

late May, 1964 - on failure of campaign to open white churches / rise of BLACK militancy + separatism / confusion about nonviolence + Christianity

These ideas discussed with William Davis

It was the next section, the conclusion, of the SNCC

pamphlet that marked the new dimension of things. The judging final testing time for nonviolence and for America had come-- this was the theme. The threat to America, as we knew it, was explicit; the threat to the Movement, as we knew it, was implicit. Mississippi was now the testing ground for the American-dream and for the Movement dream. The Freedom Summer of 1964 was the time of testing.

EKI 16.14

Now they (Black Mississippians) are faced with action by Mississippi government which literally threatens their existence as a people.

If the President and the Attorney General were placed, themselves, under a similar threat, what could be their reaction? If they had used every conceivable stratagem*, had faced police dogs and fire hoses and billy clubs and prison for the right to vote, and if all their efforts resulted only in a worsening of their condition, would they, would Americans generally, react with a strengthened conviction of the efficacy of such peaceful persuasion; or would they begin to think in pure terms of self-defense, peaceful or no, violent or nonviolent?

This question the President and the Attorney General must ask themselves, as

*Underlining mine, dark print in original. EK

must all Americans. As they answer it for themselves, so must they answer it for Negroes in Mississippi. As they would act for themselves, so must they act for those Negro^{es}.

Else let them not wring their hands and gnash their teeth and roll their eyes heavenward when Mississippi Negroes begin doing for themselves what their government has refused to do.¹³²

Even SNCC as it condemned Mississippi and America still re-
~~turn~~ turned to a ~~X~~Mississippi style Biblical imagery. But this reverse Golden Rule was frightening. The five of us read and re-read the paragraphs. Of course it was unfair for liberal Americans to insist the Movement remain nonviolent and use the proper channels of the political process--when white Americans would not be non-violent in a similar situation and when SNCC had exhausted almost all the possibilities of the "proper channels" and discovered they were a polluted fraud, only convenient words to mask the realities of ~~power~~ power. But we thought the Movement had always aspired to something more ^{than} this. Now it seemed that SNCC was threatening to become just like tra~~x~~ditional white America, just as self centered, just as violent. If this did happen then the Movement was over--and that very America we feared and resisted had won.

In our confusion, in our anguish ~~that~~ that night we had to

look at ourselves. What did we have, as pacifist veterans of the Movement, in common with our brothers in SNCC? What did we have, ~~as~~ as white men, in common with our brothers in America, even our brothers the President and the Attorney General? Were we using pacifism the same way the liberals were? Why were we so convinced that it was wrong for the Movement to use violence?

R I spoke of something that I had long feared in myself, something I knew was shared and understood by Jeannette and Jane. I sometimes wondered if my Movement activities were not some profound expression of love and loyalty to the South--was I urging non-violence on the Movement just so Black people would not respond in kind to white people, so that all the suffering, pain, and death would be on the Black side? As much as most white Mississippians despised people like us--were we still looking out more for the interests of our origins--our homes, our ~~and~~ families, our friends, even our old way of life? And in my Southern prejudice I did not realize how insulting such a remark was to Matt and Jeannine. For both quickly let us know that this was not just a problem for Southern whites in the Movement. They ~~had~~ had the same doubts about ~~the~~ ^{them} selves. Could it be that their advocacy of nonviolence was just a way of protecting all white America. They understood our feelings as Southerners--for they were common feelings for all Americans.

But there was no answer. All we could say was that, although our motives might be quite mixed or even quite bad, we did believe in nonviolence. All of us had expressed our pacifist concerns in other areas that had to do with national policy and not civil rights. Our pacifism in the Movement was consistent with ~~what~~ what we believed--but that did not mean that our common identity with other white Americans did not also blind us to the depth of frustration and anguish felt by Black Americans who had lived through the struggles of the Movement of these last few years. We just could not say. But the Movement itself had taught ~~taught~~ us to respect the highest aspirations and motives we did have. And we could not use self analysis or contrived complications to avoid the thing before us at the moment. The Movement also had ~~taught~~ ^{taught} us not to hide from confrontations. And the ~~suggestions~~ suggestions that it might be time for the Movement, for SNCC, to give up nonviolence was something we had to confront--and even to judge.

We could reach no firm conclusions--about what SNCC should do or about what we should do. ~~Our~~ Our feelings were that we would understand any turn towards violence, but could not condone or participate in it. We could not personally reject those who did. We could continue to preach nonviolence--but now the time had come to "lay our bodies on the line" and "demonstrate" in some way the

validity of nonviolence. And suddenly we realized how ignorant we really were. We knew so little of the history of nonviolence. We knew so little about the history of our own country and how we had reached such an impasse where our own democratic political instruments were ~~not~~^{now} so demonstrably invalid. But as we bemoaned such things we realized we were again ~~not~~ rationalizing. The truth of nonviolence, of the beloved community, of any of the things we believed did not depend on how well we understood or fulfilled those believes. But here we were and we had to do something.

We talked of some symbolic demonstration to affirm non-violence. We did not need to talk of ~~any~~ any thing like "sacrifice" for that was an uncomfortable word--and we knew that, violent or nonviolent, many of us and our friends faced ~~the~~ death that summer--or any time in Mississippi. Our conversation focused on ~~some~~ some way to stand up to Fear. Almost instantly we thought of the perfect symbol of fear in Mississippi--the Tank, ~~the~~ that awful, steel clad, barbed wire trimmed, robin's egg blue mastodon of death, that monster of hate. Almost all the Movement leaders had seen the thing on some visit to Jackson. The Mayor had boasted so much about the thing it bore his name--"Thompson's Tank." It was

often displayed to the delight of white citizens, to increase their enjoyment and confidence. It was often displayed in Black neighborhoods, to increase their intimidation and fear. The Movement tried to handle the fear of the tank, (and its shot guns, its tear gas launchers, its machine guns) by joking and fantasy. People ~~said~~ said that for every Black man killed by the Tank crew there would be a white magnolia emblem painted on the side. We had heard a dozen versions of how the tank might be halted or disabled. No one dared suggest a real molotov cocktail. But the constant conversation about the Tank in the Movement showed the real Terror ^{seen in} ~~symbolized by~~ the Tank, as symbol and as actuality. Yes, the five of us decided, if we could do something about the Tank--nonviolently--it would be a powerful demonstration to SNCC, to the people, and to the whole ^{Movement} ~~Movement~~ of the validity of nonviolence.

But we could think of nothing--of nothing we had the courage to do. We might put tacks in the road--useless. We might place our faithful Rambler in the road--useless. We might picket the Tank--useless, arrest would be instant. We reached two possibilities. One was an idea I suggested--that we sneak in at night and pour sugar in the gas tank or mess up the motor--something that often happened to SNCC cars. But to be caught doing that would only increase the fear in the people we were trying to inspire. NO

any attack on the Tank had to be serious. The Tank had to be destroyed. The best thing would be a fire bomb--and I did not have the slightest idea how to make such a thing. ⁴ But then Jeannine ~~Jannine~~ objected that as pacifists we ~~could~~ could not do something so violent as firebombing of property. That was too destructive; we had to do something constructive if at all possible. If we could not find that (and we couldn't in terms of the Tank, although Jane and Jeannette began to express fantasies about ~~it~~ stealing the tank and planting flowers and vines in it and using it for a playground, or sealing all the gun holes and using it for a swimming pool at some Community Center) then we still had no right to destroy property. ^{Kudzu} And so we argued the fine points of nonviolence (as if one of us did have the courage and the skill to firebomb the damned thing, even should we be able to sneak past the police guards.) I disagreed that it was against the ~~pr~~ principles of nonviolence to destroy ~~pp~~ property. But I was unsure of my own words. All I could think of was the thrill of hope--and delight--that would sweep through the Movement and the Black people of Mississippi with the happy news that the Tank had been destroyed, as if some fire-breathing dragon, the terror of the village, had been slain. St. George or Siegfried would have found a way--but we did not think of ourselves as either saints or heroes. We were just desperate

men and women who wanted to help our friends, to confound our enemies, and be ~~true~~^{true} to the beliefs that gave meaning to our lives. We were surprised that we could disagree over something as little (if it was that little) as the violent destruction of the most evil, most violent piece of property we knew-- the Tank. The pain of not agreeing with each other was great. It made us very sad. ^PThe pain of admitting we did not know what to do was awful. But we finally decided (never quite agreed) that firebombing the tank was not the proper act--either because it was not possible or because it was not proper. One of the most distasteful things about the deed would be the secretive nature of the act--and much of the strength we had found in nonviolence had been in the very openness of ~~it~~ all our demonstrations. We could not see nonviolence as a valid underground or guerilla movement. But we decided that our problems again might just be ourselves, and fear of letting go of the clean public demonstrations and nonviolent tactics which we knew, for the dreadful uncertainty, anonymity, and loneliness of the underground.

O^ur discussion of tactics led us to examine much of the recent history of the Movement. We looked at the unsuccessful campaign ~~to~~ to desegregate the white churches of Jackson. Perhaps we should have been more active here. We just knocked on the doors; we were very careful never to actually disrupt a worship service--although our very presence--and forced absence from the service was disrupting ~~the~~ the consciousness of the white people. This ~~is~~ is what we wanted.

But what if we had actually disrupted a worship service? Would not that possibly have had more impact than just knocking at the door? What if I had forced my way past the ~~g~~ usher-guards and rushed into some church at Christmas or Easter and began reading scripture to the people-- or preaching? So we have offended most people, but was it possible that we might have reached a few more than by our patient year long unsuccessful effort at the church door? And what right did white Christians have to observe the great holy days and festivals of the faith as if the life of Mississippi was normal? But we refused to do this--out of an understanding of the philosophy of nonviolence and out of considerations of good strategy, so I told myself and others. Perhaps the reasons we never pressed half this far, the reason we were "satisfied" with the almost fifty arrests at the church door, was that I, personally, was afraid--~~not~~ not of the violence but of the opinion of the white ~~of~~ Christians of Mississippi. I did not want them to think me mad. We could not say whether our tactics had been valid or not--all we could say was that we did as we thought best. And that any failure of non-violence should not be laid to our lack of skills with the instruments of ~~of~~ nonviolence. But still, the failures of all the Movement, to show more power, more successs, or even to

be more consistent in the use of nonviolence was certainly a reason why SNCC and others were now questioning everything.

~~We talked~~

We talked of the times in the past year when we ourselves had thought that the Movement had made a dangerous error in refusing to use nonviolence--or anything else. At crucial times the Movement had done nothing--surely that was why so many people now felt that nonviolence had nothing to offer in the final crises. One such time was the murder of Medgar Evers. The non-violent demonstrations staged in Jackson to protest that (which John Salter and I had led) had been stopped by the NAACP, and ~~and~~ Martin Luther King and others who advocated nonviolence were not willing, because of internal Movement^t politics, to become involved in the Jackson situation. So there was no significant response to the death of a leader. White Mississippi must have been surprised--and learned how effective such a thing as killing a leader could be. ^{from failure} Another example immediately came to mind for all of us. After the slaughter of the little girls in the church at Birmingham there had been no significant nonviolent response. A mass march by a nonviolent army across Alabama had been mentioned. But nothing was done at the time in Birmingham, or since. And the discussion within SCLC and other groups ^{in summer of 1963} about

massive nonviolent disruption of normal life in Washington (such
 as ^{Civilian} ~~Gandhi~~- Indian type actions of placing our bodies on the
 airport runways, the rails, the roads, etc.,) until ~~was~~ the
 nation accepted responsibility for ~~approved~~ securing civil
 rights, had quickly disappeared when President Kennedy seemed
 so committed to a new law (a very mild one) with no major help
 for voting, but we accepted even this with great praise instead
 of disappointment or disgust). Instead of protest and nonviolent
 action we had the Movement Picnic of the March on Washington; only
 the censored speech of John Lewis of SNCC touched on reality that
 day--and we needed both reality and the dream. ^R Now that the civil
 rights bill was being stalled by a Southern filibuster there was
 again talk of a massive campaign of civil disobedience to show
 that, just as the Senators were disrupting the business ~~and~~ of
~~progress~~ the Congress, we could disrupt the business of the
 nation. We always backed down. Even our acts of civil disob-
 edience were rare--and usually explained as the violation of
 an evil Southern court or law and not the true law--and then
 we appealed ^{our "innocence"} to the courts, ~~and~~ ~~just~~ ~~as~~ We filled the jails--only
 to get out on bail as soon as possible. Perhaps we had only
 just begun to learn about the possibilities of nonviolence; it had
 only been tried for a few years. But the impatient Americans
 of SNCC (as Dr. Lohia, our Indian friend, had suggested) were



full of doubt. If the Movement abandoned nonviolence then all of us were to blame--and all America which had refused to respond.

There did seem one thing we could do about Thompson's Tank in Jackson. If it was ever used again against civil rights demonstrators or the Black community we could place our bodies on the line in front of it. We could not know till the time came if any of the five of us in that room would have the sense, or the courage, or the power to do it.

There were no answers. All we had was each other--and whatever brothers ~~belonged~~ ^{belonged} in the beloved community. Our band of brothers was wide, our circle full--but we needed to feel the presence and the faith in that fellowship of all the men who held that dream who had ever lived--or ever would. The world was so much bigger than SNCC--or Mississippi--or the Movement.

The Herrons had just received an airmail package--their old cat from Philadelphia days, almost a year earlier. Friends had sent the cat to Mississippi--and a litter of kittens. Matt and Jeannine gave two kittens to us, yellow lion like creature. Jane named them Bayard and Phillip (for Rustin and Randolph), the other kitten, a fragile multicolored thing, she named Pietro Spina.*

* character in Bread and Wine by Ignacio Silone, popular source and some Toledo students.