Stokely Carmichael, also from Howard, came South, along with numerous white students to join the Freedom Rides. Their presence had a profound impact upon the character of the Movement.

Most of this “new blood” attracted to the Movement in 1961 was not schooled in the philosophy of nonviolence nor its tactics and disciplined modes of protest. One of the components that distinguished the Nashville activists from their counterparts elsewhere was their philosophical and disciplined approach to activism. They understood the rationale behind their actions and they exhibited a commitment to the cause that could sustain them until a successful outcome. John Lewis wrote:

I had no question . . . that the unique success of what we had achieved in the city of Nashville up until then, and what we would continue to achieve there in the coming years, was due to the discipline and care with which we approached our demonstrations. That summer [1961], though, I could see that discipline eroding, crumbling a little at the edge where the outsiders were stepping in.⁹⁵

The significance of the introduction of this new element into the Movement cannot be underestimated. To a large extent, the Nashville Phase is responsible for the germination of the

⁹⁴ Ransby, 269-70; Carson, 41-42; Lewis, 180-81.

⁹⁵ Lewis, 178.

seeds of Black Power within the ranks of the student movement. In particular, James Forman and Stokely Carmichael later became some of the primary proponents of Black Power. As Lewis recalled, Forman had doubts about nonviolence from the start. Activists such as Carmichael and Forman were not sit-in veterans who had experienced a sustained and successful nonviolent campaign with the requisite training in nonviolence. Instead, they joined the Movement during the height of the violence of the Freedom Rides. They became jaded, outraged, and angered by the horror of the violence in Alabama.⁹⁶ This experience may help explain Forman's embrace of Robert F. Williams' policy of armed self-defense in Monroe, North Carolina. At SNCC's founding conference, Ella Baker voiced concern about the influence of northerners on the direction of the Movement, a warning that proved prescient during the Freedom Rides. According to Barbara Ransby, Baker felt "the leadership for the South had to be a southern leadership" because the more politically savvy and experienced Northern students would dominate their southern counterparts. She knew that more experienced leaders had a tendency to view themselves as more capable than the locals and thereby take control of indigenous struggles. John Lewis confirmed this tendency in Carmichael when he contended that Carmichael came to Nashville the summer of 1961 "intent on not just joining us but putting himself in a leadership role."⁹⁷

James Forman's stint as executive secretary of SNCC validated Ella Baker's warning about northern influence upon the Movement. Although Forman did not assume the executive position with the intent of undermining nonviolence, during his nearly five-year tenure at SNCC from September 1961 to May 1966, he ultimately steered it away from its nonviolence roots and its belief in the beloved community. That he maneuvered the organization in this direction is not

⁹⁶ Ibid., 179-80.

⁹⁷ Ransby, 242; Lewis, 178.

surprising given his belief that nonviolence was nothing more than a tactic. In July 1961, during the height of the Freedom Rides and two months before he assumed the position of executive secretary, Forman made a trip to Nashville where he explicitly noted that he “did not believe in nonviolence as a way of life and was surprised to see many of the Nashville students still debating nonviolence as a tactic as opposed to a way of life.”⁹⁸ In hindsight, it is obvious that SNCC would not adhere to nonviolence when the Movement’s tide shifted direction if its chief executive officer was not committed to it.

Not only could Forman not be expected to hold up nonviolence as a core SNCC value, but his stewardship also endangered the organization as a close-knit group of grassroots activists bound together through common struggles. SNCC activists often referred to themselves as a “band of brothers” (and sisters) who were tied together in a “circle of trust,”⁹⁹ but this aspect of SNCC changed under Forman after the MFDP failed to unseat the lily-white delegation of Democrats in Atlantic City in 1964. It was at this point that Forman recognized a seismic shift within SNCC and began to push it in a new direction. According to him, the experience of Atlantic City raised an important question. “Could SNCC grow from a cadre of organizers into a revolutionary organization seeking power?”¹⁰⁰ Forman’s question indicated his desire to transform the agency in a fundamental way. During his watch SNCC toyed with the idea of reconfiguring itself as a mass-based organization seeking to consolidate and leverage power and influence that it had amassed by the mid-1960s. This meant the end of the core belief that the primary objective was to change the hearts and minds of opponents by way of agape love and

⁹⁸ Forman, 148.

⁹⁹ For SNCC’s November 1964 meeting in Waveland, Mississippi, Forman drafted a paper intended for discussion entitled “What Is SNCC?—A Band of Brothers, A Circle of Trust.” The document was an analysis of SNCC’s history and tried to define the organization’s ideas, working methods, and goals. See page 429 of Forman’s *The Making of Black Revolutionaries*.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 412.

respect for all humanity. In its place would be a naked accumulation of an exploitative power. Forman contended that “some others and I were ready to shift gears in the fall of 1964; most were not.”¹⁰¹

This proposed retooling came at a time when SNCC also added eighty-five new staff members. At the October 1964 meeting in Atlanta, members voted to hire many of the volunteers from the 1964 Mississippi Summer Project,¹⁰² most of them educated, middle-class northerners, and some of them white. Not only was SNCC on the verge of discarding its roots at the hands of a Black, middle-class northerner who never wholly embraced nonviolence, but at the same time its character was being altered by an influx of more northern influences. Forman was gravely concerned about the impact that this demographic would have on the character of SNCC. His primary concern was that the organization would acquire more of a reformist temperament and less of a revolutionary one. In his memoir, Forman expressed his worries bluntly.

. . . I think that the middle-class element saw SNCC basically from a reformist rather than a revolutionary point of view . . . Largely because of the Mississippi Summer Project, a Northern, middle-class, interracial element in SNCC had begun to predominate over the poor, rural, Southern Black element. This shift greatly weakened the organization. For it created internal antagonisms just at the time when the dynamics of SNCC’s work was forcing it to choose, between reform and revolution, violence and nonviolence. And an organization that is seeking revolution, and willing to use violence, cannot afford the fear of power.¹⁰³

Curiously, Forman acknowledged his own northern middle-class background, yet failed to recognize that his own northern perspective helped chart a treacherous future for SNCC.

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

¹⁰² In the summer of 1964, SNCC sponsored a massive Black voter registration campaign all across Mississippi known as the “Summer Project.” The campaign brought several hundred white and a number of Black college students into the state, resulting in the tragic murder of three CORE field secretaries on June 21 in Neshoba County: James Chaney, Michael Schwerner, and Andrew Goodman. See pages 247-251 and 255-274 in *Walking with the Wind* for a full account of the Summer Project from an SNCC perspective.

¹⁰³ Forman, 413.

Without firm roots in the Black church, Forman easily gravitated toward ideology,¹⁰⁴ a term he tossed around profusely in a chapter entitled “Internal Disorder,” his apparent attempt to explain the disorganization that gripped SNCC after Atlantic City. In that chapter, Forman revealed an obvious shift in his rhetoric that involved the future of SNCC. He spoke of moving from a mere reform stance to a revolutionary platform. He articulated a vision of Black people having “power” and willing to use violence in pursuit of their goals. Without using the phrase, Forman was already talking about what later became known as “Black Power.” It seems evident that Forman had already begun the process of dismantling SNCC’s philosophical foundation of nonviolence. The evidence shows that from the beginning of his term as executive secretary, Forman viewed nonviolence as only a tactic to be discarded when something better presented itself. Consequently, when the Movement shifted or encountered a roadblock, Forman could not be counted on to defend nonviolence as a fundamental component of SNCC. The opportunity for him to move SNCC toward his vision of a revolutionary vanguard with a mass base of southern Black folk came with the perceived failure of the MFDP in Atlantic City. At that juncture, Forman abandoned nonviolence and began moving the organization toward Black Power. It took another two years before Stokely Carmichael publicly popularized the slogan in 1966. Although Carmichael is over-credited with its emergence, James Forman deserves much of the credit for creating space for Black Power to find fertile ground within SNCC and germinate.

Ironically, although critics of nonviolence like James Forman were drawn to the South because of the success of nonviolent campaigns such as the Freedom Rides, these very same critics who built their initial careers partially upon the shoulders of nonviolence also helped to discredit it later on. For Forman in particular, although he was raised in the United Methodist

¹⁰⁴ In chapter 52, “Internal Disorder,” Forman began using Marxist terminology and analysis to attack American capitalism, suggesting that SNCC consider dismantling the American system if indeed a true revolution were to take place. See pages 411-432.

Church, he disavowed religion entirely before he became involved in the Movement. By 1954, Forman declared that he “rid [himself] once and for all, of the greatest disorder that cluttered my mind—the belief in God or any type of supreme being.”¹⁰⁵ It did not seem to register that the essence of the southern Movement was religious in nature and that his position as executive secretary of SNCC had been made possible by the religious thrust of the Movement.

In addition to producing conflict over the future direction of the Movement and producing debate about nonviolence, the Nashville Phase sparked movements in Georgia and Mississippi. The Albany Movement is a classic example. Freedom Riders such as Cordell Reagon, a Nashville native and Tennessee A & I student, and Charles Sherrod, a Petersburg, Virginia, native and student at Virginia Union Seminary, made their way to southwest Georgia, partly as a result of the Nashville Phase of the Freedom Rides. Other activists, including Salynn McCollum, Joan Browning, Norma Collins, James Forman, Sandra “Casey” Hayden, Tom Hayden, Per Laursen, Bernard Lee, Lenora Taitt, and Robert Zellner also journeyed to Albany because of the Nashville Phase.¹⁰⁶ It is the relocation of Reagon and Sherrod that is most significant for the Albany Movement.

Both Reagon and Sherrod were affiliated with SNCC. They ended up in Albany because of the Kennedy administration’s scheme to start the VEP. Sherrod sided with SNCC’s voter registration faction and went to Terrell County, Georgia, in the spring of 1961 because of the Justice Department’s assessment that the county was ripe for registration lawsuits. SNCC thought it was worth sending down a team and therefore Reagon and Sherrod got the assignment.

¹⁰⁵ Forman, 80-81.

¹⁰⁶ Lewis, 180-81; In Arsenault’s book *Freedom Riders*, the “Appendix: Roster of Freedom Riders” list these activists as the ones who traveled to Albany by Trailways bus and by train on November 1 and December 10, respectively, as part of the Freedom Rides. Cordell Reagon and Charles Sherrod were on the Trailways bus that arrived November 1.

But they soon discovered that Blacks in Terrell County were not receptive to civil rights activists and subsequently retreated to adjacent Dougherty County, home of Albany.¹⁰⁷

Not much headway was made in Albany until November 1961. On September 22, because of the relentless pressure exerted by the Nashville Phase and due to Robert Kennedy's earlier petition, the ICC issued an unanimous ruling prohibiting racial discrimination in interstate bus transportation. Beginning November 1, 1961, all interstate buses were be required to post a certificate reading: "seating aboard this vehicle is without regard to race, color, creed, or national origin, by order of the Interstate Commerce Commission." The ruling also applied to all bus terminal facilities. The ICC's ruling led to new rounds of Freedom Rides to test compliance,¹⁰⁸ essentially a continuation of the Nashville Phase.

It was the new round of Freedom Rides that brought Albany into the picture. SNCC decided to participate in testing compliance in Albany, partly because Reagon and Sherrod had already established themselves in Albany. Thus on November 1, Reagon, Sherrod, and Salynn McCollum caught a Trailways bus from Atlanta to Albany. Their Freedom Ride was part of an orchestrated campaign to assess enforcement of the new ICC order.¹⁰⁹

Reagon and Sherrod did not confirm plans for the Albany Ride until Halloween night when James Forman offered them a chance to be official observers for the four-hour trip. Salynn McCollum, a student from Peabody College in Nashville who had been recently hired by SNCC as one of its few white staff members, went along to monitor the trip and report back to headquarters. The trio left Atlanta before sunrise and arrived in Albany at 6:30 a.m.¹¹⁰ Their

¹⁰⁷ Branch, 487-88.

¹⁰⁸ Arsenault, 439-41. Although the ICC ruling applied to buses and their terminals, it did not apply to other modes of public transportation. See page 440 of *Freedom Riders*.

¹⁰⁹ Arsenault, 441 and appendix, page 583.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 454-55; Kathy Bennett interview of Salynn McCollum, March 27, 2004, for Nashville Public Library Oral History Collection.

arrival ignited a protracted local movement that gained national attention and ultimately embarrassed Dr. King and the SCLC.

When the SNCC Freedom Riders came to town, very little if any agitation was afoot. In May, a local businessman, Tom Chatmon, had organized a NAACP Youth Council with hopes of pushing white officials toward gradual change. But the presence of Freedom Riders changed everything. Instead of the timid moderate approach suggested by Chatmon who advised the Youth Council to be patient and mindful of their elders' vulnerabilities, Reagon and Sherrod inspired bold confrontation and caused a great deal of concern among conservative Black leaders in Albany.¹¹¹

Reagon and Sherrod convinced the Youth Council to get involved in testing compliance at the bus station. When the Freedom Riders arrived, the youth were supposed to meet them and simultaneously test the terminal facilities. The plan was enthusiastically embraced by the youth, but met strong resistance from Chatmon and the NAACP hierarchy. Nevertheless, out of fear that disallowing the demonstration would destroy the NAACP's credibility with the students, Chatmon secretly permitted the action. His trepidation was confirmation that SNCC's presence was an unwelcome development for many established Black leaders. More tellingly, the Albany NAACP branch, weeks before the November 1 Freedom Ride, told Reagon and Sherrod they were not welcome in town.¹¹²

Much to the dismay of the three SNCC Freedom Riders, the Youth Council did not show up at the Trailways station out of fear of being killed or beaten by local white supremacists. However, Reagon and Sherrod coaxed them back to the bus station for a sit-in that same afternoon; they immediately left after being threatened with arrest. Although this was a very

¹¹¹ Ibid., 454.

¹¹² Branch, 526; According to Arsenault, the Albany NAACP was losing membership and feared a strong campaign by SNCC would further weaken its membership. See page 454 of *Freedom Riders*.

tame demonstration by Freedom Riders' standards, the implications were monumental. As Sherrod put it, "From that moment on, segregation was dead." News that a group of high school students had dared to confront Police Chief Laurie Pritchett's men shot through Black Albany. As a result, high schoolers, students from Albany State College, a few ministers, and a schoolteacher or two began flocking to Sherrod's meetings at Shiloh Baptists Church.¹¹³ Something dramatic seemed to be taking shape in Albany that had never occurred before, all because of the Freedom Rides.

The Freedom Rides also stirred a monumental development among white law enforcement officials, something that later affected the Albany Movement in important ways. At a city commission meeting, Chief Pritchett reported that demonstrations were certain to take place. In anticipation of such a crisis, he had carefully reviewed the actions of Alabama law enforcement during the Freedom Rides and pinpointed their mistakes. The negative publicity that besieged Alabama and forced federal intervention was because police allowed violence. Rather than repeating the same mistake, Pritchett trained his officers to enforce segregation without guns or billy clubs. He also instructed them to charge arrested individuals with breach of peace infractions instead of violations of segregation codes, statutes more vulnerable to legal challenges.¹¹⁴ Without the threat of Freedom Rides, Pritchett would likely never have developed the strategy of "non-brutal" enforcement of segregation and of sequestering arrested protesters in jails in other jurisdictions in order to foil the jail-no-bail strategy. According to David Garrow, these maneuvers made Pritchett a media darling, producing stories of him as the "white knight." White Northern reporters were impressed with his combination of good ol' boy friendliness and sophistication in handling demonstrators. These qualities also prevented national outrage from

¹¹³ Arsenault, 455; Branch, 527-28.

¹¹⁴ Branch, 527.

taking shape against Albany, thereby precluding any intervention on the part of the federal government, without which the Albany Movement lacked any leverage against intransigent local officials. With no national pressure to resolve its racial problems, Albany's white leaders did not have to even talk to movement leaders, a circumstance that played a major role in the collapse of the Albany Movement.¹¹⁵

In the fall of 1961 though, the Albany Movement seemed to hit its stride. The Black community was energized after three high school and two Albany State College students were arrested at the bus station just before the Thanksgiving break. That action was soon followed on December 10 by a new set of Freedom Riders who descended upon Albany's Union Railway Terminal. This development convinced Sherrod that the time was right to deploy the jail-no-bail strategy.¹¹⁶

Over the next several days, hundreds of demonstrators poured into downtown, were arrested, and then shuttled to jail in the surrounding counties, known to locals as the "badlands." No one within movement leadership circles had anticipated such a move. Having exhausted the cash supply in Black Albany by posting bond for nearly two hundred protesters, the Albany Movement was at a loss as to what was the next step. By chance, Bernard Lee, a SCLC staffer on the scene, suggested bringing in Dr. King, a recommendation that found overwhelming favor among the locals.¹¹⁷

Dr. King, accompanied by Wyatt T. Walker and Ralph D. Abernathy, arrived in town Friday, December 15, for what he thought would be a one-time appearance at a mass meeting. However, the invitation turned into an embarrassing ordeal. Dr. William G. Anderson, president of the Albany Movement, convinced Dr. King to stay over for a march to city hall the next day, a

¹¹⁵ Garrow, 209, 217.

¹¹⁶ Branch, 530-35.

¹¹⁷ Ibid., 536-40.

decision that led to a series of arrests for Dr. King and deflating blunders for the local movement. King was arrested on December 16 and promised to remain in jail until Christmas if necessary, but was released after only two days as a result of a verbal agreement that was summarily ignored once King left town. Not only did the Black community gain nothing from the episode, but King was lambasted by the press for engineering “one of the most stunning defeats” of his career.¹¹⁸

The losses were compounded for Dr. King and the SCLC in July 1962 when he returned to Albany for sentencing from his December arrest. In court, when Judge A. N. Durden ordered King to pay a \$178 fine or serve 45 days¹¹⁹, King chose the jail time, precipitating a crisis among local white officials who wished to be rid of him. Unbeknownst to King, white Albany officials, in collaboration with the Justice Department, arranged a clever scheme to run King out of the city. A local attorney, B.C. Gardner, clandestinely paid the fine in cash and Pritchett evicted King from his cell, catching him flabbergasted. At a Shiloh Baptist Church press conference later that day, King confessed, “This is one time I’m out of jail that I’m not happy to be out,” and denounced the “subtle and conniving tactics” used to secure his release. The story that white officials told was that the fine was paid by “an unidentified, well-dressed Negro male.”¹²⁰

The outmaneuvering of King and the SCLC represented a loss of momentum for the Albany Movement. Local leaders kept up pressure by testing segregated parks and the city library, but the movement never regained the muster that it had when the Freedom Riders first appeared. The showdown at the bus station on November 1 put high school students at the leading edge of a local struggle, giving Albany the distinction of using children as demonstrators

¹¹⁸ Ibid., 544-57.

¹¹⁹ According to Taylor Branch, Ralph Abernathy was in court with King that day. Judge Durden gave him the same penalty as King. See page 600.

¹²⁰ Branch, 528.

more than a year before the “Children’s Crusade” in Birmingham in 1963¹²¹. In a way, the use of high school students gave a preview of their potential future use by the SCLC and SNCC.

Albany demonstrated that using children enhanced the boldness of protest action and pulled in adults who were reluctant to participate. For example, when the Youth Council teens defied Chief Pritchett on November 1, and thereafter flocked to Sherrod’s meetings, they pulled in several adults.¹²² Even more pointedly, had it not been for the youth, the Albany Movement would never have gotten off the ground. The influx of Freedom Riders gave the Youth Council a chance to mobilize and ignite a civil rights campaign.

The young activists involved in the Nashville Phase of the Freedom Rides paid other dividends in Alban. The city became perhaps the first community where Blacks began overcoming their paralyzing fear of white folks and the repression they used to maintain white supremacy. Black people in Albany began losing their fear because the defiance of white authority by the Freedom Riders inspired adult leaders to likewise upset racial protocol. Without the actions of the students, the adults would not likely have been prompted to act boldly themselves. The first step in conquering this fear came November 1 when the Youth Council defied Chief Pritchett. Word of such bravery shot through Black Albany like a lightning bolt, igniting a movement. Forman witnessed much of this phenomenon and wrote about it in an article in the *University of Chicago News*. He arrived in Albany on December 10 as a Freedom Rider and recorded firsthand accounts of the experiences of participants in the early phase of the Albany Movement. In his article, Forman revealed a new mood in Black Albany and cited Slater King, a local builder and real estate broker, as an example. “The determination of Slater [King],

¹²¹ See chapter eight of Glenn T. Eskew’s *But for Birmingham: The Local and National Movements in the Civil Rights Struggle* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1997) for a full elaboration of the use of children as civil rights demonstrators; Branch, 608.

¹²² Branch, 528.

a prominent businessman in Albany, to join his wife in jail reflects the overcoming-of-the-fear-of-jail and the willingness of the Negro community in Albany to demonstrate to the power structure that no longer could it resist the demands of Negroes.” Both Kings in jail meant that their three children had to be cared for by a housekeeper.¹²³ Thus, simultaneous jail terms for them represented an uncommon sacrifice and was indicative of the mood in Albany.

While the Nashville Phase certainly stimulated the Albany Movement, by extension the Albany Movement provided an important lesson for the SCLC: the need to involve young people in its operations. At a January 4-5, 1962, meeting in Atlanta, top SCLC staff acknowledged the need to add youth to its board and to hire them as field staff. One of the revelations produced by Albany was that the SCLC lacked field staff. There was no personnel who could assist communities in building indigenous movements. The SCLC board decided to approach SNCC members such as Bob Moses, Diane Nash, John Lewis, and James Bevel, activists not hostile to the SCLC, about joining the organization in some capacity.¹²⁴ (As the next chapter will illustrate, Nash and Bevel had significant influence upon SCLC strategy from 1963 to 1965.) In May 1962, John Lewis was elected to the SCLC’s board, adding some “young blood” to its leadership. James and Diane Nash Bevel played a key role in the outcome of the Birmingham and Selma campaigns, although only James was officially on the SCLC payroll.¹²⁵

Student leaders exerted critical influence upon Dr. King in other ways as a result of the Freedom Rides to Albany. As was the case with the sit-in movement and the Nashville Phase of the Freedom Rides, the question of jail versus bail became a salient issue during the Albany Movement and Dr. King vowed to refuse bail on two occasions, December 1961 and July 1962. However, because of extraordinary circumstances, he failed to honor the pledge, leading to a

¹²³ Forman, 252-54; Branch 524.

¹²⁴ Garrow, 189.

¹²⁵ Lewis, 190.

harsh rebuke by many of his critics. Diane Nash, one of the early student pioneers of jail-no-bail, joined the chorus of criticism of adult leaders who wavered on their commitment to this critical tactic. In a subtle manner, she chided King for bailing out of jail. Her words factored significantly into King's refusal to pay a fine imposed by Judge Durden in July 1962. She wrote:

I believe that the time has come . . . when each of us must make up his mind, when arrested on unjust charges, to serve his sentence and stop posting bonds. I believe that unless we do this our movement loses its power and will never succeed.

We . . . have been talking about jail without bail for two years or more. It is time we mean what we say. . .

I think we all realize what it would mean if we had hundreds and thousands of people . . . prepared to go to jail and stay. There can be no doubt that our battle would be won . . . We have faltered and hesitated . . .¹²⁶

Nash's criticism was important for several reasons. First, it prompted King to recognize "the painful truth in Nash's argument, and [vow] that . . . he would do better," according to David Garrow.¹²⁷ Second, it articulated a major policy statement on behalf of the Movement from the ranks of students. By 1962, Nash had established herself as the leading advocate of jail-no bail. It should be recalled that she was one of four students arrested in Rock Hill, South Carolina, supporting the jail-in there. Her public rebuke stemmed from her own sacrifices when she was arrested in July 1961 in Jackson during the Freedom Rides on charges of "contributing to the delinquency of minors" because she conducted nonviolence workshops for students under eighteen. Her statement was part of a longer public statement issued in April of 1962, designed to both rebuke backsliding adults and defend her decision to go to jail while in the advanced stages of her first pregnancy. Nash's open letter outlined the philosophical rationale for the no

¹²⁶ Garrow, 202.

¹²⁷ Ibid. Garrow contends King dreaded going to jail because the loneliness was unbearable. Mrs. King was cited on page 202 saying "he didn't like to be alone. Jail wasn't easy for him because he never liked to be alone . . ." In some instances, Reverend Abernathy accompanied him to jail, as was often the case in Albany. On other occasions, namely in Birmingham when he penned the "Letter from Birmingham Jail," King was in solitary confinement. See pages 550-53 of Branch's *Parting the Waters* for discussion of King's first arrest in Albany and page 735 for discussion of King's isolation in the Birmingham jail.

bail strategy in ways never before articulated and muted the criticism of those questioning the sanity and wisdom on giving birth in a Mississippi prison.¹²⁸

The Nash statement represented the student movement equivalent of Dr. King's 1963 "Letter from Birmingham Jail." Like King's letter, her pronouncement was written to a broad audience who misunderstood her actions and brilliantly articulated a philosophical stance so important to the Movement. Her motives reflected a cause larger than the priorities of a single individual. Unfortunately, Nash's message was not widely disseminated in the media and failed to attract the acclaim enjoyed by King's letter. Yet its brilliance is obvious.

I have decided to surrender myself . . . and serve my sentence . . . To appeal further would necessitate my sitting through another trial in a Mississippi court, and I have reached the conclusion that I can no longer cooperate with the evil and unjust system of this state. I subscribe to the philosophy . . . that you refuse to cooperate with evil . . .

Some people have asked me how I can do this when I am expecting my first child in September . . . In the long run this will be the best thing I can do for my child. This will be a black child born in Mississippi and thus wherever he is born he will be in prison. I believe that if I go to jail now it may help hasten that day when my child and all children will be free . . .¹²⁹

Nash went on to proclaim that to post bond puts "the matter entirely into the hands of the courts even though we know we won't get justice in these courts . . . We say this is a moral battle, but then we surrender the fight into the legal hands of corrupt courts." In addition, she offered a second compelling reason to accept jail over bail. "There is an even larger reason why we must begin to stay in jail. If we do not do so, we lose our opportunity to reach the community and society with a great moral appeal and thus bring about basic changes in people and in society." From a practical standpoint, Nash argued "it simply becomes a physical impossibility

¹²⁸ "Message from Diane Nash to Individuals and Organizations Working for Civil Rights," 30 April 1962, Fuson Papers, Box 2, Folder 2.

¹²⁹ Ibid.

for the civil rights movement . . . to raise such bonds for great numbers of people . . . for legal fees and court costs if there are mass arrests and everyone wants to make bond and appeal.” In her estimation, adherence to the jail-no-bail strategy could make or break the Movement. She felt that a unique opportunity to radically advance the cause of Black freedom had materialized but was being squandered. In a final note she wrote, “In following nonviolence we have been experimenting with a new and revolutionary method that can bring about a redeemed society. But we have faltered and hesitated . . .”¹³⁰

By standing in defense of jail-no-bail and risking a jail sentence while pregnant just as adults seemed to lose heart, Diane Nash demonstrated not only a peerless degree of self-sacrifice, but more importantly an uncanny ability to sense a Movement crossroads and the courage to take the appropriate action. She had done the same thing during the Freedom Rides after CORE pulled out. In April 1962, Nash discerned that the leadership ranks needed someone to help them reaffirm their commitment to Movement goals and strategies. Many activists looked to Dr. King for that sort of inspiration, but he had already wavered once in Albany and there was no guarantee against future relapses. Therefore, Nash filled the gap, shored up King’s backbone, and put herself in the top ranks of Movement strategists and nonviolence practitioners, superceding even Dr. King. At this juncture, she seemed more experienced and knowledgeable about the application of nonviolence than him. She became a leader of leaders, exposing two of Dr. King’s weaknesses: the dilemma of being a messianic figure whom people became overly dependent on and his paralyzing fear of the loneliness of jail.¹³¹

Even though she made this decision before the onset of the Freedom Rides, it was during the Rides that the full impact of her fulltime commitment to the Movement became evident.

¹³⁰ Ibid.

¹³¹ For Mrs. King’s revelation that Dr. King had a paralyzing fear of being in jail alone, see page 202 of Garrow.

Because Nash was already serving as a coordinator for the NCLC, it was a logical step for her to serve as coordinator of the Nashville Phase. Here she played a critical role in guiding the Rides to a successful conclusion, a task that required fulltime dedication. She and her colleagues had already decided that the continuation of the Freedom Rides was important enough to die for, therefore jeopardizing a college did not seem much of a sacrifice, a decision that contradicted Black middle class values that prioritized a college education.¹³²

The Freedom-Ride-inspired Albany Movement represented a steep learning curve and baptism by fire for the SCLC. Hitherto, the SCLC had no experience in directing a sustained protest campaign. However, the Albany experience provided a template for the next initiative: Birmingham. In early January 1963, SCLC's inner circle met to analyze Albany's lessons, an imperative before launching a Birmingham campaign. One of the most important lessons was selecting the proper target, one that would likely use violence to defend segregation, provoking public outrage and federal intervention. Along these lines, Birmingham had Eugene "Bull" Connor, the city's public safety director who was infamous for his quick temper and brutality.¹³³

The SCLC also learned to avoid communities beset with divided local leadership. In Albany, the NAACP, SNCC, and many local leaders resented the SCLC's presence. But Birmingham had no active NAACP chapter and SNCC was not present. Reverend Fred Shuttlesworth was the undisputed primary leader who was affiliated with the SCLC and had the support of hundreds of loyalists. He also led the effort to bring Dr. King and the SCLC to town.¹³⁴

¹³² According to Halberstam, Rodney Powell encountered hostility from the Meharry administration over his participation in the Movement. Powell was warned by a dean that if he participated in the Freedom Rides, was arrested, and missed graduation, he would not receive his degree. At that time, Powell was only a few days from graduation. He was disappointed that professional attainment was more important to many Meharry officials than the fate of Black people. See page 271.

¹³³ Garrow, 227.

¹³⁴ Ibid.

Finally, the SCLC learned that in places where Black people lacked political power, they should attack the economic base of the white community using Black collective buying power. In Albany, African Americans targeted the city commission, a body with whom they had no leverage because of weak Black voting strength. Birmingham would be different. By squeezing white merchants, the Black community could force the business elite to exact concessions from the politicians.¹³⁵ When the SCLC evaluated the sum of all the lessons of Albany, it felt capable of bringing Birmingham to its knees. These lessons therefore set the stage for the ascendancy of the SCLC. Before Albany, the organization had no field staff, very little experience in conducting sustained direct action campaigns, no track work of working with youth, and not much recognition as an agency that could generate social change. All of these shortcomings were reduced after Albany. Without the Nashville Phase of the Freedom Rides coming to Albany, the SCLC would not have gotten such an opportunity to improve itself.

The Nashville Phase also had important implications in Mississippi. As Reverend Vivian previously stated, taking a Freedom Ride into Mississippi risked death. Many activists considered Mississippi the most dangerous place of all, which explains why Reverend Vivian did not tell his wife, Octavia, then pregnant with their sixth child, that he was going. He led her to believe he was only going to Alabama.¹³⁶ Because of the fear that Mississippi struck in the hearts of Black people, the assault on the state by the Freedom Riders carried high stakes and was a major advance for the Movement.

Since Jackson was the termination point of the Freedom Rides, numerous activists wound up in Mississippi, including Nashville veterans such as Diane Nash, James Bevel, Bernard LaFayette, and Tennessee A & I student Lester McKinney. Already active there was Bob Moses,

¹³⁵ Ibid., 226-27.

¹³⁶ Kuhn interview of Vivian.

a Harlem native who established a voter registration project in McComb in mid-July 1961¹³⁷, just as Jackson became the focal point of the Nashville Phase. The combination of Moses organizing and the Nashville Phase descending into Mississippi set off a chain reaction of activism that made the state one of the most important battlegrounds of the Movement, partially fulfilling Lawson and Smith's hope of spreading rebellion across the South.

Although her role as Freedom Rides coordinator may have played a role, it appears Diane Nash ventured into Mississippi largely to be with James Bevel, whom she had become romantically involved with by the summer of 1961. Though they disagreed about whether the marriage was one born of practicality or resulted from an all-consuming love, it is clear they both cared a great deal for each other and wanted to be together. Consequently, to the surprise of everyone, except perhaps for John Lewis who believed they "were fated to come together," Nash and Bevel were secretly married in the fall of 1961 in Jackson by a justice of the peace. Not even their roommates, Catherine Burks and Paul Brooks, who also found matrimony in the cauldron of the Movement, knew they had exchanged vows until after the ceremony. According to journalist David Halberstam, they were pulled together and fell in love under the isolation and pressure-filled circumstances of the Movement. Their shared experiences united them as both colleagues and lovers, making it obvious to them that marriage was the next step.¹³⁸

Bevel and LaFayette ended up in Mississippi because they were aboard the Trailways bus that journeyed from Montgomery to Jackson on May 24. Both men were arrested and spent nearly two months in Parchman. While there, Bevel was disturbed by assertions on the part of local whites and the media that all Freedom Riders were "outsiders" regardless of birthplace.

¹³⁷ John Dittmer, *Local People: The Struggle for Civil Rights in Mississippi* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1994), 102; A letter from Nelson Fuson to Katherine Jones dated 6 June 1961 reveals that Nash was already in Jackson by that date. See "Letter from Nelson Fuson to Katherine Jones," Fuson Papers, Box 1, Folder 2.

¹³⁸ Lewis, 184; Halberstam, 396-99.

Bevel decided to remain in his home state once released as a way of challenging that false impression. He would work to organize local residents, mainly young people, to challenge the notion that local people were not interested in protest activities. Not wanting to see Bevel assume such great risk and responsibility alone, Bernard LaFayette volunteered to stay on as well. Jackson, they concluded, would be the new beachhead.¹³⁹

The small contingent of Nash, Bevel, and LaFayette created the Jackson Nonviolent Movement and set up the first “freedom house” on Rose Street in Jackson. Immediately, they began recruiting Black high school and college students to implement a direct action campaign against segregated public facilities in the city. With Bob Moses down in McComb, both the direct action wing and the voter registration wing of SNCC were simultaneously planted in Mississippi.¹⁴⁰

The presence of Freedom Riders in Jackson was a significant factor in the development of local movements around the state and the emergence of key indigenous leaders. These transplanted radicals served as sparks much the same way as Greensboro did for the sit-ins. Students at Tougaloo College outside of Jackson began working with the Freedom Riders and formed their own campus-based organization, the Non-Violent Action Group, which ultimately attracted noteworthy activists such as sisters Dorie and Joyce Ladner, MacAuthor Cotton, Jimmy Travis, Joan Traumpauer, and Anne Moody.¹⁴¹ Tougaloo became a hotbed of student activism in the state, so much so that the trustees of the college forced the early retirement of President Daniel Beittel in January 1964 because he refused to rein in Tougaloo student activists. It is easy to understand why local whites saw Beittel as the symbol of “communist” influence at what they

¹³⁹ Halberstam, 387.

¹⁴⁰ Dittmer, 116.

¹⁴¹ Ibid; Also see “Part Four” of Anne Moody’s *Coming of Age in Mississippi* for details of her movement activities as a Tougaloo student.

referred to as “cancer college.” It was the “Tougaloo Nine” who stirred up a big ruckus by staging a sit-in at the main branch of the Jackson public library on March 27, 1961. The protest attracted a swarm of media and led to the students’ arrest. It was also Tougaloo students who began the lunch counter sit-ins at Woolworth’s on May 28, 1963, one of the more dramatic episodes of the Jackson Movement. Two weeks later, Anne Moody and Dorie Ladner were the chief instigators in turning out Jackson State College students for a march to protest Medgar Evers’ murder.¹⁴² Tougaloo students created more than their fair share of trouble under Beittel’s tenure.

Mississippi was the last Deep South state to join the lunch counter sit-in movement, only launching it three years after it began in Greensboro. It is likely that this development may not have taken place without the congregation of Freedom Riders in Mississippi. The sit-in at the Jackson Woolworth’s was carried out by the Jackson NonViolent Movement, a direct byproduct of the Freedom Rides. Even though this demonstration came late, it was nonetheless significant in the development of the Mississippi Movement. Primarily, the Freedom Rides helped fulfilled the vision that Bevel had in 1961 while still imprisoned for Freedom Riding. His dream of organizing Mississippians to challenge the racial status quo in the state bore fruit in Jackson and other places partly due to the invasion of the state by Freedom Riders. To Bevel, it was important that natives like Anne Moody, the spokeswoman for the sit-in group¹⁴³, assumed the leadership of their own freedom struggle, a message that needed to be conveyed to other Blacks and to segregationists statewide.

¹⁴² Dittmer, 234-36, 161-62; Moody, 276-77.

¹⁴³ Moody, 264.

In Greenwood, a local movement was born because of the organizing efforts of Sam Block. James Bevel was part of a trio that included Bob Moses and Amzie Moore¹⁴⁴ who persuaded Block to begin organizing a voter registration campaign there in June 1962. Because of Block's efforts, Greenwood became the most active movement center in the Delta and perhaps the state by the spring of 1963 (evidenced by the fact that SNCC temporarily reassigned all of its personnel in the state to Greenwood in early March.) Thereafter, Greenwood garnered national media attention, precipitating a first-ever but short-lived Justice Department lawsuit against white local officials to protect the right of Blacks to protest, and mobilizing the Black community for the first time in the city's recent history. For SNCC, the Greenwood campaign proved that the organization could survive in the most hostile of environments with fickle support from the federal government.¹⁴⁵ Greenwood also established another beachhead in a state notoriously hostile to the idea of Black civil rights.

Freedom Rider presence in Mississippi was also responsible for launching the activist career of Jackson native Charles McLaurin, who first joined the Movement when the Riders came to his hometown. McLaurin joined one of the first protest actions by the Jackson Nonviolent Movement, the boycott of the state fair. Eventually, he was selected to head up SNCC's Sunflower County voter registration campaign in mid-1962. SNCC established six projects in the Delta by the summer of 1962 and at least two of them, Greenwood and Sunflower County, were established¹⁴⁶ by local activists inspired by Nashville Phase of the Freedom Riders.

¹⁴⁴ See chapter two of Charles Payne's *I've Got the Light of Freedom: The Organizing Tradition and the Mississippi Freedom Struggle* (Berkeley: University of California, 1995), for a complete narrative of Amzie Moore's career as an activist based in Cleveland, Mississippi. Chapter six of Dittmer's book additionally gives some specifics of Moore's activism.

¹⁴⁵ Dittmer, 148, 150-57. Dittmer revealed that the Justice Department dropped the suit against Greenwood after reaching an agreement with local officials to release jailed activists including, Bob Moses, James Forman, Willie Peacock, Charles McLaurin, and Frank Smith. See page 151.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 135.

At the statewide level, the descent of Freedom Riders into Mississippi helped shape the relationship between competing civil rights organizations in the state, leading to the re-birth of the Council of Federated Organizations (COFO) in 1962. When Freedom Riders set up shop in Jackson, they ignored existing Black leadership and alienated this key constituency. The resulting distrust and animosity threatened to destroy the fledgling movement from within. Recognizing the need for unity, Bob Moses, then living in Jackson, met with Aaron Henry and Medgar Evers of the NAACP and Tom Gaither of CORE in February of 1962 to revamp COFO into an agency that unified all groups operating in Mississippi. COFO became the umbrella under which state, local, and national civil rights organizations practiced their craft in the state. It allowed activists to retain their allegiance to their original organization while simultaneously joining others with common goals. This was Mississippi's version of an organization of organizations, a device that held the Baton Rouge and Montgomery bus boycotts together amid factional rivalries. Without it, Mississippi's movement may have withered away. Additionally, COFO permitted younger more radical activists who flooded the state as a result of the Freedom Rides to establish themselves by exploiting networks already established by older activists.¹⁴⁷

Another significant development that unfolded that was tethered to the Nashville Phase of the Freedom Rides was the emergence of Fannie Lou Hamer, one of Mississippi's most recognized freedom fighters. Like Sam Block, James Bevel had a significant hand in jumpstarting Hamer's civil rights career. On August 27, 1962, COFO sponsored a meeting at Williams Chapel Missionary Baptist Church in Ruleville to discuss voter registration. A friend of Hamer's, Mary Tucker, informed her of the meeting, though Hamer expressed skepticism initially. Despite her reluctance, Hamer accompanied Tucker to Williams Chapel, a decision that

¹⁴⁷ Ibid., 117-19. According to Dittmer, COFO was originally created by Aaron Henry and others in 1961 as an ad hoc organization designed to give the appearance of a united front of Black leadership in a one-time only meeting with Governor Ross Barnett.

ultimately changed her life, affected the fate of all Mississippians, and altered the trajectory of the Civil Rights Movement. At the mass meeting Bevel delivered a moving sermon, “Discerning the Signs of Time,” a message that called upon everyone to recognize the signs of the times and to act upon them just as gathering clouds might move them to prepare for rain. Bevel’s sermon came after other COFO-affiliated speakers told the audience that they had a constitutional right to vote, a right they could use to remove their oppressors from office. His words lit a fire underneath Hamer who later reflected that “Until then I’d never heard of no mass meeting and I didn’t know that a Negro could register to vote.” From that moment, Hamer devoted her life to the pursuit of racial equality. Within two years, she became a national legend because of her role in the attempted unseating of the all-white Mississippi delegation to the Democratic National Convention in Atlantic City in 1964.¹⁴⁸

Mississippi’s movement benefitted immensely because of the presence of Freedom Riders. Besides fomenting several local movements, helping to inaugurate the freedom fighting careers of indigenous Mississippians, and providing context for the reinvigoration of COFO, the Nashville Phase played a key role in opening up a state that had mostly kept significant civil rights activism at bay prior to the summer of 1961. Segregation could not be defeated without attacking the stronghold of Mississippi. No one else was willing to come to the state in 1961 except the Freedom Riders and Bob Moses. Although Mississippi had courageous homegrown leaders such as Vernon Dahmer, C.O. Chinn, Mae Bertha Carter, Aaron Henry, Medgar Evers, Annell Ponder, Dovie and Winson Hudson, E.W. Steptoe, T.R.M. Howard, and Anne Moody, the state could not be moved meaningfully toward Black freedom without the assistance of imported activists willing to risk everything in defiance of white supremacy. Mississippi needed

¹⁴⁸ Chana Kai Lee, *For Freedom’s Sake: The Life of Fannie Lou Hamer* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1999), 24-25. Chapter five chronicles Hamer’s role in Atlantic City.

an army of shock troops with experience in the trenches of social change warfare and with unwavering determination, qualities the Freedom Riders had in ample supply. By refusing to be intimidated, they let oppressed Mississippians know someone cared about their fate and that the battle could be won.

The final legacy of the Freedom Rides in Mississippi is that it helped prepare the way for Freedom Summer 1964, the most important civil rights project of the Mississippi Movement. Freedom fighters such as Sam Block, Charles McLaurin, Dave Dennis and were all lured into voter registration work in Mississippi as a result of the Freedom Rides. Once Block's activist career was given a boost by Freedom Rider James Bevel and others, Block became a stalwart component of Greenwood's voter registration drive. Likewise, McLaurin joined the Movement because of the presence of Freedom Riders in Jackson and went on to head the Sunflower County voter registration campaign. Dave Dennis, a student at Dillard University in New Orleans, came to Jackson aboard the Trailways bus that left Montgomery on May 24. He remained in Mississippi and became a central figure in the 1964 Freedom Summer.¹⁴⁹ As a result of the high profile presence of Freedom Riders demanding voting rights for Black people and attracting at least half-hearted federal interest, scores of others were drawn to the Mississippi Movement. By 1964 there was enough momentum behind Black voter registration to mount Freedom Summer and establish the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party.

Because of Freedom Riders in Mississippi, the larger freedom struggle in the South benefitted. Mississippi became an important part of an emerging pattern of militant agitation taking hold in the region. It was one thing to have one isolated episode of protest activity, but it

¹⁴⁹ See pages 117-119 of *Local People* for details of Dave Dennis' rise to position of CORE's field secretary in Mississippi and his term as assistant program director of COFO. Most of the voter registration work was done under the COFO banner; A roster of Freedom Riders in Arsenault's book lists Dennis as a Freedom Rider on the Trailways bus that traveled from Montgomery to Jackson on May 24. See page 539.

was quite another to see a chain reaction of demonstrations flare up in Birmingham, southwest Georgia, and Mississippi. The Freedom Rides introduced Alabama, Georgia, and Mississippi to a new breed of “Negro,” one determined to challenge the racial status quo at any price. Activists such as Diane Nash had the uncanny ability to sense a moment pregnant with opportunity to advance the cause for all Black people. That was why she chided Dr. King and other adults for backsliding on the issue of jail-no-bail. Nash knew that surrendering herself to the notoriously brutal Mississippi penal system while pregnant could foster region-wide recommitment to a fundamental tenet of nonviolence: non-cooperation with an unjust legal system. Just as important, she also understood that her sacrifice could give a much-needed boost to the sagging spirits of the Movement. Viewed from the perspective of a national Civil Rights Movement, Nash’s actions proved that local movements were tethered together by the actions of high profile participants and that Lawson’s protégés were uniquely capable of compensating for the questionable judgment and timidity of some adult leaders. The Nashville crew had already done it once when CORE abandoned the Freedom Rides.

Beyond Albany and Mississippi, the Nashville Phase of the Freedom Rides demonstrated a central truth about the Movement, that federal intervention required violent confrontation. This reality guided the calculations of Bob Moses and SNCC as they developed plans for Freedom Summer and it undergirded the rationale behind the SCLC’s campaigns in Birmingham and Selma. Movement leaders in each of these campaigns hoped to provoke the worst behavior that Mississippi and Alabama had to offer, knowing that this was the only way to force the federal government to protect the rights of Black citizens.

The Nashville Phase also greatly impacted the Monroe, North Carolina, Movement. Monroe became significant in the drama of the Freedom Rides not because it was one of many

specific targets of the Rides, which it was not, but because it became a testing ground in the debate between proponents of violent self-defense and the advocates of philosophical nonviolence. Monroe also became part of the interconnected complex of emerging movement centers that drew influence and inspiration from each other.

Monroe became destination of some Freedom Riders in the summer of 1961 for two reasons: ABT student Paul Brooks' personal interest in the Monroe Movement and James Forman's appropriation of Monroe as a testing ground for the strategy of violent self-defense. By 1961, Forman was openly embracing alternatives to philosophical nonviolence. Addressing the potential for a movement based on self-defensive violence, he wrote, "While I had no qualms about the aggressive use of violence in any liberation movement, I did not believe that in 1961 the masses of black people in this country were psychologically prepared to use aggressive violence. One could, on the other hand, build a movement and organization on the principle of self defense."¹⁵⁰ Brooks, on the other hand, had different motives for his interest in Monroe. He had been keeping up with developments in Monroe and approached Forman about going there after learning of Klan attacks against Union County NAACP chapter president Robert F. Williams in the wake of his attempt to desegregate the local swimming pool. Brooks and Williams began talking by telephone frequently and Brooks felt compelled to help his new friend when trouble arose. Brooks was also pulled into Monroe because of his frustration over King's refusal to take a Freedom Ride. He joined the chorus of King's critics that included Williams who chastised King in a telegram, charging that he was "a phony" who should do as Gandhi did and "lead the way by example" if he really was "the leader of this nonviolent movement."¹⁵¹ The presence of Brooks and Forman in Monroe helped attract more activists to the area, some with

¹⁵⁰ Forman, 158.

¹⁵¹ Tyson, *Radio Free Dixie*, 246.

divergent philosophical viewpoints. Many came who embraced nonviolence as a way of life while others brought notions about the tactical applications of nonviolence.

The competing motives for going into Monroe revealed by Brooks and Forman were part of a debate raging in 1961 over Movement strategy, a dispute which was never resolved and which ultimately fractured the unity seen among young activists in the early 1960s. Robert F. Williams was at the center of this debate. His fate and the outcome of the Monroe Movement revealed the primary fallibility of the concept of armed self-defense. Williams belonged to the self-defense camp as did many Black residents of Monroe. In fact, after Williams fled Monroe in late August 1961, the FBI uncovered a cache of dynamite, machine guns, rifles, pistols, helmets, and thousands of rounds of ammunition hidden in Black homes and businesses.¹⁵²

As a result of these divergent motives, Robert F. Williams and Monroe became the persona and battleground of an internecine struggle within the student movement. As Forman declared, for many activists, Williams “symbolized the alternative to both tactical nonviolence and nonviolence as a way of life.”¹⁵³ Consequently, when seventeen Freedom Riders arrived in Monroe on August 17, 1961, an undercurrent of tension lurked beneath the elation that Williams felt because help had arrived. Besides the duality of motives, the example of Williams reveals a nuance within the debate over nonviolence. Some proponents of tactical nonviolence easily reverted to armed self-defense when nonviolence did not produce satisfactory or immediate results, as Forman’s views illustrate. All of these factors combined to shape the immediate outcome of the Monroe Movement and the larger national Movement in the long-term.

An astute man, Williams was aware of how Monroe was used as a pawn in the internal debate over protest strategy. “The Freedom Riders came at my invitation,” he wrote, “because I

¹⁵² Ibid., 283.

¹⁵³ Ibid., 262.

advocated a politics of self-defense” and they “wanted to show me the power of nonviolence and love as taught by Gandhi.” Yet he did not seem to think of himself as being used by outsiders. On the contrary, he seemed to both welcome the assistance and positioned the challenge presented by nonviolence proponents as an opportunity to prove the efficacy of armed self-defense. Williams wrote in the Monroe NAACP newsletter, *The Crusader*, that “If you are a Freedom Fighter or a Freedom Rider, [come] to Monroe . . . and help us in this noble undertaking for human dignity.” To a friend he wrote, the Freedom Riders “are my friends, even though I am not a pacifist and don’t believe their philosophy will work with conscienceless racists. . . I also saw [their arrival] as an opportunity to show what King and them were preaching was b___s___.”¹⁵⁴

Likewise, the Freedom Fighters understood the stakes. Forman wrote in a report to SNCC that the growing support for Williams reflected that “the Negro is becoming impatient and he is not always going to turn the other cheek.” Another Freedom Rider who ventured to Monroe, John Lowery, remarked that he came to turn “the violence of two camps” in the direction of nonviolence and social justice. More tellingly, Lowery confessed, “If the fight for civil rights is to continue to use nonviolence, we must be successful here.”¹⁵⁵ Obviously, many activists who came to Monroe saw the future of nonviolence at stake in the outcome of the local struggle.

On the afternoon of Sunday, August 27, a serious violent conflict erupted when Black protesters attempted to demonstrate in downtown Monroe. The town was already a powder keg because of a series of violent encounters between the Black community and diehard segregationists. Sunday was a dangerous day to demonstrate because every racist in the county was free to cause trouble. By the time the protesters reached downtown, thousands of angry

¹⁵⁴ See page 141 of Tyson for details of 1959 launch of *The Crusader* by the Monroe NAACP chapter; Tyson, 266.

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 265.

whites were present. With the local police being few in number and sympathetic to the mob, the demonstration soon became a shootout. Black Monroe residents retreated to their side of town and barricaded themselves. Governor Terry Sanford called in state troopers who cordoned off the Black section. However, a lost white couple, Bruce and Mabel Stegall, somehow stumbled upon an agitated Black community itching for a fight. Initially threatened by Blacks guarding the community, the Stegalls were able to leave after Williams insisted they not be harmed. Even though Williams helped the Stegalls escape any harm, law enforcement officials used the incident to frame Robert and Mabel Williams for kidnapping them, charges that ended the Monroe Movement and forced the Williams family to flee to Cuba.¹⁵⁶

Williams' gamble that armed self-defense was the best strategy for Monroe carried a heavy price. It did not validate James Forman's assumption that "One could . . . build a movement and an organization on the principle of self defense."¹⁵⁷ Although one might launch a movement and an organization on such grounds, it cannot be sustained because even self-defense risks unleashing the full might of the white power structure. Armed self defense also could not attract sympathetic white allies nor the support of the federal government, key objectives of most civil rights leaders. Because a successful armed defense in Monroe could have inspired a copycat move by Blacks elsewhere, Governor Sanford, the FBI, and local police teamed up to destroy Williams and the local movement. In fact, the FBI unleashed a full-blown, international dragnet to apprehend Williams, calling upon good diplomatic relations with the Canadian government to assist in his capture. What Williams and Forman failed to comprehend was that even the use of self-defensive violence¹⁵⁸ played to the strengths of the Movement's opponents and frightened

¹⁵⁶ Ibid., 271-85.

¹⁵⁷ Forman, 159.

¹⁵⁸ Self-defensive violence is an option under the rubric of tactical nonviolence advocated by activists such as James Forman. If nonviolence is merely a tactic to be deployed as long as it is useful, then it can be discarded in favor of

white allies as well. White America would not tolerate armed Black rebellion. Although the philosophy of nonviolence survived the challenge presented by Robert F. Williams and the Monroe Movement and despite the fact that defensive nonviolence did not work, a convincing argument for the policy of tactical nonviolence gained credence because of Williams' legendary armed defense of Monroe's Black community. In one of Malcolm X's most publicized speeches written in 1964, "The Ballot or the Bullet," he restated Williams' refrain that many whites had no conscience, a clear denunciation of the philosophy of nonviolence. He said, "And that whole thing about appealing to the moral conscience of America----America's conscience is bankrupt . . . Uncle Sam has no conscience. If he had a conscience, he'd straighten this thing out with no more pressure being put upon him."¹⁵⁹ By the time Malcolm uttered these words, some Black activists were frustrated enough to seriously consider abandoning nonviolence.

As the example of Monroe illustrates, the Nashville Phase of the Freedom Rides had weighty consequences. One of the most important of these was the impact on student leadership. First of all, Nashville leaders Diane Nash, John Lewis, and James Bevel grew tremendously as a result. Nash established herself as the most capable student leader in the nation as evidenced by her role as the Freedom Rides coordinator. More than any other leaders, she transformed the Rides into a national phenomenon by insisting that they continue and by leading the multi-organizational collaboration that sustained the Rides through the end of 1961. Her decision to invite CORE and the SCLC into Montgomery set the stage for the formation of the FRCC. Nash also identified herself as an ad hoc shepherd of adult leaders when they seemed to waver,

self-defense when necessary. As Forman wrote in his memoir, he did not believe in 1961 that the masses of Black people were ready for aggressive violence, but "One could, on the other hand, build a movement and organization on the principle of self defense." It is also an option for those who reject nonviolence entirely, such as Robert F. Williams who rejected nonviolence as useless against "conscienceless racists." See page 266 of Tyson's *Radio Free Dixie*.

¹⁵⁹ Malcolm X, "The Ballot or the Bullet," in Manning Marable and Leith Mullings eds., *Let Nobody Turn Us Around: Voices of Resistance, Reform, and Renewal, An African American Anthology* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2000), 434.

especially in the case of Dr. King in Albany. Her motivational witness on behalf of jail-no-bail revealed that she shared Ella Baker's uncanny sense of when to intervene in a crisis. It also demonstrated that Nash had no peer as a movement strategist. She sensed critical crossroads like no one else.

Lewis and Bevel enhanced their status as Movement legends, Lewis more so than Bevel. Because of Lewis' renowned beating in Montgomery that was immortalized on film, he became recognized as one of the bravest activists in the U.S. He was already known among his Nashville colleagues as a stalwart freedom fighter and his Freedom Rider performance spread his legend even more, setting him up to be SNCC chair in 1963. The Freedom Rides exposed James Bevel's mastery of recruiting youthful activists. In Jackson, he primarily targeted college and high school students, helping to found a local movement. His talents were so impressive that the SCLC eventually hired him as a field secretary. Bevel demonstrated an unparalleled set of pulpit skills, loads of charisma, and a golden touch with grassroots individuals, evidenced by the recruitment of Mrs. Hamer and the Jackson students. These attributes became more valuable later as an SCLC staff member.

The maturation of these Nashville leaders was the capstone of Lawson's leadership development model. Their stellar performance during the Freedom Rides proved that one could systematically train students for local, regional, and national leadership and then dispatch them where the need existed. Because of the careful nurturing of their potential and the trust granted to them, they excelled under the most dangerous and stressful circumstances as many adult leaders seemed to falter and stumble. Nash, Bevel, and Lewis were ready for any challenge that the movement could dispense. With the exception of Lewis, they all left Nashville for good during the Freedom Rides, to the benefit of the larger Movement.

The Nashville Phase also benefitted local movements and civil rights organizations. The locales of Albany, Greenwood, Birmingham, and Monroe all gained from the exploits of the Freedom Riders. Albany and Greenwood, in large measure, owe the birth of their movements to the Nashville Phase. The success of the Birmingham campaign is due mostly to the lesson learned by SCLC in Albany and to Bevel's intervention. Monroe's case was not so much about accrued gains, but about the future of nonviolence. Robert Williams calculated that the Freedom Riders would prove the viability of armed self-defense as a movement strategy. The resulting legacy was the folk hero status of Williams and the subsequent lesson not learned. Rather than dethroning nonviolence, armed self-defense proved suicidal, but opponents of nonviolence failed to take note, leaving one to wonder how Black Power would have fared had they paid closer attention to its weaknesses.

The Freedom Rides exposed nonviolence to other challenges that it did not survive. An influx of Northern students to the South in 1961 represented a threat to the disciplined nature of nonviolence as practiced in Nashville. In fact, John Lewis lamented how disruptive this was and how power-hungry students like Stokely Carmichael were. Such developments ultimately changed the character and direction of the Movement, ushering in dissent, confusion, disruption and radicalism. These new influences sowed early seeds for Black Power and helped doom SNCC in the late 1960s.

The Freedom Rides also exposed the limits of white liberalism. When CORE conceived the Rides, it hoped to force the federal government to protect the right of Black people to engage in interstate travel without the burden of segregation. Although this goal was ultimately achieved, it came with a price. As the Nashville Phase increased the likelihood of violence, the Kennedy administration and white allies of the Movement turned against the Rides. It became

evident that good public order and protecting the nation's reputation were more important than the travel rights of African Americans. Unfortunately, activists did not understand this reality and continued to misunderstand the motives behind the limited cooperation of the federal government. It took until 1964 before Movement veterans realized the limits of their white allies. By then it was too late to make the necessary adjustments and give white allies another chance. As Clayborne Carson noted, activists such as James Forman concluded after the MFDP challenge in Atlantic City that “. . . black people in Mississippi and throughout this country could not rely on their so-called allies.”¹⁶⁰

The Freedom Rides also uncovered other significant leaders, primarily Hamer, Sam Black, and Charles McLaurin. Each of these individuals, though they may have had inherent misfit tendencies, were motivated to join the freedom fight by the Nashville Phase. Fannie Lou Hamer is the most significant leader among the trio, becoming a folk hero in Movement circles and beyond.

Two distinct and radically different Freedom Rides emerged in 1961, one more relevant to Black freedom than the other. The CORE Phase did not accomplish what it set out to do and would have done irreparable harm to the Movement had it been allowed to stand, yet it set the stage for the Nashville Phase to finish the assignment. The Nashville Phase followed the path to freedom and took the requisite risks while the CORE Phase was too risk-averse. The Nashville Phase helped solidify the new, more daring leadership paradigm under development by students whereas the CORE Phase remained stuck in the old traditional leadership mode that could only advance Black people to the door of freedom but failed to open it.

And finally, the Nashville Phase exposed the primary obstacle that adult leaders faced in advancing Black freedom: the death threshold. Even the most supportive mentor that Nashville

¹⁶⁰ Carson, 128.

students had, Reverend Smith, hesitated due to the probability of death. This is what, however, separated the students from their adult counterparts and more importantly what propelled the Movement forward: the students were willing to invest truth in what Bayard Rustin said in 1947. One had to be ready to sacrifice “what freedom will demand” in order to be free.

CHAPTER 7: A “BEVELUTION”: THE INFLUENCE OF NASHVILLE ACTIVISTS ON THE CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT, 1963 TO 1965

Just as the Freedom Rides represented a threshold for the Civil Rights Movement, the period of 1963 to 1965 constituted new frontiers for the movement. In a sense, the Freedom Rides made it possible for the movement to reach its peak during these years. The peak occurred in large part because the SCLC came into its own at this time and because the careers of Diane Nash Bevel and James Bevel reached their apex at the same time. To a lesser extent, John Lewis and Bernard LaFayette had significant influence upon the Black freedom movement as well.

The years 1963 to 1965 were a “Bevelution¹,” a period when the strategic genius of Diane Nash Bevel and James Bevel had their most significant influence upon the Movement. Together, they were the most dynamic Movement couple of the era who reshaped the concept of civil rights activism in Birmingham and Selma. The “Bevelution” began with the use of children as young as elementary school age in the Birmingham campaign. This move an extremely risky but necessary tactical maneuver that saved the campaign from failure, set the stage for the March on Washington, positioned the SCLC as a premiere and well financed civil rights organization, helped establish Dr. King as a Movement icon and recipient of the Nobel Peace Prize, helped solidify Reverend Fred Shuttlesworth as a national figure, and paved the way for the 1964 Civil Rights Act and the 1965 Voting Rights Act. The Selma-to-Montgomery march was “Bevelutionary” in that it fused two seemingly oppositional tracts in the civil rights world: direct action and voting rights. Although Ella Baker was the one who theorized that the split between

¹ The term “Bevelution” was coined here in order to define how the civil rights couple of Diane Nash Bevel and James Bevel reshaped activism as a result of their participation in the Birmingham campaign and the Selma-to-Montgomery march. The term captures the strategic genius displayed by one of the most important activist couples in the history of the Twentieth Century Black freedom struggle.

direct action and voting rights was a false dichotomy, it was the Bevels who demonstrated the truth of her thesis. These two “Bevelutionary” acts made the Bevels the most significant strategists of the period 1963 to 1965.

Though less significant, John Lewis’ leadership is also important to the era. It was in 1963 that Lewis was elected chair of SNCC, a move that was partly symbolic but nonetheless foreshadowed dynamic developments in the student movement. While most scholars have noted the controversy over his March on Washington speech, little has been said about how it served as a barometer for a more radical brand of activism at nearly the same time that Malcolm X was gaining notoriety. Also largely overlooked is the implication of Lewis’ intentional use of the term “Black” instead of the traditional moniker of “Negro.” By then Lewis had assumed the chairmanship of SNCC and at the March on Washington the responsibility of national leadership compelled him to use language that reflected a more defiant attitude emerging in Black communities. In addition to his militant March on Washington speech, Lewis demonstrated a deeper loyalty to ordinary Black people when he decided to march on “Bloody Sunday” despite SNCC’s official decision to remain on the sidelines.

The activism of Bernard LaFayette served as a prelude to the Selma campaign. With the assistance of his wife, Colia Liddell LaFayette, Bernard laid the foundation for what later unfolded in Selma and the surrounding Black communities. More than two years before the SCLC launched a campaign in Selma, the LaFayettes began organizing a voter registration drive based on the remnants of the work of indigenous activists, leaving behind a community ready for a more sustain campaign by the time SNCC and the SCLC decided to prioritize Selma. Without this foundational organizing, the Selma campaign could not have taken off as it did in 1965.

When considered together, the actions of Diana Nash Bevel, James Bevel, John Lewis, and Bernard Lafayette had a dominating influence upon the period 1963 to 1965. In a sense, their actions represented the capstone of the mentorship of Reverend James M. Lawson, Jr., and Reverend Kelly Miller Smith. Their investment in these young people paid the most significant dividends in the years 1953 to 1965 when these four misfits-turned-warriors, especially the Bevels, profoundly influenced the major civil rights developments of the era.

The Bevelation in Birmingham is the most logical starting point and could not have occurred without the Reverend Fred Shuttlesworth and the ACMHR. A native of Mt. Meigs, Alabama, Shuttlesworth first called Birmingham home in the 1920s when as a child his family relocated there in pursuit of economic prosperity. By the 1920s, Birmingham was already a New South industrial center due to large deposits of coal, iron ore, and limestone. These resources earned it two nicknames: the “Magic City” for its rapid growth and the “Pittsburgh of the South” for its dominance of regional steel production. Shuttlesworth’s family was among numerous African American families who were attracted to the city’s emerging industrial boom, forming part of the intraregional migration that lured droves of southern rural Blacks to urban areas in the South during early twentieth century.²

Except for stints in Mobile and Cincinnati, Shuttlesworth spent much of his life in Birmingham.³ Before returning to Birmingham, he served as pastor of First Baptist Church in Selma, the city’s most elite Black congregation. It was at First Baptist where Shuttlesworth began preparation for his Birmingham crusades. According to Andrew Manis, Shuttlesworth believed “. . . God sent me to First Baptist Church [in] Selma to get me ready for Birmingham,

² Andrew M. Manis, *A Fire You Can’t Put Out: The Civil Rights Life of Birmingham’s Reverend Fred Shuttlesworth* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1999), 12-13.

³ Chapter Two of *A Fire You Can’t Put Out* details of his pre-Movement days. Pages 256-61 discuss his decision to accept the pulpit at Revelation Baptist Church in Cincinnati, Ohio, in August 1961. In 1966, he accepted a call to pastor Greater New Light Baptist Church, a congregation of dissenters who split from Revelation.

Alabama . . . I was partially prepared before I went to Birmingham for what was coming.” He enjoyed a contentious relationship with the First Baptist deacons partly because he lacked the middle class polish of previous pastors. These social class tensions led to conflict that ended Reverend Shuttlesworth’s tenure at First Baptist, but forced him to identify with ordinary people who lacked social status. The Selma experience also revealed his combative tendencies, qualities that would serve him well in Birmingham.⁴

Birmingham was where Reverend Shuttlesworth’s career as an activist began. By the time he returned to fill the pulpit of Bethel Baptist Church in 1953, there existed what was referred to as the “zeitgeist,” or the spirit of the times. The 1950s proved to be a decade primed for dramatic social change, much of it previewed by important Supreme Court rulings in the area of civil rights during the previous decades, particularly the 1940s with verdicts such as *Smith v. Allright* (1943) that outlawed the all-white primary and *Morgan v. Virginia* (1947) that outlawed segregated interstate transportation. Other winds of change blowing across the racial landscape include the integration of major league baseball by Jackie Robinson in 1947 and the formation of President Harry Truman’s President’s Committee on Civil Rights (1948), a body established in order to recommend means by which the civil rights of American citizens could be protected. Dr. King concluded that it was these same forces that compelled Rosa Parks into action in Montgomery in December 1955. Reverend Shuttlesworth acknowledged the new atmosphere himself. “When the idea and the mood and the time and the man and God all conspire—that’s when a movement is born.” What Reverend Shuttlesworth meant to convey was that he too felt the impulse of “a kind of black American zeitgeist,” making the mid to late 1950s a time when

⁴ Manis, 37-39, 44-45, 52-54, 67.

Shuttlesworth himself began to practice a more socially conscious ministry, one that compelled him to push for full citizenship rights from the pulpit.⁵

By 1956, the zeitgeist inhabited Birmingham and apparently had infected Reverend Shuttlesworth, especially in the wake of bus boycotts in Baton Rouge and Montgomery and the Supreme Court's *Brown* decision. The impetus for Shuttlesworth's activism derived from the city commission's refusal to hire Black policemen, a demand made after the police beat an African American in their custody in December 1954. His leadership on this issue led to a committee chairmanship with the NAACP in early 1956. On June 1, Alabama circuit judge Walter B. Jones issued an injunction against the NAACP prohibiting it from operating in the state and ordering it to turn over all state records and membership lists. The NAACP remained inactive statewide for the next eight years, prompting Birmingham leaders to form the ACMHR on June 5 with Reverend Shuttlesworth as president.⁶

Like Reverend Smith in Nashville, Reverend Shuttlesworth became one of the founding members of the SCLC, signing on as secretary in August 1957. This close association to the organization, and a cordial relationship with Dr. King, made it very likely that the ACMHR would ask the SCLC for assistance with its movement.⁷

The Birmingham Movement was galvanized on the night of December 25, 1956, when fifteen sticks of dynamite⁸ destroyed Reverend Shuttlesworth's parsonage, resulting in the injury of a visiting deacon and two of the Shuttlesworths' children, but leaving Ruby and Fred unharmed. As a crowd gathered around the bomb-riddled structure, Reverend Shuttlesworth emerged from the rubble and pronounced his survival as a providential sign that God had chosen

⁵ Manis, 68-69, 73; Patricia Sullivan, *Lift Every Voice: The NAACP and the Making of the Civil Rights Movement* (New York: The New Press, 2009), 282-85, 316-17, 329-30, 342.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 81, 86-93, XXXI.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 119, 123-24.

⁸ Branch, 198.

him to lead the Birmingham struggle. “The Lord has protected me, I’m not injured,” he exclaimed. Someone in the crowd ratified the notion with “God saved the Reverend to lead the movement.” This simple declaration became a tenant of faith within the ACMHR’s ranks⁹ and gave the Birmingham and Nashville movements a common element: providence.

The Christmas night bombing spurred Birmingham’s Black community to activism. The next morning, Reverend Shuttlesworth told a crowd of nearly two hundred gathered at the Smith and Gaston Funeral Home, “The Fight is on,” referring to a bus desegregation campaign that began immediately and the general local movement that unfolded. For the next several years, Reverend Shuttlesworth and the ACMHR butted heads with the city’s white power structure, a battle that fractured Birmingham’s white leaders and played a role in Shuttlesworth’s decision to leave the city in 1961.¹⁰

Despite the galvanizing effect of the Christmas night bombing, little progress was made in desegregating Birmingham, a circumstance that opened the door for the SCLC’s involvement. Reverend Shuttlesworth began courting the SCLC’s assistance in January 1962 when he beckoned the organization to join the ACMHR in a lawsuit against segregated airport accommodations. He increased the pressure at the SCLC’s May board meeting by insisting it take part in demonstrations designed to support a student–led boycott of downtown. The SCLC only promised to give the idea future consideration at its annual convention, which,

⁹ Eskew, 132. Eskew revealed that the bombing was precipitated by Shuttlesworth’s pledge to start a city bus desegregation campaign on December 26. See page 131 for details.

¹⁰ Ibid., 134. See pages 160, 170, and 178-192 of *But for Birmingham* for a full discussion of how Birmingham’s municipal reforms represented an attempt by the white business elite to remove Bull Connor as the public safety director after he allowed the Klan to assault the Freedom Riders on Mother’s Day 1961. See page 244 of Diane McWhorter’s *Carry Me Home: Birmingham, Alabama, The Climatic Battle of the Civil Rights Revolution* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2001), for Shuttlesworth’s charge that Bull Connor blamed him for the Freedom Riders coming to Birmingham. Shuttlesworth also concluded that “since my native state would like to disown me,” he would save it the trouble by accepting the pulpit at Revelation Baptist Church in Cincinnati, Ohio, beginning in August 1961. Although Reverend Shuttlesworth left Birmingham, he remained president of the ACMHR until 1969.

conveniently, was set for Birmingham in September. Understandably, the SCLC was reluctant to commit to another desegregation campaign after the sobering experience of Albany.¹¹

Ultimately, the SCLC decided to intervene at a January 1963 board meeting at the Dorchester Conference Center near Savannah, Georgia.¹² Several factors drove the decision to make Birmingham a battleground. Most compelling was Reverend Shuttlesworth's insistence that "If segregation is going to fall, we've got to crack Birmingham. In fact, if you can break the back of segregation in Birmingham, Alabama, then you can break the back of segregation all over the nation." Reverend Shuttlesworth's "polite professional" relationship with Dr. King also factored into the decision. King would not likely have gone into a city where he was not on good terms with key leaders. Another factor was Reverend Shuttlesworth's longstanding record of opposition to Birmingham's white supremacy. Andrew Young wrote in his memoir that Shuttlesworth "had been laboring tirelessly for racial justice" in the city for years and "had the heart of a lion and was fearless." Added to those qualities was Shuttlesworth's support among Birmingham's Black working class, the largest African American constituency in the city.¹³ All of these circumstances together made Birmingham an attractive target.

From the start, the Bevels were the most valuable assets of the Birmingham campaign, originally labeled "Project X" but renamed "Project C" for "Confrontation".¹⁴ Without their strategic genius, Project C would not likely have succeeded. James had joined the SCLC fulltime in April 1962 as a field secretary for Mississippi and Diane floated between SNCC and SCLC assignments. This was a curious arrangement given James' reputation as a temperamental genius

¹¹ Ibid., 198, 201-2.

¹² In March of 1963, Boutwell faced off against Bull Connor in the mayoral race, resulting in Connor's defeat. The Birmingham campaign was delayed until early April because of this election. See *But for Birmingham*, pages 202-206.

¹³ Manis, 331-32, 208; Young, 187.

¹⁴ Eskew reveals that the campaign was renamed after police dogs attacked Black bystanders two weeks into the campaign. The "X" stood for the original kick-off date of March 14. See page 211-12.

compared to Diane's solid record of commitment and near perfect logic. Sexism no doubt made James a more acceptable choice to the male preachers at the SCLC.¹⁵

As the Birmingham campaign commenced, the Bevels remained in Mississippi with their new baby, Sherrilyn. When she was not helping her husband organize for the SCLC, Diane attended to her duties as SNCC's director of direct action, working on a project she started known as "Move on Mississippi," an initiative for which James served as a recruiter and a field organizer.¹⁶ They remained in Mississippi until James was summoned to Birmingham by Dr. King.

Project C got off to a slow start on April 3 due to factionalism between Shuttlesworth and his key rival, Reverend J.L. Ware, head of the Baptist Ministers Alliance, who disdained Shuttlesworth's lack of polish and dictatorial leadership styles. This class division became a perennial problem for the Birmingham Movement.¹⁷ As a result, the SCLC and the ACMHR were unable to attract the anticipated large numbers of participants. The dismal start of the Birmingham campaign was reflected in a *New York Times* article on April 7 which reported that the "promised mass demonstrations have not been held, however, and there appeared to be a possibility tonight that the campaign might be temporarily abandoned." The failure of Black institutions to support the Birmingham Movement made the service of the Bevels all the more likely. This factionalism meant that Aldon Morris' mobilization theory did not apply to Birmingham. Rather than pre-existing institutions, leaders, and organizations being involved in all phases of the struggle, black institutions and the traditional Negro leadership class stymied the civil rights struggle by active opposition to it. The movement also fell victim to delaying

¹⁵ See chapter six of Ransby's book on Baker which details the gender battles Baker waged with the male preachers at the SCLC. Andrew Young in *An Easy Burden* wrote that Dr. King was oblivious to gender equality issues, causing Dorothy Cotton and Septima Clark to grumble privately about their treatment at the SCLC. See page 139.

¹⁶ Lisa Mullins, *Diane Nash: The Fire of the Movement* (Miami: Barnhardt and Ash Publishers, 2007), 59-67.

¹⁷ Eskew, 217-19, 223-24.

tactics of the courts. State circuit judge W.A. Jenkins issued an injunction on April 10 prohibiting all forms of mass direct action. King knew that if the injunction was obeyed, the movement would stall as it did in Albany, thus his decision to defy it was not a surprise.¹⁸

It is worth noting that King's decision to defy the injunction and march on Good Friday, April 12, 1963, came after he was urged to recommit to the "jail no bail" policy by Diane Nash during the Albany campaign. Contrary to his decision to bail out in Albany, King chose incarceration in Birmingham and was among forty-six arrested that day. Birmingham became the scene of King's most noteworthy jailing and after Albany, King seemed more conscious of the use of jail as a worthwhile movement strategy. In Birmingham, as he pondered his decision to defy a court order and risk jail, he concluded, "The path is clear to me. I've got to march . . . If we obey [the injunction], then we are out of business." Andrew Young recognized this moment as pivotal in the evolution King's leadership, declaring that, "The Birmingham campaign was a turning point for our leader." It marked the point when King began to abandon his overtly cautious approach.¹⁹ This was the kind of adult leadership that Diane Nash pleaded for in her open letter during the Albany Movement.

It is interesting that King too issued a public letter to rebuff his critics, a development that begs comparisons to Nash's 1962 letter. Both documents begin by outlining the rationale behind their actions. King and Nash refute the critics who question their judgment. While white clergymen charged that King was an outsider whose actions were ill-timed, Nash was challenged as an unfit mother for risking jail while pregnant. Yet they both asserted that it was the injustice heaped upon Black Americans that compelled them to risk their personal safety. In addition, they both assailed the prejudice that Black people routinely experienced in southern courts. King

¹⁸ Eskew, 225, 233-37, 240.

¹⁹ Young, 185.

wrote that “[Birmingham’s] unjust treatment of Negroes in the courts is a notorious reality.” Similarly, Nash said, “. . . When we are arrested we . . . put the matter entirely in the hands of the courts even though we know we won’t get justice in these courts.” Both activists concluded that going to jail put the spotlight on these injustices. Like Nash, King spoke of his jail-going as an conscience-raising opportunity for the community. He wrote, “I submit that an individual who breaks a law that science tells him is unjust, and willingly accepts the penalty by staying in jail arouse the conscience of the community over its injustice, is in reality expressing the very highest respect for law.” In a similar vein, Nash declared, “. . . There is an even larger reason why we must begin to stay in jail. If we do not do so, we lose our opportunity to reach the community and society with a great moral appeal and thus bring about basic changes in people and in society.”²⁰ By 1963, Dr. King had impeccable clarity on the moral imperative of the jail-no-bail strategy. In part, his decision to endure the injustice of jail was a reflection of his more advanced grasp of nonviolence and a renewed obligation to high leadership, both of which came after Nash’s gentle chiding a year earlier. This is not to suggest that Dr. King had her in mind when he wrote it. Nor is the assertion being made here that King and Nash discussed King’s lapse on the jail-no-bail policy since there is no record of such a conversation. Yet it appears that Nash’s admonishment pushed King to reconsider his actions in Albany and to reassess the worth of jail-no-bail. As a result, Nash could only claim to have schooled the most prominent civil rights leader of the era.

Dr. King’s arrest failed to energize Black Birmingham behind the Movement as anticipated. ACMHR and SCLC staff struggled to keep the campaign afloat. There was also

²⁰ Martin Luther King, Jr., “Letter from a Birmingham Jail,” Vicki Crawford and Janice Sumler-Edmonds editors, *The United States, Africa and the World: A History Reader, 2002-2003 Edition* (Acton, MA: Tapestry Press, 2002), 338-40; Diane Nash, “Message from Diane Nash Bevel to Individuals and Organizations Working for Civil Rights,” Fuson Papers.

dwindling media interest in the movement. With the movement on the verge of collapse, King called in James Bevel who arrived on Good Friday as King was being arrested. He and Diane had come to Birmingham before the official start of the campaign to assist Reverend Lawson with the nonviolence workshops there, but had returned to Mississippi.²¹

The Bevels' presence in Birmingham had important implications. It foreshadowed the Movement's transition from desegregation campaigns to voter registration work. Birmingham became the last major desegregation initiative. Stalwart direct action proponents like Diane and James Bevel and Bernard LaFayette, because of their experiences in Mississippi, had begun to drift over to voter registration work. They realized that Deep South white authorities hated Black voting more than anything else. Thus during the Birmingham campaign, the Bevels began pushing for voter registration, an emphasis that lined up with the shifting priorities of the SCLC in Birmingham. When the desegregation campaign began to stall, Wyatt T. Walker shifted the emphasis to voter registration, couching it as the "second phase" of the campaign.²² The Bevels brought to Birmingham the understanding that there was no significant difference between direct action and voter registration. In fact, voter registration was little more than political direct action that challenged the exclusion of African Americans from the body politic much the same way segregation excluded them from public accommodations. Unlike Walker who seemed to migrate to voter registration as a reaction to lagging support for direct action, the Bevels reached the same conclusion with the conviction that the time had come for a new strategy. (This revelation of the synergy between direct action and voter registration would take on great urgency as a result of the Sixteenth Street Church bombing in September 1963 and become a reality in Selma.)

²¹ Eskew, 250-54; Halberstam, 435, 438.

²² Halberstam, 248; Eskew, 248.

In the meantime, the Birmingham Movement still floundered and nonviolent direct action still dominated the campaign. But it did not stall for much longer. From the moment James Bevel arrived in Birmingham, he began pushing for what turned into the “Children’s Crusade.” Immediately, he recognized the dead weight of a fractured community. Most churches opposed the campaign, a constituency that the SCLC always counted on. Although the adults were divided and were mostly dependent upon whites, the students were another matter. Bevel explained that “The Black community as a whole did not have that kind of cohesion or camaraderie. But the students, they had a community they’d been in since elementary school, so they had bonded quite well.”²³ Unlike the adults, they were eager to take risks their parents avoided. With the movement stalled, Bevel believed children were the only group available who could be organized for mass mobilization. Just as he had done in Jackson, Bevel set up workshops at First Congregational and other churches near schools whose congregations were friendly to the movement. Displaying his mastery as an organizer, he recruited local football legend James Orange as his main youth organizer. Orange pulled in the captains of the football teams at Ulman and Parker high schools who in turn recruited homecoming queens and student body presidents. Before long, Bevel’s nonviolence workshops overflowed with high school students. From there the enthusiasm spread to junior high and then to elementary school students.²⁴

Andrew Young gives most of the credit for organizing the youth to Bevel, who organized “dramatic” workshops bolstered by a “strong focus on positive affirmation.” In these workshops, Bevel insisted that segregation could be broken if the Black people withdrew their cooperation

²³ Eskew, 262.

²⁴ Halberstam, 438-39; Young 236-38.

with the evil system and renewed their faith in their potential.²⁵ The success of Bevel's workshop stimulated an internal SCLC debate over the minimum age of protesters. Some staffers argued for college as the cut off while others preferred to permit high schoolers to participate. At first fourteen was designated as the minimum age, but then Bevel took over the debate. Using a sound theological argument, Bevel convinced Dr. King that any age limits were useless. While the point that the Black children should be allowed to fight racism because it had already damaged them was persuasive, Bevel's argument about living one's faith was the most compelling for Dr. King. He contended that if a child was old enough to belong to a church at age five or six, then he was old enough to live out that faith on Birmingham's streets. No one, Bevel said, had the right to prevent a child from acting on faith. The faith argument was brilliant. The concept of faith is a cornerstone of Christianity. It means trusting in God and living a life based on the conviction that God will keep his word. Matthew 17:20 is a scriptural verse often used to communicate the power of Christian faith. When Jesus expelled a demon from a boy after his disciples had failed to, he told them they had not been able to do so "because you have so little faith. I tell you the truth, if you have faith as small as a mustard seed, you can say to this mountain, 'Move from here to there' and it will move. Nothing will be impossible for you."²⁶ As one Baptist preacher to another, Bevel knew his argument spoke to King's core value system. How could a minister of the Gospel stand in the way of another Christian's faith? King reluctantly agreed to permit the Children's Crusade. Bevel's strategic genius was about to pay huge dividends and make Birmingham a turning point for the national Civil Rights Movement.²⁷ A mustard seed moved a mountain.

²⁵ Young, 235-36.

²⁶ <http://www.christianityetc.org/faith/php/>; Matthew 17:20, *Holy Bible*, New International Version, 1978.

²⁷ Halberstam, 440; Young, 18.

In short order, Bevel assembled an army of youth who changed the dynamics and the atmosphere of the Birmingham Movement. Whereas previously there existed insufficient adult participation, very little media attention, and little excitement about the overall campaign, with the insertion of youth activists the campaign found new life. On the first day of the Children's Crusade, wave after wave of students streamed out of Sixteenth Street Baptist Church and the Apostolic Overcoming Holiness Church of God, catching Birmingham police completely by surprise and frustrating Bull Connor who stationed firefighters at key intersections in a futile attempt to contain the demonstrations. By the end of the day, over one thousand people, mostly children, had been arrested.²⁸

The next day, children filled the streets again. A desperate Bull Connor, short on jail space, decided to use water hoses to forcibly end the crisis rather than make more arrests. For two straight hours, demonstrators were tossed about like rag dolls by powerful streams of water. When a group of angry Black bystanders retaliated with bricks and bottles, Connor unleashed a squad of six police dogs. This melee attracted a barrage of condemnation, prompting the Kennedy administration to send in Burke Marshall from the Justice Department, beginning a new round of more serious negotiations between local Black and white leaders. Demonstrations continued and hundreds more were arrested until a moratorium on demonstrations was announced. On May 10, a negotiated truce was reached that included desegregation of large downtown stores, the hiring of Black clerks in downtown stores, the release of jailed protesters, and the creation of a biracial committee. This agreement had little in common with original demands made at the beginning of the campaign such as the demand that school desegregation proceed unhindered.²⁹

²⁸ Eskew, 264-65.

²⁹ Ibid., 266-69, 289, 293-96

Although some local leaders such as Reverend Shuttlesworth felt that the settlement undermined the demands of the Birmingham Movement, the Bevelution had major implications at the local, regional and national levels. Locally, the use of children broke a stalemate in race relations. Only after youngsters filled the jails and were depicted by the media as victims of Bull Connors' police dogs and fire hoses did white leaders begin serious negotiations with ACMHR-SCLC officials that broke the stalemate. Eventually, African Americans in the city gained access to public accommodations, to jobs traditionally held by whites, and to the ballot box. At the national level, the Bevelution ended a logjam in Congress and the White House over the future of Jim Crow.³⁰ Birmingham made it clear that President Kennedy had to choose sides on the issue of race, a situation that he had been artfully avoiding since the Freedom Rides. Congress too was also forced to emerge from the sidelines on the issue of segregation. It was compelled to pass legislation that made racial discrimination illegal.

From a regional perspective, the Bevelution gave new life to the Nashville Movement. John Lewis, who was still in Nashville at the time, recalled that, "Perhaps more than anything else, I think it was Birmingham that really forced the Nashville student community to really move . . . We would take copies of the *Tennessean* . . . where they had pictures of fireman with the water hoses and police officials with the dogs, and put them on posters . . . and tack them on trees right in front of the Fisk Student Union and Fisk Chapel . . . so we could say 'come to the mass meeting. March.'" This was a significant development in Nashville because after the Freedom Rides, Nashville students had fallen into a period of little activism. Much of this lull was due to the absence of some of the key "misfits" such as Diane Nash Bevel and her husband James who had moved to Mississippi near the end of the Freedom Rides and never returned to Nashville. Bernard LaFayette had remained in Mississippi too, inspired by Bevel's vow to

³⁰ Ibid., 299.

organize the Black people of his home state. Only John Lewis was still in Nashville when 1963 began.³¹

Outside of Nashville, other local movements were stimulated at least in part by the Birmingham campaign. John Lewis recalled that a “climate. . . was moving across the South,” illustrated in places such as Danville, Virginia, Gadsden, Alabama, Americus, Georgia, West Helena and Pine Bluff, Arkansas, and even Cambridge, Maryland, where under the leadership of Gloria Richardson the Cambridge Movement gained momentum after the Birmingham campaign. The months following the Bevelution were some of the busiest for the entire Movement as attested to by Lewis who had become SNCC’s chairman and traveled “a great deal” to several of the hotspots ignited by Birmingham.³²

The Bevelution was especially significant at the national level. It compelled President Kennedy to make a public stand on the side of civil rights. This stand came on June 11, 1963, when, in a televised address on the same day that Governor George Wallace blocked the enrollment of a Black student at the University of Alabama, Kennedy said: We are confronted primarily with a moral issue . . . Are we to say to the world—and more importantly to each other—that this is the land of the free, except for the Negroes? . . . Now the time has come for this nation to fulfill its promise.”³³ Although Cold War politics influenced Kennedy’s new revelation on race, the Bevelution in Birmingham brought home the stark realization that segregation was a moral albatross that the United States could no longer afford. The use of children in Birmingham made clear the immorality of white supremacy. Fire hoses and police dogs set upon school children revealed to the whole world the horrifying reality of life in the segregated South in the land of the “free.” Without the newsreel footage of Bull Connors’ fire

³¹ Allen interview transcript of Lewis, 103; Halberstam, 386-87.

³² Allen interview transcript of Lewis, 110.

³³ *Ibid.*, 310.

and canine brigades, it is not likely that President Kennedy would have been moved to this new public stance on race relations. The Bevelution marked a turning point for Kennedy and for the nation.

The Bevelution had other important consequences. In the words of President John Kennedy, “The events in Birmingham and elsewhere have so increased the cries for equality that no state or legislative body can prudently choose to ignore them.”³⁴ Not only did Birmingham force Congress to pass the 1964 Civil Rights Act, but it set the example for the rest of the segregated South. As Reverend Shuttlesworth told Dr. King in January 1963, “. . . if you can break the back of segregation in Birmingham, Alabama, then you can break the back of segregation all over the nation.”³⁵ Reverend Shuttlesworth’s prediction yielded fruit before the passage of the 1964 Civil Rights Act. Because of the Bevelution, the “cries for equality” were shouted in more than seven hundred demonstrations in nearly two hundred cities, precipitating close to fifteen thousand arrests in 1963. In the aftermath of Birmingham, President Kennedy acknowledged that “The fires of frustration and discord are burning in every city, North and South”³⁶. Legalized segregation was no longer a stable southern institution. President Lyndon B. Johnson paid homage to the powerful social and political tremors unleashed by Birmingham at the signing ceremony for the sweeping civil rights legislation on June 22, 1964. At the White House event he joked: “I don’t think you should all be totally harsh on Bull Connor. After all he has done more for civil rights than almost anybody else. But for Birmingham, we would not be here today.”³⁷

³⁴ Eskew, 310.

³⁵ Manis, 332.

³⁶ Eskew, 310.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 312.

But for Birmingham, the SCLC would not have established itself as the premier civil rights organization in the country with the necessary capital to finance its programs. Birmingham resulted in a public relations and financial watershed for the SCLC. Dr. King began receiving a staggering volume of mail. Speaking engagements and other requests for King and his staff led to what Wyatt T. Walker called “intense schedules . . . in light of the accelerated activity in civil rights since Birmingham.” The increased volume of mail also meant more donations. Within a month after the Birmingham settlement, the SCLC took in more money in one month than in all of 1962. In all, the agency netted \$159, 856 from rallies held in response to Birmingham, well beyond the \$2,529 collected just prior to the start of the Birmingham campaign. The cash flow continued. By 1964, the organization reported receipts of \$626,758.72.³⁸

Part of the public image as a top-tier civil rights organization meant new expertise in the application of nonviolent direct action. For the most part, the SCLC applied many of the lessons from the Albany Movement. Primarily, it developed a reasonable strategy with obtainable goals. With input from the ACMHR, it set its sights on crushing Jim Crow completely rather than a piecemeal plan of targeting only one or two segregated institutions such as downtown stores or city buses. The SCLC also avoided being out-manuevered by local officials as they were in Albany. Instead, the Birmingham campaign kept the white community off balance, evidenced by the Children’s Crusade, and was able to isolate the contending factions within the white community. In Albany, the divisions within Black leadership helped drain momentum from the movement. Even though there was not much leadership unity in Birmingham, the trump card was the Bevelution. The ability of the children to fill up the jails gave new life to a flailing movement.

³⁸ Ibid., 314-15.

And perhaps more importantly, Birmingham gave the SCLC a strategic platform that it used for the next three years. Wyatt T. Walker institutionalized the lessons from Birmingham into a blueprint on direct action known as “How to Crack a Hard Core City,” designed to precipitate “creative tension” through provocation. These methods were later employed with mixed success in St. Augustine, Florida, in 1964, and Chicago, Illinois, in 1966. There were much better results in Selma, Alabama, in 1965.³⁹ Yet at the same time, the Birmingham campaign revealed a perennial weakness in the SCLC’s strategy: its failure to do grassroots organizing and instead rely on the “community-mobilizing tradition,” an emphasis on large-scale, relatively short-term public events.⁴⁰ King’s decision to go to jail on Good Friday was an effort to spark a mass mobilization within Black Birmingham, but the community was not inspired because the prerequisite community organizing work had not been done. SCLC’s actions demonstrated that the organization also failed to understand the mood of the Black community. Mistakenly, it relied on Reverend Shuttlesworth inflated assessment that Birmingham was ready for action when in fact it was deeply divided. That is when James Bevel showed up, diagnosed the problem, and organized the children into miraculous crusaders.

The Bevel children’s experiment helped the SCLC refine its media strategy. In the wake of the campaign, Wyatt T. Walker bragged, “There never was any more skillful manipulation of the news media than there was in Birmingham.” Andrew Young concurred with Walker’s assessment, noting that “we were consciously using the mass media to try to get across to the nation what our message was,” and that message was that segregation was much more vicious than white American realized. “The movement,” Young concluded, “was really about getting publicity for injustice . . . the injustice was there under the surface and as long as it stayed below

³⁹ Ibid., 315.

⁴⁰ Payne, 3.

the surface, nobody was concerned about it. You had to bring it out in the open.”⁴¹ Television was the best medium for exposing the injustice, a reality that was compounded when it victimized children. The assault of children by water cannons and police dogs played into the teeth of SCLC’s media strategy and more than anything else broke the local and national stalemate on race relations. The images captured in May 1963 in Birmingham today remain as iconic symbols of the city’s past.

The media also helped facilitate the further radicalization of the Movement by Black youth. Print media and television offered images of “young high school girls who wrestled with police officials and their clubs,” recalled Lewis. “. . . There was a . . . willingness to stand up . . . a greater sense of defiance. . . .there was what I think I called in 1963 . . . aggressive nonviolent action.” Lewis further described the time of the Birmingham campaign as one exhibiting “a greater degree of militancy.” The enhanced militancy was a product of two developments. First, it was a consequence of using of children as agents of social change, a group less likely to be restrained in their actions. Second, the inability of Movement leaders to more effectively institutionalize the Lawson model of training participants in nonviolent direct action meant that undisciplined and untrained participants could create chaos and violence in the streets.

The further radicalization of the student movement because of the Bevelution represents another significant step for Black people. The defiance of Bull Connor and his repressive regime signaled that a significant number of young African Americans no longer feared the consequences of their actions. As Lewis’ comments about the enhanced militancy suggests, a whole generation was now becoming unafraid of the white power structure and its henchmen. Because Black children publicly dared to confront one of the most feared and brutal law enforcement agents in the South and triumphed, it is no wonder that in 1963 wave after wave of

⁴¹ Garrow, 264.

protests consumed communities where segregation still reigned. These protests were part funeral for Mr. Jim Crow and part manifestation of the lost fear of white authority. Birmingham therefore played a significant role in creating the emerging new self-image of African Americans, one of a people moving toward making demands rather than asking for favors.

This new aggressive mood coincided with the emergence of Malcolm X and the Nation of Islam as a credible voice in the Black freedom struggle, setting the stage for intense ideological feuds over the future of African Americans. When the images of children being attacked by water hoses and canines shocked the nation, Malcolm X responded that “real men don’t put their children on the firing line.”⁴² What was shaping up was a potentially explosive mix of more aggressive youth activism and inflammatory rhetoric from quarters of the Black community who were philosophically opposed to nonviolent direct action. This dynamic put pressure on the proponents of nonviolence to produce concrete results, setting up violent retaliation as an alternative in the event that no meaningful change resulted. The images of children brutality assaulted by the gatekeepers of segregation could only help spread the message of the Nation of Islam among young urban African Americans outside the South. No one was more aware of the potential for violence as an alternative than Dr. King. There had already been several episodes of violence in Birmingham and when troubling rhetoric from the Nation of Islam suggesting that violence was the only cure for racism, the usually mild-mannered Dr. King lashed out against the Black Muslims in several public statements. On one occasion, Dr. King retorted, “What gets me is that these people don’t have the nerve, nor are they irrational enough, to advocate the alternative of violence. If they’re for violence, why don’t they say so?” These developments suggest that Birmingham may have been, along with so much else, a crucial point in the emergence of Black Power and the rejection of nonviolence by some Black people.

⁴² Manis, 370.

According to Garrow, comments such as these further heightened the antipathy of Muslims and their supporters toward Dr. King. This was evidenced by a Harlem crowd who threw eggs at him in June 1963 when he spoke at a church rally.⁴³ Public rebuke of Dr. King indicated some dissatisfaction with nonviolence as a solution to racial problems and a willingness to give Malcolm's brand of Black nationalism a chance.

Public rebukes aside, Dr. King nevertheless reaped extraordinary personal dividends as a result of the Bevelution. He received much of the credit for the campaign's success, resulting in a tremendous upsurge in his popularity. This development came with mixed blessings. On the one hand, he became the highest apostle for the Movement, generating more speaking requests than he could possibly fill. King was so overwhelmed that he lamented the flood of requests that inundated him immediately after the Birmingham campaign ended. Starting in 1963, King truly became the symbol of the Movement and a messianic figure for many African Americans. But all the fame was a quandary to King. He told one of his seminary mentors, J. Pius Barbour, "I am conscious of two Martin Luther Kings. I am a wonder to myself . . . I am mystified at my own career. The Martin Luther King the people talk about seems foreign to me." On the other hand, his popularity drove him to self-impose an exhausting schedule, one so hectic that, according to James Bevel, he resorted to "scheming up ways to get out of doing some work, off hiding so nobody could bother him." By October 1963, his schedule became so ruthless that he was hospitalized at the point of fatigue with a nasty virus and high blood pressure.⁴⁴ Dr. King had pushed himself beyond his physical limits.

The most important accolade that King received as a partial byproduct of the Bevelution was the 1964 Nobel Peace Prize. Prior to this award, King had received more than two hundred

⁴³ Garrow, 275.

⁴⁴ Garrow, 289, 354.

awards, including *Time*'s prestigious 1963 "Man of the Year," which he told Stanley Levison was nothing special and queried "what's one more?" However, the Nobel Peace prize stood alone in its renown. It was not just a personal achievement, but rather an international recognition of the righteousness of the Black freedom struggle and an explicit endorsement of the philosophy of nonviolence. Without Bevel's insistence of a bold children's initiative, there would have been no international backlash against Birmingham's racial status quo, no swift discrediting of segregation, no heightened glory for Dr. King and the SCLC, and the likelihood of a Nobel Peace Prize much less certain. The award signified that Gandhi's legacy had traveled from India to America, from Gandhi to Lawson, from Lawson to Bevel, from Bevel to the people of Birmingham and beyond, fulfilling Gandhi's wish that someone else advance it for the benefit of humanity.⁴⁵

In addition to the benefits that accrued to the SCLC, the Bevelution made the Birmingham campaign ascend to heights never before reached by a local movement. The use of children transformed a local movement into a campaign of national significance, evidenced by the close attention of the Kennedy administration. Although Burke Marshall had spent time in Montgomery during the Freedom Rides, his time there was more about the fate of the Freedom Riders than about anything related to the status of African Americans in Montgomery. Birmingham, on the other hand, came to symbolize something terribly wrong about American society: Black people were not free in the land of the free. The image was so damaging that both the president and Congress were obliged to act. This was unprecedented for a local movement.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 354; In 1936, Black theologian Howard Thurman traveled to India where he met with Gandhi and urged him to come to the United States to help Black people with their struggle. Gandhi declined the offer, noting that he had much to do in India regarding Indian freedom. After Thurman sang two well-known spirituals for Gandhi, the Indian leader remarked that "it may be through the Negroes that the unadulterated message of non-violence will be delivered to the world." See pages 255-56 of David Hardiman, *Gandhi in His Time and Ours: The Global Legacy of His Ideas* (London: Hurst and Company, 2003), for details of Thurman's trip to India.

Reverend Shuttlesworth benefited from the rising symbolic significance of Birmingham. If the “Magic City” symbolized something immoral about American race relations, then Fred Shuttlesworth came to symbolize something good about Americans who confronted injustice. He became forever wedded to the saga of Birmingham’s desegregation battle. Nearly every history text that recaptures the story makes Reverend Shuttlesworth central to that story. Shortly after the settlement was reached in May 1963, he recognized his own upgraded status in the pantheon of Movement leadership. In the final days before the settlement was reached, Reverend Shuttlesworth left his recuperative bed to launch into one of the more noted instances of a Movement colleague “putting King in his place.”⁴⁶ However, not long after the settlement was reached, Reverend Shuttlesworth put his dispute with Dr. King aside as he found himself caught up in the heady vortex of Movement fame. Near the end of the campaign, Shuttlesworth felt King had forsaken the goals of the local movement, but as Shuttlesworth became a noted figure himself, he began identifying more with the national struggle than with the local scene. He told a mass meeting audience that “Birmingham Negroes have set an example all over the country. In some places the Negro is telling the white man if he don’t get us what we want we will call Shuttlesworth, King and Abernathy; and they say, ‘Please don’t do that.’” The reverend saw himself in a new light⁴⁷ and his name became associated with the Black freedom struggle in the minds of many others. Birmingham literally made the civil rights legacy of Fred Shuttlesworth,

⁴⁶ During the high drama of the campaign, Shuttlesworth was injured by a water hose blast and hospitalized. He interrupted his convalescence at home to attend an emergency meeting with top SCLC leadership where he lost his temper when Dr. King informed him that a decision had been made to call off the demonstrations. Shuttlesworth launched into a tirade against King. “You can’t call them off because you ain’t called nothing on and ain’t got nothing to call off . . . We came in with the idea to say to Birmingham and the world, and we agreed before we got here that we wasn’t gon’ call it off no matter what . . . So if you want to go against that, go ahead and do it. But I will *not* call it off . . .” When Reverend Shuttlesworth learned of a planned press conference to announce the cessation of demonstrations, he angrily told Dr. King “I’ll be d_____ if you have it like this. You may be Mr. Big now, but if you call it off, you’ll be ‘Mr. Sh___.’ You’re way up here, but you’ll fall way down low, and you’ll be Mr. Nothing.” See pages 382-83 of *A Fire You Can’t Put Out* for Shuttlesworth’s tirade against King. For the details of Shuttlesworth’s encounter with the infamous water cannons of Birmingham and his subsequent injury, arrest, and confrontation with Dr. King, see pages 376-82 of Manis.

⁴⁷ Eskew, 316.

confirmed by the statue of his likeness erected on the grounds of the Birmingham Civil Rights Institute and Museum. An inscription at the foot of the statue reads: “Reverend Fred L. Shuttlesworth, Birmingham’s Freedom Fighter: With singular courage he fired the imagination and raised the hopes of an oppressed people.”⁴⁸

Without the momentum for Black freedom generated by Birmingham, there would have been no need to sponsor segregation’s going away party on August 23, 1963. The March on Washington began with Dr. King’s consideration of how to maximize the impact of Birmingham. The Kennedy administration and the nation were focused upon civil rights. King telegraphed the White House requesting a conference with the president and attorney general to press for an executive order ending segregation. After being rebuffed, Dr. King told advisor Stanley Levison that an idea that Bayard Rustin and A. Philip Randolph had been discussing for the past several months deserved further consideration. Levison agreed that a “March on Washington” or a series of Birmingham-like campaigns across the country might force the administration to act. King agreed and added that simultaneous demonstrations combined with a nationwide work stoppage could send a strong message. A King adviser, Clarence Jones, consulted with Randolph who was eager to combine King’s idea with plans he and his associates were developing for a Washington pilgrimage in October.⁴⁹

King’s thinking on the proposed March on Washington was largely influenced by James Bevel. During the Birmingham campaign, Bevel and another young SCLC staff member, Ike Reynolds, tossed around the idea of a mass campaign in the nation’s capital. In fact, Bernard LaFayette believes that Bevel deserves all of the credit, contending in a January 2003 interview

⁴⁸ Manis, 212.

⁴⁹ Garrow, 265-66.

that the whole notion of such as march “was basically Bevel’s idea.”⁵⁰ His perspective was that the success in Birmingham was only the beginning. He wanted to take the young people who had been so eager to demonstrate in Birmingham, and make them part of a much larger children’s march in the nation’s capital. Bevel was angry at the lack of support for civil rights by the federal government and was aware that the Kennedy administration vigorously lobbied King to bar the participation of children in the Birmingham campaign. A national children’s march would make a dramatic point to officials in the White House about the political agency of children. Bevel told Andrew Young that his plan was for eight thousand Birmingham children to walk all the way to Washington, fed by strangers and camping out along the way. It would mimic Gandhi’s Salt March to the Sea of the 1930s. Ten thousand children or more, Bevel believed, would join them once they arrived in the nation’s capital. The whole country would be captivated because it was children doing it.⁵¹

Dr. King was concerned about the risks associated with children marching through Klan-infested areas along the way, but felt some aspects of the idea held merit, especially in an era when television images could be quite provocative. The idea rested in Dr. King’s memory bank for a few weeks until Rustin broached the subject with him about an updated version of Randolph’s original idea of a March on Washington first introduced in 1941.⁵² It appears that Bevel was unaware of Randolph’s 1941 idea since he later vented anger that Randolph was given credit for the 1963 rendition. Bevel was also angry that the March on Washington ended up as a

⁵⁰ Ibid., 266; Bennett interview of Bevel, LaFayette, and Patton.

⁵¹ Halberstam, 442-43; Young, 269.

⁵² Ibid., 443; See Jervis Anderson, *Bayard Rustin: Troubles I’ve Seen* (New York: HarperCollins, 1997), chapter sixteen for a thorough discussion of Randolph’s threat to launch a March on Washington Movement, the unleashing of tens of thousands of Blacks on the nation’s capital, unless President Franklin D. Roosevelt eliminated racial discrimination among defense contractors with government contracts. Randolph’s gambit resulted in Executive Order 8802, issued June 25, 1941, declaring illegal any racial discrimination in defense industry hiring. A Fair Employment Practices Committee was created to monitor compliance.

mented version of what he had conceived.⁵³ In his memoir, Andrew Young concluded that “The March on Washington evolved into something other than the revolutionary statement Bevel had originally intended. Bevel’s vision was a grassroots march of people who went to jail and sacrificed for the movement. But the March on Washington became establishment, made up of middle class Black and white liberals who had been reluctant to support Birmingham in the early days.”⁵⁴ Although Bevel perhaps had legitimate reasons to lay claims to the origins of the march, his reaction to the unfolding of the most noted civil rights march in American history is one of the first recorded instances of Bevel’s concern with his own legacy, clearly far afield of Reverend Lawson’s emphasis on claiming no personal ownership of the struggle. His notorious ego was on full display in this instance.

As the events shaping the March on Washington unfolded, John Lewis’ destiny was about to intersect with them. On June 14, Lewis received a telegram from SNCC headquarters informing him of Charles McDew’s resignation and summoning him to an emergency meeting in Atlanta. James Forman telephoned Lewis to say that he might be elected as McDew’s replacement. Lewis’ ascension to the chairpersonship of SNCC had several dimensions. Most likely among them, according to Lewis, was not so much his allegiance to philosophical nonviolence so much as it was his reputation as perhaps the most tried and tested warrior in the student movement. By mid-1963, Lewis had been arrested twenty-four times and had experienced countless instances of verbal and physical abuse, most notably the highly publicized pummeling in Montgomery during the Freedom Rides. His exploits made him ideal for the job of SNCC chair in the eyes of his colleagues.⁵⁵ The activist career of John Lewis symbolized the essence of the student movement: courageous, uncompromising, and bold action in defiance of

⁵³ Halberstam, 443.

⁵⁴ Young, 270.

⁵⁵ Allen interview transcript of Lewis, 105-7.

the racial status quo without regard for one's personal safety, all in the name of Black freedom. No one embodied these attributes more than Lewis.

Lewis' embodiment of the student movement served a broader more pressing institutional purpose. Throughout the early 1960s, specifically during the sit-ins, Freedom Rides, the pre-1964 Mississippi voter registration campaigns, and the Albany Movement, SNCC did much of the leg work to draw attention to racial problems in these areas, yet lamented Lewis:

. . . All the other organizations received the credit and got a lot of the funds. So, in order to raise funds for our purpose, SNCC needed . . . a symbol. Needed someone that people who had to raise funds could point to [as] our symbol. . . . And they tried to make me a symbol of the student movement . . . of the things that SNCC sought to do.⁵⁶

That John Lewis consented to function as an iconographic figure for the student movement seems to contradict its practice of shunning the limelight and goes counter to his own personality type. The very idea of Lewis as the "Martin Luther King, Jr.," of the student movement has an uncomfortable ring to it. Many of his colleagues, especially James Forman, had urged Lewis to step into leadership roles. "But," as he recounted, "during those early days, and up to this time I continue to say, that I never considered myself a leader. [I was] always a participant in the struggle."⁵⁷ Nevertheless, Lewis took on the challenge of being the public face of the student movement and the March on Washington was his debut in that role.

The March on Washington represented both new visibility for John Lewis and a chance to articulate demands on behalf of the Black masses. He was the only student at the speaker's podium on August 28, 1963, a sign that the traditional adult civil rights leaders perceived themselves as the forefront of the Movement when in fact the students constituted the "vanguard." Many of Lewis' SNCC colleagues turned a cold shoulder to the idea of marching on

⁵⁶ Allen interview transcript of Lewis, 108.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

Washington. Although Lewis saw the event as “a creative force to protest the conditions, not only in the South, but [nationwide as well] and call the nation’s, . . . Congress’ and the President’s attention to [these conditions],” others were ambivalent or lukewarm to the idea. James Forman “did not believe that a large march would accomplish much,” but felt SNCC should be represented nonetheless. He felt that the march’s original purpose had been hijacked to serve as a victory celebration for the Kennedy administration and its supporters. In the wake of the atrocities in Birmingham, Forman believed the White House wanted to portray an image of a democratic and peaceful nation no longer marred by angry protests. On the other hand, most within SNCC saw the march as an opportunity to condemn American society and make radical demands on behalf of the Black masses.⁵⁸

Lewis too saw the march as a chance to take a militant stance, but admitted that the Kennedys got the upper hand and took the sting out of it. Rather than the “creative disruption” that he hoped for, the march was diluted. This was evident when in July Rustin assured D.C. police and Kennedy administration officials during a planning meeting that there would be no civil disobedience on the big day.⁵⁹ In an effort to give the affair a touch of militancy, Lewis drafted what he thought was an appropriately militant speech with the assistance of Courtland Cox and Joyce Ladner of SNCC, law student Eleanor Holmes, and Rustin’s assistant, Tom Kahn. It turned out that his language was too strong for the Kennedy administration and the white liberals recruited to project an image of interracial unity as a symbol of the march. Specifically, white liberal clergy like Washington’s Archbishop Patrick O’Boyle, designated to deliver the invocation, and Reverend Eugene C. Blake of the National Council of Churches, objected to the passage criticizing the proposed civil rights bill as “too little too late” and to Lewis’ provocative

⁵⁸ Forman, 332.

⁵⁹ Allen interview transcript of Lewis, 111; Garrow, 277.

language calling for a march “through the heart of Dixie, the way Sherman did.” The question asking “Which side was the federal government on?” also provoked strong objections.⁶⁰

Begrudgingly, Lewis agreed to last minute changes that allowed the image of interracial unity to pervade the event.

James Forman was part of a group that negotiated the final version of Lewis’ speech. Both Lewis and Forman felt that despite the changes, the speech remained biting, reflecting the anger, frustrations, aspirations, and hopes of SNCC and the masses they represented. Forman later learned that much of white liberal opposition revolved around Lewis’ expression of opposition to Kennedy’s civil rights bill. Since, according to Forman, the march was intended to demonstrate massive support for the proposed legislation, the administration, white liberals, and moderate Black civil rights leadership did not want any contrary views uttered from the podium. The entire affair was a classic case of power brokers manipulating those representing oppressed people for specific political purposes. Forman contends that:

But people all over the country thought they were marching for jobs and freedom when in actuality the sellout leaders of the March on Washington was playing patsy with the Kennedy administration as part of the whole liberal-labor politics of Rustin, Wilkins, Randolph, Reuther, King, the Catholic and Protestant hierarchy. If people had known they had come to Washington to aid the Kennedy administration, they would not have come in the numbers they did. Moreover, if I had had any idea of the true purpose of the March on Washington, I would have resisted our participation in that March.⁶¹

It was Forman’s assessment that the March on Washington did little more than simply sell an image of unified biracial support behind the Kennedy administration’s legislative agenda. In addition, he concluded that the march “subvert[ed] mass discontent” and took “the steam out of the black anger then rising in the South.” John Lewis’ speech was originally intended to

⁶⁰ Lewis, 222-23.

⁶¹ Forman, 335-36.

articulate those sentiments, but his speech was adjusted to accommodate white liberal objectives. Forman was right that anger in the South was rising, especially so soon after the sight of police dogs and fire hoses unleashed upon children in Birmingham. He felt that Lewis' speech should have articulated "a blistering criticism of the society in general and [should have stated] some of the passion" with which SNCC activists had been exhibiting since the beginning of the student movement.⁶²

James Bevel's assessment of the march coincided with Forman's perspective. In fact, Bevel was so disgusted with the substance and tenor of the affair that he refused to attend. When Dr. King, at the last minute, realized that in the frenzied preparation for the march Andrew Young and Bevel had been left behind in Birmingham, he called Young and instructed him to come to Washington with Bevel in tow. In classic Bevel posture, perhaps still upset over the perceived notion that his idea for the march had been stolen, he told Young, "If you're going on a real march, call me, but not if you're just going up there for some d___ picnic in the Capitol lawn. I don't want any part of no bulls___ picnic."⁶³

Even with the changes, Lewis' message was still the most oppositional pronouncement heard that day, evidenced by his closing remarks.

We will not stop. If we do not get meaningful legislation out of this Congress, the time will come when we will not confine our marching to Washington. We will march through the South, through the streets of Jackson, through the streets of Danville, through the streets of Cambridge, through the streets of Birmingham. But we will march with the spirit of love and with the spirit of dignity that we have shown here today.

By the force of our demands, our determination and our numbers, we shall splinter the desegregated South into a thousand pieces and put them back together in the image of God and democracy.

We must say, 'Wake up America. *Wake up!!!* For we cannot stop, and we *will* not be patient.'⁶⁴

⁶² Ibid., 332, 336.

⁶³ Halberstam, 455.

⁶⁴ Lewis, 224.

The defiant tone of Lewis' words adequately reflected the more militant mood of the Movement. It also indicated the embryonic stages of a new identity percolating among young Black people. The tenor of the speech separated young activists from their adult counterparts. What most observers and participants missed was the intentional symbolism embedded in Lewis' language. Partly as an expression of the anger over being forced to compromise his message, he deliberately inserted the term "Black" in place of the traditional "Negro" still in vogue. Lewis wrote:

I was angry. But when we were done, I was satisfied. So was Forman. The speech still had fire. It still had bite, certainly more than any other speech made that day. It still had an edge, with no talk of 'Negroes'—I spoke instead of 'black citizens' and 'the black masses,' the only speaker to use those terms.⁶⁵

The terms "black citizens" and "black masses" suggest a tension between the youth and adult wings of the Movement as well as SNCC's trademark affinity for the grassroots citizenry not well represented at the March on Washington. Lewis' choice of Black over Negro implies both a tactical and an ideological separation gaining ground between SNCC and more traditional civil rights organizations. Thus in a way, Lewis as chair was more publicly symbolic than was at first realized. He was not just merely an icon for the student wing of the Movement, but a voice signaling a shift in the identity and the direction of the student movement. In three years, young people would begin calling themselves "Black" as a way of rejecting the old pattern of race relations favored by older African Americans. In many ways, the March on Washington fit the old pattern of African Americans accommodating to the preferences of white people over the

⁶⁵ Ibid., 223.

demand for revolutionary new racial frameworks. Lewis' language symbolized the rumblings of a break with those longstanding traditions and the "Negroes" who clung to them.

Yet the signals sent by Lewis were tentative and not very clear. The critical tone of his speech was "moderated by the organization's [SNCC's] continuing desire to remain part of the dominant national civil rights coalition." SNCC was not ready to offer an alternative position to the dominant theme of interracial collaboration and the idea of the federal government as a "white knight" ready to intervene on their behalf.⁶⁶ SNCC remained in the coalition until the utterance of "Black Power" in mid-1966.

While Lewis served as the sole voice of the student movement, no women were allowed to grace the speaker's platform except as songbirds. The planning committee even barred the wives of male leaders from marching with their husbands, instead marshalling them separately down Independence Avenue. The only female voices heard that day were by way of performances by vocalists such as Joan Baez, Eva Jessye, Odetta, Marian Anderson and Mahalia Jackson. In a generous spirit, Taylor Branch asserted that despite their overt omission from the platform of speakers, "women provided much of the afternoon's historical resonance." This was a reference to the "Tribute to Negro Women Fighters for Freedom" given by Randolph in which he rattled off the names of prominent women activists: Rosa Parks, Myrlie Evers, Mrs. Herbert Lee, Daisy Bates, Diane Nash Bevel, and Gloria Richardson.⁶⁷ The mention of Diane Nash Bevel's name was significant for it acknowledged her status as the most noteworthy young woman activist. She was on par with the achievements of women a generation ahead of her. Together she and John Lewis, two Lawson protégés, were the gendered symbols of the student movement, one allowed the public honor of embodying a youthful generation of more aggressive

⁶⁶ Carson, 83.

⁶⁷ Branch, 877, 880-81.

leadership and the other relegated to the status of honorable mention. Tragically, both of them were dishonored in different ways. Lewis was put in his place by adult leaders afraid of his militant grassroots truth. The hierarchy of chauvinistic male leadership silenced Nash Bevel and other women leaders fully capable of expressing themselves and those they represented.

The auxiliary drama taking place in the context of the march was overshadowed by Dr. King's address. The crowd responded to his oratory with thunderous ovations. King's speech was considered the "rhetorical achievement of a lifetime," conveying to millions the moral power of the Movement and making plain the "undeniable justice of blacks' demands." When Dr. King and other major march participants retreated to a White House reception, President Kennedy was euphoric about King's speech and elated that no disruptive incidents had taken place. The administration got its desired public relations coup and for the most part dodged the angry condemnation preferred by SNCC.⁶⁸

Largely because of the impetus provided by the Bevelution in Birmingham, the March on Washington became a reality, perhaps not the one preferred by most student activists, but one that moved the racial issue to the front of America's political agenda. The march helped win considerable white support for the Movement and solidified even more King's iconic status as the face and voice of the Movement, especially in the eyes of white Americans. Taylor Branch contended that King's mesmerizing delivery "projected him across the racial divide and planted him as a new founding father."⁶⁹

Together, the Birmingham campaign and the March on Washington set a climate for the ultimate dismantling of formal segregation. The president submitted civil rights legislation to Congress shortly after the conclusion of the Birmingham crisis and after the March on

⁶⁸ Garrow, 284-85.

⁶⁹ Branch, 887.

Washington. In the meantime, Birmingham felt continuing desegregation pressures. With a settlement in the public accommodations battle only a few months old, in September 1963, Birmingham officials faced a federal court order to admit the first five Black students to previously all-white schools. In this atmosphere of heightened racial tensions, new violence erupted with fatal consequences.⁷⁰

The violent eruption occurred on September 15. As the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church celebrated its annual Youth Day with a program entitled “The Love That Forgives,” a powerful blast of dynamite killed teenagers Denise McNair, Addie Mae Collins, Cynthia Wesley, and Carole Robertson. John Lewis recalled that their murders were “so shocking and so hurt[ful]” so soon “after the March on Washington,” setting off developments that had more profound consequences for the Black freedom struggle. Their martyred blood compelled more Bevelutionary action on the part of Diane and James Bevel in which they seamlessly blended voter registration work and direct action into one cohesive campaign that served as the capstone of an era of social change activism. The blood of these four girls ultimately led directly to the Selma campaign, an initiative that engaged all of the primary Lawson protégés again in the same battle though at different points along the way.⁷¹

Diane and James Bevel were in North Carolina⁷² working on a voter registration campaign when news of the tragedy reached them. Like many African Americans in Birmingham, guilt and anger were their first responses. They felt responsible for helping to bring the Movement to Birmingham that resulted in the murder of these four girls. Therefore, they

⁷⁰ Ibid., 888-89.

⁷¹ Lewis, 229; Branch, 889-92; Allen interview transcript of Lewis, 129.

⁷² Inconsistencies exist in the literature concerning the exact whereabouts of the Bevels when the bombing occurred. David Halberstam contends they were in Edenton while David Garrow lists Williamston as their location. Edenton, located in Chowan County, and Williamston, situated in Martin County, are both in close proximity to each other in northeastern North Carolina.

could not simply walk away from the tragedy. More personally, Diane and James were parents of a year-old daughter making the bombing strike close to home. On the afternoon of the murders they pondered an appropriate response. At first, violent retaliation seemed logical. With the right contacts and enough cash incentive, the perpetrators could be discovered and eliminated. Surprisingly, in light of their nonviolent history, the Bevels considered retaliatory murder more than a fleeting moment. In time, though, a more nonviolent and effective response evolved, one that meant creating a new political structure that would politically empower Blacks, thereby ensuring such a calamity would never transpire again.⁷³ What resulted from the spilled blood of four children was an epic voter registration campaign centered on Selma.

Diane and James Bevel had scaled back their activism as new parents prior to the bombing. But because the activist in her identified so closely with the mothers of the four girls who had lost their daughters, Nash's mother-activist instincts generated the only logical response: a plan for a mass march on Montgomery, a nonviolent siege of the state capital. The idea for such action grew out of a casual conversation between Nash and Lewis during funeral preparations for the murdered girls. At that stage they were merely "throwing around" the notion of a mass march on the state capitol in Montgomery. This idea represented a constructive channeling of the anger and shattered hope that spewed forth at first word of the bombing. To Diane, the brainstorm was perhaps related to a compelling question that consumed her: What did she owe God at this moment? For Lewis, the notion of marching on Montgomery was a way to counteract the "serious blow to the hope and faith of all people in the Movement" that had been dealt by the bombing.⁷⁴

⁷³ Halberstam, 491-92.

⁷⁴ Lewis, 230-31; Allen interview transcript of Lewis, 129. Halberstam, 492.

Diane Nash Bevel was in Atlanta by Monday the 16th. James remained in North Carolina, already committed to the project there. The discussion with Lewis about marching on Montgomery evolved into a scheme for the mass assault on the Alabama capital. That Monday Diane and John Lewis casually mentioned the idea of a mass march on Montgomery to a Black reporter from the *Washington Post* and the scheme found its way into the *Post* and other newspapers, assuming a life of its own. She conferred with Reverend Vivian while in Atlanta and by Tuesday Nash Bevel had drafted a “Proposal for Action in Montgomery.” Her proposal envisioned the creation of a “nonviolent army” equipped with two objectives. One was the removal of George Wallace as governor. The other was the registration of every Alabama citizen over the age of twenty-one as a voter. Her scheme echoed Reverend Lawson’s vision of a “nonviolent army” articulated during SCLC’s 1961 convention held in Nashville.⁷⁵ Nash’s plan had the ring of a military operation with “marching and drills [on] command and coordination of battle groups, drill[s] in dealing with fire hoses, dogs, tear gas, cattle prods, . . .” and “practice in blocking runways, train tracks, etc.” Other facets of the plan called for developing a flag and insignia and closing down power plants. Her proposal was so ambitious that it seemed as though she was attempting to bring a March-on-Washington-style demonstration to Montgomery. And of course young people were projected as the core of this “nonviolent army.”⁷⁶

On Tuesday, Nash Bevel arrived in Birmingham where she shared the proposal with Reverend Shuttlesworth who recommended that she hold a strategy meeting with Dr. King before attempting to take any action. After attending the funerals of the martyred girls on Tuesday and Wednesday, Nash Bevel, Lewis, Bevel, and several SNCC and SCLC staff

⁷⁵ Allen interview transcript of Lewis, 129; Garrow, 292. For details of Lawson’s idea of creating a ten thousand person nonviolent army of individuals trained to oppose segregation with their bodies and willing to submit to lengthy jail sentences, see page 168 of *Bearing the Cross*. This army was part of the SCLC’s hopes to use the newly hired Lawson to fashion teams of nonviolent activists to service communities where direct action was called for.

⁷⁶ Garrow, 293; Branch, 893.

caucused with Dr. King concerning the concept of a siege force for Alabama. Nash Bevel explained that an assault upon Montgomery could channel the anger of Black Birmingham into effective action. King was not very enthused over the plan. Birmingham minister John Thomas Porter recollected that Dr. King simply “looked at her and laughed . . . because she suggested that we go out and throw ourselves under trains and the wheels of airplanes.” Taylor Branch suggests that the weight of the funeral services for Denise McNair, Addie Mae Collins, and Cynthia Wesley earlier that day made King disinclined to give her idea much favor. It also appears that Dr. King was distracted by thoughts of an upcoming political strategy meeting with President Kennedy to plot a response to the killings. King wanted to discuss high level White House gambits, dealings Nash Bevel felt were unproductive.⁷⁷

King, though partly dismissive of her plan, did not explicitly reject the idea. He and others in the room agreed that some response was required, but apparently not the sort of assault that Nash Bevel envisioned. In his memoir, Lewis concluded that the SCLC was not ready for such a potentially suicidal campaign, not so soon after the Birmingham project. A move of that sort would have to be implemented by the youth wing of the Movement, something made plain by the reaction of traditional civil rights organizations to John Lewis’ March on Washington speech.⁷⁸

Although the SCLC was not prepared for the bold action outlined by Diane Nash Bevel, student activists were. Within SNCC there was enthusiasm for some sort of full-blown frontal assault and Diane’s plan for Alabama came at about the same time as SNCC’s assessment that Mississippi was where a massive assault should first take place. Since SNCC had already organized portions of the Delta and southern Mississippi thanks to the work of Bob Moses and

⁷⁷ Garrow, 294; Lewis, 231; Halberstam, 492.

⁷⁸ Lewis, 231.

since other traditional civil rights groups avoided the state, it made sense to start there first. Moses was planning a statewide mock election, known as the “freedom vote,” for the fall of 1963 to coincide with actual elections.⁷⁹

The prioritization of Mississippi as fertile voter registration ground did not mean ignoring Alabama entirely. Not long after the Birmingham slayings in the fall of 1963, SNCC decided to put pressure on Selma.⁸⁰ This pressure was made possible by the preparatory work of Bernard and Colia LaFayette. In late summer 1962, Bernard LaFayette, was too restless to return to school and ventured to SNCC headquarters in Atlanta searching for an assignment. James Forman offered him an opportunity to assist Moses in Mississippi, but Bernard preferred his own project. A slot was open in Selma where previous SNCC field workers had failed to establish a beachhead. In fact, according to Bernard, Selma was open for the taking because it was “scratched off the map” as a potential project site, reflecting the assessment of it being too risky. Although Selma exemplified the worst aspects of white supremacist domination, it carried potential due to the large disfranchised Black population. Of the 15,000 Blacks eligible to vote in Dallas County where Selma was located, only about 300 were registered. In addition, Dallas County held disproportionate power in state politics because of a post-Reconstruction deal made with the planters of the area to compensate them for the political power they lost when it was decreed that African Americans had to be disfranchised. Black Belt Alabama gained control of the state legislature, and Dallas County became the key player in white supremacy politics. Keeping African disfranchised was the key to maintaining this system of white supremacy and to sustaining Dallas County’s disproportional share of political power in Alabama. Understanding

⁷⁹ Ibid., 232; Allen interview transcript of Lewis, 180.

⁸⁰ Ibid., 233.

this racial history, LaFayette concluded that Selma and the Black Belt were the key to Alabama politics. Selma represented an enticing challenge that he was eager to take on.⁸¹

Before embarking on a Selma campaign, Bernard LaFayette married a fellow warrior, Colia Liddell, whom he met while organizing in Jackson, Mississippi. Liddell was no civil rights neophyte, having served as a special assistant to Medgar Evers. Near the end of 1962, Bernard moved to Selma ahead of his new bride and discovered how dangerous the place was. There was a vibrant, combat-ready White Citizens Council and the degree of white anger was abnormally high, even for Alabama. More revealing, during the Freedom Rides, the leg from Montgomery to Jackson deliberately bypassed Selma because an angry mob of 2,500 awaited them in spite of unprecedented police protection. And Selma had Sheriff Jim Clark, the small town equivalent of Bull Connor, a man known as the toughest and meanest law enforcement agent in the region. Clark felt duty-bound to maintain the color line in his fiefdom.⁸²

The LaFayettes found the early going in Selma a challenge. Bernard's reputation as a "Freedom Rider" made him someone the locals avoided. Two of the few Selma residents who befriended him were Amelia and Sam Boynton, a couple active in Dallas County voter registration initiatives. Their son, Bruce, was the plaintiff in *Boynton v. Virginia*, the Supreme Court case that prompted the Freedom Rides. One brave local teacher dared rent him a room. Before arriving, Bernard conferred with Rufus Lewis, a Montgomery funeral director who was renowned for his knowledge of effective voter registration work in hostile areas. Lewis gave him advice that made him successful where predecessors had failed: be low key; start with small groups whose members could recruit others; talk about citizenship then graduate to voting rights, emphasizing building a future for one's children; and help people unload their anger as a way to

⁸¹ Ibid; Halberstam, 412; Findlay interview of LaFayette.

⁸² Halberstam, 412, 415-18.

engender commitment and action. Lewis' instructions on how to organize Selma reminded Bernard of how his grandmother had organized New Hope Baptist Church in Tampa, starting off with small groups talking about family problems and using that to build an institution. He recalled that the key to turning the situation around for African Americans was his method. "My approach [was] a slow, methodical, laying a firm foundation, and I learned this from my grandmother."⁸³

After heeding Lewis' advice, Bernard did more research on the local conditions. He wanted to know why the previous SNCC field workers concluded white folks were too mean and the Blacks were so intimidated. As he framed it, "I had to find out why . . . this situation exist, because unless we understand the conditions, we are not going to change the problem . . . and then begin to move in a way that we uproot the problem." Once in Selma, Bernard conducted "on-the-ground research by talking to people . . . and seeing what existed." He discovered that the Dallas County Voters League, run by the ailing Sam Boynton, was inactive. Despite warnings from some locals who had lost faith in the dysfunctional Voters League and who predicted any civil rights campaign was a waste of time, Bernard decided to revive the League and tackle a seemingly hopeless situation. His determination was grounded in a principle of nonviolence which dictated that one tackle the most difficult cases. ". . . The principle is that where violence is at its worst is where you have the opportunity for nonviolence to be at its best, so that if you are going to test nonviolence it has to be in a situation where it can get a true test. Selma became a logical site for a voting rights campaign. This undertaking was facilitated by the support of other locals such as attorney James Chesnut, Reverend Lewis L. Anderson of Tabernacle Baptist Church, dental hygienist Marie Foster, and postal worker Ernest Doyle. Each

⁸³ Ibid., 418-21; Findlay interview of LaFayette.

of these individuals were economically independent of the white power structure and came to form the nucleus of what evolved into a solid local voter registration campaign.⁸⁴

Bernard earned the blessings of Sam Boynton before inaugurating his voter registration program in earnest. Boynton was confined to a nursing home and LaFayette spent many days by his bedside, giving relief to his wife, Amelia, and facilitating a passing of the torch to the next generation of activists. Bernard told an interviewer in October 2002 that in talking to a verbally incapacitated Boynton “In a mysterious way . . . I felt a sense of transference because of his life’s work and I was there to extend that work and continue that work.”⁸⁵

The community seemed ready to move ahead on voting rights as the death of Sam Boynton became the occasion that for Selma’s first mass meeting. His funeral served as both a memorial service and a political meeting to honor his legacy of voter registration work. At the ceremony, Sheriff Clark posted large number of deputies welding baseball bats in an attempt to block the entrance into the church. The deputies also smashed the taillights of those attending the service and ticketed them the next day. As had happened in Birmingham with the heavy-handed use of water hoses and police dogs, the attempted intimidation by Clark’s men backfired and turned the tide. Violating a sacred service in honor of a man revered for his contributions to Black Selma was beyond the pale. Colia LaFayette recalled that the largest crowd in recent memory came to the service and rather than being intimidated by Clark’s self-invited deputies, the crowd was enraged and openly cheered the audacious keynote speech of James Forman who told the audience to wait no longer and to register to vote.⁸⁶

⁸⁴ Findlay interview of LaFayette.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁶ Halberstam, 422-24; Findlay interview of LaFayette. According to LaFayette, Cox, a minister escaped death because he was away from his home base that night he was to be killed.

On that day, something changed in Selma. The fear that had previously stymied Black opposition to the racial status quo began to diminish. Mass meetings became more frequent and better attended. At the same time, the diehard segregationists detected the reinvigorated determination in the Black community and went into action, making Bernard and Colia the targets of threatening phone calls and violence. Late on the night of June 12, 1963, Bernard was crowned with a pistol butt by two white men pretending to need assistance with a stalled car. Without the timely rescue by a shotgun-toting neighbor, Bernard believed he may have been killed. Later he learned from the Mobile FBI office that his assault was part of a three state Klan scheme to murder Medgar Evers, LaFayette, and a CORE activist in Louisiana, Benjamin Elton Cox. Evers was the only one fatally wounded that night. Much like Bob Moses did when he was beaten by Billy Jack Caston in McComb⁸⁷, Bernard used his visible wounds as a recruiting tool and testament to his commitment to the Selma struggle. Instead of fleeing, he walked around the next day with his wounds and bloody shirt on full display. Attorney Chesnut believed that Bernard's calculated display of courage represented another turning point in Selma. It led to increased attendance at mass movements and bolstered the confidence of Blacks in town.⁸⁸

Bernard and Colia LaFayette opened important doors in Selma and soon moved back to Nashville in September 1963 where they enrolled at Fisk. Upon departing, they left the organizing in the hands of local youth and Amelia Boynton. SNCC sent in Worth Long and Prathia Hall to replace the LaFayettes. As an indication of Selma's significance as a voter registration site, John Lewis and Forman arrived there in late September where they found the

⁸⁷ According to Taylor Branch in *Parting the Waters*, when Bob Moses escorted a small group of Black Amite County, Mississippi, residents to register to vote on August 29, 1961, Billy Jack Caston bloodied Moses' head with a pistol butt. Not only did Moses file charges against Caston, the son-in-law of the local sheriff, but he also proceeded on his mission to the registrar in his bloodied condition. Moses' refusal to be intimidated both unnerved the registrar who nervously closed the office and stirred local Black people. That same day Moses attended the first ever mass meeting in McComb, the county seat, where he swept the crown off its feet with his insistence that violence not deter them. The sight of Moses with stitched wounds surely lifted the community's resolve and fortitude.

⁸⁸ Halberstam, 425-28.

town alive with protests and full of tension. Within a week or two of Lewis' arrival, several hundred people were arrested as scores attempted to register on "Freedom Mondays," days when the registrars' office was open. Freedom Mondays, noted Lewis, partly resulted from SNCC's effort to put into action a theme sounded in his March on Washington speech, "one man, one vote," a phrase that eventually became the organization's motto.⁸⁹

After a flurry of activity in the fall of 1963, the Selma project was not much of a priority for SNCC, especially as Freedom Summer and the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party's effort to unseat the all-white Democrat delegation to the Democratic National Convention in Atlantic City dominated the scene in 1964. SNCC did not refocus on Selma until late 1964 when the organization became embroiled over issues of its future direction, its organizational structure, and its racial composition. Chairman John Lewis thought that refocusing on the groundwork laid by Bernard and Colia LaFayette could serve as a much needed distraction from the internal conflict besieging the organization and could also advance the freedom agenda of Selma's Black residents. As it turned out, SNCC lost focus on Selma and by December 1964, the campaign was at a standstill with less than three hundred voters on the rolls.⁹⁰

At the same time, the SCLC was looking for its next project. The organization had just concluded a campaign in St. Augustine, Florida, and was on the hunt for something more substantial. In the meantime, Diane and James Bevel never lost sight of their goal to bombard Montgomery with a nonviolent army. In the period preceding the SCLC's engagement in Selma, James refined and pitched "a prolonged nonviolent campaign" designed to "[educate] and [enfranchise] . . . nearly all people in Alabama." The plan appeared to be another rendition of the one originally proposed by Diane, but without the components laughed off by King as

⁸⁹ Lewis, 233-34; Allen interview transcript of Lewis, 180.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 291-94, 300-3.

unrealistic. At the heart of James' proposal was a cohort of high school and college students who would constitute the "manpower," a lesson gleaned from years of organizing. The plan also suggested that King and Abernathy recruit adult participants from around Alabama. Once this was done, letters would be sent to Governor Wallace and other officials insisting they desist from disfranchising eligible voters. These actions would be in preparation of mass protests. In light of the movement toward a civil rights bill, Dr. King found merit in Bevel's proposal because of its voter registration emphasis and indicated his readiness to implement it at the SCLC's March meeting in Montgomery. The more than two hundred SCLC representatives in attendance gave Bevel's plan an enthusiastic endorsement. Item number two of the five-point program revealed a blending of two spheres of activism traditionally considered almost mutually exclusive: direct action and voter registration. Item two called for "initiation of a 'state-wide coordination of [the] masses in direct action to secure in fact the right of the ballot' by employing 'whatever techniques [are] necessary to implement the 'one man—one vote' concept.'"⁹¹ Bringing to fruition such an approach constituted a Bevelutionary step in the maturation of civil rights methodology. Nothing of the sort had heretofore been achieved. The concept represented both a confirmation of Ella Baker's earlier insight and a natural progression of the work that the Bevels and the LaFayettes had been engaged in for the last two years.

Despite the enthusiasm for the Bevel proposal among the SCLC's staff, little progress was made toward its implementation, making Bevel increasingly unhappy. Other developments within the organization no doubt added to his frustration. Chief among them was his increasingly contentious relationship with Wyatt T. Walker. During the St. Augustine campaign, Bevel lost his temper with Walker and cursed him out in front of others. Although Bevel later apologized,

⁹¹ Lewis, 303; Garrow, 314-15.

Walker refused to accept it and demanded that Dr. King fire him for insubordination. Tensions between the two strong-willed men had been evident since Bevel first joined the SCLC staff. From the beginning, Walker had always considered Bevel a loose cannon and tried to exert his executive authority over him without much success. Walker soon announced his decision to leave the SCLC in mid-1964, a move partially prompted by the conflict with Bevel. The resignation of Walker came amid SCLC's hesitancy over the next steps in Selma. Hoping to prod King into action, Bevel and his wife Diane, along with James Orange, moved to Montgomery. Bevel warned Dr. King that the longer the SCLC delayed action the more "people are losing faith . . . in the nonviolent movement."⁹²

By the late fall of 1964, Dr. King and the SCLC seemed more willing to plunge into Alabama. While President Johnson's landslide reelection over Barry Goldwater and the passage of the 1964 Civil Rights Act which was weak on protecting Black voting rights, stirred up King and his staff, Amelia Boynton broke the hesitancy of the SCLC when she complained that the organization's commitment to Selma had diminished just as local officials became even more politically repressive. King dispatched Reverend Vivian to Selma on an exploratory trip to gauge the local temperature for activism and to reaffirm the SCLC's interest in helping build a mass movement. Vivian reported that Selma seemed like "an ideal place" to launch a voting rights crusade, given the unified Black community and the brutal hostility of Sheriff James G. Clark and his deputies.⁹³

In late December 1964, Dr. King announced that the SCLC's formal inauguration of its Alabama campaign would begin on January 2, 1965, at a mass meeting in Selma. The campaign, under the direction of James Bevel, was entitled "Project for Alabama—Political Freedom

⁹² Garrow, 318-319, 321.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 359.

Movement,” and was designed to use Selma as a base for voter registration in ten rural counties. Held at Brown Chapel AME Church, the function drew seven hundred people and was the first local public civil rights event in six months. Inviting the SCLC into Selma posed risks for the local movement. The indigenous leaders like Amelia Boynton called on the SCLC to help with local needs, but along the way the local movement was dominated by the SCLC in order to satisfy its national objectives: federal voting rights legislation. Much like what had happened in Birmingham, the Selma Movement was transformed into a campaign with national implications. These national goals explain why in mid-February the SCLC soon branched out into more hostile outlying areas such as Camden in Wilcox County and Marion in Perry County.⁹⁴

The decision to branch out beyond Selma transformed the campaign and made Jimmie Lee Jackson a martyr. Jackson’s martyrdom was set up by a confrontation between Reverend Vivian and Sheriff Clark on the Dallas County courthouse steps on a rainy February 16. When Clark refused to allow Vivian’s group to take shelter inside the courthouse, Reverend Vivian, loud enough for nearby reporters to hear, told Clark and his deputies, “You’re racists the same way Hitler was a racist!” Then he dared Sheriff Clark to strike him. Someone punched Reverend Vivian hard enough to knock him down the steps.⁹⁵

The assault on Reverend Vivian led to an evening rally and subsequent march on February 18 to the Perry County courthouse in Marion. As state troopers attempted to halt the marchers’ progress, the streetlights went out and as if on cue the lawmen assaulted the demonstrators. In the chaos that ensued, a trooper shot Jimmie Lee Jackson at Mack’s café as he

⁹⁴ Ibid., 370-71, 390.

⁹⁵ There are inconsistent accounts concerning who actually struck Reverend Vivian. Lewis’ memoir contends that it was Sheriff Clark (see page 315) while Garrow’s account asserts that years later Vivian revealed one of Clark’s deputies as his assailant. Taking credit for the attack added to Clark’s carefully crafted reputation as a symbol of white supremacy (see page 391).

attempted to protect his mother, Viola Jackson, from an officer's blows. He died eight days later on February 26.⁹⁶

Jackson's death triggered an essential component of the plan Diane Nash Bevel presented to Dr. King and the SCLC back in September 1963: to lay siege to Montgomery. The day after he died, Bevel and LaFayette visited Jackson's family. As LaFayette recalled, on the way there Bevel talked about this being the moment for dramatic action. At the home of Jackson's family, Bevel asked Cager Lee, Jackson's grandfather, what should be done about the marches and his reply was they should continue. To Bevel's question about being willing to lead such a march, Lee responded, "Yes. I don't have anything else to lose. I've lost all that I have . . ."⁹⁷

Bevel and LaFayette headed to a mass meeting in Selma after visiting Jackson's family. On the way, LaFayette remembered that Bevel confided, ". . . I'm going to walk [from Selma to Montgomery]. I'm going to tell Wallace what I think about his troopers. I need the walk so I can literally get my mind [right] about the message I'm going to deliver to him 'cause I don't want to . . . rush down there." When Bevel asked LaFayette if he thought more people would walk with him, LaFayette reminded him of the distance, fifty-four miles, but promised to walk with him. At the mass meeting, Bevel told the audience he had something to say to Governor Wallace about Jackson's murder. He said, "Now, sometimes when you talk to someone, you just call him up on the phone, and sometimes you send him a letter, but I want to say this to him personally. . . so I thought I would walk to Montgomery and tell the governor in person. Mr. Cage Lee has said he's willing to walk with me." Someone in the crowd shouted, "Let's go see the governor."⁹⁸

On this occasion, James Bevel displayed another one of his talents, the ability to read the mood of the people. As John Lewis noted, "The people of Selma were hurting. They were angry.

⁹⁶ Garrow, 391; Lewis, 316, 318; Branch, *Pillar of Fire*, 593.

⁹⁷ Findlay interview of LaFayette.

⁹⁸ Halberstam, 504; Findley interview of LaFayette.

. . . They *needed* to march.” Bevel understood how to use this emotion to the movement’s benefit. The anger could be put to constructive rather than destructive use. Bevel’s idea gained momentum everywhere except among SNCC members who resented the SCLC’s intrusion after SNCC had already done the bulk of the grassroots organizing there. When Bevel formally announced on March 3 that there would be a Selma-to-Montgomery march four days later led by Dr. King, Lewis was the only top SNCC leader in favor of the march. James Forman penned a letter to the SCLC registering strong objections and offering only minimum support. The issue of SNCC’s participation was so contentious that an executive committee meeting was held in Atlanta the day before the march. Lewis’ argument that SNCC was obligated to support the people’s decision to march made no difference, forcing him to march as an individual rather than as SNCC’s representative. To Lewis, this decision separated SNCC from the people and violated a core principle of grassroots organizing: supporting the decisions of local communities. He took the position that “The people in Selma, the local people, wanted to march. We’d been there with the people from Selma since 1962 and we should be there” backing up their collective action.⁹⁹

With the march scheduled to go forward, John Lewis was selected as one of two co-leaders. By a coin toss SCLC staff member Hosea Williams beat out Andrew Young and James Bevel to head the column with Lewis. In his memoir, Lewis portrayed the event as a leaderless march featuring regular folk. Even Dr. King was absent that day, opting not to miss another preaching commitment at Ebenezer and persuaded to stay home in the face of a death threat. The absence of high profile leaders did not reduce the risk of death or injury for those who did participate. In fact, the white lawmen dispatched by state and local officials unleashed a furious beating, one of the most brutal of the entire era. So much blood was spilled that the melee earned the name “Bloody Sunday.” Troopers and possemen, some on horseback, used billy clubs and

⁹⁹ Allen interview transcript of Lewis, 186.

bullwhips to seriously injure men, women, and children. Canisters of C-4 tear gas were employed to induce nausea. Horses trampled on a few demonstrators. As the marchers retreated back into Black Selma, according to a United Press International reporter, “The troopers and possemen, under Gov. George C. Wallace’s orders to stop the . . . ‘Walk for Freedom’ . . . [chased] the screaming, bleeding marchers nearly a mile back to their church, clubbing them as they ran.” So vicious was the lawmen’s attack that more than ninety people were treated for injuries at local facilities, including John Lewis who suffered a fractured skull. Network news crews captured the brutal scene on film and replayed it that night during the prime time showing of the popular Sunday night movie. At approximately 9:30 p.m., ABC Television interrupted the broadcast of *Judgment at Nuremberg*, a film portraying Nazi racism, with fifteen minutes of footage from Selma. Movie viewers were stunned to see lawmen on horseback clubbing defenseless people. Sheriff Clark could be heard in the background screaming, “Get those godd_____ niggers!”¹⁰⁰

The violence that the country witnessed that night seemed to supersede the brutality seen during the Freedom Rides and the Birmingham campaign. And the public’s response was immediate, resulting in a stream of supporters descending upon Selma, extraordinary interest from the Johnson administration, and rapt attention and recognition from Dr. King that a Selma-to-Montgomery march was a necessity. Before Bloody Sunday, Dr. King did not fully grasp the need to march immediately as Bevel had insisted. In fact, just before the march began, Bevel, Hosea, and Young were huddled discussing Dr. King’s last minute decision to call the march off that day. Apparently, Dr. King was either concerned about death threats or about missing another

¹⁰⁰ Lewis, 324-31.

sermon at Ebenezer or both, therefore he proposed delaying the march for one day. Fortunately, King listened to Bevel and Hosea's insistence that the march not be postponed.¹⁰¹

It was fortuitous that the march took place on Sunday, March 7. The airing of the violence against defenseless marchers demanding Black voting rights during a widely viewed movie about the Nazi regime gave it a public placement it could not otherwise have gotten. The similarities between Nazi Germany and the segregated South could not have missed. White Americans were forced to compare the situation in Selma to that of Hitler's Germany, a comparison likely too painful for many. There is no doubt that Bloody Sunday guaranteed the passage of the 1965 Voting Rights Act. On Monday night, March 15, President Lyndon B. Johnson, gave a televised address to Congress, a speech Lewis considered the strongest ever made by a president on the subject of civil rights:

At times history and fate meet at a single time in a single place to shape a turning point in man's unending search for freedom. So it was at Lexington and Concord. So it was a century ago at Appomattox. So it was last week in Selma, Alabama.

Rarely in any time does an issue lay bare the secret heart of America itself. . . . The issue of equal rights for American Negroes is such an issue. And should we defeat every enemy, and should we double our wealth and conquer the stars and still be unequal to this issue, then we will have failed as a people and a nation.

Even if we pass this bill, the battle will not be over. What happened in Selma is part of a far larger movement which reaches into every section and State of America. It is the effort of American Negroes to secure for themselves The full blessings of American life.

Their cause must be our cause too. Because it is not just Negroes, but Really it is all of us who must overcome the crippling legacy of bigotry and Injustice.

And we shall overcome.¹⁰²

Johnson's opening paragraph seemed almost to come from the providential script that James Bevel had been following all along. Bevel seemed to know better than anyone that the murder of

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 332, 324; Garrow, 396.

¹⁰² Lewis,

Jimmie Lee Jackson set the stage for an epic moment in the Civil Rights Movement. He knew on the drive out to visit Jackson's family that the time had come for dramatic action. The dramatic action that became Bloody Sunday turned out to be the most pivotal point leading up to the presidential signing of the 1965 Voting Rights Act only a few months later. By ensuring that the march became a reality, another Bevelution took place. While many activists thought that direct action was passé after Birmingham, the Bevels demonstrated through their plan to lay siege to the Alabama capital that combining direct action with voter registration was the most effective means to secure the franchise for African Americans in the South. Nothing like it had ever been tried before. Better than anyone else, he understood that channeling Black anger against white supremacist power in that part of Alabama could reap civil rights benefits.

It is difficult to conceive of the period of 1963 to 1965 turning out as it did without the contributions of John Lewis, Bernard LaFayette, Diane Nash Bevel, James Bevel, and C.T. Vivian. Every major civil rights development in the period bears their imprint. In many ways, their work was more noteworthy than any other activists during the two-year span. The pace and direction of the Movement was significantly a result of their endeavors. Additionally, the evolution of SCLC and the positioning of Dr. King as a civil rights icon had much to do with the strategic genius of Diane Nash Bevel and James Bevel. James in particular had an uncanny knack for knowing when to force a particular mode of action, making the peak years of the Movement truly "Bevelutionary."

CHAPTER 8: CONCLUSION: THE LEGACIES OF NASHVILLE: POST-MOVEMENT LIVES, HISTORICAL AND HISTORIOGRAPHICAL SIGNIFICANCE, THEORETICAL IMPLICATIONS, AND THE NEED FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Post-Movement Lives

Although this study ends in 1965, the influence of the Nashville warriors carried over for decades. Their lives became forever intertwined with community activism and politics. In the case of John Lewis, he served as chair of SNCC until he was “de-elected” and replaced by Stokely Carmichael in May 1966, ending a record three-year chairmanship and signaling a changing of the guard within SNCC from nonviolence to Black Power, a phrase Carmichael popularized only one month later. John Lewis resigned from SNCC on July 22, 1966. From there, Lewis spent time in the not-for-profit world, taking a position with the Southern Regional Council as the director of the Voter Education Project (VEP). It was not long before Lewis became involved in electoral politics, at first as a staff member of Senator Robert Kennedy’s presidential campaign and later as an Atlanta city council member in the early 1980s and as Georgia’s representative of the Fifth Congressional District, a position he still holds today.¹ Lewis continues his faith in nonviolence as a way of life and speaks often to students and civic groups about his Movement experiences.

Bernard LaFayette remained affiliated with social justice organizations for much of the rest of the 1960s and made the proliferation of nonviolence his vocation. After Selma, he joined the American Friends Services Committee and worked in Chicago assisting the SCLC with its

¹ See chapters eighteen through twenty of *Walking with the Wind* for details of Lewis’ defeat as SNCC chair and his subsequent post-Civil Rights Movement Career. Other sources including *The Children*, pages 523-24 and 568-72, and *In Struggle*, pages 199-204, also cover Lewis’ final SNCC years and his activities beyond the 1960s.

1966 project there until he was asked to join the staff in 1967. While on the SCLC's staff he became National Program Administrator, and served as National Coordinator for the 1968 Poor Peoples' Campaign. Beyond the 1960s, LaFayette earned a doctorate in education and developed a curriculum and pedagogy for peace and nonviolence, a program that he installed around the globe in such places as Colombia, South America, and the state of Morales, Mexico. Much of this work was done while serving as a Distinguished Scholar-In-Residence and founding director of the University of Rhode Island's Center for Nonviolence and Peace Studies. His vision for the Center was to establish a network of ten peace centers around the world, an idea that was under development by Dr. King just before he was killed in Memphis. On the day of his murder, King told LaFayette that he wanted to institutionalize nonviolence. Since that time, he has embraced this as his primary goal. Today, LaFayette continues to proselytize on behalf of nonviolence. In January of 2009, he was appointed as a Distinguished Scholar in Residence in the areas of religion, conflict, and peacemaking at Emory University's Candler School of Theology. Though now at Emory, LaFayette retains his affiliation with the University of Rhode Island by serving as a Distinguished Visiting Scholar and Consultant where he conducts summer training in nonviolence.²

Like LaFayette, James Bevel remained engaged in activism beyond the peak years of 1965. He maintained his affiliation with the SCLC, helping to shape strategy for the 1966 Chicago campaign and playing a key role in pushing Dr. King's public opposition to the Vietnam War. On his way to a retreat in Jamaica in January 1966, Dr. King saw a photograph of a Vietnamese woman with her dead child killed by the U.S. military, a visual image that helped move him to embrace a firm anti-war stance. Bevel pushed him further in that direction by

² Findlay interview of LaFayette; "Biography: Bernard LaFayette, Jr.," <http://www.uri.edu/nonviolence/popup/biography.html>.

compelling him to headline an April 15 rally in New York. Bevel told King “We can’t afford to be silent. That’s like betrayal.” This led to his April 4, 1967, antiwar speech at Riverside Church in New York, his fullest and most critical public statement on the war that Dr. King had made. King’s speech at the April 15 rally was more moderate, but together the two speeches represented King’s moral stance and first public statements on the matter. The speeches also caused deep rifts between him and President Lyndon Johnson and separated him from other mainstream civil rights leaders. Regardless of the consequences, Bevel helped King to realize that his silence on Vietnam was incompatible with the philosophy of nonviolence.³

Exactly one year after the Riverside speech, Dr. King was murdered. The death of Dr. King sent Bevel over the edge, according to John Lewis. He remained with the SCLC until the summer of 1970 when his behavior turned very erratic and he just floated aimlessly about. The erratic behavior reached a crisis point that summer when he gathered several Spelman College students in a hotel room for several days where he urinated in a glass and told them to drink it to prove they were his true followers. By then, Bevel was convinced that he was a prophet to whom disciples needed to prove their allegiance. The Paschals’ incident led to a two-day stay at a hospital psychiatric ward and his banishment from the SCLC.⁴

In the 1980s and 1990s, Bevel dabbled in electoral politics, running as a Republican candidate for a Chicago congressional seat in 1984 and running as economist and political activists Lyndon LaRouche’s running mate in the 1992 presidential campaign. Also in the 1990s, Bevel again displayed his strategic genius when he met Minister Louis Farrakhan and suggested that he sponsor a second coming of the March on Washington, this time for Black men. According to Halberstam, the idea took shape and became the Million Man March of 1995.

³ See chapter ten of Garrow’s *Bearing the Cross* for a full discussion of the evolution of King’s antiwar position.

⁴ Lewis, 408; Halberstam 682.

Life turned dramatically downhill for Bevel in 2008 when he was convicted of molesting one of his own daughters when she was a teenager. The prosecutor claimed that Bevel told his daughters that it was his parental responsibility to train them sexually. He served only a few months of his sentence and was released from prison in November 2008 after being diagnosed with pancreatic cancer. James Luther Bevel died December 19, 2008. One of his daughters, Chevara Orrin, told an Associated press reporter, “I’m very proud to be the daughter of a man who contributed so much to the world through his civil rights work. [But] I am equally devastated and disgusted by his pedophilia.”⁵ Bevel was the only Lawson protégé whose life spiraled out of control after the Movement’s peak.

The post-Movement days of Diane Nash seemed more precarious than her male counterparts, although she never strayed from her commitments to nonviolence and to empowering grassroots communities. By the mid-1960s, her marriage to James Bevel was in shambles due to his incessant and shameless womanizing. Unwilling to tolerate such incorrigible behavior, Nash served Bevel with divorce papers in February 1965 while he was in a Selma jail and moved back to her home town of Chicago with her two small children.⁶

As Nash adjusted to life as a single mother, she retained her social consciousness. For the next few decades, she engaged in a number of activities that can be seen as an extension of her Movement days. In 1966, she and three other women traveled to North Vietnam in protest of the Vietnam War after seeing a photograph of a Vietnamese woman holding her badly burned child, an image that no doubt evoked memories of when she committed to giving birth to her first child in a Mississippi prison and of the murder of four girls in the bombing of the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church. Nash’s response to the plight of that Vietnamese woman was a reflection of her

⁵ Halberstam, 682; Bruce Weber, “James L. Bevel, 72, an Adviser to Dr. King, Is Dead,” <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/12/23/us/23bevel.html>.

⁶ Halberstam, 534.

growing concern with women's issues, a subject that she became more outspoken on over the next few decades. In addition, Nash also became active in the areas of tenant organizing, welfare support, and housing for the poor.⁷

As interest in the Civil Rights Movement has increased over the last few decades, Nash has enjoyed an active public speaking career, frequently lecturing around the country at numerous college campuses and other venues. She has also been the recipient of numerous awards, including the John F. Kennedy Library's Distinguished American Award in 2003 and the Lyndon Baines Johnson Award for Leadership in Civil Rights in 2004.⁸

Like his protégés, Reverend James Lawson remained committed to social activism after the Movement peaked. In 1966, from his home base of Memphis, Tennessee, he organized a continuation of James Meredith's "March Against Fear" after Meredith was shot while attempting a one-man trek from Memphis to Jackson. That same year, Lawson acted as a counselor to veteran SCLC activists involved in the SCLC's Chicago campaign, who by then were exhibiting signs of psychological exhaustion and erratic behavior from years on the frontlines of the Movement. In 1968, it was Lawson who invited Dr. King to Memphis in order to bring national attention to a strike by Black garbage workers, a development that led to King's assassination.⁹

Reverend Lawson remained in Memphis until 1974 when he accepted a position as pastor of Holman Methodist Church in Los Angeles. From California, he and wife Dorothy raised three sons and rebuilt their lives after the tragic murder of his close friend and Movement colleague, Dr. King. Ironically, Reverend Lawson developed a relationship with King's convicted

⁷ Lisa Mullins, *Diane Nash: The Fire of the Civil Rights Movement* (Miami: Barnhardt and Ashe Publishing, 2007), 86; Jeanne Theoharis, "Diane Nash" in Darlene Clark Hine, ed., *Black Women in America: An Historical Encyclopedia*, vol. 2 (New York: Carlson Publishing, 1993), 836.

⁸ Mullins, 97-98.

⁹ Halberstam, 527, 531, 551-53.

murderer, James Earl Ray, whom he visited numerous times in prison. Even more astonishingly, he officiated at Ray's prison wedding in the mid-1970s.¹⁰ While in Los Angeles, Lawson also hosted a weekly radio call-in program, "Lawson Live," that featured discussions on social and human rights issues affecting minority communities. In addition, he remained vocal on the subject of racism and frequently raised questions about the United States' Cold War policies as well as its military involvement in Angola, Cuba, and Central America.¹¹

Lawson's post-Movement days led to a number of organizational affiliations. In the early 1990s, he joined the ACLU's board of directors and later served as chair of its National Advisory Council from 2006 to 2009. Since his retirement as pastor of Holman Methodist Church in 1999, he has served as president of the Los Angeles chapter of the SCLC, and in 2006 he was appointed as a Distinguished Professor and Visiting Fellow at Vanderbilt's Center for the Study of Religion and Culture, a position he still maintains.¹²

Reverend C.T. Vivian remained close to the Movement and its guiding principles after 1965. He retained the position of national director of affiliates for the SCLC until 1966, a post he first assumed in 1963. During the summer of 1966, he started a program known as Vision, designed to send Alabama students to college. Vision grew out of Vivian's recognition that student activists often forfeited their college education during the Movement and some mechanism was needed to allow these students to complete their formal education. Over time, the Vision program became Upward Bound.¹³

After leaving the SCLC in 1966, Reverend Vivian moved to Chicago where he became director of the Urban Training Center for Christian Missions. There he trained clergy,

¹⁰ Ibid., 600-603.

¹¹ <http://www.evergreen.edu/news/archive/2008/05/jameslawson.htm>.

¹² <http://www.aclu.org/organization-news-and-highlights/rev-james-lawson-jr-renowned-civil-rights-leader-chair-aclus-nation>.

¹³ <http://www.visionaryproject.org/vivianct/>

community leaders and others to organize. Later, as a coordinator for an organization known as United Community Action, he spearheaded an anti-racism campaign in trade unions and helped to mediate a truce among gangs in Chicago.¹⁴

From the 1970s onward, Reverend Vivian became chairman of the board of the National Anti-Klan Network, today known as the Center for Democratic Renewal, founded the Black Action Strategies and Information Center (BASIC), and most recently, in response to the tragedy of Hurricane Katrina, launched a new organization called Churches Supporting Churches.¹⁵

Reverend Kelly Miller Smith, like James Bevel, is now deceased, his life taken by cancer in 1984. Smith was the only one of the key leaders still anchored to Nashville after the Movement's peak in 1965 where he remained the most influential Black leader in the city. Reverend Smith's post-1965 activities indicate that his role as a public minister continued. He was active in numerous organizations such as the Faith and Order Commission of the National Council of Churches, the Opportunities Industrial Center, People United to Save Humanity, several anti-apartheid agencies, the Nashville chapter of the National Urban League where he was a founding member, and a host of local civic improvement groups. These affiliations demonstrated that Reverend Smith never lost his passion for integrating church and community, perhaps the primary hallmark of his leadership.¹⁶

Other noteworthy legacy achievements on the part of Reverend Smith include his appointment as assistant dean of the Divinity School at Vanderbilt University 1969 to 1984, his selection as Honorary Tribal Chief of the Bashua Tribe of Zaire (now known as the Congo), the distinction of being named by *Nashville* magazine as "One of Nashville's Ten Most Influential

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ <http://www.thehistorymakers.com/biography/biography.asp?bioindex=744&category=CivicMakers>.

¹⁶ For a brief summary of Smith's legacy, see Peter J. Paris' "Introduction to the Kelly Miller Smith Collection" in *The Kelly Miller Smith Papers* (1989), vii-x, available at the Special Collections section of The Jean and Alexander Heard Library, Vanderbilt University, Nashville, Tennessee.

Citizens (1977), and in 1983 the honor of delivering the prestigious Lyman Beecher Lectures at Yale University. The Beecher Lectures served as the basis for Smith's most important publication, *Social Crisis Preaching* (1984), a monograph outlining Smith's Black Social Gospel philosophy. After his death, Vanderbilt established the Kelly Miller Smith Institute on the Black Church as a testament of his legacy.¹⁷

As the post-1965 activists of Nashville's primary leaders illustrate, once a person acknowledges the role of providence in their life, accepts the reality of being a misfit, and embraces the philosophy of nonviolence as a way of life, one becomes a social change agent for life. These leaders continued various modes of advocacy on behalf of others, and with the exception of James Bevel, did not lose perspective on their roles as activists nor seek to exploit their activist careers for personal gain. For them, the struggle remained essentially the unselfish building of a better world.

Beyond these post-1965 activities, the lessons from the Nashville Movement and its primary activists can be divided into four categories: historical significance, historiographical significance, theoretical implications, and future research.

Historical Significance

The most important lesson gleaned from the Nashville Movement and its activists is the significance of trained leadership. With the aid of divine providence and the presence of Black colleges and churches, Reverends James Lawson and Kelly Miller Smith developed a pedagogy of leadership that was based upon the philosophy of nonviolence. Lawson was the first to recognize that a corps of young leaders who were thoroughly trained in nonviolent direct action

¹⁷ <http://www.tnstate.edu/library/digital/smithk.htm>; <http://www.library.vanderbilt.edu/speccol/smithkm.shtml>; http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kelly_Miller_Smith.

could destroy segregation. To Lawson, the problem of segregation was not a legal or political problem. Rather it was a moral issue that could only be solved by applying principles of Christian love. All that was needed was a group of young people willing to risk their lives to prove that responding to oppressive violence with love could change the hearts and minds of white people. This approach to social change yielded results because it relied upon the oldest and most potent tradition in the Black community: Christianity. Lawson and Smith did not introduce a foreign element into the community when they advocated Gandhian nonviolence. Instead, they demonstrated the alignment between the two, thereby creating a seamless synergy that made nonviolence feel existentially natural.

Lawson's approach to civil rights was radical in that it fractured canonical assumptions about Black leadership. Heretofore, oppressed African Americans had always turned to traditional adult-led organizations to solve racial problems. Lawson, with full support from Smith, proved that young people were an untapped source of dynamic leadership who could take the freedom struggle places that adults could not. It became evident that the combination of adult guidance, support and resources, and young people's bravado, energy and healthy irreverence for the status quo were the formula for success. Unlike many other Black communities in the South, Nashville's primary adult leadership nurtured the leadership potential of its young people, a strategic decision that put John Lewis, Diane Nash, Bernard Lafayette, and James Bevel at the forefront of the pre-1965 Movement. Nash and Bevel, in particular, became the most effective husband and wife team in the Movement, always operating on the cutting edge of protest strategy and tactics.

Without the presence of these four young leaders, the Civil Rights Movement would have looked much different. Much of the dynamism of the sit-ins can be credited to them. The

Freedom Rides may well have been aborted were it not for the Nashville warriors. Without the Nashville Phase of the Freedom Rides, there would have been no sparks to light the fires for the Albany, Mississippi Delta, and Jackson Movements. The Children's Crusade would not have been possible without James Bevel. And because of the Children's Crusade, the fortunes of the SCLC rose, Dr. King's prospects for the Nobel Peace Prize were enhanced, and the passage of the 1964 Civil Rights Act became a likely reality. In a final act of strategic genius in the wake of the bombing of the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church, Diane Nash and James Bevel conceived a plan that ultimately led to the showdown in Selma and the Voting Rights Act of 1965. All of these developments are linked to a few training sessions in Nashville led by Reverend Lawson beginning in the late 1950s. Clearly then, because of the work of Reverends Lawson, Vivian and Smith, young leaders like John Lewis, Diane Nash, Bernard LaFayette and James Bevel became the most outstanding leaders of their generation to emerge from one city during the Civil Rights Movement.

Not only did their actions change the legal status of Black people and the nature of race relations, they also changed how African Americans viewed themselves. In large part because John Lewis, Diane Nash, Bernard LaFayette, and James Bevel helped lead the way in eliminating violence as an obstacle to racial progress, Black people developed new self-confidence in what could be achieved. Before the advent of these young leaders, Black dignity and freedom were held prisoner by the gradual, paternalistic relationship between the powerful whites and traditional Negro leaders. These traditional leaders were conditioned not to offend white sensibilities and to seek gradualism in solving racial problems. As long as this leadership model was in force, traditional Negro leaders would not take the necessary risks in order to advance the Black freedom struggle and reclaim Black dignity. Lewis, Nash, Bevel, and

LaFayette by repeatedly risking their lives between 1960 and 1965, led the way in freeing African Americans from the constraints of white moderation and liberalism. Though many white allies supported the end of segregation, very few of them were willing to risk good public order for the sake of racial equality. Many Negro leaders were afraid to break ranks with their white allies, however, the students were not bound to such relationships. The sit-ins and the Nashville Phase of the Freedom Rides began the process of permanently rupturing the old paternalistic relationships. This process continued for the rest of the decade and race relations were permanently altered as a result.

Such a development challenges the long-held assertion that the most important gains of the Civil Rights Movement were the passage of the 1964 Civil Rights Act and the 1965 Voting Rights Act. While those were monumental gains, they seem to pale in comparison to the reclamation of Black dignity. The fact that Black people were willing to demand that white America treat them as equals meant that Black people could be returned to the human family in the eyes of white people. One of the fundamental justifications behind the denial of rights to Black people historically had been the notion that they were not equal to whites. Proof of this for many whites was the myth that Blacks never *demand*ed better treatment. However, the bold defiance of white authority as seen in the sit-ins, the Nashville Phase of the Freedom Rides, the Children's Crusade, Lewis' defiant March on Washington speech, and the Selma campaign demolished such mythology and signaled the rise of a new, more self-confident, and uncharacteristically assertive southern Blacks. This new emerging self-image meant that Black people were positioning themselves to make demands on a nation that had for so long forsaken them. The passage of significant legislation was merely a byproduct of a people who were

reintroducing themselves to the world. The Nashville activists helped Black people hold their heads higher than ever held before.

Related to the new patterns of race relations stimulated and advanced by the Nashville activists was the emergence of Black Power. Although the seeds of Black Power were extensive and multi-layered, the success of the Nashville Movement is often overlooked as a factor facilitating its emergence. Because Nashville became a model for the sit-ins and rescued the Freedom Rides, many northerners migrated to the South to join the Movement. Particularly significant are Stokely Carmichael and James Forman, two men most intimately associated with the emergence of Black Power. Both men were pulled into the vortex of southern protests partly because of the energy generated in Nashville. Although the power of this nonviolent movement drew them in, they never accepted the concept of philosophical nonviolence. Due in part to their lack of training and their Northern upbringing, they preferred tactical nonviolence. Because Forman was in a leadership position within SNCC during the height of nonviolence, he was able to strategically undermine nonviolence at a critical moment when questions about its viability arose within SNCC. Later, Carmichael dealt a death blow by popularizing the slogan “Black Power” in Greenwood, Mississippi. In essence, the Nashville Movement gave them access to a nonviolent struggle that they helped to undermine.

On another level, John Lewis’ career as SNCC’s chairman served as the counterweight to the forces moving toward a renunciation of philosophical nonviolence. In addition, during his tenure he gave voice to a more radical mood in Black America that was apparent by 1963. He was elected chair of SNCC because he best exemplified the nonviolent tradition and his angry March on Washington speech indicated developments that ultimately surfaced in the cry for “Black Power” only three years later. Lewis’ speech signaled a high degree of impatience found

in the streets of Black America and his intentional choice of the label “Black” instead of the traditional moniker “Negro” perhaps foreshadowed that African Americans were gaining an angry new self-confidence.

Other aspects of the Nashville Movement had significant consequences for the Black freedom struggle, most notably the Nashville Student Movement’s (NSM) role as the forerunner and prototype of SNCC. To a certain degree, it could be argued that Nashville birthed the student movement starting in 1958 when Reverend Lawson began teaching nonviolence. His workshops led to the formation of the NSM and sit-in plans that evolved into a model for other sit-ins campaigns around the South. The NSM gave SNCC its first chairman as well as its most long-serving chair who led the organization during the critical years of 1963-1965. Nashville leaders also gave SNCC its philosophical base of nonviolence and modeled the most aggressive forms of nonviolence seen up to 1961. Additionally, the NSM, perhaps before any other student group, demonstrated the independence of action for which the student movement became known.

Another important lesson gleaned from the Nashville Movement is the significance of relationships. Unlike any other movement center yet discovered, Nashville’s success depended upon intergenerational collaboration. This mode of collaboration is different from intergenerational cooperation that involves begrudgingly working across generational lines to achieve common goals with an incompatible partner. Such relationships are largely full of conflict and are often unhealthy and temporary. Collaboration, on the other hand, means a strategic relationship based upon mutual respect and a genuine desire to work together despite some differences of opinion. In many cases, the two parties form lasting bonds that endure for years. The type of intergenerational relationship found in Nashville to a large extent made racial progress possible in the city.

The ability of Nash, Bevel, Lewis, and LaFayette to work effectively with adults had significant benefits for the national movement. After Albany, Dr. King explicitly sought out the young Nashville leaders as possible new SCLC staff because they were not hostile to him.¹⁸ In the end, they all worked with the SCLC in some capacity with Nash, Bevel, and LaFayette playing critical roles. Without the assistance of these specific young leaders, the adult-led SCLC could not have been successful in its most important campaigns, Birmingham and Selma. And by extension, because the Birmingham campaign succeeded, SCLC's was firmly established as the leading traditional civil rights organization.

Dr. King's legacy also benefited from the contributions of the Nashville leaders. After Birmingham, his stock as an icon soared. The public put more demands on his time as "the leader" of the Movement. The 1964 Nobel Peace Prize was a direct result of the outcome of the Birmingham campaign. Without Bevel's Children's Crusade, there could be no favorable outcome in Birmingham and perhaps no Nobel Peace Prize. While the superficial impact of Bevel, Nash, and LaFayette upon the SCLC and Dr. King is quite evident here, a more thorough study is warranted. Still unclear is how these young people reshaped Dr. King's thinking and guided the priorities and strategies of the SCLC.

One cannot analyze the historical significance of the Nashville Movement and its leaders without concluding that the period 1963 to 1965 was largely dependent upon the actions of the Bevels, making this two-year span Bevelutionary. From the Birmingham campaign to the Selma voting rights initiative, the brilliant teamwork of James Bevel and Diane Nash Bevel was most evident. Because of their organizing acumen that was first groomed in Nashville in the sit-ins,

¹⁸ According to David Garrow, the SCLC board met in January of 1962 to assess the Albany Movement and decided to invigorate the organization by "adding younger people to the board and by approaching SNCC members who were not hostile to King—John Lewis, Bob Moses, Diane Nash, and James Bevel—about the possibility of signing on with SCLC as field staffers." See page 189 of *Bearing the Cross*.

and refined during the Nashville Phase of the Freedom Rides and in the post-Freedom Rides days in Mississippi, this young couple innovated some of the most daring and successful protest methodologies of the era. In doing so, they not only helped bring two major civil rights campaigns to a successful conclusion, but pushed the boundaries of nonviolence to new places. Never before had anyone been daring enough to insist that young children be used to confront the vicious regime of Bull Connor. And until the Selma voting rights campaign, no one merged direct action with voter registration. These developments were truly Bevelutionary and could only have come from young people who were groomed first in Nashville. There is no other place known to have intentionally developed a cadre of young leaders in the fine points of nonviolent direct action. The leadership exploits of Diane Nash, John Lewis, James Bevel, and Bernard LaFayette were a natural outgrowth of their preparation for social warfare and their commitment to building a beloved community.

The final point of historical significance involves the long view of civil rights history taken here. From the start, Nashville seemed to be such a unique movement center that it was necessary to start at the city's founding. Commencing the study in the twentieth century would produce a shortsighted analysis. When it became evident that Nashville produced more young leadership than any other place, the question was why. As it turned out, the answer to this burning question led all the way back to the founding of Fort Nashborough. In those origins lay Nashville's connection to the emergence of the Black freedom struggle, a development born out of the founding of Black churches. These first Black religious institutions were created because Black Christians rejected second-class membership in white churches. Nashville's Black churches were a result of this impulse and over time, the city became the center of southern Black religious life, boasting well over one hundred churches, several religious publishing

houses, many seminaries, and a host of denominational headquarters. At the same time, Nashville became home to a complex of Black colleges that ultimately formed a critical partnership with Black churches that made the Nashville Movement possible. Consequently, the Nashville Movement evolved from four essential components: an institutional base of churches and colleges; a history of challenging white racism by local leaders and the college community; less virulent racism in Middle Tennessee; local adult leadership and mostly imported student leadership committed to a functional partnership; a training module based upon philosophical nonviolence; and, the influence of divine providence. Without a long view of Nashville, these essential components could not be uncovered and the interconnection between them understood.

Historiographical Significance

On February 1st of each year, numerous activities commemorate the start of the sit-in movement in Greensboro. In the Civil Rights Movement documentary that aired on WPBA on January 17, 2010, Harry Lefever noted that February 1, 1960, was seen as the start of the sit-in phase of the Movement.¹⁹ The Nashville Movement challenges that long-held assumption and proves that the sit-in phase began in the fall of 1959 with two test expeditions. As Fred Powledge concluded, 1959 should be marked as the onset of the sit-in movement because Nashville activists already had a plan that had been tested and proven viable. As a result, Nashville's sit-ins became the model and invigorated many of the student protest groups. The fact that the Nashville and not the Greensboro students were the star attraction of SNCC's founding conference, and that CBS and NBC featured Nashville in its documentaries also confirms the city's position at the forefront of the sit-in movement. The sit-ins can no longer be treated as a relative flash-in-the-pan starting on February 1, 1960.

¹⁹ *Atlanta Voices: The Civil Rights Movement*, WPBA, 17 Jan. 2010, 30 min.

Nashville's planning and preparation for the sit-ins also means that scholars can no longer simply depict student activism as spontaneous activity that lacked planning and preparation. Casting student participation in this light diminishes their contributions and makes their actions often appear impulsive, inappropriate, and wrong-headed. This impressive is counter-posed against adult activism that is portrayed as logical, carefully considered, cool-headed, and a wise course of action. One of the reasons why the Nashville students received such extensive local adult support was because their actions were appropriate and in line with community priorities, a combination that built intergenerational trust.

Beyond the sit-ins, the historical record on the Freedom Rides need reevaluation. The record should reflect the two distinct phases. The CORE Phase was not intended to be long in duration and national in scope. It was intended to culminate on the seventh anniversary of the *Brown* decision and call attention to violent opposition to desegregated interstate transportation, without too much risk. As it turned out, CORE was willing to compromise its objectives in the face of mob violence. On the other hand, the Nashville Phase was not. Its student leaders decided to either desegregate the buses or die trying. There was no room for compromise on this point. To date, the historical record makes almost no distinction between the two phases, seamlessly blending them together. While the two phases are contiguous, the Nashville Phase had different leadership, a new organizational structure behind it, a more aggressive stance, and a national network of riders ready to sacrifice their lives for a principle. Future scholarship on the Freedom Rides should also connect the character of the second phase to the movement temperament emerging from Nashville. At this stage of the Movement, Nashville's students represented the most aggressive brand of leadership and this style was automatically transferred to the Freedom Rides because Diane Nash and company took control. Additionally, the historical record must

reflect the fact that the Nashville Phase was a direct result of the youth leadership born out of the Nashville sit-ins.

On another historiographical front, much of the scholarship on the Civil Rights Movement focuses on dramatic developments in Mississippi, key cities in Alabama, and the work of Dr. King and the SCLC. While Mississippi, Alabama, and Dr. King are central to the Movement's history, the over-emphasis obscures other important aspects of the Movement made evident by a close examination of Nashville. For one, an over emphasis on Alabama and Mississippi gives the impression that only Deep South cities with the worst records on race relations deserve the attention of scholars. In fact, Nashville's sit-in movement and its role in the Freedom Rides imply that cities with much milder forms of racial oppression can lead the way in destroying Jim Crow. Secondly, ignoring Nashville means that those who study and teach the Movement fail to fully comprehend how dependent the Black freedom struggle was upon the partnership between youth and adults and between Black churches and Black colleges. No other city illustrates these critical liaisons like Nashville.

If Nashville has been rendered practically inconsequential by virtue of its general omission from Movement historiography, the obvious question is why. The main factor in this oversight has to do with the media's role in shaping perceptions about the nature of the Civil Rights Movement. Many scholars have been drawn to particular aspects of the Movement because of how the media treated its developments. David E. Sumner wrote that the white-dominated media tended to make its coverage "follow a predictable 'storyline,' complete with heroes, villains, starring and supporting actors, all resulting in a 'good versus evil' conclusion."²⁰ Media values such as these mean that movement centers like Montgomery, Birmingham, Selma,

²⁰ David E. Sumner, "The Media's Role in a Nonviolent Movement: The Nashville Student Movement," p. 2, unpublished paper presented at the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication 1993 convention, Kansas City, MO.

and various Mississippi sites had a steady supply of heroes and villains and good versus evil scenarios. Television and print media were attracted to places where Dr. King confronted the Bull Connors and Jim Clarks. Nashville lacked the dramatic confrontations found in the segregationist strongholds of the Deep South and therefore was hardly ever featured on the evening news or on the front page of the major daily newspapers. Some of the most prominent impressions of the Movement are images of fire hoses, police dogs, and billyclubs welded against peaceful protesters. Nashville also did not boast a charismatic figurehead with the rhetorical flourish to sweep an audience off of its feet. Instead, it had a band of nondescript misfits dedicated to freeing African Americans from the grips of segregation and doing it without a need for public acclaim. Without the high drama or an iconic spokesperson, Nashville was overshadowed and overlooked. The research presented here calls upon civil rights historians to acknowledge and minimize the influence of media values as a subliminal criteria for scholarly pursuits.

Another historiographical problem peculiar to Civil Rights Movement is the tendency to normalize adult leadership while simultaneously treating student leaders as an auxiliary unit in need of adult mentorship. As plainly as any local movement has done so, Nashville destroyed that paradigm. Not only does this study reveal a more central role for student leaders, often placing them on the leading edge of social change methodology, but also demonstrates that mentorship is a two-way street. While the Nashville students were mentored by Reverend Smith and Reverend Lawson and many of them idolized Dr. King, there were cases of role reversal seldom acknowledged by Movement historians. The Nashville Student Movement taught local adults that their cordial dealings with white leaders were an obstacle to racial progress. At the start of the sit-ins, adults insisted on delays because of potential danger, but James Bevel

challenged the adults' reasoning by arguing a fundamental point: racial progress required new levels of risk. Several years later, Bevel taught veteran SCLC leaders a lesson when he saved the Birmingham campaign from almost certain doom with the Children's Crusade, a proposal that seemed insane at the time but proved to be golden. It is a common assumption that Dr. King was the leading guru of nonviolent direct action, yet Diane Nash taught Dr. King and other adults an important lesson about its application during the Albany Movement. After Dr. King reneged on a promise to stay in jail, Nash gently chastised him, forcing him to reconsider his actions. Nash's rebuke set the stage for Dr. King's famous stand in the Birmingham city jail. At this stage, Nash demonstrated greater knowledge on the fine points of nonviolence than Dr. King. Seldom does the historical record acknowledge adult leaders as beneficiaries of student leaders' knowledge and experience.

If Diane Nash taught Dr. King a thing or two about nonviolence, then Dr. King's standing as the prince of nonviolence merits additional reconsideration. Not only did Nash exhibit a more refined understanding of nonviolence than King, but Reverend Lawson too proved more experienced and knowledgeable on the subject. At a SCLC meeting in Nashville in 1961, Dr. King told the audience, "Some time ago I read that Jim Lawson was a disciple of Martin Luther King on the philosophy of nonviolence. This was very interesting to me because I'm sure Jim Lawson knew about nonviolence before Martin Luther King and he knows more about it than Martin Luther King."²¹ Lawson's superior knowledge does not diminish King's relationship to nonviolence. It simply changes our understanding of his role in relation to its proliferation. To a significant degree, Lawson firmly planted nonviolence within a younger generation of activists who helped mature it to where it could be seamlessly merged with voter registration by 1965, disproving the notion that voter registration and nonviolent direct action were oppositional

²¹ Fuson Papers, Box 4, cassette tape, "September 1961 SCLC Meeting Nashville."

methodologies. Dr. King's understanding of nonviolence was profoundly shaped by Reverend Lawson and his protégés. Therefore, rather than viewing Dr. King as the leading authority on nonviolence, he should be depicted as its most recognized advocate. The proliferation of nonviolence required a dual thrust. Lawson provided the mentoring thrust that helped institutionalize it within SNCC and sharpen its application within SCLC by way of training workshops and practice. Lawson and his protégés then spread it to other places and organizations. Dr. King gave it a public face and persona in his role as chief spokesman. Together they made nonviolence a powerful force for social change. Thanks to what is now known about the Nashville Movement, these dual roles have come to light. Lawson's role is no longer obscured and King's role is better understood.

Related to the development of nonviolence is the role of Nashville activists in perfecting protest methodology, a topic seldom addressed in the Movement scholarship. In his memoir, *An Easy Burden: The Civil Rights Movement and the Transformation of America*, Andrew Young noted that "The students in Nashville nearly perfected the sit-ins. It was a well-balanced movement that included demonstrations, boycotts, voter registration, mass marches, and negotiations with the white business community all working in concert."²² While his observation is correct concerning the sit-ins, he misses the big picture. The Nashville students played a more significant role. They were instrumental in bringing to full maturity the primary protest methodology of the entire Civil Rights Movement: nonviolent direct action. While credit must be given to the Fellowship of Reconciliation and CORE for early application of direct action, they could not employ it systematically in the South on a large scale at the right time. And while the Montgomery Bus Boycott deserves credit for helping to introduce the concept to the South, their model "was a non-cooperation with segregation" that "consisted of passive nonviolence."

²² Young, 128.

Instead, what the Nashville students nearly perfected was a “direct, nonviolent confrontation with segregation.”²³

Nashville’s role in the development of nonviolent direct action did not stop with the sit-ins, but continued throughout the Movement. In 1961, Nashville students took nonviolence to another level during the Freedom Rides, forcing intervention from the federal government and compelling the ICC to issue rulings prohibiting segregated interstate travel. The Freedom Rides employed a new level of risk taking that involved sacrificing one’s life, a risk much less prominent in the sit-in movement. As Nash told Reverend Shuttlesworth when he warned her about the risks of resuming the CORE-abandoned Freedom Rides, “. . . We can’t let violence interfere with our constitutional rights. . . . If they stop us with violence, the movement is dead.”²⁴ The fearless stand against violence at that moment deprived white supremacists of their most potent weapon: intimidation. During the Birmingham campaign, James Bevel changed the nature of protesting by involving youth as young as grade school age, a previously unheard of concept. In 1965, Bevel and his wife Diane were instrumental in merging direct action with voter registration at a time when many activists thought that direct action was passé. By the mid-1960s, nonviolent direct action had been taken as far as it could be taken, primarily because of Nashville activists. While Dr. King and the SCLC are usually given the credit for advancing nonviolent direct action, it was really the Nashville group who paved the way and made it possible for organizations like the SCLC to receive global acclaim as the vanguard of nonviolence.

²³ Ibid., 126.

²⁴ Manis, 271.

Theoretical Implications

Feminist scholars often use the term feminist epistemology, meaning women's "ways of knowing," "women's experience," or simply "women's knowledge."²⁴ In other words, there is knowledge produced by virtue of being a woman that is unique to women. The same goes for young people. There is a **youth epistemology** made evident by a careful study of the Nashville Movement. Young activists seemed to understand that their youth made them especially equipped to move the Black freedom struggle further than it had ever advanced before. Part of what John Lewis and other young activists understood is that they lived in a different era than their parents. Consequently, they had a different attitude about and relationship to the white power structure. Lewis addressed this issue directly when he revealed his inability to accept the status quo. "I loved my parents mightily, but I could not live the way they did, taking the world as it was presented to them and doing the best they could with it . . . My Parents, and millions of other black men and women just like them, bore their load with a grace and dignity I could only hope to come close to. Theirs was not a time nor a place for turning and facing the system."²⁵ Lewis and his cohorts seemed to know that not only were the 1960s ripe for change, but that the task belonged to them.

Youth epistemology also involved understanding that students were "the" ones who could afford to sacrifice everything in the name of freedom. This was evident when Lewis needed his parents' approval in order to proceed with a lawsuit against segregated Troy State University, a school that he wanted to attend in the late 1950s. After initially supporting his proposed legal challenge, both parents changed their minds out of fear that they would lose their land, have their credit revoked, or face other economic reprisals. But Lewis was aware of the

²⁴ Linda Alcoff and Elizabeth Potter, eds., *Feminist Epistemologies*, (New York: Routledge, 1993), 1.

²⁵ Lewis, 58.

risks involved. When informed that not only could he be hurt, but that his parents could suffer injury or financial losses, he simply nodded that he was sure of his desire to desegregate Troy State.

Without Black college students recognizing that only they could function as the vanguard of the Black freedom struggle in the 1960s, it is difficult to fathom sit-ins, aggressive Freedom Rides, a Children's Crusade in Birmingham, or a showdown in Selma, the last stronghold of Alabama's white supremacist structure. In this way, youth epistemology played a leading role in the demise of Jim Crow and overt Black disfranchisement.

One of the most important discoveries revealed by the Nashville Movement and its activists the **mutual dependency** between the leadership, between local movements, and the larger national Movement. This phenomenon is obvious on two levels. First, at the leadership level, a healthy dose of friction existed between the more militant young Nashville activists and their rather cautious adult mentors. Although the two generations sometimes were at odds over the direction of the struggle and the tactics needed to achieve community goals, the two groups enjoyed a mutually beneficial relationship full of tension. They were dependent upon each other for support, confirmation, and resources. The students needed adult guidance, support, and community resources while the adults needed the students' controlled recklessness, energy, fearlessness and the pressure to transcend the traditional gradualistic brand of race relations. Together they were counterbalancing forces that propelled the struggle forward and provided appropriate constraints. What worked so beautifully in Nashville was that each generation seemed to be aware of its role in this dialectic relationship. They used tension to generate progress rather than inhibit it, a fact made possible by the mutual respect that each group had for each other.

Second, at the movement center level, Nashville demonstrated a process of multi-directional influence among cities engaged in racial struggles. It has been widely acknowledged by scholars that the Montgomery Bus Boycott generated an avalanche of protest activity. Reverend Smith himself was inspired by the year-long struggle and used the incentive to help invigorate the Nashville Movement. Nashville in turn became “the model” for the sit-in movement, a development that ultimately led to the desegregation of public facilities in approximately two hundred cities by the end of 1962.²⁶ The movement momentum that Nashville helped to precipitate in the early 1960s created space for activists to migrate to Albany, Georgia, and the states of Mississippi and Alabama, spreading social disorder in places usually avoided by traditional activists. In the end, what Dr. King helped to inspire because of Montgomery rebounded back to him in Albany, Birmingham, and Selma later. What he helped to inspire was absorbed by others, reinterpreted, refined, and perfected, making it possible for the SCLC to make good use of a more advanced version of non-violent direct action. Nashville was more important to this process than most movement centers because its leaders consciously aimed to propagate insurrection against segregation. That was the purpose for Reverend Lawson coming to Nashville under the auspices of FOR. What this implies is that rather than spontaneity playing an over-prominent role in spreading social protest, intentionality had an invisible hand in proliferating activism.

One of the most interesting and significant theoretical developments produced by a study of the Nashville Movement is the concept of **organizational** (or leadership) **hybridization**. Nashville’s success depended upon collaboration between the NSM, a SNCC affiliate, and the NCLC, a SCLC affiliate. Nashville leaders, both adult and students, created organizational structures that merged the two together in a co-dependent fashion. The adults needed the shock

²⁶ Wilmore, 208.

troops and defiant attitude provided by the students and the students depended upon adults for moral support, guidance, and material resources. The merging of the best aspects of student and adult leadership made Nashville unique as a movement center and it remains to be seen whether other cities successfully bridged generational gaps in meaningful ways. Nashville's mode of operation stands out against the generational tension that beset Atlanta and the class conflict that nearly destroyed the Birmingham movement. In fact, it was a Nashville youth veteran, James Bevel, who saved the Birmingham campaign from near doom.

There is also a **spatial dimension** to the Nashville story that is instructive for all local movements. Atlanta student leader Lonnie King remarked that he and his colleagues needed space to organize, a place from which to dispatch troops, and a location where resources could be collected and marshaled. King identified the church of Reverend Joe Boone, Rush Memorial Congregational United Church of Christ, as that place for the Atlanta students. In Nashville, that place was primarily Reverend Smith's church. There cannot be an effective local movement without a command center. The difference between the Nashville and Atlanta command centers is that Reverend Boone's church was more peripheral in the Black power structure while Reverend Smith's church was central to Nashville's Black elite. Rush Memorial was a small congregation established in 1913 and located at 150 James P. Brawley Drive. While Atlanta student activists held numerous meetings there, Rush Memorial did not have the status in Atlanta's Black community enjoyed by more prestigious churches such as Big Bethel AME Church, Ebenezer Baptist Church, Wheat Street Baptist and Friendship Baptist Church.²⁷

No assessment of the Civil Rights Movement can be credible without attention to the role of Christianity. A preponderance of Movement literature places the Black church at the center

²⁷ *Atlanta Voice: The Civil Rights Movement*, WPBA, 17 Jan. 2010; <http://www.angelfire.com/ga4rushchurch/history.html>.

yet still excludes the influence of providence. In the case of Nashville, there is no real activist thrust without perceived **providential intervention**. This fact raises the question of the role of providence beyond Nashville and its key activists. The subject of providence creates challenges for scholars trained to rely on physical evidence because divine inspiration is beyond the realm of what can be “proven.” Academicians are also trained to focus on rational human action to explain historical developments and providence cuts against that paradigm. The Nashville Movement requires scholars who genuinely seek to understand social change processes to not only broaden their understanding of the role of Christianity, but to consider non-rational dimensions of human actions.

The fact that Nashville produced such excellent leadership has theoretical implications. Aldon Morris developed the concept of movement centers, a useful framework by which Nashville’s role in the Movement can be evaluated. The most important function performed by the city was as a **leadership production center**. Some movement centers such as Albany, Birmingham, Selma, and Greenwood required outside expertise in order to achieve its objectives. But Nashville was an entirely self-sufficient operation that ultimately sent forth its leaders to assist other communities. Because of the training and mentoring that Diane Nash, James Bevel, John Lewis, and Bernard LaFayette received in Nashville, they were able to transport that experience and expertise around the country, and in the case of LaFayette, around the world after the freedom struggle peaked. Their primary mentors, C.T. Vivian and James M. Lawson, also used their social change expertise in many places beyond the confines of Nashville. To date, no other city seems to have performed this function.

The concept of a leadership production center has another benefit. It can reduce the corrupting influence of media values upon civil rights historiography by reminding scholars to

hone in on a movement center's role in the freedom struggle rather than focusing upon sites of activism because of the intense media attention given to them. A role-driven analysis will also change the perspective of all of those interested in Movement history. A movement center's value will no longer be determined by the availability of villains and heroes, camera-ready action, and charismatic leadership. Focusing upon the exploits of a few individuals leads to misconceptions about the processes of social change and to the practice of hero worship, the latter problem especially rampant in Movement history.

The final theoretical component that unfolds from this research is the concept of **itinerant leadership**, a mode of activism in which the core Nashville leaders, with the exception of Kelly Miller Smith, all left the city to serve as social change agents and apostles of nonviolence across the nation. Their intention was not so much to plant roots in a particular community, but to plant or nurture seeds of rebellion. John Lewis was particularly aware of the evangelizing nature of civil rights works very early in his activist career. The conviction that the Freedom Rides must not be stopped came from this missionary perspective of the Movement. Lewis acknowledged as much when he confided that

That's why I felt that the Freedom Rides had to continue. It was part of a national effort that would not only break down the barriers of segregation and racial discrimination in areas of public transportation, but it would serve to inspire young people and black people in particular all across the country. That they could do something. That a movement didn't have to be just localized, but it could be a Southwide, or nationwide or worldwide movement.²⁸

Consequently, Lewis and his colleagues migrated from one community to another after the sit-ins, going wherever a need for assistance existed. These young activists were especially prone to moving about. In his memoir, Lewis noted that for those who committed to a life in the

²⁸ Allen interview transcript of Lewis, 85.

Movement, their notion of home was altered. “If your life was in the movement . . . the concepts of home and belongings were different from most people’s . . . You traveled constantly and you traveled light. When you were on the road, which was much more often than not, home was wherever you found a bed and a blanket for the night.”²⁹ Even the ones who were married with children, such as the Bevel, shifted their place of residence depending on the demands of the Movement. Near the end of the Freedom Rides, they relocated to Mississippi for a while where their first child was born and where they remained until James was summoned to Birmingham by Dr. King.²⁹

Itinerant leadership served two purposes. First of all, it made expertise and experience in nonviolent direct action methodology available to almost any community. Seasoned veterans were able to travel to communities ready to attack Jim Crow practices and not only transfer knowledge about social change to environs that lacked indigenous expertise, but helped end a social evil. Secondly, communities assisted by apostles of nonviolence became part of a web of locales moving in the same direction together, strengthened by the knowledge that there were others who cared about their fate. The result of this communal interconnectivity was a slow and measured accumulation of momentum that ultimately led to the demise of segregation and other forms of racial discrimination. Activists involved in this process knew that the future of the freedom struggle largely depended upon setting off fires of freedom in as many places as possible.

Future Research

The breadth and significance of the Nashville Movement and its leadership has revealed numerous gaps in the scholarship that mandate future research. For starters, a more

²⁹ Lewis, 201.

²⁹ Mullins, *Diane Nash: The Fire of the Movement*, 65-67, 69.

comprehensive study of the sit-ins must be undertaken. Presently, the scholarship offers the notion of youthful spontaneity as a significant driving force and no doubt that element existed. On the other hand, the Nashville Movement demonstrated that African American leaders were thinking about protesting segregation in a more confrontational way before February 1, 1960. If the Nashville activists was ready to launch a well-planned sit-in campaign prior to February 1st, were others thinking along similar lines? It is known that Reverend Douglas Moore was working with students in North Carolina and was in contact with Reverend Lawson before the Sit-In Movement began. Had he contacted other ministers in his circle urging them to help energize college students? There has to be some mechanism that better explains the rapid proliferation of sit-in campaigns around the South. Was Nashville the only place where protest planning took place in the late 1950s?

Another unanswered question raised by this research is the degree of collaboration between students and adults in southern communities where vibrant local movements erupted. The dominant paradigm in the scholarship is one of innate and natural intergenerational conflict. It now seems clear that student-adult relationships were more complex and nuanced than that. Nashville illustrated that principled adult leaders could bridge the generational gap, raising the question of what other young Black leaders in the late twenties and thirties developed healthy relationships as mentors to college activists. Again, Douglas Moore comes to mind. Dr. King also was known to embrace student activists. There are likely others who appreciated the contributions that students could make to the Movement. The issue of intergenerational collaboration also raises the question of the relationship between local movement success and such collaboration. Did movement centers that had colleges nearby see more energetic protest activity that led to the demise of Jim Crow?

In addition to the question of intergenerational collaboration, Nashville also poses questions about how geographical location influences the character of local movements. More specifically, how did movements in upper South cities like Nashville differ from those in the Deep South? One of the reasons that FOR based Lawson in Nashville was because the city's racial climate was deemed more moderate and its Black leadership less insular. Was Nashville unique in this way or was there a similar pattern in other cities of the upper South? Clearly, comparative studies are warranted to distinguish geographical patterns of activism within the complex racial milieu of the South.

Because Nashville's success was so intimately linked to intentional leadership development based upon nonviolent direct action, one wonders about the undercurrent of training as an essential activity during the Movement. How crucial and extensive was nonviolence training to the success of the Movement? How critical to the maturation of nonviolence was the influence of Reverend Lawson? How institutionalized was nonviolence? How well understood was it? The existence of two strands, tactical and philosophical, implies a great deal of misunderstanding about what nonviolence really was. Was tactical nonviolence really nonviolence if you abandon it later? Why did some activists like Lewis, Bevel, Nash, and LaFayette never abandon nonviolence? It seems that a thorough study of the phenomenon of nonviolence in a civil rights context is needed.

One of the more intriguing and perhaps most significant areas of future research involves the impact of student activists upon Dr. King and the SCLC. This research has revealed that Diane Nash, James Bevel, and Bernard LaFayette had monumental influence, but their full impact remains to be seen. And there are others who no doubt contributed to King's evolution as an international leader. Presently, it is unclear how the hiring of young leaders such as Bevel and

Bernard Lee influenced the decision-making of Dr. King and his organization. The bits and pieces so far revealed about Bevel's role in forcing King's anti-Vietnam War stance suggest some sort of radicalization process taking place. The role of student leaders in this process has not been fully articulated. On a grander scale, prevalent assumptions about mentorship being a top-down process have to be re-evaluated. If these young leaders significantly shaped King's thinking, then in what ways were other adult leaders radicalized by the more aggressive activism of their student counterparts?

On a final note, the most glaring gap in the history of the Movement is the lack of scholarly biographies on luminaries like John Lewis, Diane Nash, James Bevel, Bernard Lafayette, James Forman, Kelly Miller Smith, C.T. Vivian, and James Lawson. These are not minor figures, but some of the most important activists of the era whose contributions broke old patterns of race relations and helped give African Americans new dignity and status in American society. Our understanding of the Movement remains incomplete and flawed without attention to these and other gaps illuminated by this study.

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