Essay Review

Students and Civil Rights in the 1960s

Doug McAdam. *Freedom Summer*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1988. Pp. x, 333.

Seth Cagin and Philip Dray. *We Are Not Afraid: The Story of Goodman, Schwerner, and Chaney and the Civil Rights Campaign for Mississippi*. New York: Macmillan, 1988. Pp. x, 613.

Mary King. *Freedom Song: A Personal Story of the 1960s Civil Rights Movement*. New York: William Morrow, 1987. Pp. 592.

Taylor Branch. *Parting the Waters: America in the King Years, 1954–63*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1988. Pp. xii, 1064.

The black civil rights movement of the early 1960s was a mass movement that used activist tactics, was committed to a philosophy of nonviolence, and sought racial integration and equality as its goal. By the middle of the decade, this movement had achieved a considerable measure of success. Race segregation in America, while not yet abolished, had been stripped of the institutional legitimacy it had previously enjoyed. In the process, America's culture and politics were transformed.

After 1965, people set in motion by the civil rights movement went off in a number of different directions. The nonviolent, integrationist perspective declined and was displaced by black nationalist tendencies that used the slogans "black liberation" and "black power." The civil rights movement also spawned New Left radical movements among white, college-age youth. Several recent books about the civil rights movement help us to understand these events and to see the relationship between the civil rights movement and the emergence of student radicalism in the 1960s.

Freedom Summer by sociologist Doug McAdam is a follow-up study of one thousand college students who, during summer vacation 1964, volunteered to go to Mississippi to help the civil rights movement. The book draws a composite portrait of these students' lives after they returned and concludes that the Mississippi Summer Project was the decisive experience leading to the formation of the New Left and the counterculture of the sixties. Three assertions make up what McAdam calls "the central theme of this book." First, "Freedom Summer," McAdam says, "served both as the organizational basis for much of the activism of the Sixties as well as an important impetus for the development of the broader counterculture that emerged during the era." Second,

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he claims that the volunteers formed a "political and cultural bridge . . . between the Southern black struggle and the college campuses of the North and West. They were pioneers in an important diffusion process by which the ideologies, tactics and culture symbols of the Southern civil rights movement were introduced to the population—Northern white college students—that was to dominate the activist politics for the remainder of the era." Finally, McAdam believes that "the ties [the students] established with other volunteers laid the groundwork for a nationwide activist network out of which the other major movements of the era—women's, antiwar, student—were to emerge" (pp. 6–7).

This analysis, I believe, is largely correct—particularly McAdam's identification of the civil rights movement as the root from which the sixties radical movements branched. Others treat civil rights as one of several important influences. McAdam sees it as the single, decisive influence. *Freedom Summer* is also correct to focus on the summer of 1964 as the moment of change.

I disagree, however, with his interpretation of the process. In McAdam's view, the white college students who went to Mississippi were influenced by the black movement and then carried that influence back to their northern campuses. Because their number was sufficiently large, they constituted a critical mass and became the seed from which the New Left grew.

In my view, the experiences of the Mississippi volunteers were just *one* of many channels through which "ideologies, tactics and culture symbols of the Southern civil rights movement" diffused north. By 1964, northern students had a four-year history of involvement in civil rights, and this had already influenced the formation of a number of radical student networks. I have seen no evidence that networks explicitly created or maintained on the basis of associations formed in Mississippi in 1964 were centrally significant.

Nonetheless, *Freedom Summer* is interesting and useful. The portrait McAdam draws of the returned Mississippi volunteer is fairly accurate. He tells us that most continued to be social activists through the 1960s and beyond. They then "struggled through the seventies to reconcile the personal and political lessons of Mississippi with an America that was increasingly apolitical and individually oriented. Their efforts to do so mark their lives during the seventies as much more continuous with the sixties than popular accounts suggest" (p. 200).

The Mississippi volunteers make up one clearly defined segment of a larger group of students who were radicalized in the 1960s and who ended up dedicating their lives to the social movements of their time. The volunteers make a particularly good sample for studying because inclusion is clear-cut—based on what people actually did, not upon

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someone's judgment of their beliefs. The picture he paints is a good representation, not just of the Mississippi volunteers, but of a larger group of serious young political radicals of the 1960s.

Mary King's book, *Freedom Song: A Personal Story of the 1960s Civil Rights Movement*, provides a good counterpoint to McAdam's study. Where he portrays the composite impact of the civil rights movement on one thousand white students, she tells how one young white woman was drawn into the civil rights struggle and how it changed her life.

Freedom Song starts in 1962 when Mary King, a religious white student, was in her senior year at Ohio Wesleyan University. On Easter break, she joined ten students and a professor on a "study tour" of the southern civil rights movement. On the trip, she visited the Atlanta office of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). It was love at first sight, and King decided she wanted to work for the organization. After graduation later that year, Mary King moved to Atlanta where she eventually became a mainstay of the SNCC communications department—handling press relations and contact with Friends of SNCC organizations in the North.

SNCC was the most important and most militant of the organized forces driving the southern civil rights movement. Mary King's book allows us to see the personalities and dynamics of SNCC through the eyes of a single, well-placed insider.

Most of SNCC's staff started out opposing the idea of inviting large numbers of northern white volunteers to Mississippi in 1964. There was fear that northern white students would be too pushy and would try to take over. Robert Moses, SNCC's Mississippi Project director, convinced the organization to accept the plan. King describes attitudes on SNCC's staff just before the volunteers arrived:

> With a thousand volunteers, we could turn the eyes of the country on the state of Mississippi and its legal reign of terror. Some accused us of using the 99 percent white volunteers as cannon fodder. Yet we were not asking the volunteers to do anything that the staff wasn't already doing or to take risks that we weren't already taking. . . . With the strength of numbers—and paradoxically by capitalizing on the double standard and racism of the news media that found whites more newsworthy than blacks—we hoped to attract human and material resources and bring the case of black people living in a vestigial system of slavery to the attention of the nation and the world (p. 369).

Those who volunteered for the project knew it would be dangerous. Racially motivated violence was typical of Mississippi in the same way that clogged freeways were typical of Los Angeles. Over the summer, SNCC would be running a statewide voter registration campaign and

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organizing a political challenge to the militantly segregationist Mississippi Democratic party. Ostensibly, the role of the student volunteers would be to canvass for black voter registration, to teach in freedom schools, and to help staff offices coordinating SNCC's Mississippi activities. But as Mary King and everyone else who has written about the Mississippi Summer Project reports, the real reason students had been called to Mississippi was to bear witness. It was certain that a number of the volunteers would experience racist violence first hand. Recruited from elite universities, from wealthy and influential homes, their presence might finally force the nation to pay attention and act.

No one could have guessed how quickly this strategy would be affirmed. On 21 June 1964—only forty-eight hours after the first group of students entered the state—three young volunteers disappeared. Two were white; one was black. They were stopped on the highway, abducted, and then murdered—victims of a wide-ranging conspiracy that included members of two klaverns of the Ku Klux Klan, the Neshoba County Sheriff's Department and probably Mississippi Highway Safety Patrolmen as well.

We Are Not Afraid: The Story of Goodman, Schwerner, and Chaney and the Civil Rights Campaign for Mississippi by Seth Cagin and Philip Dray gives a detailed account of the murders, the subsequent investigation, and the incidents surrounding them. This well-written book is a perfect antidote to the false impressions created by the recent movie *Mississippi Burning*. Anyone whose interest was piqued by the movie, but who wants the true story, should read *We Are Not Afraid*.

The authors make good use of trial transcripts and FBI files (code named "Miburn" for "Mississippi burning") recently released under the Freedom of Information Act. They present credible, detailed information about the investigation—what really happened, how the FBI, the federal government, and the state of Mississippi actually responded. For this alone, the book would be valuable.

We Are Not Afraid, however, does much more. It uses the murders to tell the story of SNCC and the southern civil rights movement from its beginning at the Greensboro sit-downs to the movement's climax in the summer of 1964 and then to its denouement at the Democratic party's national convention in Atlantic City.

I was a student civil rights activist in Berkeley, California, during the period covered. I knew the story, not from books or even primarily from magazines, newspapers, or TV. I knew it word of mouth—from the movement grapevine. When I read *We Are Not Afraid*, it all came back. Over the years, I had lost (or maybe never securely held) the full factual basis upon which many of my opinions and conclusions about these events were based. This book put it back together.

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Another important new book also provides background to these events: *Parting the Waters: America in the King Years, 1954–63* by Taylor Branch. It organizes its discussion of the civil rights movement around the role of Martin Luther King, Jr., during the period from the Montgomery bus boycott to the assassination of John F. Kennedy. This book provides deep insights into the role of the African-American church in the civil rights movement—especially the Baptist church. Making use of a mass of new source material, it also lays bare the cynical machinations of Robert Kennedy's Justice Department and J. Edgar Hoover's FBI.

Although official American myth tells us that the federal government under John F. Kennedy supported and encouraged the civil rights movement, the contrary case is massively documented (although Branch attempts to put the Kennedys in the best light the evidence permits). The Kennedys always tried to appear to be supporters of civil rights. In private, however, they acted to demobilize and discourage the movement. Each Kennedy initiative, it appears, was defined with a single consistent motive—how to avoid political embarrassment while acting to keep the civil rights movement from gaining the kind of momentum it would need to overthrow race segregation.

On the last page of the book, Taylor Branch reports on an interview that Martin Luther King gave to a graduate student upon returning home from the Kennedy funeral. "When the student asked about the effects of Kennedy's death, King said it was a blessing for civil rights." Quoting from King's reply, he continues:

> "Because I'm convinced that had he lived, there would have been continual delays, and attempts to evade it at every point, and water it down at every point," he said, almost brightly. "But I think his memory and the fact that he stood for this civil rights bill will cause many people to see the necessity for working passionately . . . So I do think we have some hopeful days ahead" (p. 922).

Parting the Waters then concludes:

> The reaction to Kennedy's assassination pushed deep enough and wide enough in the high ground of political emotion to enable the movement to institutionalize its major gains before receding. Legal segregation was doomed. Negroes no longer were invisible, nor those of normal capacity viewed as statistical freaks. In this sense, Kennedy's murder marked the arrival of the freedom surge, just as King's own death four years hence marked its demise (p. 922).

While the Kennedy assassination was certainly an important event in the history of civil rights, I disagree with Branch that it was the decisive turning point marking the end of one period and the beginning of the next. In Branch's view, the public's reaction to Kennedy's assassination doomed segregation—a victory that was then institutionalized in the Civil

Rights Act of 1964. The Civil Rights Act of 1964, while very important, was not the watershed. The new law failed on the single most important of all civil rights concerns—an effective mechanism to secure black voting rights. A whole new wave of mass mobilizations would still be needed.

The turning point came a year later and can be marked by any of the following events: SNCC's 1964 Mississippi voter rights campaign, the 1964 Democratic party convention, the 1965 Selma, Alabama, marches, or the passage of the Voting Rights Act. From 1960 until the autumn of 1964, the activist, nonviolent, integrationist perspective remained at the center of the civil rights movement. Then, after passage of the Voting Rights Act in 1965, the influence of this perspective waned and Martin Luther King became increasingly isolated.

Parting the Waters is an excellent book. In it, we see the frightening array of forces that conspired to block King's emergence as an effective black leader capable of uniting the movement. The book also gives us a good sense of the movement's ebbs and flows and its dynamics. Branch has a wonderful feel for the movement's building process through the major events and turning points. Although over nine hundred pages in length, *Parting the Waters* is a hard book to put down.

The book does not focus on the role of students in the movement, but rather on Martin Luther King, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), and the role of preacher politics in movement leadership. Still, *Parting the Waters* provides ample evidence that black students were always the driving force in the southern civil rights movement and that *their* organization, SNCC, was consistently the most militant of the civil rights groups and the one that constantly drove events forward.

SNCC was formed in 1960 as the organization coordinating a wave of lunch counter sit-ins to protest segregated public facilities. In that year, seventy thousand black students were mobilized in one hundred southern communities. Tens of thousands of northern students—black and white—picketed Woolworth and Kress stores in their own communities in sympathy. In the North as well as in the South, these events laid the organizational foundation for a decade of youth activism to follow.

This is where *Freedom Summer* gets off track. While McAdam correctly documents the influence of the southern civil rights movement on northern student radicalism, he mistakenly asserts that the Mississippi Project, summer of 1964, "marked the first widespread entrance of young whites into the movement" (p. 7). Because he fails to acknowledge fully the depth of civil rights participation by northern students prior to the summer of 1964, he is drawn to the false conclusion that returning volunteers were the primary agency through which the civil rights ethic diffused north.

The first large northern student protest that could be considered distinctively "radical" or "New Left" happened in May 1960. Students

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from Berkeley and other San Francisco area campuses protested hearings held by the McCarthyite House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) at San Francisco City Hall. Thousands participated in a direct confrontation with the police and with federal authorities. It sent a signal that was picked up across the country and helped make Berkeley a magnet attracting students with radical leanings.

At first glance, this event appears to have nothing to do with civil rights. The example of Greensboro, however, legitimated student protest at a time when—for over a decade—all forms of unconventional social behavior had been strictly taboo. More specifically, organizing networks that had been established to run and coordinate the Woolworth sympathy pickets were available to organize the HUAC protest. Maurice Isserman in *If I Had a Hammer* quotes a participant, Betty Denitch: "The fact that all these people had already been out picketing Woolworth's [and] understood that kind of politics, meant that when the call goes out let's picket City Hall, then, bang, instead of getting a couple of dozen regulars out, you got thousands."[1]

A handful of northern students with ties to the Socialist party had an organizational connection to the southern civil rights movement through the black pacifist socialist, Bayard Rustin. In New York, Chicago, California, and other places, beginning in 1960, these young socialists formed an organizing center for activities in support of civil rights. As a result, their organization, the Young People's Socialist League (YPSL) grew quickly to several thousand members. Factional conflicts in the parent organization soon killed YPSL. Its remnants, however, went on to form a number of networks that advanced student civil rights activism and then student New Left radicalism.

Children of parents who had once been members or sympathizers of the Communist party formed other early networks active in and energized by civil rights. This group was particularly influential in New York and in California. In the San Francisco area, Communist party-influenced youth were an important catalyst in the movement. In 1963, an organization they created—the Ad Hoc Committee to End Discrimination—launched a major round of demonstrations at Mel's Drive-ins and at the Sheridan Palace Hotel. For thousands of San Francisco and Berkeley students, these protests were a first experience with mass arrest tactics. They introduced the local civil rights movement to a new, more aggressive, and confrontational activist style.

Independent New Left organizations also began to grow directly from the civil rights experience starting in 1960. Students for a Demo-

[1] Maurice Isserman, *If I Had a Hammer—: The Death of the Old Left and the Birth of the New Left* (New York, 1987), 187.

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cratic Society (SDS) had its first public event that spring at the University of Michigan. It was a conference titled "Human Rights in the North," and its draw was southern students who had come to tell about their experiences in the sit-in movement. From its very beginning, SNCC heavily influenced SDS.

At the start of the decade, SDS leaders, independent civil rights activists, and young people influenced by various flavors of Old Left radicalism set up organizations and networks that were later to play a significant role in the formation of the New Left. Following the Freedom Rides in 1961, however, the southern civil rights movement became temporarily less visible. Northern student interest and involvement declined, and as a result, student radicalism again retreated to the margins of northern campus life.

In 1963, the tempo of the southern civil rights movement picked up. A SNCC-led project made a breakthrough in Greenwood, Mississippi. Black citizens there continued attempting to register to vote despite a sustained campaign of racist violence and intimidation. The national press again started following civil rights. A *New York Times* reporter covering a racial incident in Greenwood quoted a member of a menacing white mob saying: "We killed two-month-old Indian babies to take this country. And now they want us to give it away to the niggers" (Cagin & Dray, p. 193).

Soon afterwards, Martin Luther King began leading demonstrations in Birmingham, Alabama. This became the most massive and dramatic of all the southern direct action civil rights campaigns. TV nightly news was then just evolving, and for the first time, civil rights demonstrations were shown on national television, night after night.

Young students were the backbone of the Birmingham movement. Thousands marched for freedom every day. They filled all the jails, and kept coming—wave after wave. Fearless and determined, these students were no longer willing to tolerate the status of inferiority that had been imposed upon their parents. On the other side, TV showed images of Bull Connor, snarling police dogs, water cannons, and angry white mobs. Under Birmingham's impact, the civil rights movement intensified everywhere in the country. In ten weeks there were 758 demonstrations, and 14,733 arrests in 186 American cities.

White northern baby boomers, in their mid-teens, saw on television thousands of members of their generation marching for freedom and going to jail. The image of snarling police dogs and fire hose attacks was, for many, a first introduction to American race relations. Six months later, this image of racist violence and the image of the Kennedy assassination would blur. The rank and file of 1960s' New Left student activism would later be recruited from this group.

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Among northern college students, sympathy and support for civil rights took off after Birmingham. At Berkeley, nine thousand students attended a speech by black author James Baldwin during the Birmingham demonstrations. A few months later, eight thousand heard Malcom X.[2]

Although the time was ripe for a new wave of student civil rights activism, SNCC, the most popular civil rights group among students, was not encouraging student civil rights activism outside the South. Its main strategy in the North was to channel emotions aroused by the southern struggle into fund raising and political support for the southern movement. SNCC feared that civil rights activism in the North would alienate potential supporters. Therefore, its northern operatives concentrated on raising money and political influence for the southern movement. As a result, they often had little to say to the ordinary student whose passions were inflamed and who wanted to "do something."

The Congress On Racial Equality (CORE), a civil rights organization with a northern base, had a different approach. CORE believed that emotions aroused by southern civil rights struggles and injustice should be directed into the fight for justice in one's own community.

The 1963 Birmingham demonstrations occurred at the end of spring semester—not a good time for launching demonstrations with a college student base. Over the summer, however, civil rights groups made plans to mobilize students when they returned in the fall. Then, at the start of fall semester, 1963, a racist bomb blast at the Sixteenth Street Baptist church in Birmingham murdered four young school girls. The next day, CORE national director, James Farmer, spoke at an open air CORE rally on the Berkeley campus called to build support for the San Francisco Bay Area civil rights movement. "The violence of Birmingham," Farmer declared, "is blood brother to racial discrimination as it exists in San Francisco and Berkeley and all over the country."

> I suggest to you my friends, that . . . the good people who would not think of throwing a bomb, who are horrified by the deaths of the kids in Birmingham—these good people with their ordinary prejudices, who move out of a community when a negro moves in, who fail to hire a negro in their business—these persons are greater and stauncher and stronger defenders of the system of segregation than the canine corps of Alabama that hurls bombs. (Source: TV video footage from rough cut of Movie: *Berkeley in the Sixties*.)

Beginning in the fall, San Francisco area civil rights groups staged a series of demonstrations against racial discrimination in employment in which Berkeley students were important participants. *The Spiral of*

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[2] Max Heirich. *The Spiral of Conflict: Berkeley, 1964* (New York, 1971), 85.

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Conflict, a book about the Berkeley student movement by Max Heirich, reports that the "campus newspaper for the fall of 1963 gave major front-page space to race controversies on an average of three out of five days in the week that semester." The demonstrations reached their high water mark in March 1964 with a protest at San Francisco's Sheraton-Palace Hotel.

> In the next few weeks literally thousands of students took part. More than nine hundred persons were arrested in the various Sheraton-Palace demonstrations, including about two hundred students enrolled at the Berkeley campus. With this momentum—and the existence of hundreds of martyrs for a popular cause—the campaign swept on toward "Automobile Row" in San Francisco and toward the Bank of America. More arrests followed.[3]

White college students, in large numbers, joined the civil rights movement. They marched, clapped hands, sang freedom songs, went to jail—and in the ecstasy of the struggle, became committed. Civil rights activism was winning a substantial base at Berkeley.

Though it played little or no role in civil rights struggles outside the South, SNCC remained the civil rights group northern students most respected. When SNCC issued a call for white students to come south in 1964 and help, one thousand responded. The murder of Chaney, Schwerner, and Goodman was a turning point in national white public opinion and dealt Jim Crow a serious blow. It also demonstrated depth and sincerity of commitment on the part of the student volunteers. Though the lynching of the three young civil rights workers had occurred in June—at the start of the summer—only a handful of the students were frightened off by it. They stayed in Mississippi the whole summer and continued working under difficult circumstances.

Though the murders aroused America, people in the movement recognized that it was only because two of the three murdered volunteers were white. If just Chaney had been murdered, it wouldn't have been such a big deal. *We Are Not Afraid* is introduced by a quote from Ella Baker, SNCC's godmother, summing up this feeling: "Until the killing of a black mother's son becomes as important as the killing of a white mother's son, we who believe in freedom cannot rest."

At the end of the summer, the Mississippi movement presented itself to the Democratic party national convention at Atlantic City and was rebuffed. SNCC, CORE, and the young civil rights radicals felt the movement had been betrayed—by candidate Lyndon Johnson; by the politicians; by the NAACP, the Urban League, and other civil rights moderates;

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[3] Ibid., 86, 87.

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and by the leaders of the mainstream liberal organizations. A chasm opened that would continue to widen through the rest of the decade and would find expression both in the Black Power movement and in the conflict over the Vietnam War.

After the convention, attitudes were never the same—not in Mississippi, not in Berkeley. Mary King describes the SNCC reaction: "Because of the rejection of the [Mississippi Freedom Democratic party] challenge, some of us were bitterly disenchanted with the prospect of changing the American political system that excluded blacks from governance" (p. 437). She continues, "The SNCC staff became disillusioned, not only with other civil rights groups, but also about the capacity of existing political institutions for reform. Thus began SNCC's move toward independent and separate institutions. . . . we started to speak of the radical restructuring of society" (p. 349).

San Francisco Bay Area civil rights activists responded with anger to the Atlantic City betrayal. Hundreds had gone through court trials that summer for arrests the previous year. Although most Berkeley students were away for the summer, the Berkeley campus CORE remained highly active—marching, picketing, negotiating nondiscrimination agreements, staging sit-ins, working on voter registration, and more. Everyone was ready for a renewed round of mass demonstrations when the students returned in the fall.

The university was also ready. At the start of fall semester, the campus administration announced a new set of rules governing the activities of student organizations at Berkeley. Business leaders had been complaining that the Berkeley campus was being used by civil rights organizations as a "base for attacks on the community." State politicians demanded the university discipline students arrested in protests. In response, the administration worried funding might be in jeopardy and tried to clamp down on the students—much like administrators had done at several southern black colleges during the 1960 sit-ins.

The newly announced rules banned all activities on campus whose purpose was to organize students to participate in off-campus social or political action or to take a particular stand on an off-campus issue. Campus organizations rallied in opposition. Energies and commitments targeted for civil rights activism went instead into the Berkeley Free Speech Movement (FSM), the most massive and sustained campus rebellion the country had ever seen.

By December, Berkeley students had won, and in the process, the majority of the campus community came to embrace activism. Many wanted to direct this new energy back into the civil rights struggle. The civil rights movement, however, had already changed—both nationally and locally. The black militants and activists no longer wanted help from

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white students. Black moderates, on the other hand, wanted nothing to do with militancy and activism. Committed white civil rights activists, however, were no longer able to return easily to mainstream society. By then they had become too sensitized and hostile to its values, its prejudices, its lame excuses masquerading as good cause. At exactly that moment, the Vietnam War started heating up. Across the country, the same student activist networks that had been emotionally involved with civil rights now became active against the war. There was a cadre of experienced organizers, a mass base with activist sympathies, and a range of existing youth-based radical organizations and networks.

A history of involvement in civil rights had kindled intense hatred for the racism, false patriotism, and national chauvinism being used to pump up war sentiment. War opponents questioned America's right to dictate to Asians how they should live. They saw the imperialistic foreign policy that had drawn our country into the war as little more than a dressed up version of Mississippi racism. (At the same time, I suspected that President Johnson was pushing the war to try and regain support and affection from racists who still hated him for the civil rights concessions he had given blacks.)

The student forces poised to continue the civil rights struggle had a new place to go. In Berkeley, the anti-Vietnam War movement was a simple extension of civil rights activism. At the start, it was the same people, the same networks, the same political and organizational style. A new line of development had begun that would reverberate across the country and change American politics and culture.

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