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From Greensboro to SNCC: Nonviolent Sit-Ins of 1960

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FROM GREENSBORO TO SNCC: NONVIOLENT SIT-INS OF 1960

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Abstract: This paper examines the extent to which the Greensboro Four and other civil rights activists led to the rise of the New Left in the 1960s, drawing references predominantly to Howard Brick's *Radicals in America*. In considering the developments of the 1960s as a whole, this paper illustrates the arduous process in which the people of various activist movements sought solidarity under a single, broad political movement known as the New Left. Specifically, this essay examines how the civil rights, feminist, and anti-war movements were able to unite in their fights for justice. In light of a recent surge in hate crimes, gun violence, and the overruling of *Roe v. Wade*, American citizens, reminiscent of the 1960s, began to take to the streets again to protest against what they believe as violations of their inalienable rights. While this paper contributes to the greater discussion of non-violent political movements throughout the 1960s, it also sheds light upon the various ways in which the people of the United States can stand united amidst an increasingly polarized society.

I have no malice, no jealousy, no hatred, no envy ... All I want is to come in and place my order and be served and leave a tip if I feel like it.” – Joseph Charles Jones, black former student at Johnson C. Smith University²

“The attack is on southern customs and southern habits — not southern laws.” – Lowry Bowman of The Chicago Defender³

“If the leaders in the Kremlin had worked up a plan to weaken us throughout the world, I can think of none which would be more effective than the script we are now following” – Governor LeRoy Collins of Florida in March 1960⁴

Introduction

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² “Negroes Extend Sitdown Protest: 150 in Charlotte Fill Seats at 8 Lunch Counters -- Other Cities Are Quiet,” *New York Times* (1923-), February 10, 1960, 115065640, ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The New York Times.

³ Lowry Bowman, “Sit-Down 'Drive Opens All-Out Bias Fight,” *The Chicago Defender (National Edition)* (1921-1967), March 5, 1960, 492937305, Black Studies Center; ProQuest Historical Newspapers: Chicago Defender; ProQuest Historical Newspapers: Chicago Defender.

⁴ Clive Webb, “Breaching the Wall of Resistance: White Southern Reactions to the Sit-Ins,” in *From Sit-Ins to SNCC: The Student Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2012), 59.

The 1960s was, in many ways, a period of unprecedented turmoil in the history of the modern United States. From the failed Bay of Pigs invasion to the drastic escalation of the Vietnam War, the United States faced numerous setbacks in its geopolitical initiatives. Domestically, the 1960s was no less challenging for the U.S. government. Its institutionalized racist and anti-communist ideals exacerbated social tensions, which ultimately led to a society fragmented by ideology and a generation shattered by disillusionment. Amidst such turbulent times emerged various activist groups who resorted to their own tactics in hopes of bringing about social change. Centermost of many activists' demands was, however, the common call for racial equality.

On February 1, 1960, four black university students “staged a sitdown strike” at the segregated lunch counter of their local F. W. Woolworth Company in Greensboro, N.C.⁵ The movement, which began in Greensboro, immediately picked up momentum and spread to almost all major cities in the southern and border states within the next three months. Thousands of protesters, most of whom were black student activists, voluntarily participated in the sit-in demonstrations as a means to protest against institutionalized racial segregation in the Jim Crow South. From February to May, the sit-ins received tremendous news coverage and gained the widespread support of black activist leaders such as Rev. Martin Luther King Jr., which later led to the creation of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) in April 1960. As the movement gained popularity, so did its opposition—segregationists resorted to often violence means to thwart the growing demands for desegregation.

Utilizing a variety of historical newspapers and contemporary scholarship, this essay examines how the sit-in demonstrations unfolded during the spring of 1960, how the movement attracted both support and hostility, and how it ultimately nurtured a new wave of activist leaders who later formed the SNCC. The focus of this paper is not to give an extensive overview of the larger civil rights movement of the 1960s, but to zoom in on the events and developments of the sit-in demonstrations to illustrate how different groups reacted to the demonstrations until the creation of SNCC in April 1960. In the words of Joseph Charles Jones, a former graduate student at Johnson C. Smith University, the series of sit-ins were “part of my [Jones] race’s efforts to secure

⁵“Negroes in South in Store Sitdown: Carolina College Students Fight Woolworth Ban on Lunch Counter Service,” *New York Times* (1923-), February 3, 1960, 115207329, ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The New York Times.

God-given rights,” and it was such determination that led to the movement’s success in securing more representations for peoples of color in the mid 1960s. ⁶

Successes and Setbacks of the Nonviolent Student Movement

On February 1 1960, four black students of North Carolina Agricultural and Technical College sat down at a white-only lunch counter in their local Woolworth after purchasing several items from the store. Later known as the Greensboro Four, Ezell Blair Jr., Franklin McCain, Joseph McNeil, and David Richmond believed that “since we buy books and papers in the other part of the store we should get served in this part,” but their request for service was refused by the waitress and the four were later asked to leave by the local store manager.⁷ Reporting on the incident one day later, the *New York Times* wrote that the group “vowed to continue it in relays until Negroes were served at the lunch counter.” On the same day, the sit-in protest led by the Greensboro Four gained great momentum, in which *The Atlanta Constitution* later reported that “at one time during the day Negro students filled 63 of the 66 seats at the counters.”⁸ Significantly, the group of black student activists was reported to have received the “moral support” of three white students, who claimed that more “white students would [also] back the effort.”⁹ On Thursday, the three-day demonstration was “thwarted,” as claimed by *The Atlanta Constitution*, by a group of white youths backed by several members of the Ku Klux Klan who arrived “ahead of the Negroes and claimed some of the seats,” producing a stand-off of some 60 youths of each race in the Woolworth lunch counter.¹⁰ At the same time, the demonstration spread to a nearby S.H. Kress store, where black student activists alongside several white sympathizers protested against similar discriminatory practices used in the store. Local police forces were summoned to both stores to prevent violence from breaking out between the activists and reactionists.

⁶“Negroes Extend Sitdown Protest.”

⁷“Negroes in South in Store Sitdown.”

⁸“Negro Collegians Fill All Seats At Cafe in Integration Sitdown,” *The Atlanta Constitution (1946-1984)*, February 4, 1960, 1536212942, ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The Atlanta Constitution.

⁹“Negro Collegians Fill All Seats.”

¹⁰“Whites Grab Seats in Cafe To Slow Integration Push,” *The Atlanta Constitution (1946-1984)*, February 5, 1960, 1636830296, ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The Atlanta Constitution.

On Saturday February 7, the Greensboro demonstrations were “halted abruptly” by bomb threats in both locations. In an effort to “ensure public safety,” managers of both Woolworth and S. H. Kress closed down their stores in the early afternoon. After vowing to “return daily to both stores and sit at the counters until served,” the student demonstrators began to march through the streets and were confronted by white youth groups. On one occasion, members of two white teenage gangs, “Los Hermanos” and “Rebels”, began to wave Confederate flags at the demonstrators, who later responded by waving a few smaller American flags back at the hecklers.¹¹ The Atlanta Journal reported frequent “instances of shoving and swearing” between the two groups and a hastily-broken up fist fight that led to the arrest of three people, including one black man who was allegedly drunk.¹² *The Boston Globe* reported a further instance of a white man “dropping a burning piece of paper in the lap of a Negro youth.”¹³ In considering the violent reactions by segregationists, historian Clive Webb observed that “white southerners were almost unanimous in their condemnation of the sit-ins [but] were much less assured of how to stop black activism.”¹⁴ For Webb, the white mobs’ use of violence was a clear reflection of their inability to organize effective counter-demonstrations. By utilizing violent tactics, then, the mobs attempted to dissuade black activists from continuing their sit-in protests, but to the disappointment of white youth groups and klansmen alike, such tactics proved to no avail. Two days later, student demonstrators took their cause beyond Greensboro and to the nearby cities of Durham and Winston-Salem.

On February 9, a group of black students, accompanied by four white students from Duke University, arrived at the Woolworth lunch counter in Durham to protest against the store policy of “stand up service” for black customers.¹⁵ As reported by *the Atlanta Constitution*, the spokesperson of the group rhetorically questioned: “If we can stand up and be served, why can’t we sit down and be served?” Apart from Durham, similar instances of protest also occurred that

¹¹“Bomb Scares Halt Negro Sitdown,” *The Atlanta Journal and the Atlanta Constitution (1950-1968)*, February 7, 1960, Sunday ed. edition, 1644150716, ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The Atlanta Constitution.

¹²“Bomb Scares Halt Negro Sitdown.”

¹³“Negro-White Row Closes Lunch Counters,” *Daily Boston Globe (1928-1960)*, February 7, 1960, 276444157, ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The Boston Globe.

¹⁴Webb, “Breaching the Wall of Resistance,” 58.

¹⁵“Integration Push At Cafes Spreads,” *The Atlanta Constitution (1946-1984)*, February 9, 1960, 1556061610, ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The Atlanta Constitution.

same day in Winston-Salem. Black activists who took part in the Durham and Winston-Salem protests, however, denied affiliation with any “groups or individuals at the other schools.”¹⁶ In the words of black graduate student Joseph Charles Jones, “there is no organization behind us.”¹⁷ On February 10, the protest saw its presence in Charlotte, the largest and most populous city in North Carolina. Following the protocols of previous demonstrations, protestors entered and demanded service at the segregated lunch counter of a local Woolworth store. Like the others, they were ignored by the waitress and jeered at by white youth groups. A moment of tension emerged during the Charlotte protest when white hecklers began to throw eggs towards the counter that “splashed on the Negroes,” who were reported by *The Atlanta Constitution* to have given “no reaction either to this or the jeers and catcalls thrown at them by white youths and girls.”¹⁸

Racial tension continued the following day when demonstrations appeared in various Woolworth stores in the state capital of Raleigh, which ultimately resulted in the closure of seven lunch counters in the city that afternoon.¹⁹ Commenting upon the recent societal unrest in his state, Attorney General Malcolm L. Seawell urged local authorities to take action against what he perceived as “a serious threat to peace and good order.”²⁰ In defense of the state’s customary segregationist policies, Seawell maintained that private stores and companies had the legal right to “sell or not to sell to customers as they see fit” and that school officials had “the right and probably the duty” to keep their students’ rebellious actions in check.²¹ The American Civil Liberty Union (ACLU), on the other hand, was quick to come to the defense of the protesters, declaring that “Negro students staging the sit-down protests were within their rights” to do so and that state officials should negotiate with demonstrators to grant civil liberties to black and other minority groups.²² Alongside the ACLU, many black activist leaders, non-governmental

¹⁶“Negroes Extend Sitdown Protest.”

¹⁷“Negroes Extend Sitdown Protest.”

¹⁸“Eggs Spray Negroes In Cafe Flareup,” *The Atlanta Constitution (1946-1984)*, February 11, 1960, 1536223613, ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The Atlanta Constitution.

¹⁹“Lunch Counter Protest Spreads To N. C. Capitol,” *Daily Defender (Daily Edition) (1956-1960)*, February 11, 1960, 493811908, ProQuest Historical Newspapers: Chicago Defender.

²⁰“Eggs Spray Negroes In Cafe Flareup.”

²¹“Eggs Spray Negroes In Cafe Flareup.”

²²“Negro Diner Push Spreads to Virginia,” *The Atlanta Constitution (1946-1984)*, February 12, 1960, 1555735978, ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The Atlanta Constitution.

organizations, and a “handful of white students” also voiced their vehement support for the sit-in demonstrations.²³ In an address to various student-leaders of recent protests, Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. claimed that the students of North Carolina have “taken their undying and passionate yearning for freedom and fashioned it into a creative protest that is destined to be one of the glowing epics of [their] time.”²⁴

For King and his fellow Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) members, the vibrant youth demonstrators’ resort to nonviolence was a crucial element in winning widespread support. A great admirer of former Indian leader Mahatma Gandhi, King believed that “nonviolence was one of the most potent weapons available to oppressed people in their struggle for freedom.”²⁵ While some skirmishes did take place between demonstrators and white supremacists, black students, for the most part, kept their cool and “gave no reactions” to the heckling, jeering, and occasional physical violence by their white counterparts.²⁶ In fact, many student leaders of the sit-in demonstrations were also believed to be directly inspired by Gandhi’s nonviolent means of protest.²⁷ For historian Iwan Morgan, “the youthful dynamic of the movement was essential to its character and uniqueness,” but unlike other youth movements during the Black Power movement in the decade that followed, the students’ choice of nonviolence allowed them to secure widespread support from prominent black activists and white sympathizers.²⁸

The spirit of nonviolence was, however, not a shared belief between demonstrators and reactionary crowds, as white youth activists, in many cases supervised directly by Ku Klux Klansmen, were willing to use violence in breaking up the demonstrations. To the disappointment of King and other activists who believed in unconditional practice of non-violence, black demonstrators were often forced to respond with violence of their own means against physical attacks by their white counterparts. On February 20, the sit-in demonstrations had spread beyond

²³Claude Sitton, “Negro Sitdowns Stir Fear Of Wider Unrest in South: Negro Sitdowns Disquiet South,” *New York Times* (1923-), February 15, 1960, 115054025, ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The New York Times.

²⁴Martin Luther King et al., *The Papers of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, vol. 5, 6 vols. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), 366.

²⁵King et al., *The Papers of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, 422.

²⁶“Eggs Spray Negroes In Cafe Flareup.”

²⁷“Gandhi ’Aims Seen in South Negro Protest,” *Chicago Daily Tribune* (1923-1963), February 10, 1960, 182435403, ProQuest Historical Newspapers: Chicago Tribune.

²⁸Iwan Morgan, “The New Movement: The Student Sit-Ins in 1960,” in *From Sit-Ins to SNCC: The Student Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2012), 7.

the borders of North Carolina into Virginia and South Carolina. At High Point, student demonstrators got into a “brief fist fight” with white protestors before being broken up by the local police force.²⁹ Later that day, the *New York Times* reported some “250 youngsters of both races [squaring] off in a parking lot” at a downtown shopping center in Portsmouth, Virginia.³⁰ Two days later, 22 youths were arrested in the state of Tennessee when “a group of 200 Negro demonstrators and 500 white hecklers swarmed over the downtown area” of Chattanooga, an incident reported by *The Daily Defender* as the “most serious” since the sit-in movement began at Greensboro.³¹

As a response, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) issued a declaration saying that the youth would “initiate action immediately” to organize sit-in demonstrations “in every city and town in the southeastern region” while also calling for better education programs designated for the “study of the history of the Negro race.”³² The NAACP declaration was met with a wave of backlash by segregationists. As white mobs ramped up their use of violence against student demonstrators, southern governors and other officials began to endorse such behaviors as justified administ widespread social unrest caused by black demonstrators. On February 28, two white men struck a black woman protester “about the head several times with miniature baseball bats” in downtown Montgomery and got away without being arrested.³³ Later that day, white supremacists attacked the houses of two black families in Chickamauga, Tennessee where “a 15-year-old boy was showered by pellets.”³⁴ Acknowledging the widespread protest by black activists but refusing to offer meaningful reconciliatory measures, Governor John Patterson of Alabama claimed that “Negro demonstration against segregated lunch

²⁹“Negroes Fight Back In The South: Fistfights Flare All Over South,” *New York Amsterdam News (1943-1961)*, February 20, 1960, City edition edition, 225480546, Black Studies Center; ProQuest Historical Newspapers: New York Amsterdam News; ProQuest Historical Newspapers: New York Amsterdam News.

³⁰“Negroes Fight Back In The South.”

³¹“Arrest 22 in Sit-Down Move: Street Fight in Tenn. Over ‘Sitdown’ Protests,” *Daily Defender (Daily Edition) (1956-1960)*, February 24, 1960, 493816124, Black Studies Center; ProQuest Historical Newspapers: Chicago Defender; ProQuest Historical Newspapers: Chicago Defender.

³²“NAACP Youth Resolve To Extend Sit-Ins All Over Southeast Area,” *Tri - State Defender (1959-1989)*, February 27, 1960, 370678949, Ethnic NewsWatch.

³³“Racial Tension Erupts As Sit-Down Protests Spread: Montgomery Negro Is Clubbed; Shots Fired Into Georgia Homes,” *The Atlanta Journal and the Atlanta Constitution (1950-1968)*, February 28, 1960, Sunday ed. edition, 1644196062, ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The Atlanta Constitution.

³⁴“Racial Tension Erupts As Sit-Down Protests Spread.”

counters would bring a racial explosion.”³⁵ The problem, Patterson emphasized, was not the fact that black students were protesting against what they believed to be unjust, but that there was “not enough” of a police force “to prevent riots and protect everybody if they continue to provoke (the whites) on that matter.”³⁶ As reported by Claude Sitton, the governor originally pushed for the immediate expulsion of “all students who participated in a sit-in demonstration” on February 25, but when his remarks were met with widespread discontent by the enraged black public, Patterson softened his stance while maintaining that “action should be taken against the leaders.”³⁷ Governor Patterson’s call to “protect” whites from their black counterparts was echoed in the announcement of Dr. Beverly Lake, a candidate for the governor of North Carolina, who claimed: “If the administrative officers of any institution operated by this state are either unable or unwilling to exercise over its students sufficient control to prevent organized, group invasion of private property by the students, the state should supply the institution with an administration which can and will do so.”³⁸

By calling the organized student demonstrations as a “group invasion of private property,” Lake reflected what Clive Webb observed as a common tactic of southern media and politicians’ blaming of “black activists whose criminal behavior had supposedly provoked whites.”³⁹ In making this statement, Webb critically noted it was ironically white segregationists’ racism that “undermined their ability to defend Jim Crow against the sit-in demonstrations,” as “their inability to believe that black youth possessed either the motivation or ability to organize an insurgency against segregation left them confused as to who their enemies were and what tactics to use against them.”⁴⁰ For segregationists, then, their best tactic was twofold: to use violence as a direct means of bringing to a halt the activities of black activists while simultaneously casting off such actions

³⁵Claude Sitton, “Warns Negroes on Race Flareup,” *The Globe and Mail* (1936-), March 1, 1960, 1291074960, ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The Globe and Mail.

³⁶Sitton, “Warns Negroes on Race Flareup.”

³⁷Sitton, “Warns Negroes on Race Flareup.”

³⁸Sitton, “Warns Negroes on Race Flareup.”

³⁹Webb, “Breaching the Wall of Resistance,” 61.

⁴⁰Webb, “Breaching the Wall of Resistance,” 59.

to the “skeptical northern public” as simply upholding the “sacred constitutional principle of federalism.”⁴¹

Far from the hopes of southern segregationists, however, such tactics fueled the anti-segregationist sentiment among student demonstrators as the sit-in movement continued to pick up momentum. Backed by Rev. Martin Luther King Jr., several black adult activists “staged a quiet, orderly sitdown demonstration in Nashville” on March 2, where the spokesman Rev. C. T. Vivian claimed that their actions were pursued to send the clear message that the “ Negro community is in accord with the basic spirit shown by the students.”⁴² Later that day, more than 1,000 black students from the all-black Alabama State college “marched silently up the hill to the white-columned Alabama capitol where Jefferson Davis became the Confederacy’s first president, and as silently walked away again.”⁴³ By then, the sit-in protests had spread to 24 cities across 6 southern and border states. Recognizing the undeniable fact that the student-led movement had grown continuously despite numerous attempts to confront it, the Southern Regional Council based in Atlanta, Georgia, declared that “segregation cannot be maintained in the South,” for any attempts to forcefully suppress the growing civil rights movement was almost certain to be met with fierce resistant that would ultimately disrupt the functioning of the region as a whole.⁴⁴ “The sit-ins,” noted the regional council, “have spread in such contagion as to make brightly clear that the South is in a time of change, the terms of which cannot be dictated by white southerners.”⁴⁵

Although the council’s statement gave veiled implications that reconciliation was likely the best course of action for the peoples of both races, defiant white supremacists continued, in a last-ditch effort, to thwart the ongoing movement. On March 5, the *Chicago Daily Tribune* reported that the local police force of Sumter, South Carolina, arrested some 26 “Bible-carrying Negro

⁴¹Webb, “Breaching the Wall of Resistance,” 61.

⁴²“Cleric Leads ‘Sit-In ’Move: Minister Leads ‘Sit-In ’Protest,” *Daily Defender (Daily Edition) (1956-1960)*, March 2, 1960, 493808999, Black Studies Center; ProQuest Historical Newspapers: Chicago Defender; ProQuest Historical Newspapers: Chicago Defender.

⁴³“Cleric Leads ‘Sit-In ’Move: Minister Leads ‘Sit-In ’Protest.”

⁴⁴“Student ‘Sit-Ins ’Emerge As Vital Force To Be Reckoned With: New Movement Inspires South,” *The Louisville Defender (1933-)*, March 3, 1960, 2703272471, ProQuest Historical Newspapers: Louisville Defender.

⁴⁵“Student ‘Sit-Ins ’Emerge As Vital Force To Be Reckoned With.”

college students” for trespassing the private property of a white southerner.⁴⁶ An hour away in Florence, 48 black students were arrested for “parading without a permit.”⁴⁷ Later that same day in Miami, Florida, a cross in front of the house of a black family was reported to have been burned down, with the father telling the police that “he would kill anyone else who tried to burn a cross in his yard.”⁴⁸ Such blatant attacks, however, were not only ineffective but largely counterintuitive for segregationist leaders trying to sell their ideology to white Northern democrats, as it made the ideology of white supremacy less palpable to those who previously held moderate beliefs. Dissatisfied by the recklessness of white youths in Richmond, Virginia, a local segregationist leader observed that the black students wore “coats, white shirts and ties,” while their white boys that “came to heckle” were “slack-jawed, black-jacketed, grinning fit to kill, [and] were waving the proud and honored flag of the Southern States in the last war fought by gentlemen.”⁴⁹ Recognizing that they were quickly losing public support, segregationist leaders, as illustrated by Webb, “were forced to dissociate themselves from the white rank and file because their resort to racial demagoguery and violence made it impossible to persuade the rest of the nation of the political legitimacy of their cause.”⁵⁰

In the weeks following the 1,000-men march on the former Confederate Capitol in Montgomery, Alabama, the movement carried on amidst the usual heckling and occasional violence perpetrated by white teenage gangs. By mid-March, the sit-in demonstrations had taken place in various major cities, including Charlotte, Richmond, Baltimore, Houston, Miami, New Orleans, and Atlanta.⁵¹ Faced with large-scale arrests by the police, Rev. Martin Luther King urged the demonstrators to “show that [they were] willing and prepared to fill up the jails of the South.”⁵² By April, the student-led civil rights movement had swept across a majority of the southern and border states. Recognizing the achievements of black student activists, civil rights leaders such as King and Ella Baker organized a conference to be held at Shaw University in North Carolina on

⁴⁶“Police Seize 26 Students in S. C. Sitdowns,” *Chicago Daily Tribune (1923-1963)*, March 5, 1960, 182464058, ProQuest Historical Newspapers: Chicago Tribune.

⁴⁷“Police Seize 26 Students in S. C. Sitdowns.”

⁴⁸“Police Seize 26 Students in S. C. Sitdowns.”

⁴⁹“Student ‘Sit-Ins’ Emerge As Vital Force To Be Reckoned With.”

⁵⁰Webb, “Breaching the Wall of Resistance,” 62.

⁵¹Morgan, “The New Movement,” 5.

⁵²King et al., *The Papers of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, 366.

April 15, which included hundreds of student-leaders who organized and took part in the sit-in demonstrations. In his opening address, King remarked that the protests represented a great “offensive in the history of the Negro peoples’ struggle for freedom” and that the students have readily embraced “a philosophy of mass direct nonviolent action.”⁵³ Upon conclusion of the conference, a new student-led civil rights organization was formed: the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). Reflecting upon the events of 1960, former SNCC Chairman Charles McDew later recalled: “The sit-ins have inspired us to build a new image of ourselves in our own mind,” an image that ultimately guided black activists towards toppling the customary segregation practices of the Jim Crow South.⁵⁴

Conclusion

A month following the creation of SNCC, Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. described the sit-in demonstrations as “an electrifying movement [that] has shattered the placid surface of campuses and communities across the South.”⁵⁵ Characterizing the movement as nothing but “historic,” King further observed that “never before in the United States had so large a body of students spread a struggle over so great an area in pursuit of a goal of human dignity and freedom.”⁵⁶ By June 1960, sit-ins had occurred in 78 cities in the southern and border states, over thousands of activists had gone to jail, but the movement gave blacks and other anti-segregationists a concrete cause to rally behind.⁵⁷ In considering the events of 1960 as a whole, historian Francesca Polletta observed that it was the combined efforts of courageous students, ministers, NAACP officials, and white sympathizers that allowed the movement to gain popularity and momentum.⁵⁸

The creation of SNCC was instrumental in the struggle against racial inequality of the 1960s, for the organization’s emphasis on nonviolent means stood in stark contrast with that of various militant activist organizations influenced by Marxist-Leninist ideals. Although its methods

⁵³King et al., *The Papers of Martin Luther King, Jr*, 425.

⁵⁴Francesca Polletta, *It Was Like a Fever: Storytelling in Protest and Politics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 43.

⁵⁵King et al., *The Papers of Martin Luther King, Jr*, 447.

⁵⁶King et al., *The Papers of Martin Luther King, Jr*, 448.

⁵⁷Morgan, “The New Movement,” 5.

⁵⁸Polletta, *It Was Like a Fever*, 32.

differed from those of the Black Panthers and the Brown Berets, SNCC still played a crucial role in the fight for racial and social justice throughout the 1960s. As with other activist movements, SNCC, from the onset of its creation, faced widespread opposition from far-right politicians and white supremacist groups alike. This essay examined the non-violent student sit-ins of the early 1960, the backlash it faced amidst the violent heckling of white supremacists, and the latter's poor self-image that rendered ineffective segregationist leaders' attempts to thwart the advancement of civil rights for people of color. Four years later, the Civil Rights act of 1964 was, undoubtedly, a victory for black activists, but it did not end the blacks' arduous journey towards achieving equality. Today, the memories of Daunte Wright, Manuel Ellis, George Floyd, and other victims of police brutality serve as a painful yet vivid reminder that the United States, as a whole, is far from being completely free of racial discrimination. The stunning successes of the nonviolent demonstrations in 1960 should, however, serve as an inspiration for future civil rights movements in the United States, so long as institutionalized racial inequality continues to plague American societies.

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