The Negro Protest Against Segregation in the South

By Tilman C. Cothran

ABSTRACT: The Negro protest against segregated public accommodations and facilities is a reform social movement which seeks total desegregation of all facets of American life. The protest is analyzed in terms of ideology, tactics and strategy, leadership, and membership. Basic conclusions are that, although nonviolent direct action was a successful means of mass nonco-operation with segregation, tactics were dictated by expediency and not by a master plan of strategy; that protest organizations conflict over tactics and credit; that biracial committees have become an important tactic for diminishing racial tension; that all social classes are potential sources of members for protest organizations; and that Negro leaders no longer require white support. While the Civil Rights Act altered the structural basis of segregation, programs to improve the individual Negro are needed. Changes in the race relations pattern depend upon interracial communication, leadership unity in the white versus the Negro community, the willingness of Negroes to protest, and the racial climate within the community.

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The Negro American protest is sometimes referred to as a revolution. This notion strains the more scholarly and scientific uses of the concept. Social scientists generally classify social movements, on the basis of their ideological orientation, into "revolutionary" or "reform" types. When a movement seeks to overthrow the basic value system of a society, it is revolutionary. On the other hand, a social movement designed to extend basic values to another segment of the population is reform.

The protest is a generalized movement that is characterized by a number of specific movements. All the specific movements, with the exception of Black Muslims, coalesce in a common set of objectives—the total desegregation of all facets of American society.

This paper presents a succinct description and analysis of the Negro American protest against segregated public accommodations and facilities in terms of ideology, tactics and strategy, leadership and followers. The presentation focuses on some salient features of the protest in general and on specific movements in particular. Also, the concept "Negro American protest" does not imply a monolithic Negro thrust. White participation is an essential ingredient, although it is not emphasized here.

Ideology: The Quiet Battle

Any social movement requires explicit or implicit ideological justification and a group of intellectuals to provide its rationale.

The minimum function of an ideology . . . is to provide a rationale not only for the objectives but for the tactical and organizational means to those objectives—it must make a good case for what the Movement is trying to do and how it is trying to do it.3

The protest movements today are virtually without intellectuals to interpret goals, to explain tactics, to build new symbols, to reinforce old symbols, and to answer the "curious logic" of segregationists. With the possible exception of Martin Luther King, Jr., Kenneth B. Clark, and writers such as James Baldwin and Louis E. Lomax, little is being accomplished by Negro intellectuals. However, the tenets of the American Creed and the writings of white social scientists give legitimacy to the Negro protest and define its reform character.

Negroes seek an identity as individual Negro Americans with emphasis on being an American instead of an identity as American Negroes with emphasis on being a Negro. Segregation, as a form of human interaction, depends upon the monopoly of legal and extralegal force

concentrated in the hands of the dominant group and upon the obedience or submissiveness of the subordinated group. The necessity of reciprocal orientations in power relations has been prominent in the writings of Max Weber, Georg Simmel, Chester I. Barnard, Hans Gerth, and C. Wright Mills. In the past, Negroes accepted segregation due to fear, expediency, indifference, feelings of inferiority, and other motives.

However, the philosophy of non-violent direct action was developed by Martin Luther King, Jr., in the Montgomery Bus Boycott. Its historical roots spring from Christian theology and from the teachings and practice of Mahatma Gandhi. The underlying tenets of the philosophy are "love force," "self-suffering," "adherence to truth" or Stayagraha, and the "spirit of reconciliation." These concepts rationalize not only combating evil but also refusing to co-operate with it. Thus, the doctrine of nonviolent direct action means nonco-operation with injustice, persuasion, negotiation, and suffering, when necessary.

Nonviolent direct action proved uniquely appropriate as a tactic of mass nonco-operation with segregation. The dominant group had an opportunity to lessen discrepancies between values and practice without violent repression or repudiating equality. Negroes were able to assert their human dignity without initiating violence.

**Tactics and Strategy**

In the past, Negro Southerners, appealing to white paternalism, employed subtle protest tactics. They rarely revealed the discrepancy between their subjective feelings and accommodation to segregation. Thus, Negro accommodative tactics are deceptive. Duplicity in the acceptance of subordinated roles often characterizes the behavior of a minority group.

Historically, the Negro protest has suffered from the absence of a master plan of strategy. There have been tactics involving direct and indirect hostility, desegregation, or separation, dictated by expediency and not by design. Strategy has consisted of unco-ordinated tactics, shifting goal priorities, and limited specialization in organizational responsibilities or functions. When civil rights organizations co-operate, it is a loose confederation of organizations interested in limited objectives, such as public accommodations or voter registration. They have no master strategy for attacking the totality of segregation and for making gains meaningful to the Negro masses. To be sure, there are specific programs in each important area, but they represent a "shooting from the hip" approach. The Council of United Civil Rights Leaders established in 1963 as an informal alliance of civil rights executives has no power to allocate responsibilities or to censure.

Since national and local civil rights organizations are striving for the same goal—equal citizenship rights—extensive co-operation should be possible. However, this is not the case. There are rivalry, competition, and conflict. Often, there is strife, in varying degrees of intensity, over credit for gains, personality clashes between organizational leaders, and competition for membership and financial support. In spite of latent and overt hostility, two or more civil rights organizations have periodically worked on limited goals—National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) in Durham and Louisville; NAACP and Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) in Savannah; and SCLC,
CORE, Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), and NAACP in Danville.  

A major source of conflict centers around adult conservatism and youthful aggressiveness. Often, adults accept limited demonstrations and arrests, but become alarmed over mass demonstrations and arrests. While adult leaders counsel against and attempt to prevent much youthful aggressiveness, they condone it; they share or take credit for dramatic changes. Somewhat strained co-operation between youth and adults occurred in Memphis, Saint Louis, Charlotte, Richmond, and Atlanta.  

No particular tactic has been successful in all situations. Yet the civil rights organizations generally do not hesitate to apply a tactic that worked for others without regard to differences in local situations. Mass demonstrations and arrests in Albany and Birmingham failed to achieve their immediate goals. However, they were significant in forcing the Kennedy Administration to abandon its "legislative expediency policy" on civil rights and to introduce legislation in Congress.  

Many civil rights leaders become advocates of a particular tactic and see little or no virtue in others. Some youth leaders identified negotiation and legalism with adult leaders and rejected their efficacy. Direct action, the tactic par excellence for youth, won few changes; it made possible or strengthened negotiations and legal action.  

Civil rights gains were most extensive in those instances where two or more tactics were combined. Negotiations in conjunction with mass demonstrations or threat of such increased negotiators' bargaining power. Negotiations from a position of power make bargaining possible; otherwise, they are unilateral and paternalistic. In Nashville, the combination of mass demonstrations and economic boycott enhanced the effectiveness of each tactic. Not only were Negroes kept out of the central shopping area, but also many whites who feared the outbreak of violence stayed away.  

The Atlanta Summit Leadership Conference was a successful co-ordination of tactics and organizations. It coordinated the special skills and talents of nine direct action groups with planned negotiations and allocated specific programs to each organization; it presented white community leaders with the appearance of Negro unity; and it attempted to weld youth and adult leaders into a unified program of negotiations and nonviolent direct action. Thus, with few exceptions, the civil rights organizations were most successful when two or more organizations worked co-operatively, when two or more tactics were used, or when young and old leaders combined efforts.  

The Civil Rights Act of 1964 does not remove race as a motivating force in race relations. Where segregation had the support of local and state law, minority groups now enjoy support of federal laws; where protestors of segregation were law violators, segregators are now guilty of a civil or criminal offense. Thus, the effect of the Civil Rights Act on the strategy and tactics of protest organizations is that it substitutes legal action for nonviolent direct action. The ostensible widespread compliance with the Act suggests the hypothesis that large-scale change in race relations, which has the sanction of law and basic societal values, engenders less opposition than does token change.  

8 Ibid.  
9 Ibid., p. 16.
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The solution of major social problems requires changes in institutional patterns and in the individual. The Civil Rights Act changes institutional arrangements. By removing the glamour of mass demonstrations and arrests, protest organizations now face the prosaic task of eliminating the "gaps" between Negroes and whites. Equal access to public accommodations and facilities should facilitate narrowing the gaps in education, employment, life expectancy, housing, and participation in political processes. Of course, the most difficult area of change is housing. Without a solution to this problem, the gaps can be narrowed but not closed.

Individual Negroes need assistance in the development of new self-conceptions, elimination of the effects of cultural deprivation, and creation of higher orders of motivation and competitiveness. Most civil rights organizations, as presently constituted and staffed, cannot attack, in a professional manner, the social and psychological needs of the individual. New organizations and personnel are needed.

Some Specific Direct Action Movements

The Montgomery Bus Boycott (1955-1956) developed many specific tactics—mass meetings, nonviolent techniques, and legal-judiciary measures—which have become "standard operating procedures" of the Negro protest movement and of the white reaction.

The Greensboro sit-in initiated limited nonco-operation with segregation and made the system untenable. From Greensboro, the sit-ins spread rapidly to other cities in North Carolina and the South. In addition to the estimates in Table 1, at least 141 students and 58 faculty members were dismissed by Southern colleges and universities. Reports on the number of cities that desegregated lunch counters vary. Burns estimated that by the end of 1960, 126 cities had desegregated lunch counters and that by the end of 1961, the number was in the neighborhood of 200. There are no data, at the present time, on the extent of compliance with the Civil Rights Act. With few exceptions, desegregation of public accommodations and facilities is widespread throughout the South.

Sit-ins had far-reaching implications for race relations in the South and in the nation. The demonstrators were saying (1) that not all Negro Southerners were content with their lot; (2) that demand for change was not from outside; (3) that there were polite, educated Negro Southerners; (4) that cooperation with segregation was ending; and (5) that the time for freedom was now.

After much publicity, the freedom riders—seven Negro and six white—left Washington for a CORE conference in New Orleans. The riders encountered minor difficulties in Danville, Virginia; Charlotte, North Carolina; and Rock Hill and Winnsboro, South Carolina; and major difficulties in Anniston and

12 The National Urban League is an exception.
17 See The Student Protest Movement: A Recapitulation, op. cit.
Birmingham, Alabama; and Jackson, Mississippi.\textsuperscript{18}

Sit-ins wrought change when some members of the white community used their influence to open, on a token basis, public accommodations and facilities. Freedom rides brought social change when the federal government responded with the Interstate Commerce Commission (ICC) ruling eliminating segregated traveling facilities.

In early 1962, more than 55 biracial committees had been appointed. At least 225 of the 589 United States cities of more than 30,000 population now have such agencies.\textsuperscript{19} These committees have among their functions keeping open the lines of communication between the races, community self-survey action-oriented research, and negotiations.\textsuperscript{20} While Negros and whites do not always agree, these contacts provide a disagreement based upon misinformation and incipient understanding rather than a disagreement, characteristic of the past, based upon misinformation and ignorance.

**PROTEST LEADERSHIP**

While Negro ministers have lost their virtual monopoly on leadership, they are still the largest occupational category.\textsuperscript{21} Doctors, lawyers, and occasionally teachers and businessmen have assumed significant leadership roles. Students, because of the lack of interest in the status quo, and ministers, because of multiple clientele, are relatively free from white reprisals. Doctors and lawyers possess economic freedom, but frequently are limited by requirements of the profession. Because teachers have a single employer and businessmen are vulnerable to economic and legal pressures, they are seldom leaders of the protest.\textsuperscript{22}

Leadership conflict has been between local chapters and their national bodies,

\textsuperscript{18} Based on *The Freedom Ride* (Atlanta: Southern Regional Council, May 1961), Special Report.


\textsuperscript{20} See Killian and Grigg, *op. cit.*, p. 29.


\textsuperscript{22} Teachers in private colleges are exceptions.
between local chapters of different national affiliations, between factions within a given local chapter, between youth and adults, and between non-violent direct action leaders and the older Negro leadership. Some local chapters may not agree with the policies of their national leadership and either resist national policy or seemingly carry it too far. Thus, Robert Williams of the Monroe, North Carolina, NAACP was rebuked for advocating "defensive violence," and the Columbus, Georgia, branch of the NAACP was criticized for lack of a direct action program. In Jackson, SNCC and CORE, feeling that the NAACP demonstrations were too timid, withdrew support. In Louisville, tension between NAACP and CORE over tactics, finances, and credit developed and lingered long after the desegregation of downtown Louisville.23

Factionalism within local chapters often breaks into open conflict. The Atlanta Branch of the NAACP experienced conflict between the militant and conservative elements. The militant president offered to resign. In St. Louis, Charlotte, and Richmond, there was conflict between NAACP youth and adult leaders over militancy versus negotiations and credit. Birmingham provides an illustration of conflict between direct action leadership and established leadership outside of organizational ties. The old independent leadership criticized King's suggestion on the feasibility of resuming demonstrations.24

Membership

Objective studies on the social characteristics of protest participants are limited. With the exception of SNCC, generalizations about the social status of memberships in protest organizations are risky. Local conditions and available leadership contribute to status variations among the chapters of all protest organizations. The NAACP in suburban New York is upper class; in Youngstown, Ohio, it is dominated by labor; in Atlanta, it is middle-class oriented. CORE has substantial white liberal membership in the North; but in the South, with few white members, Negroes are from the middle and working classes. SCLC, with ministerial dominated affiliates, is mainly middle class with some affiliates having large upper-lower class memberships. SNCC consists of upwardly mobile students, many with working-class origins.

Negroes of all social classes are potential members of protest organizations in nearly equal proportions when approached in a concerted fashion. However, the lower-class Negro, often expressing more intense antiwhite attitudes than the middle- and upper-class Negroes,25 has a membership potential which is only beginning to be tapped. The lower class is now becoming involved in the protest.

On the whole, Negro civil rights leaders express rather accurately the hopes and aspirations of their constituents. In fact, it can be hypothesized that the readiness of the Negro masses to desegregate equals or exceeds that of their leadership. A possible explanation of this proposition is that Negroes lend verbal, emotional, and moral, if not always physical and financial, support to other Negroes in interracial competition or conflict. White endorsement no longer establishes Negro leadership; rather, white support is a decided handicap.26 To the extent that protest leadership is oriented to the aspirations

23 Meier, op. cit., p. 18.
of the masses, protest movements communicate an antisegregation attitude.

**Some Implications of the Protest**

Leadership unity and active mass support, in either the Negro or white community, emerged as central factors in the success or futility of specific protest movements. In Albany, Montgomery, Birmingham, and Jackson, for example, the white leadership and community maintained a high degree of unity. This partially explains why white demonstrators were treated harshly by police, courts, and the white public. Desegregation, in whatever quantity, seems dependent upon either liberal white people of power acting without pressure or white persons of power instigating change, even though reluctantly, in order to alleviate a crisis situation. On the other hand, the protest was least successful when Negro leadership was split or did not enjoy mass support.

While many white moderates interpret gradualism and tokenism as progress, Negro activists fail to get excited over this pattern of social change. It is precisely at this point that many Americans, Negro and white, fail to appreciate fully the nature of the movement and to understand the demand for change, now. Negroes say that over three hundred years of patience are enough and that civil rights as citizenship rights are not subject to ration. The demonstrations have fired the imagination and hope of millions of Negro Americans, who, envisioning individual freedom, can never again accommodate emotionally or intellectually with second-class citizenship. This observation is especially apropos for the thousands of young college and high school students who have engaged in demonstrations, spent time in jail, and displayed a willingness to sacrifice for freedom. Thousands of adult Negroes have found and are finding it tedious to continue co-operation with segregation.

Possibly the most obvious consequence emerging from the demonstrations is a validation of Myrdal's hypothesis that the race problem in America—the contradiction between the American Creed and practice—is a problem in the minds of white people. At the time Myrdal wrote, millions of Americans avoided conscience qualms by taking refuge behind the myths of "racial superiority" and "Negro satisfaction." Science does not support the racial superiority myth, and non-violent direct action shattered the "Negro satisfaction" or "good race relations" myth. Thus, the demonstrations made real the "American Dilemma" and cultivated the type of social climate in which meaningful communication between the races can take place.


28 See Pettigrew, *op. cit.*