

Subgroup - SNCC

FACE THE NATION Interview with Stokely Carmichael,
Chairman of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating
Committee, Sunday, June 19, 1966.

Interviewer: Mr. Carmichael, you said that you would achieve black power by using the franchise -- by using the vote -- yet you have also said that your organization in Lowndes County, while out to take power legally, if it was stopped by the government from doing it legally, and I quote your words now, "We're going to take it the way everyone else took it, including the way many Americans took it in the American Revolution." This would seem to imply that you are advocating taking power by force and violence -- by the overflow, in effect, of the government. Is that what you meant?

Carmichael: Let me say this: in Lowndes County, that county is 80% black, 20% white. Its been ruled by the minority by force, by violence, and by every illegal trick that one can think of. Now, the black people in Lowndes County have organized themselves around the question and around the issue that they have been oppressed which is their blackness. They have been oppressed because they are black. And like any other group in the country, they organized around the issue of oppression. The unions, the workers, organize around the question of low wages. And they are going to try to achieve taking over the power structure according to the democratic processes in this country. Now, if no one is willing to assure the fact that that process is carried on, then that leaves the black people of Lowndes County, it seems to me, no alternative except to stay in the condition which they have been in for the last 100 years.

Interviewer: Mr. Carmichael, supposing the Black Panther Party loses the election in Lowndes County, what do you propose to do?

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Carmichael: First, let me say that the name of the organization in Lowndes County is not the Black Panther Party. The symbol happens to be a black panther. The name is the Lowndes County Freedom Organization. I am very concerned about that, you see, because Americans, particularly white Americans, have been referring to it as the Black Panther Party. And it is their problem with sex and color. They do not refer to the Alabama Democratic Party as the White Rooster Party, and that happens to be the emblem of that party.

-- If they lose and its a Democratic process, then there is nothing they can do. But, now, if they are cheated out of the vote, then it seems to me there must be some means for them to achieve power.

Interviewer: What means?

Carmichael: Well, that would have to develop out of the Lowndes County movement and the discussions that the people of Lowndes County want to carry on.

Interviewer: Mr. Carmichael, do you reject the ultimate use of violence as a final, last resort in bringing down the power structure?

Carmichael: I don't organize around violence or around non-violence. The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee organizes black people to get certain things that they have to get: decent houses, decent jobs, decent schools, and a right to participate in decisions that effect their lives. Now, that is what we organized for. The question of violence and nonviolence just happens to be tactical, as far as we are concerned.

Interviewer: Then, what is your tactic, as a last resort?

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Carmichael: Well, then we would have to decide that; depending on how stiff the resistance was in the country.

Interviewer: You'll reject it, then.

Carmichael: Oh, no, I've never rejected it.

3/7 Interviewer: You don't reject it -- violence -- then?

Carmichael: No, I've never rejected it.

4/18 Interviewer: How can you not reject violence and be the head of the Student Coordinating Nonviolent Committee?

Carmichael: Nonviolence has always been a tactic with SNCC; it has never been a way of life. We've made that clear since 1960; that it is just tactical. In my own thinking, I have never rejected anything; I only object to a host of means.

Interviewer: Mr. Carmichael, there is a lot of confusion about what you mean when you say, as you have said, and I quoted these words a moment or so ago, that "if we are stopped by the government from doing this legally, we are going to take it -- [power, that is] -- the way everyone else took it, including the way Americans took it in the American Revolution." Are you advocating a violent way if you can't get it legally? That is all we want to know.

Carmichael: This country, Mr. _____, is fighting in Viet Nam.

Interviewer: Right.

Carmichael: They are dropping bombs in Viet Nam around the whole question of selection and the right for people to participate in the decisions that effect their lives. That is precisely the same thing we are doing now in Lowndes County, Alabama: We are fighting for people to have free elections, and that this government and this country has a responsibility to back the

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people in Lowndes County to assure them of free elections. ¹¹
Now, if this country neglects to do that, then it seems to me that the responsibility of assuring free elections lies in the hands of the black people in Lowndes County, and anybody else in the country who is willing to have free elections at whatever means left up to them -- they are completely justified in doing that because they then have done all the legal processes that this country has demanded that they do.

Interviewer: Under these circumstances, you feel there is a justification for these violent means?

Carmichael: I think its justified whatever they do. If they have tried every legal means in this country, and there is no response.

Interviewer: Following that up, Mr. Carmichael, you said last week on the march that Negroes now fighting in Viet Nam should leave and come back here and fight for these elections you are talking about. Now, do you want them to desert? And if they do, what kind of fighting do you want them to do?

Carmichael: I think the number one answer is that this is an individual decision. My own feeling is that there is no reason why black people should be fighting for free elections in Viet Nam for some other people to get free elections, when they don't have it in their own country. They should first have free elections in their country, and then decide whether or not they in fact want to participate in that war.

All of those black soldiers who are from Alabama, all of them from Mississippi, did not even decide whether or not they

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wanted to participate in that war.

Interviewer: Would you be advocating(?) [unintelligible]
a mass desertion of Negro soldiers?

Carmichael: I think that if they would do that it would have to be an individual decision based upon what the consequences are, if in fact they are willing to face the federal government and a jail sentence.

Interviewer: Can you separate black soldiers from white soldiers? There may be many white soldiers who also had no choice at all about fighting in Viet Nam. None of us have a choice if we are drafted.

Carmichael: On the contrary, I can separate it, because black people in this country are oppressed because of their color. Because of blackness. The black people of Alabama and Mississippi were denied the right to vote because they were black. They are forced to live in ghettos because they are black; and that whether this country wants to realize it or not, you cannot sugar-coat that and say that they are all the same. It is a question of black and white.

Interviewer: No one makes an effort to sugar-coat it. In fact, all of the civil rights legislation that has been passed demonstrates how completely aware the government is of exactly what you are saying, and legal --

Carmichael: In terms of words.

Interviewer: In terms of words?

Carmichael: That's correct.

Interviewer: You don't feel, then, that -- would you feel that all civil rights legislation is dictated by hypocrisy?

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Carmichael: I think that certainly the fact that no federal registrars have not been sent into the 600 counties, and in fact, to have federal registrars, black people must begin demonstrating. You see, I don't go along with this feeling in this country that the government is doing so much, and I give the response and all the credit to the black people in this country who stood up and started to rebel. The rebellion brought the civil rights bill; a rebellion brought the voting rights bill. And that voting rights bill had to be passed because the government was aware of the fact that if they did not do it, black people would move to disrupt this country. And internationally, this country could not afford that. So, it had to pass the voting rights bill.

And that voting rights bill is very tricky. I mean, the literacy portion of that voting rights bill expires on August 6 of 1970; the literacy test can once again be used. What that means is that if a federal registrar is not in Mississippi, and black people do not vote, the Eastlands can move to reinstitute literacy tests by 1970 and be elected again ~~###~~ by 1972 because he will block black people from voting. And the government has not spoken to that issue. And they will not because Eastland happens to be a very powerful figure.

Interviewer: You are talking about a theory now that depends on its waiting until 1970. But speaking about terms of words. I'd like to ask you about your words. Last Wednesday you witnessed people registering to vote in Greenwood, Mississippi, in the county courthouse. That night, you told a rally of young people, "every courthouse in Mississippi should be burnt down

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tomorrow so that we can get rid of the dirt." My question is: How ^{do} ~~does~~ statements like this -- and you have made many of them which incite both your friends and your enemies -- how do they advance the cause of Negro equality?

Carmichael: Well, number one, the cause of black equality will be decided by black people because they are the oppressed; that is what we have to understand. And that it is a reality that all the courthouses in Mississippi are full of filth and dirt. There is no such thing as justice in any of those courthouses for black people, and the history of Mississippi speaks for itself. The history of the murders from Emmett Till all the way down to the shooting of Mr. Meredith two weeks ago speaks to Mississippi.

Interviewer: Can you register voters if you burn down courthouses? Are you going to burn down courthouses? I am talking about a literal translation of that; I wasn't talking figuratively -- I was talking about literally getting rid of the people inside those courthouses. Getting rid of the (unintelligible), sheriffs.

(Interviewer and Carmichael speaking simultaneously)

Carmichael: I mean literally burn down. That analogy is used in this country all over by many people.

Interviewer: You are talking in analogies, and yet when we ask you, you know, (laughter from Carmichael, I assume) are you a nonviolent person, or are you talking in violent analogies because you want to see a Negro violent uprising? Can you answer that question?

Carmichael: I told you the question of violence and nonviolence

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to me is irrelevant; that is not what I am working for. I am not organizing for riots. I am not organizing to make black people nonviolent. I am organizing for them to get the things they are supposed to have in this country -- that every other group has in this country --

(Interviewer and Carmichael speaking simultaneously; unintelligible)

Interviewer: But do you dismiss the matter as irrelevant?

Carmichael: I certainly do, Mr. _____.

Interviewer: Well, you may, but it doesn't make sense for you to do that. You tell me its irrelevant whether or not you get it by peaceful means or by use of force. You really don't want it that way, do you?

Carmichael: For _____ years we have been speaking to the issues in this country. This is the richest country in the world. It is a shame and a tragedy that in 1966, government officials can stand up on national television and say that the only hope for black people in this country is that they go into the army. That is tragic.

Interviewer: Who said that?

Carmichael: Many officials say it all the time.

Interviewer: Who?

Carmichael: (Slight pause) I can't think of any right now. You have never heard this statement that the hopes of black people - - -?

Interviewer: I know of no responsible spokesman who has ever said that.

Carmichael: You have never heard that the hope for black people is to go into the army? That this is the reason they leave the

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ghettos?

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Interviewer: I heard James Meredith say that his time in the air force did more for him than anything else.

Carmichael: That's Mr. Meredith. You should speak to him.

Interviewer: Mr. Carmichael, if the means are irrelevant, is there a condition under which you can see a usefulness in a Watts riot, or a Chicago riot?

Carmichael: I think that the tragedy of the Watts riot is that it was romanticized by white people and their articles about, "let's get Whitey," and that the other tragic thing about it was that the black people once have not benefitted. They were not able to use that riot to achieve anything at all. And that is tragic, because what it means is that it leaves an atmosphere for more riots.

Interviewer: If all means are legitimate, then, are you saying that this riot is a legitimate means?

Carmichael: I am not to define legitimacy; I will not say to the people in Watts who rioted that they have no right to riot -- that it is outside of the way to get whatever they want to get. They have the right to decide whatever means they want to use to achieve that, and that is up to them. They live in Watts; they live with rats and roaches; they live in Harlem; they live in Chicago; they live in the Delta in Mississippi; they earn \$3 a day; they are the poverty-stricken people, and they have to speak to (unintelligible), and I cannot and will not define for them that they must do it this way.

Interviewer: Mr. Carmichael, the Negro in this country is a minority. Are you telling us that it is possible that there could be a Watts riot -- there could be an uprising of Negroes when it

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would not be tragic?

Carmichael: That it would not be tragic?

Interviewer: Yes. Are you telling us the Negro can riot and take over? What do you mean by black power? Are you saying the Negro can take over parts of the country?

Carmichael: I am saying that in the counties where black people outnumber white people in the majority that they have the right to organize themselves politically and to, via the vote, seize the power. The Irish people did that in Boston; just like Jewish people do that in their communities; just like people did it in New York with LaGuardia; that black people in the areas where they outnumber racist whites, who rule the counties with terror, should take over their counties.

Interviewer: No one denies that right that the majority rule -- that's the democratic procedure.

Carmichael: Of course, no one denies it -- but the only difference is that when that majority is black.

Interviewer: We are trying to ask you a different question: If, by the democratic method, let us assume that there could be a fair election in Lowndes County, and let us assume that the Negroes could win under that democratic method, then let us assume that the government would not permit, locally, the taking over by the Negroes the power they won in a free election. Then, certainly, the government [federal] would have to step in. Then you would be justified. But you seem to be arguing that wherever the Negroes cannot get what they wish, they are entitled to use violent methods to achieve it.

Carmichael: On the contrary. I never said that. I am not saying that. When I talk about black power, I talk about black

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people in the counties where they outnumber them, to get together to organize themselves politically and take over those counties from the white racists who now run it. When I talk about black power, I talk about black people independently outside of the both parties since they do not now speak to the needs of the black people, organizing themselves first and if they decide to move into those parties, to move into those parties as a strong block vote so that they can force the politicians who do not now speak to their needs, to speak to their needs. The tragedy of the Watts riot is that in every report that came out of Watts, they agreed that black people were asking for Chief Parker to be dismissed. And one year later, Parker is still chief of police. If that were a Jewish community, if that were an Irish community, if that were an Italian community, the man would be gone, and I'm saying the reason why he is not gone is because black people in Watts do not have the power. They have to organize to get the power so that the people who work in their communities will respect and speak to their needs.

Interviewer: Would you agree, Mr. Carmichael, that the Watts riot and any violence like that is irrelevant and doesn't make sense?

Carmichael: I would not say that because I would be saying that the people in Watts are irrelevant and they don't make sense. I cannot say that. I would have to say that the white power structure of Watts is responsible; I will not shift the blame to black people.

Interviewer: Can we pinpoint here your feeling on violence? You say you are not advocating it, and yet you say means are

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irrelevant, violence or nonviolence are irrelevant, are you saying that is an acceptable form?

Carmichael: Mr. Hart, I am saying that people who participate in violent revolutions decide for themselves whether or not it is acceptable. I will not define it for them. When I myself decide to be violent, if that is my objective, then it becomes acceptable.

Interviewer: Have you decided to be violent?

Carmichael: I have not yet decided to.

Interviewer: Are you against the use of violence to achieve the objective of the Negro movement?

Carmichael: I have said that I am not against the use of violence; the people who participate in it must decide it. I work for the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee. The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee has never yet said it is working for violence.

Interviewer: You use language which seems to imply that you advocate violence --

(Interviewer and Carmichael simultaneously; unintelligible.)

-- you say that it is not your responsibility to define what you mean. It is your responsibility.

Carmichael: I just defined for you precisely what I meant --

Interviewer: You have not defined it; you said, "I stand aside," that's what you said.

Carmichael: No, I said that I cannot and I will not say that all black people in this country should be nonviolent, that they should lay down their arms. I will never say that. I will say that the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee accepts that -- nonviolence -- however it is defined, as a tactic. It is not a

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way of life for me; it never has been, it is not for most people in the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee. Some people in SNCC do accept it as a way of life.

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Interviewer: Mr. Carmichael, lets return to the subject of integration. You observed that it is an "insidious subterfuge for white supremacy." What do you mean by that?

Carmichael: Well, you will have to use the whole quotation. It has been quoted out of context. The entire quotation is that "integration is^{an}/insidious subterfuge for white supremacy when initiated by blacks." What I mean by that is that throughout this country since 1954, there has been a move of integration. That's all we talk about. And we ask for decent homes, for decent jobs, for decent schools, and the answer is to integrate. And we have to observe what that means.

Interviewer: One of the most distinguished American Negro leaders, Dr. Martin Luther King, advocates integration, and very strongly. Do you regard Dr. King as a stooge for the white establishment; for the white power structure?

Carmichael: I am going to define what I mean by integration and then Dr. King will define what he means. What has been happening in this country is that you have to (unintelligible) with black kids. For example: in the South, black children are told to go to white schools because they are good. They leave their black schools which they are told are bad. They have to go through mobs; they are being beaten to go and sit in a white school; They never speak of the issue of that black school which has in it now the rest of the students. In the North, you take the black kids out of the ghettos and bus them to white neighborhoods again to good white schools; they heighten in the inferiority

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process in those children who are left and that didn't go there. White kids never initiate a move for integration; they never move into black schools. White people who believe in integration in Westchester and/Hollywood -- they never move into Watts and into Harlem as if they truly believe in integration. And what I am saying is that what black people have to do is to, among themselves, develop their communities first. They must control their school board. And when they control their school board, they will have good schools. And then you can talk about integration. Then you can send white kids to black schools, and black kids to white schools. Until you can do that you have an insidious subterfuge for white supremacy. You have black people being asked to forsake their neighborhood and come into good neighborhoods because these are white neighborhoods. And that is an insidious subterfuge for white supremacy.

Interviewer: Mr. Carmichael, you are talking about black isolation. What can you show us that will indicate to us that if the blacks elect sheriffs in the South, control their own school boards, that that alone aside from the governmental process in this country, is going to give them good school systems and its going to get the tenant farmer a better job and money in his pocket?

Carmichael: It is not. I mean, I see the problem in this country as in economic problem in terms of black people being exploited. Now, there may be other people being exploited, but they [Negroes] are exploited, in that they don't have an economic base. We are the property-less people in this country, and we have to seek to regress that and the only means open to us now are political mean. So, we grasp that political power now and then we see how we can work with that political power to then achieve

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economic power. You are absolutely right; we never received our 40 acres and a mule.

Interviewer: Mr. Carmichael, if you are after economic power, how is the Negro in the Delta Mississippi who is looking to make \$500 a year -- what kind of handle does he have on any kind of economic power?

Carmichael: He doesn't; that's why he has to grab ahold of political power.

Interviewer: How do you propose to give it to him?

Carmichael: I don't. I say that he first grasps the political power that is now available to him; you grasp what you can. He now has at his disposal, via the voting rights bill, political power. He grasps that political power and he starts through that, seeing what terms he can use. / He controls the CAP board if he has the political power so that the chief of police in Indianola, who was the chief of police last year who beat up black people who is now the CAP director in Sunflower County, Mississippi, will not have that power; that Eastland does not have the power and cannot say the things he has said. For example, he said on April 22nd, and I quote: "I have objected to the sending of every federal registrar into Mississippi." Ordinarily, the Justice Department will inform me the day it plans to send a registrar into a Mississippi county, and I have been able to block some." Now, that shows that black people can't do anything about that.

(Interviewer and Carmichael speaking simultaneously;
unintelligible.)

Interviewer: How do you know that its true? There have been re istrars in the area.

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Carmichael: Number one, the voting rights bill was passed to get voting registrars into Birmingham. Southern Christian Leadership Conference had to demonstrate for rights; they had to get more black people beaten and more black people arrested, and then the country spoke to the issue. We have to do that all over. We have 600 counties where we don't have registrars; why don't they send them in there if Johnson is in fact sincere about it? Why doesn't he dispatch federal registrars where he knows that they need it, and they need it in the counties where they have not registered black people.

Interviewer: Mr. Carmichael, if you do gain political power in those counties where Negroes outnumber whites -- in all those counties -- if you gain the courthouse and clean out all the dirt, as you say, and elect sheriffs, and education boards, what kind of real leverage do you have in Mississippi and Alabama -- in states where you do have these counties -- against the remaining power structure on a state level? You are still a minority in this state. What kind of real leverage or equality can you gain from that kind of power?

Carmichael: Number one, first thing, is that for once, you are going to have political fallacy. Up to this point, black people in this country have only had moral force. They talked about moral power; they tried to get to the conscience of people so that the so-called "white liberals" (I use that word in quotes because I am not quite sure what it means) would then speak and say the poor black people need this, its a good thing morally. But black people themselves have not had the power to sit down. Now, if in fact that black people in Mississippi have all the Delta

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they can sit down with Johnson -- Paul Johnson -- and they can say, now, we represent X number of votes, we want this. They don't have that now. And that's what they have to get.

Interviewer: Mr. Carmichael, you had the chance to sit down with President Johnson at the White House Conference. Why didn't you?

Carmichael: Well, we outlined that very clearly. Number one, we felt that the problems of racism in this country do not exist in the black community, it exists in the white community, and that we didn't see why we needed a conference to talk about fulfilling our rights.

Interviewer: Why not take the opportunity to tell the president this?

Carmichael: We had other reasons. Number two, we felt that the president was calling that conference at a time when his international prestige/^{and} in this country was at a low ebb, and he was going to try to use us to try and build up his prestige, and we refused to be a part of that.

Interviewer: (Question asked unintelligible.)

Carmichael: That's correct.

Number three, he was discounting(?) unintelligible the war in Viet Nam which flagrantly violates the life of colored people. Its unintelligible to sit down and talk about human rights --

Interviewer: I sincerely regret that our time is up.

Carmichael: I also regret it.

Interviewer: Thank you for being here on Face the Nation.