

## Investigating HUAC Charges that the SNCC was Communist

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In news footage, Southern suppression of the 1960s civil rights movement is portrayed by vicious police dogs and powerful fire hoses brutalize peaceful activists. Although these images show Southerners' attempts to stifle civil rights activists, they do not provide a complete picture of the South's opposition to the civil rights movement. The more subtle tactics used by Southern Congressmen caused greater impediment to the movement than physical assaults. By examining Southern Congressmen's charges that civil rights groups were communist, we can better understand the magnitude of the antagonism these groups endured.

On February 16, 1966, Congressman Colmer of Mississippi attacked the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) before the U.S. House of Representatives. Claiming that the group was a communist force acting "under the guise of civil rights," Colmer asserted that the group's actions were "aiding the Communist conspiracy to enslave the world." The following day Colmer's colleague, Congressman Joe Waggoner of Louisiana, introduced House Resolution 738, which called for a House Committee on un-American Activities (HUAC) investigation of SNCC and several other organizations.

But HUAC's investigation of the group is questionable. The congressmen involved in HUAC initiated the investigation to stifle the civil right group's use of federal intervention for the movement. Many of the congressmen involved in the investigation of SNCC participated in blatant resistance to the civil rights movement's legislative progression. Furthermore, the congressmen's motives are questionable because SNCC did not exhibit characteristics common in communist groups. SNCC's work in voter registration drives demonstrated the organization's desire to work within the existing system to obtain its goals. In addition, an analysis of literature read by prominent SNCC members indicates that they held beliefs that ran contrary to the rigid ideologies of communist organizations. Also, SNCC adopted a loose, individualistic structure for its organization that ran contrary to the strict structure of communist organizations. The congressmen who initiated HUAC's investigation of SNCC in 1966 based their efforts upon a threat of federal civil rights legislation and not a threat of communism.

Prior to 1966, chief HUAC investigators participated in attempts to stifle the implementation of federal decisions regarding civil rights policy. A 1966 SNCC background memo indicated that HUAC's 1966 vice-chairman and chairman, Representative William Tuck of Virginia and Representative Edwin Willis of Louisiana, had long opposed the federal government's drive toward desegregation. These representatives publicly opposed civil rights legislation by asserting that it would violate states' rights at the hands of the federal government. The men's legislative participation and public statements prior to 1966 demonstrated their opposition to federal civil rights legislation and established their motivation for investigating SNCC.

Representative William Tuck, vice-chairman of the 1966 HUAC, was instrumental in the massive Virginia resistance plans to the Supreme Court's 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka*, Kansas school desegregation decision. His first project, the Gray Plan of 1955, allowed local school boards to determine where pupils would go to school. It stated that school boards should utilize criteria, such as health, transportation convenience, and aptitude, to determine their student populations. These factors played upon the established differences between black and white students and prevented a large amount of racial integration.

Following the Virginia legislature's approval of the Gray Plan, Tuck influenced a second plan—the Stanley Plan—that called for the governor to close any school where the Supreme Court's decision forced segregation. If the local school board opted to reopen the school integrated, the governor could withhold its state funding. The schools' other opportunity would be to remain closed. In this case, the students of the district would be given tuition grants to attend a segregated school. Through the Stanley and Gray plans, Tuck sought to impede the transition in Virginia from segregation to integration.

In addition to his resistance to *Brown vs. Board of Education*, Tuck extensively opposed civil rights legislation in the U.S. Congress. He consistently affirmed that the federal government did not have the right to determine racial matters of the states. Tuck rejected the 1964 Civil Rights Bill, stating that it would "coerce and compel submission of innkeepers and landlords to the dictatorial edicts of overlords in Washington." The following year, Tuck attacked the Voting Rights Act of 1965, stating, "House Resolution 6400 reaches a crest in the flood of Federal intrusions into the matters constitutionally reserved to the States." Tuck devoted a great amount of his political career to his belief in diminishing the role of the

federal government in determining state civil rights policy.

Representative Edwin Willis also established a pattern of opposition to federal intervention in state civil rights policy. Willis summarized his position on states' rights in February 1964, stating that the federal system did not create a "single best answer to every problem" in the states, but tended to "prevent the states from adopting any worst answer." Willis acted upon this belief by using his political position to oppose federal participation in state civil rights policy. Long before he was elected chair of HUAC, he refused to support House Resolution 3199 in 1949. This bill aimed to facilitate enfranchisement for poor African-Americans by ending the poll tax in the seven states in which it remained. He refused to endorse the bill because it mandated that federal officials ensure obedience to the law by supervising southern elections.

Seven years later, Willis further declared his opposition to federal intervention by joining the 101 congressional signatories of the *Southern Manifesto*. Southern congressmen drafted this document on March 12, 1956 as a public condemnation of the Supreme Court's *Brown vs. Board of Education* decision. The document asked for the reversal of the decision and affirmed that the decision was a "clear abuse of judicial power."

The congressmen's opposition to federal intervention in state civil rights policy could have influenced their opinion of SNCC. SNCC members prided themselves on working within the system to gain federal government support for civil rights objectives. These activities encouraged federal intervention in state operations—a proposal that enraged Willis and Tuck. Consequently, they may have influenced the Congressmen's decision to accuse the group of communist activity.

SNCC's activism within the existing capitalist system undermined any assertion that the group was communist. Marx and Engels, of course, had asserted that "the immediate aim of the Communists is ...formation of the proletariat into a class, overthrow of the bourgeois supremacy, conquest of political power by the proletariat." SNCC did not adopt the communist revolutionary idea as its motivation for action. Instead, it focused upon reform within the existing system. SNCC member Mary King described SNCC's goal in her memoir, *Freedom Song*: "Ours was not a revolution nor was it pressing for exotic ideals; it was a movement to assure basic rights and to allow blacks to participate in their own governance." In 1966, SNCC member Stokely Carmichael asserted that SNCC's main focus in the years leading up to that time was to gain political power by enfranchising Southern blacks. In addition, SNCC initiated an enormous voter registration drive during the 1964 Mississippi Summer Project. Summer volunteers convinced over 17,000 African-Americans to register to vote at the courthouse, but Mississippi law only allowed 1,600 to officially register.

SNCC's voter registration work, in addition to the fundamental structure of SNCC was the very opposite of communist organizations. Communists believed that the organization should be firmly—and hierarchically—organized. Lenin, the first major organizer of a communist revolution, wrote that the conquered ruling class must be controlled by a group of revolutionaries with structure. Quoting a passage from Engels, he stated that there must be a "'special repressive force' of the proletariat for the suppression of the bourgeoisie." Similarly, Mao Tse-tung, wrote, "Without a revolutionary party ...it is impossible to lead the working class and broad masses of the people." Finally, the *Programme of the Communist International* detailed the belief of the international movement for Communism that structure is paramount: "[t]he world system of Communism will replace the elemental forces of the world market ...by consciously organized and planned production."

According to Norm Fruchter, editor of the journal *Studies of the New Left*, SNCC opposed rigid organizations where there was a fixed leader and favored a group organization where "everybody is a leader." Similarly, contemporary *Newsweek* editors noted that SNCC was, "openly contemptuous of stuffy Marxist-Leninism or, for that matter, any organized ideology."

SNCC based its organization on the concept of a "beloved community." Clayborne Carson, a prominent historian of the movement, affirmed that the concept stemmed from the students' willingness to meet solely on the basis of equality. They were "intolerant of anything that smacked of manipulation or domination," and "stressed that all people, regardless of educational background and class status, should have meaningful roles in the political process." Mary King was fond of the concept of beloved community. She recounted that SNCC's main concept was to organize "local Negroes around the needs that they feel, so that it is not our giving direction to the local people so much as their giving us direction." John Lewis affirmed that the essence of SNCC was "a bottom-up system of direction." While he was chairman of SNCC, he believed that if SNCC became highly organized and disciplined, it would be the organization's death. James Forman expressed concern over this lack of organization for the group's efforts. Since he was an organized individual, the group's planning discussions frustrated him. He complained that "there seemed to be no order to the [group's] discussion.... [T]he process was shattering to the mind of someone who wanted order, point-to-point discussion, and resolution."

The ideologies of individual SNCC members influenced the group's rejection of conventional Communism and willingness to work within the existing American system. The ideological foundation of the organization can be exhibited by the literature that prominent members read and followed. In early 1966, executive secretary Forman, chairman Lewis, and members King and Bob Moses were pivotal influences in the organization. The literature endorsed by SNCC members promoted participation within the existing system instead of an overthrow of the existing order. It also praised nonviolent

action as an alternative to the communist concept of “violent revolution.” Finally, the literature asked African-Americans to develop an awareness of their role in their own oppression instead of developing a class-consciousness with a division between oppressor and oppressed.

Many SNCC members mentioned reading Reinhold Niebuhr’s book, *Moral Man and Immoral Society* (1932). In his recount of his years with SNCC, *The Making of Black Revolutionaries*, Forman mentioned that this book was a significant influence on his belief that a non-violent mass movement could occur in the South and end segregation. Niebuhr called for mass movements among the oppressed: “when collective power, whether in the form of imperialism or class domination, exploits weakness, it can never be dislodged unless power is raised against it.” Niebuhr asserted that the power could be raised in a mass movement within the system. He demonstrated this argument with a specific example of a possible method for African-Americans to counter oppression in the states. Niebuhr concluded that southern African-Americans needed to mobilize themselves by gaining access to a quality education. By doing this, they could dispel white southerners’ assertions that they were not intelligent enough to vote, and they could gain access to further opportunities in the existing system.

A second influence was the writings of Ghanaian President Kwame Nkrumah. Forman considered Nkrumah’s actions toward the liberation of Ghana an inspiration for SNCC. Forman praised Nkrumah for his adherence to a doctrine of nonviolent direct action. Nkrumah believed that the attainment of education and participation within the system was paramount to a successful liberation movement of the oppressed. Nkrumah stated that literacy was the “strongest weapon of the imperialists” in “holding people down.” He urged that “every literate person in Africa teach at least one person who is at present illiterate to become literate.” SNCC’s movement toward equal rights centered upon obtaining legal support for blacks’ right to vote and educating southern blacks to meet the system’s voting literacy standards.

The writing of Indian liberator Mahatma Gandhi motivated SNCC workers to adopt a concept of political change through nonviolent action and demonstration. In early 1966, John Lewis mentioned Gandhi’s *Non-violent Resistance (Satyagraha)* as a key piece of literature to his ideology. This book introduced its readers to the concept of Satyagraha, which Gandhi explained as, “vindication of truth not by infliction of suffering on the opponent but on one’s self.” The process was not of attacking the opponent, but of patiently reinforcing the truth until he recognizes the error of his ways.

Lewis believed that Satyagraha should guide SNCC members in their pursuit for equality. Lewis interpreted the concept as “a holy and affective thing.” He described its influence: “It affects not only ourselves, but it touches and changes those around us as well. It opens us and those around us to a force beyond ourselves, a force that is right and moral, the force of righteous truth that is the basis of human conscience.” Lewis believed that Gandhi’s principle of nonviolence could be applied to the United States civil rights struggle. He thought of Gandhi as an inspiration for nonviolent action’s potency: “Gandhi showed it could be done. This one little man, armed with nothing but the truth and a fundamental faith in the response of human society to redemptive suffering, was able to reshape an entire nation without raising so much as a fist.”

Finally, Frantz Fanon’s *The Wretched of the Earth* and Albert Camus’s *The Rebel* inspired SNCC members to recognize their own need to rise to equality. Instead of entertaining the notion that African-Americans in the South should be dichotomized against white oppressors, these books asked them to recognize mutual humanity with those who caused their oppression. This idea ran contrary to the writings of prominent communists, who accentuated the need for the oppressed class to recognize their oppressors as a separate class that deserved obliteration.

Regarding a colonial situation in Algeria, Fanon wrote that situations of oppression are based upon an established dichotomy between the oppressed and oppressor. The oppressor reminds the oppressed that “he is the master,” and the oppressed becomes passive because he is wrapped up in the chains of that statement. However, once the oppressed “discovers that his life, his breath, his beating heart are the same” as the oppressor’s, he can recognize his ability to counteract the condition of injustice. In her memoir, King recounted Fanon as a significant influence. The book motivated her to view herself as “a serious political being functioning in a democratic system that must be forced to change or live up to its promise.” SNCC members used the new concept of mutual humanity with desegregationists as an affirmation that they must seek the same rights.

King also mentioned the influence of Camus’s *The Rebel*. Like Fanon, Camus also pondered the effect of colonialism on Algerians. Camus resolved that revolution could not be based upon a moral ideal that denies the humanity of the adversary. He reasoned: “Calculated revolution which, in preferring an abstract concept of man to a man of flesh and blood ... allows itself to be contaminated with resentment; it denies life.” Thus, if African-Americans in the South only recognized themselves as moral superiors to Southern whites, they would forget the whites’ humanity. SNCC members realized that moralistic actions would be based in the same type of dichotomous attitude that the Southern whites used to justify racism. King maintained that Camus taught SNCC to strike a balance between moral purity and political effectiveness.

The 1966 House Resolution to investigate SNCC was motivated by forces against federal civil rights intervention rather than genuine concern that the group was a communist infiltration. Many of the prominent congressmen in HUAC, the group assigned with the investigation, demonstrated histories of opposition to federal civil rights intervention. Both Edwin Willis and William Tuck labored for decades to suppress federal involvement in state civil rights procedures. The activities

SNCC undertook to achieve this goal may have antagonized the congressmen, but they also stand as evidence that the group did not represent communist values. House Resolution 738 was an attempt to stifle federal intervention in state civil rights practices rather than an attempt to discover communist activity.