

Reading 1 – Side A

Stokely Carmichael on Black Power

1 The concept of “black power” is not a recent or isolated phenomenon: It has grown out of
2 the ferment of agitation and activity by different people and organizations in many black
3 communities over the years. Our last year of work in Alabama added a new concrete
4 possibility. In Lowndes County, for example, black power will mean that if a Negro is
5 elected sheriff, he can end police brutality. If a black man is elected tax assessor, he can
6 collect and channel funds for the building of better roads and schools serving black people
7 – thus advancing the move from political power into the economic arena. In such areas as
8 Lowndes, where black men have a majority, they will attempt to use it to exercise control.
9 This is what they seek: control. Where Negroes lack a majority, black power means proper
10 representation and sharing of control. It means the creation of power bases from which
11 black people can work to change statewide or nationwide patterns of oppression through
12 pressure from strength – instead of weakness...

13
14 Ultimately, the economic foundations of this country must be shaken if black people are to
15 control their lives. Black people in the United States have a colonial relationship to the
16 larger society... Politically, decisions which affect black lives, have always been made by
17 white people... [Economically], exploiters come into the ghetto from outside, bleed it dry,
18 and leave it economically dependent on the larger society... [T]hese exploiters frequently
19 come as the “friend of the Negro,” pretending to offer worthwhile goods and services, when
20 their basic motivation is personal profit... The colonies of the United States – and this
21 includes the black ghettos within its borders, north and south – must be liberated... This
22 pattern must be broken. As its grip loosens here and there around the world, the hopes of
23 black Americans become more realistic. For racism to die, a totally different America must
24 be born.¹

25
26 White America will not face the problem of color, the reality of it. The well-intended say:
27 “We’re all human, everybody is really decent, we must forget color.” But color cannot be
28 “forgotten” until its weight is recognized and dealt with. White America will not
29 acknowledge that the ways in which this country sees itself are contradicted by being black
30 – and always have been... When the Lowndes County Freedom Organization chose the
31 black panther as its symbol, it was christened by the press “the Black Panther Party” – but
32 the Alabama Democratic Party, whose symbol is a rooster, has never been called the White
33 Cock Party. No one ever talked about “white power” because power in this country *is* white.
34 All this adds up to more than merely identifying a group phenomenon by some catchy
35 name or adjective... The furor over “black power” reveals how deep racism runs and how
36 great the fear which is attached to it. I have said that most liberal whites react to “black
37 power” with the question, What about me?, rather than saying: Tell me what you want me
38 to do and I’ll see if I can do it... One of the most disturbing things about all white

¹ For clarification purposes, portions of this paragraph are quoted from: Carmichael, S. & Hamilton, C. V. (1967). *Black power: The politics of liberation in America*. New York: Random House.

39 supporters of the movement has been that they are afraid to go into their own communities
40 – which is where the racism exists – and work to get rid of it. They want to run from
41 Berkeley to tell us what to do in Mississippi; let them look instead at Berkeley. They
42 admonish blacks to be nonviolent; let them preach nonviolence in the white community...

43
44 But our vision is not merely of a society in which all black men have enough to buy the
45 good things of life. When we urge that black money go into black pockets, we mean the
46 communal pocket. We want to see money go back into the community and used to benefit
47 it. We want to see the cooperative concept applied in business and banking. We want to
48 see black ghetto residents demand that an exploiting store keeper sell them, at minimal
49 cost, a building or a shop that they will own and improve cooperatively; they can back their
50 demand with a rent strike, or a boycott, and a community so unified behind them that no
51 one else will move into the building or buy at the store. The society we seek to build among
52 black people, then is not a capitalist one. It is a society in which the spirit of community
53 and humanistic love prevail...

54 - Stokely Carmichael, "What We Want," from New York Review of Books,
55 September 22, 1966
56

57 Now several people have been upset because we've said that integration was irrelevant
58 when initiated by blacks and that in fact it was a subterfuge, an insidious subterfuge for the
59 maintenance of white supremacy. We maintain that in the past six years or so this country
60 has been feeding us a thalidomide drug of integration, and that some Negroes have been
61 walking down a dream street talking about sitting next to white people, and that that does
62 not begin to solve the problem... When we went to Mississippi, ...we went to get [white
63 supremacists] out of our way, and people ought to understand that. We were never
64 fighting for the right to integrate, we were fighting against white supremacy... According to
65 [the advocates of integration], social justice will be accomplished by "integrating the Negro
66 into the mainstream institutions of the society from which he has been traditionally
67 excluded." This concept is based on the assumption that there is nothing of value in the
68 black community... The thing to do is siphon off the "acceptable" black people into the
69 surrounding middle-class white community. The goals of integrationists are middle-class
70 goals, articulated primarily by a small group of Negroes with middle class aspirations...
71 Such people will state that they would prefer to be treated "only as individuals, not as
72 Negroes"; that they "are not and should not be preoccupied with race." This is a totally
73 unrealistic position... [B]lack people have not suffered as individuals but as members of a
74 group; therefore, their liberation lies in group action... [T]he concept of Black Power
75 affirms that helping individual black people to solve their problems on an individual basis
76 does little to alleviate the mass of black people.²
77

78 We are not gonna wait for white people to sanction black power. We're tired of waiting.
79 Every time black people move in this country, they're forced to defend their position before
80 they move. It's time that the people who're supposed to be defending their position do that.

² For clarification purposes, portions of this paragraph are quoted from: Carmichael, S. & Hamilton, C. V. (1967). *Black power: The politics of liberation in America*. New York: Random House.

81 That's white people. They ought to start defending themselves, as to why they have
82 oppressed and exploited us... In order for America to really live on a basic principle of
83 human relationships, a new society must be born. Racism must die, and the economic
84 exploitation of this country, of non-white people around the world, must also die.

85
86 We've been saying that we cannot have white people working in the black community and
87 we've based it on psychological grounds. The fact is that all black people often question
88 whether or not they are equal to whites because every time they start to do something
89 white people are around showing them how to do it. If we are going to eliminate that for
90 the generations that come after us, then black people must be seen in positions of power
91 doing and articulating for themselves... We have taken all the myths of this country and
92 we've found them to be nothing but downright lies. This country told us that if we worked
93 hard we would succeed, and if that were true we would own this country lock, stock and
94 barrel. It is we who have picked the cotton for nothing; it is we who are the maids in the
95 kitchens of liberal white people; ...it is we who sweep up your college floors; yes, it is we
96 who are the hardest working and the lowest paid... Black people are economically insecure.
97 White liberals are economically secure. Can you begin an economic coalition? Are the
98 liberals willing to share their salaries with the economically insecure black people who
99 they so much love? Then if you're not, are you willing to start building new institutions
100 that will provide economic security for black people? That's the question we want to deal
101 with...

102
103 We are never going to get caught up with questions about power. This country knows what
104 power is and knows it very well. And knows what black power is because it's deprived
105 black people of it for 400 years. So it knows what black power is. But the question is, why
106 do white people in this country associate black power with violence? Because of their own
107 inability to deal with blackness. If we had said Negro power, nobody would get scared.
108 Everybody would support it. And if we said power for colored people, everybody would be
109 for that. But it is the word "black," it is the word "black" that bothers people in this country,
110 and that's their problem, not mine...

111
112 It is ironic to talk about civilization in this country. This country is uncivilized. It needs to
113 be civilized. We must begin to raise those questions of civilization. What it is, and we'll do
114 it... We are on the move for our liberation. We have been tired of trying to prove things to
115 white people. We are tired of trying to explain to white people that we're not going to hurt
116 them. We are concerned with getting the things we want, the things that we have to have
117 to be able to function. The question is, can white people allow for that in this country? The
118 question is, will white people overcome their racism and allow for that to happen in this
119 country? If that does not happen, brothers and sisters, we have no choice, but to say very
120 clearly, move on over, or we're going to move on over you.

121 - Stokely Carmichael, "Black Power" speech at Berkeley, November 19, 1966

Reading 1 – Side B

Bayard Rustin on “Black Power” and Coalition Politics

1 There are two Americas - black and white - and nothing has more clearly revealed the
2 divisions between them than the debate currently raging around the slogan of "black
3 power." Despite-or perhaps because of the fact that this slogan lacks any clear definition, it
4 has succeeded in galvanizing emotions on all sides, with many whites seeing it as the
5 expression of a new racism and many Negroes taking it as a warning to white people that
6 Negroes will no longer tolerate brutality and violence. But even within the Negro
7 community itself, "black power" has touched off a major debate...and one which threatens
8 to ravage the entire civil rights movement...

9
10 I would contend that "black power" not only lacks any real value for the civil-rights
11 movement, but that its propagation is positively harmful. It diverts the movement from a
12 meaningful debate over strategy and tactics, it isolates the Negro community, and it
13 encourages the growth of anti-Negro forces. In its simplest and most innocent guise, "black
14 power" merely means the effort to elect Negroes to office in proportion to Negro strength
15 within the population. There is, of course, nothing wrong with such an objective in itself,
16 and nothing inherently radical in the idea of pursuing it. But in Stokely Carmichael's
17 extravagant rhetoric about "taking over" in districts of the South where Negroes are in the
18 majority, it is important to recognize that Southern Negroes are only in a position to win a
19 maximum of two congressional seats and control of eighty local counties... [and] obviously
20 they could do nothing by themselves to reconstruct the face of America... [We must
21 instead make] the Democratic party truly responsive to the aspirations of the poor,
22 and...develop support for programs aimed at the reconstruction of American society in the
23 interests of greater social justice. The advocates of "black power" have no such programs
24 in mind; what they are in fact arguing for (perhaps unconsciously) is the creation of a *new*
25 *black establishment*.

26
27 Proponents of “black power” – accepting a historical myth perpetrated by moderates – like
28 to say that the Irish and the Jews and the Italians, by sticking together and demanding their
29 share, finally won enough power to overcome their initial disabilities. But the truth is that it
30 was through alliances with other groups (in political machines or as part of the trade-union
31 movement) that the Irish and the Jews and the Italians acquired the power to win their
32 rightful place in American society. They did not "pull themselves up by their own
33 bootstraps"-no group in American society has ever done so; and they most certainly did not
34 make isolation their primary tactic.

35
36 In some quarters, "black power" connotes not an effort to increase the number of Negroes
37 in elective office but rather a repudiation of nonviolence in favor of Negro "self-defense."
38 Actually this is a false issue, since no one has ever argued that Negroes should not defend
39 themselves as individuals from attack. Non-violence has been advocated as a *tactic* for
40 organized demonstrations in a society where Negroes are a minority and where the

majority controls the police. Proponents of non-violence do not, for example, deny that James Meredith has the right to carry a gun for protection when he visits his mother in Mississippi; what they question is the wisdom of his carrying a gun while participating in a demonstration. There is, as well, a tactical side to the new emphasis on "self-defense" and the suggestion that non-violence be abandoned. The reasoning here is that turning the other cheek is not the way to win respect, and that only if the Negro succeeds in frightening the white man will the white man begin taking him seriously. The trouble with this reasoning is that it fails to recognize that fear is more likely to bring hostility to the surface than respect; and far from prodding the "white power structure" into action, the new militant leadership, by raising the slogan of black power and lowering the banner of non-violence, has obscured the moral issue facing this nation, and permitted the President...to lecture us about "racism in reverse" instead of proposing more meaningful programs for dealing with the problems of unemployment, housing, and education.

It is, in short, the growing conviction that the Negroes cannot win - a conviction with much grounding in experience - which accounts for the new popularity of "black power." So far as the ghetto Negro is concerned, this conviction expresses itself in hostility first toward the people closest to him who have held out the most promise and failed to deliver, then toward those who have proclaimed themselves his friends (the liberals and the labor movement), and finally toward the only oppressors he can see (the local storekeeper and the policeman on the corner). On the leadership level, the conviction that the Negroes cannot win takes other forms, principally the adoption of what I have called a "no-win" policy. Why bother with programs when their enactment results only in "sham"? Why concern ourselves with the image of the movement when nothing significant has been gained for all the sacrifices made by SNCC and CORE? Why compromise with reluctant white allies when nothing of consequence can be achieved anyway? Why indeed have anything to do with whites at all?

But again: however understandable all this may be as a response to objective conditions and to the seeming irrelevance of so many hard-won victories to the day-to-day life of the mass of Negroes, the fact remains that the quasi-nationalist sentiments and "no-win" policy lying behind the slogan of "black power" do no service to the Negro. Some nationalist emotion is, of course, inevitable, and "black power" must be seen as part of the psychological rejection of white supremacy, part of the rebellion against the stereotypes which have been ascribed to Negroes for three hundred years. Nevertheless, pride, confidence, and a new identity cannot be won by glorifying blackness or attacking whites; they can only come from meaningful action, from good jobs, and from real victories such as were achieved on the streets of Montgomery, Birmingham, and Selma. When SNCC and CORE went into the South, they awakened the country, but now they emerge isolated and demoralized, shouting a slogan that may afford a momentary satisfaction but that is calculated to destroy them and their movement. Already their frustrated call is being answered with counterdemands for law and order and with opposition to police-review boards. Already they have diverted the entire civil-rights movement from the hard task of developing strategies to realign the major parties of this country, and embroiled it in a debate that can only lead more and more to politics by frustration.

87 It may, in the light of many...victories which have been achieved in the past few years, seem
88 strange that despair should be so widespread among Negroes today... [D]espite these
89 victories Negroes today are in worse economic shape, live in worse slums, and attend more
90 highly segregated schools than in 1954... [T]he truth is that it need only take ten years to
91 eliminate poverty – ten years and the \$100 billion Freedom Budget recently proposed by A.
92 Philip Randolph...³ Let me interject a word here to those who say that Negroes are asking
93 for another handout and are refusing to help themselves. From the end of the 19th century
94 up to the last generation, the United States absorbed and provided economic opportunity
95 for tens of millions of immigrants... [T]hey were able to find jobs, and as industrialization
96 proceeded, they were gradually able to move up the ladder to greater skills. Negroes who
97 have been driven off the farm into a city life...cannot be compared with these immigrants
98 of old... [T]he ghettos of today have become dead-ends of despair... [T]he Negro of today is
99 struggling to go beyond the gains of the past and, in alliance with liberals and labor, to
100 guarantee full and fair employment to all Americans... In 1947, the Marshall Plan was put
101 into effect and 3 per cent of the gross national product was spent in foreign aid. If we were
102 to allocate a similar proportion of our GNP to destroy the economic and social
103 consequences of racism and poverty at home today, it might mean spending [\$100
104 billion]...although I think it quite possible that we can fulfill these goals with a much
105 smaller sum. It would be intolerable, however, if our plan for domestic social reform were
106 less audacious and less far-reaching than our international programs of a generation ago.

107
108 We must see, therefore, in the current debate over "black power," a fantastic challenge to
109 American society to live up to its proclaimed principles in the area of race by transforming
110 itself so that all men may live equally and under justice. We must see to it that in rejecting
111 "black power," we do not also reject the principle of Negro equality...

112 - "Black Power and Coalition Politics," Commentary Magazine, September 1966.
113

³ The Freedom Budget was a proposal for spending \$185 billion over a ten year period to attack the causes of poverty. It included plans for housing, education, guaranteed annual income, expanded medical care and social insurance, and the creation of jobs to eliminate unemployment.