
SNCC AND THE ALBANY MOVEMENT

By Clayborne Carson

FOR THE MEMBERS OF THE STUDENT NONVIOLENT COORDINATING Committee (SNCC), the civil rights struggle in Albany, Georgia was an important stage in the development of their protest strategy. Drawing on their previous experiences, SNCC workers began to use militant protest activity to overcome the psychological barriers that had previously prevented political activism among blacks in the deep South.

The Albany protests, which occurred between the fall of 1961 and the summer of 1962, demonstrated not only the appeal of SNCC's militancy to urban blacks but also the importance of Afro-American religious beliefs and institutions as a foundation for mass struggle among southern blacks. The growing confidence of SNCC activists in Albany led to their open criticism of the approaches of other civil rights groups, especially the SCLC, and to their decision to expand the work into rural areas. But they also learned in Albany that even massive, sustained, and generally disciplined protests based on moral principles did not necessarily ensure immediate success and that efficient police action against demonstrators could seriously hamper their struggle.

Albany experienced little protest activity before October 1961 when SNCC field secretaries Charles Sherrod and Cordell Reagon arrived there to open a SNCC office. Students at Albany State College, a restrictive, paternalistic institution that was typical of most black schools in the deep South, had not taken part in the sit-ins of the spring. "The campus is separated from the community by a river, a dump yard and a cemetery," commented Sherrod. "And if any system of intelligence gets through all of that it is promptly stomped underfoot by men in administrative positions who refuse to think further than a new car, a bulging refrigerator and an insatiable lust for more than enough of everything we call leisure."¹

Albany itself was a backwater city of about 60,000 inhabitants with a history of generally peaceful if unequal relations between the black minority, representing about 40 percent of the population, and the white majority. The only significant indication of dissatisfaction had been the presentation to the city

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1. Howard Zinn, *SNCC: The New Abolitionists* (Boston, 1965), pp. 125-26.

commission of a modest petition for reforms by a small group of blacks in early 1961. The petition was condemned by the staunchly segregationist *Albany Herald* and was subsequently rejected.²

Sherrod and Reagon were experienced activists who had already formulated a strategy for their work in Albany. Both had been freedom riders and were influenced by the religious ideas that pervaded the early student protest movement. Reagon, who was eighteen when he began work in Albany, had been active in the Nashville student movement; Sherrod, who was twenty-two, had led sit-in protests in Richmond, Virginia. Sherrod, the more articulate of the two, was also director of SNCC's southwest Georgia voter registration project, in which capacity he was able to imprint his own personality and attitudes on the activities in Albany.

Like other young blacks who participated in the sit-in movement, Sherrod was sensitive to the psychological importance of militancy for blacks. He had grown up in the slums of Petersburg, Virginia, the eldest of six children in a fatherless home. His mother, who was fourteen at the time of his birth, had only reached the eighth grade. He worked as a child, "carrying junk and shining shoes," to help support his family, which received welfare assistance. Strong-willed and earnest, Sherrod studied religion at Virginia Union University while continuing to contribute to his family's support. "I worked as hard as any two men getting through school," he commented. As a Baptist preacher, he was attracted, like John Lewis and many others, to the radical implications of Christianity. After becoming a civil rights activist, he felt a new sense of freedom and racial pride. During the spring of 1961 he expressed the desire "to go ahead in a new way—maybe not the way the whites have shown . . . We are *not* the puppets of the white man. We want a different world where *we* can speak, where *we* can communicate."³

Sherrod's experience in the sit-ins and freedom rides led to his decision to use nonviolent protest as a means of prompting Albany blacks to break with previous traditions of accommodation. Initially, however, he found that "the people were afraid, really afraid. Sometimes we'd walk down the streets and the little kids would call us freedom riders and the people walking in the same direction would go across the street from us." Sherrod's first objective was to remove "the mental block in the minds of those who wanted to move but were unable for fear that we were not who we said we were."⁴

Sherrod and Reagon sought the support of all segments of the black populace. As Reagon explained, they acted "like neighborhood boys,"

2. David L. Lewis, *King: A Critical Biography* (Baltimore, 1970), p. 143.

3. Sherrod to Davis, n.d., folder 9, Sherrod Papers, Civil Rights Collection, State Historical Society of Wisconsin, Madison, Wisconsin; Charlotte Devree, "The Young Negro Rebels," *Harper's Magazine*, Oct. 1961, p. 135.

4. Zinn, *SNCC*, p. 125; James Howard Lane, "Direct Action and Desegregation: Toward a Theory of the Rationalization of Protest" (Ph.D. diss., Harvard University, 1963), p. 174.

because "you don't achieve anything with the preachers, teachers and businessmen until you work with the common people first." Sherrod recalled that they talked to people "in churches, social meetings, on the streets, in the pool halls, lunch rooms and night clubs," telling them "how it feels to be . . . in jail for the cause . . . that there were worse chains than jail and prison. We referred to the system that imprisons men's minds and robs them of creativity. We mocked the system that teaches men to be good Negroes instead of good men. We gave an account of many resistances, of injustice in the courts, in employment, registration and voting . . . we started to illustrate what had happened to . . . other cities where people came together and protested against an evil system."⁵

Although Sherrod and Reagon initially focused on "the common people," they later received crucial support from the black middle class, particularly from ministers who allowed their churches to be used for meetings. According to Sherrod, "even the hypocrisy" of the black church bore the "seeds of the ultimate victory of Truth." Rather than attempting to "beat the box," Sherrod advised, one must accept the people "where they are."⁶ Sherrod's own religious training helped him to gain the support of the Baptist Ministerial Alliance and the Interdenominational Alliance.

Sherrod and Reagon led nightly workshops in churches on nonviolent tactics. They drew growing numbers of young people from colleges, trade schools, high schools, and the street, who, Sherrod recounted, were "searching for a meaning in life."⁷

On 1 November 1961, their efforts led to a sit-in at a bus station by nine students to test compliance with the Interstate Commerce Commission ruling, which became effective that day, barring segregation in transportation terminals. As Sherrod recalled, many blacks gathered at the bus station, which was located in a predominantly black neighborhood, to watch the protesters, who symbolized in their eyes "the expression of years of resentment—for police brutality, for poor housing, for disenfranchisement, for inferior education, for the whole damnable system." Even though the students left as planned when threatened with arrest, in the hearts of black residents, "from that moment on, segregation was dead."⁸ Later the students filed affidavits with the commission charging that Albany whites were ignoring its ruling.

After the protest at the bus terminal, representatives of civil rights organizations and other black community groups met to discuss their griev-

5. *Ibid.*, pp. 350, 174.

6. Fred Powledge, *Black Power/White Resistance: Notes on the New Civil War* (Cleveland, 1967), p. 39.

7. Zinn, *SNCC*, p. 126.

8. Laue, "Direct Action," p. 176. See also Howard Zinn, *Albany: A Study in National Responsibility* (Atlanta: Southern Regional Council, 1962); James Forman, *The Making of Black Revolutionaries* (New York, 1972), pp. 247-60; Vincent Harding and Stanley J. Stein, "Albany, Georgia," *Crisis*, Feb. 1963.

ances, and they formed the Albany Movement, a coalition of SNCC, NAACP, the ministerial alliances, the Federation of Women's Clubs, the Negro Voters League, and many other groups interested in racial reform. William G. Anderson, a black osteopath, was elected president, and Slater King, a black realtor, became vice-president. One of the black leaders of the Albany Movement commented: "The kids were going to do it anyway . . . they were holding their own mass meetings and making plans . . . we didn't want them to have to do it alone."⁹

A few days after the formation of the Albany Movement, three members of the NAACP Youth Council were arrested by Albany Police Chief Laurie Pritchett as they attempted to use the dining room at the Trailways bus station. Later that same day, Bertha Gober and Blanton Hall, two Albany State students who had been working with SNCC, were arrested after entering the white waiting room at the bus station. These arrests further aroused the black community and set the stage for the first mass meeting of the Albany Movement.

Held on 25 November in Mount Zion Baptist Church, the meeting revealed the depth of pent-up emotions that had been released by the student protest. "The church was packed," Sherrod reported. The students who had been arrested described their experiences in jail, and after the last speaker had finished, "there was nothing left to say. Tears filled the eyes of hard, grown men who had known personally and seen with their own eyes merciless atrocities committed by small men without conscience."¹⁰

Then everyone rose to sing "We Shall Overcome," which had recently been adopted as a "freedom song." As Bernice Reagon, one of the Albany student activists, recalled: "When I opened my mouth and began to sing, there was a force and power within myself I had never heard before. Somehow this music . . . released a kind of power and required a level of concentrated energy I did not know I had." Goldie Jackson, a black woman who had lost her job after allowing SNCC workers to stay in her house, remembered praying and singing in the church for the rest of the night: "Two things we knew held us together: prayer of something good to come and song that tells from the depth of the heart how we feel about our fellow man."¹¹

The trial of the five students on 27 November was the scene of a mass rally to protest both their arrests and the expulsion of Gober and Hall from Albany State College. SNCC worker Charles Jones led the demonstrators on a march to a church where four hundred people signed a petition demanding the reinstatement of the students. When the *Albany Herald* condemned the march, black residents began a boycott against advertisers in the paper.

9. Zinn, *SNCC*, p. 128.

10. Forman, *Black Revolutionaries*, p. 247.

11. Bernice Reagon, "In Our Hands: Thoughts on Black Music," *Sing Out!* 24 (Jan.-Feb. 1976): 2; Pat Watters, *Down to Now: Reflections on the Southern Civil Rights Movement* (New York, 1971), p. 158.



Albany Movement protestors march in the rain, December 1961.

On Sunday, 10 December, ten activists, including James Forman, Bob Zellner, and Norma Collins of SNCC, arrived from Atlanta to fan the flames of militancy. While several hundred Albany blacks looked on, the integrated group of protesters sat in the waiting room at the Albany train station and were quickly arrested on trespassing charges. Their arrests, which Albany mayor Asa Kelley later conceded was "our first mistake," ignited a week of mass rallies and demonstrations.¹²

On Monday, Forman addressed a mass meeting where residents planned further protests. On Tuesday, 267 black high school and college students were arrested when they refused to disperse from a protest at the trial of the train station protesters. Most of the students chose to remain in jail rather than paying bail. On Wednesday Slater King was arrested after leading a prayer vigil at the courthouse, and later in the day more than 200 demonstrators who had marched to City Hall were jailed for parading without a permit. As Chief Pritchett told newsmen, "We can't tolerate the NAACP or the SNCC or any other nigger organization to take over this town with mass demonstrations."¹³ On Thursday, when the number of arrests had exceeded 500, the governor of Georgia sent 150 national guardsmen to Albany.

Local city officials then agreed to establish a biracial committee to discuss black demands for the integration of transportation facilities and the release of demonstrators. Anderson invited Martin Luther King, Jr. to address a rally on

12. Laue, "Direct Action," p. 178; Zinn, *SNCC*, p. 130.

13. Zinn, *SNCC*, p. 130.

Friday, 15 December, where King told the largest gathering yet assembled at Shiloh Baptist Church: "Don't stop now. Keep moving. Don't get weary. We will wear them down with our capacity to suffer."¹⁴ The next day after negotiations had broken down, King led a prayer march to City Hall and was arrested along with more than 250 demonstrators. When King announced that he would remain in jail and spend Christmas there, city officials again resumed negotiations in order to resolve the crisis. Two days later, King suddenly announced that he was allowing himself to be released on bail as part of a settlement which included city compliance with the Interstate Commerce Commission ruling and release of the other demonstrators.

The truce marked the end of the first stage of the Albany protests. To the dismay of SNCC workers, the momentum that had developed during December dissipated rapidly. City officials stalled on implementing the concessions they had granted and refused to seek desegregation of the city bus service, which became the target of a black boycott early in 1962. SNCC workers continued to use direct action tactics in attempts to revive the movement, but these protests received little attention. In April 1962, Jones, Reagon, and two others sat in a lunch counter and were arrested; subsequently they were sentenced to sixty-day jail terms. And in a SNCC-led demonstration at City Hall, twenty-nine persons were arrested while protesting the April shooting of a black man by an Albany policeman for allegedly resisting arrest.

Then on 10 July 1962, the Albany Movement came alive once again when Martin Luther King and his associate, Ralph Abernathy, returned to Albany for sentencing in connection with the December protests. King and Abernathy were given jail terms of forty-five days or a fine of \$178. When both announced that they would serve their sentences, Albany Movement leaders announced a mass rally for the following night. The rally was preceded by a march to City Hall, which resulted in the arrest of thirty-two persons, and that evening violent clashes took place between brick-throwing black youngsters and police outside the church where the rally was held. On 13 July, the crisis atmosphere eased when King and Abernathy were released from jail after an unidentified black man paid their fines. "I've been thrown out of lots of places in my day," Abernathy later remarked, "but never before have I been thrown out of jail."¹⁵

Demonstrations, however, continued. Small groups of blacks led by Jones of SNCC and Wyatt T. Walker of SCLC attempted to gain admission to segregated facilities in Albany, and there were mass marches to City Hall demanding civil rights. One of these, on 24 July, ended in more rock and brick throwing.

This outbreak of violence brought back national guardsmen to Albany. King responded by calling a "day of penance" while he, Abernathy, and Jones

14. *Ibid.*, p. 137.

15. Lewis, *King*, p. 159.

attempted to convince local black residents to remain nonviolent. A few days later King, Abernathy, and Anderson were arrested while leading a prayer pilgrimage to City Hall, and they joined hundreds of protesters already in jail. By this time, the Albany jails had been filled, and prisoners had to be moved to nearby jails.

Violence was not confined to the streets of Albany. At Camilla jail Marion King, Slater King's pregnant wife, was knocked unconscious by a deputy sheriff when she visited demonstrators there, and a few weeks later attorney C.B. King was caned by the sheriff of Dougherty County. "I wanted to let him know," the sheriff remarked, "I'm a white man and he's a damn nigger."¹⁶

After repeated requests by Albany black leaders for a statement of support, President Kennedy finally responded by urging Albany officials to negotiate a settlement. At a news conference on 1 August, Kennedy noted that the United States government was "involved in sitting down at Geneva with the Soviet Union. I can't understand why the government of Albany, City Council of Albany, cannot do the same for American citizens."

King, Abernathy, and Anderson were convicted on 10 August of disturbing the peace and parading without a permit, but their sentences were suspended. By this time the enthusiasm of Albany blacks had been weakened by the months of fruitless appeals to the conscience of Albany's white residents. According to journalist Pat Watters, "that final despair in Albany—the losing of steam," was perhaps a profound expression "of disappointment at having found and offered so much—and being understood so little." The Albany protests were a turning point, for afterwards "activists in the movement to whom, from the beginning, non-violence was merely a sophisticated weapon were to gain in influence over those who were imbued in their personal lives with it as a spiritual quality." Or as SNCC worker Bill Hansen analyzed the situation: "We were naive enough to think we could fill up the jails . . . We ran out of people before [Chief Pritchett] ran out of jails."¹⁷ Although the Albany Movement remained in existence through the late 1960s and SNCC continued its activities in Albany for several years, the emotion and sense of hope that once existed were never recaptured.

In a purely instrumental sense, the Albany protests could be viewed as a serious setback for the civil rights movement. The initial objective of desegregation in bus and train terminals involved no more than compliance with federal rulings, and the broader civil rights goals of the movement—general desegregation and acceptance by city officials of the rights of blacks to hold peaceful demonstrations—remained in contention. Chief Pritchett had consistently crushed demonstrations through mass arrests without resorting to the kind of excessive force that would have provoked federal intervention. The lesson to those in SNCC was clear: patient suffering by nonviolent protesters was

16. Zinn, *SNCC*, p. 135.

17. Watters, *Dope*, p. 106.

insufficient to bring about federal intervention. Yet, though the Albany Movement failed to achieve some of its objectives, it served as a training ground for many SNCC workers who learned new techniques for sustaining mass militancy for long periods and it served as a model for blacks in other southern cities where mass struggles would soon emerge. As Howard Zinn explained at the time, the black movement in Albany, though "not one of perfectly coordinated tactical efficiency," was "one of courage, passion and sacrifice, and it brought forth . . . some of the noblest qualities that human beings have shown anywhere."¹⁸

SNCC workers, though disappointed by the few immediate tangible gains, emerged from the Albany protests confident of being in the vanguard of a mass struggle. Sherrod observed that "the super-structure" was "being shaken to the very foundations" by the protests. Southern racial etiquette was being challenged: "It is no longer a matter-of-fact procedure for a Negro to respond in 'yes sirs' and 'no sirs.'" Blacks were beginning to "wonder if it is their right to say what they strongly believe even if this means letting the mayor or chief of police or 'bossman' know about it; *they are thinking.*"¹⁹

The Albany struggle convinced SNCC workers that their distinctive organizing strategy, which emphasized grassroots leadership, had broad support among blacks in the deep South. In Albany they had developed close ties with local black leaders and carefully avoided threatening the authority of those leaders. At a SNCC meeting in March 1962, Charles Jones cited Albany as an example of SNCC's unique "willingness to sacrifice" and to "form community movements, not organizations." At the same meeting, Julian Bond asserted that when SNCC left an area, it left behind "a community movement with local leadership, not a new branch of SNCC." Moreover, SNCC workers learned that mobilizing young people was an effective way of reaching black adults. "When I learned that, I could organize in any community because there are children everywhere, and they are so easy to get to," Sherrod later remarked. He added, however, that organizers also learned that it would be a mistake to "mess with" children before gaining the respect of parents. "That's when the white folk won't have to get you out of town; they [the black adults] get your ass out of town."²⁰

SNCC workers' close ties to local residence and their deference to local leadership distinguished them from SCLC representatives who came to Albany after the protest movement had begun. Soon after Martin Luther King had visited Albany in December 1961, a reporter noted that SNCC workers held a "dominant position" among the competing civil rights groups in Albany. Sherrod was quoted as saying that "a constant war" regarding strategy took place between SNCC and SCLC. "The students," observed historian David

18. Zinn, *Albany*, p. 19. See also Reese Cleghorn, "Epilogue in Albany: Were the Mass Marches Worthwhile?" *New Republic*, 20 July 1963, pp. 15-18.

19. Laue, "Direct Action," p. 189. Emphasis in original.

20. *Ibid.*, p. 380; Sherrod interview with author, 9 Dec. 1979, in Jackson, Mississippi.

Lewis, "were piqued by the fixation of the press and some of the older community people upon the person and utterances of [King]. SNCC had labored unheralded in the vineyards of racial protest in Albany long before 'De Lawd'—Martin's new SNCC appellation—appeared on the scene to work his miracles." SNCC workers and local black leaders resented Wyatt Walker, SCLC's executive director, who moved "about the community a little too haughtily and noisily, dispensing the patronage that the SCLC's sizable financial resources allowed." The resentments of SNCC workers against SCLC were expressed openly at a meeting in July 1962 involving King, Sherrod, Reagon, and Jones. According to Lewis, the SNCC workers "disputed with the Atlanta pastor the right of SCLC to monopolize the Movement. Martin denied any such intent on the part of his organization and attempted to extenuate the peremptory conduct of Wyatt. Until that afternoon, he had probably not been fully aware of the extent to which his chief subaltern had alienated the local leadership."²¹

By the fall of 1962, SNCC workers had firmly asserted their own right to influence the course of the southern struggle. For many on the SNCC staff, the Albany protests were an important training ground in which to learn the techniques of mobilizing the dormant black populace of the deep South. Perhaps of greatest importance, they became aware of the cultural dimension of the black struggle. SNCC workers in Albany, for example, quickly recognized the value of freedom songs, often based on black spirituals, to convey the ideas of the southern movement and to sustain morale. Bernice Reagon, an Albany student leader who joined SNCC's staff, described the Albany Movement as "a singing movement." Church music, which was an integral part of the black cultural world, became in Albany a symbol of the civil rights struggle as well. Singing had special importance at mass meetings, Reagon observed: "After the song, the differences among us would not be as great. Somehow, making a song required an expression of that which was common to us all . . . This music was like an instrument, like holding a tool in your hand."²²

Freedom songs had been a part of the protest movement for some time, but the Albany songs carried greater emotional force and were more often rooted in the Afro-American cultural heritage than was earlier the case. Reagon noted that many of the songs which had previously been used by students were altered to make them more appropriate for a "basically adult" movement.²³ The songs of the Albany Movement were used at countless mass meetings held by SNCC in the deep South. When Sherrod drew up an outline of

21. Claude Sitton, "Negro Groups Split on Georgia Protest," *New York Times*, 24 Dec. 1961; Lewis, *King*, pp. 152, 163.

22. Reagon, "In Our Hands," p. 1.

23. Josh Dunson, *Freedom in the Air: Songs for the Fight of 1962* (Athens, Ga.: UGA Press, 1962); see also p. 43.

community organizing for the SNCC general conference in the spring of 1963, the first point on his list was to teach freedom songs.²⁴

Albany songs were also given national exposure by the SNCC Freedom Singers, a fund-raising group formed in 1962 and composed largely of participants in the Albany protests. Reagon, one of the original Freedom Singers, described the songs as "more powerful than spoken conversation. They became a major way of making people who were not on the scene feel the intensity of what was happening in the South."²⁵

Freedom songs popularized during the Albany protests remained with the southern movement for years, and many were adopted by protest movements elsewhere in the nation and even by protest movements outside the United States.²⁶ One song in particular, first used during the summer of 1962, became a favorite of SNCC workers:

Ain't gonna let nobody turn me 'round
turn me 'round, turn me 'round,
Ain't gonna let nobody turn me 'round
I'm gonna keep on walkin', keep on a-talkin'
Marching up to freedom land.

Other verses specifically referred to events or personalities associated with the Albany protests, such as, "Ain't gonna let Chief Pritchett turn me 'round." Another traditional song adapted by members of SNCC was "Oh Freedom":

No segregation, no segregation,
no segregation over me,
And before I'll be a slave, I'll
be buried in my grave
And go home to my Lord and be free.

Although the emotional enthusiasm displayed in the Albany protests was a source of inspiration for SNCC, the protest confronted SNCC idealists with a difficult dilemma. The demonstrations that SNCC stimulated sometimes prompted outbursts of violence and often lacked the discipline so noticeable in early student-led protest movements. The reluctance of many SNCC workers to exercise leadership endeared them to local blacks who did not wish to see their movement restrained, but it also reflected the tenuousness of SNCC's role in the expanding protest movement.

Caught between the new mood of racial anger and the reticence of the Kennedy administration to exert federal authority against southern white

24. Fred Powledge, "Civil Rights Youth Study Strategy," *Atlanta Constitution*, 14 Apr. 1963.

25. Reagon, "In Our Hands," p. 2.

26. See *Songs of the Southern Freedom Movement: We Shall Overcome!*, comp. Guy and Candie Carawan (New York: The Martin Luther King, Jr Papers Project

officials, the proponents of nonviolent direct action continued to agitate, but they became increasingly aware of both the potential for racial violence in the South and the limitations of moralistic idealism when pitted against determined opposition. With a note of resignation Sherrod observed in 1963 that "non-violence as a way of life was a long way off for most of us"; he nevertheless argued that it was still "an invincible instrument of war." The only question was whether nonviolent activists were willing to continue to suffer.²⁷

Despite Sherrod's lingering doubts, the Albany protests reinforced the confidence of SNCC workers in their organizing approaches. For the first time they had mobilized large numbers of black adults for a sustained struggle. They had demonstrated that patient efforts to win the confidence of local residents and calculated acts of civil disobedience could unleash dormant feelings of racial militancy. With greater success than before, SNCC had sunk roots in the fertile soil of an emerging mass movement.