

The Molding of a Leader

Stokely Carmichael and the Washington, D.C. Race Riots of 1968

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-By David H. Young-
ICAR

To nurture and encourage truly inspirational and charismatic leaders requires significant investments of time and energy. Events congeal to form a potential leader's identity, and the interpretation of those events and an ability to communicate this interpretation together constitute the basis for a leader's solitary emergence from a pool of equally intelligent and insightful men and women.

Our leaders are far from perfect. But their experiences, memories and interpretations of their existence—where they fit in the present and how they might hope to shape the future— all provide a vibrant mountain of knowledge to students of rhetoric, charisma and leadership in general.

Specifically, the Civil Rights conflict is saturated with captivating leaders and serves as an excellent backdrop for their comparison, because variables such as geography, race, culture, and education can be neutralized. Given the same context, it is far easier to isolate and examine the diverse personalities, identities and histories of multiple leaders.

As always, the charisma of Martin Luther King, Jr. certainly deserves our attention and respect; but in the context of leadership, there are a number of reasons why analyzing Stokely Carmichael's role in resolving the American social conflict for civil rights might elicit more valuable tools for resolving such conflicts.

First, like most great leaders, Carmichael was once a great follower, but he grew disenchanted with his leader—namely, Dr. King and his organization, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC). Second, Carmichael's rhetoric has always been founded on practical ideas, which can be helpful to any student, not merely those who are struggling against the grave injustices that made Dr. King so iconic. In contrast, Carmichael's strategy was more accessible to his followers, and its lessons are more readily applicable to any issue or conflict, not merely those that elicit a comprehensive sense of grandeur and oppression.

Together, these two reasons point to a third: the frequency of factionalism in our daily lives—whether political, religious or cultural—illustrates the need to study not just our beloved and/or martyred leaders, but also, and perhaps especially, the former disciples of these leaders and their respective paths and strategies.

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Around the time when Stokely Carmichael replaced John Lewis as the chairman of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) in the spring of 1966, black activism across the United States was gaining enough momentum to drastically change the face of American racism. While the efforts of Martin Luther King, Jr.—a southern preacher and icon of nonviolence—constituted the driving ideological force behind the movement, it could not have gained the momentum it did without an equally devoted and capable student/youth activist boom.

The young and devoted Carmichael was at the center of this energized youth activism agenda. Specifically, this surge was both a cause and an effect of Carmichael's natural ability to present King's ideas to a younger audience that needed a more practical justification for nonviolent behavior. Both then and now, Carmichael has distinguished between using nonviolence as a philosophy (like King did) and employing it as merely a "means by which to confront an entrenched and violent racism" (like Carmichael did).¹ Yet embracing the same tactics to achieve the same objectives made their differing rationales irrelevant.

Hardly twenty-five years old, SNCC's new chairman was in a position to help King solidify his base—a daunting task at a time when youths felt increasingly pulled toward violent resistance, as the hundreds of American race riots in the 1960s illustrated. Yet like many young and bright black men at this time, Carmichael felt a similar urge to use violence when the circumstances warranted it. In fact, his ability to inspire younger crowds was likely the direct result of his more militant leanings.

As one prominent student of riots and unrest noted in 1971, militants like Carmichael "won a large following not just because they are charismatic and eloquent but also because they are in close touch with the upcoming generation and its emerging ideology."² Thus, Carmichael was the perfect ambassador for King with the younger crowd, as "human behavior both constitutes and is constituted by, rhetoric."³ As it turned out, however, Carmichael was simply too good at inspiring crowds to operate in King's shadow for long.

The two men remained close friends, despite the protégé's more radical leanings. They mused openly about using each other for political gains,⁴ and they would even tease each other about their respective beliefs and tactics. According to Carmichael, he once baited King with news that a mutual friend had been shot.

King: What? Where?

Carmichael: In Vietnam. You told him to be nonviolent in Mississippi. He didn't get shot there. But he got shot in Vietnam. I guess you should have told him to be nonviolent in Vietnam. That's what your problem is. You don't carry your stuff like you say you're supposed to carry it.⁵

In a speech to the University of California (Berkeley) in October 1966, Carmichael painted a very clear portrait of his close friend, Martin—hinting that King might simply be too loving to make much of a difference in white America:

¹ Ture, Kwame and Ekwueme Michael Thelwell. *Ready for Revolution: the Life and Struggles of Stokely Carmichael* (Kwame Ture). Scribner: 2003, P.166.

² Fogelson, Robert M. *Violence as Protest: A Study of Riots and Ghettos*. Doubleday, 1971, P.147.

³ Gardner, William and Bruce Avolio. "The Charismatic Relationship: A Dramaturgical Perspective," *The Academy of Management Review*, 23(1): 33.

⁴ As long as Carmichael served the radical agenda, King capitalized on the media's portrait of him as the consummate "good guy." Likewise, after the Meredith March in June 1966, Carmichael confided to King, "Martin, I deliberately decided to raise this issue on the march in order to give it a national forum and force you to take a stand for Black Power," to which King responded with a sigh, "I have been used before. One more time won't hurt." See *Bearing the Cross*, David J. Garrow, Quill: 1999, P.485.

⁵ Hampton, Henry and Steve Fayer. *Voices of Freedom: An Oral History*. Bantam: 1990, P.340.

I look at Dr. King on television every single day, and I say to myself: "Now there is a man who's desperately needed in this country. There is a man full of love. There is a man full of mercy. There is a man full of compassion." But every time I see Lyndon on television, I say, "Martin, baby, you got a long way to go."⁶

Despite this close friendship, Carmichael had been slowly drifting away from King's nonviolence approach, after having generally embraced it for tactical (not philosophical) reasons when he was a student at Howard University in Washington, DC. But the moment the *public* saw the true internal division between SNCC and King's SCLC was during the Meredith March in Greenwood, Mississippi—a march whose purpose was to register to vote as many local blacks as possible. On June 16th, 1966, a number of Carmichael's peers had been giving speeches to large crowds of supporters about the need for more power, and left it to Stokely to drive the point home when he spoke last. Years later, Carmichael recalled the moment vividly, and is worth quoting at length:

Luckily for us, that night King had to go do a taped television thing, I think for "Meet the Press," in Memphis. So he was not there. He had other [SCLC] people there, but they were not a threat to us. It meant the whole night belonged to us and were in Greenwood, in SNCC territory... So when we finally got there and [I] dropped it—"Black Power"—of course [the audience] had been primed and they responded immediately... And then the enthusiastic response not only shocked me but gave me more energy to carry it on further. By the time we got down that night, SCLC was running around everywhere. We knew it was finished. We had made our victory. They could not bring [the moderate SCLC slogan] "Freedom Now" back. It was over. From now on, it was Black Power. King was immediately rushed back. It was too late. We had a meeting the following morning where King tried his best to ask me not to use the term Black Power. But I told him that really I could not do that.⁷

Likewise, Arlie Schardt, a correspondent for *Time* magazine wrote that "Stokely gave a very, very fiery address that evening, in which he basically told the group that they couldn't count on the white man, and that blacks had to do it on their own, that blacks were being sent off to fight and die in Vietnam and yet they couldn't even vote."⁸

The ambitious Carmichael had only been at the helm of SNCC for three months when he publicly challenged King's tactics and began forcing the country into a corner. Stokely Carmichael had arrived, and he was here to stay.

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Without a doubt, Carmichael was (and felt) liberated by his own 'Black Power' speech; he became free to abandon entirely all rhetoric of nonviolence *for the sake of nonviolence*. In fact, he even went so far as to view his election to SNCC chair as an

⁶ <http://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/stokelycarmichaelblackpower.html>

⁷ Hampton, 291

⁸ Hampton, 292

obligation to make such a tactical change. According to Carmichael, SNCC's organizers clearly understood that

the question of morality upon which King's organization depended to bring about changes in the community was not possible. The SNCC people had seen raw terror and they understood properly that this raw terror had nothing to do with morality but had to do clearly with power... We saw the political organization of the masses as the only route to solving our problem... Our direction was clear, with a heavy emphasis on nationalism.⁹

And accordingly, when King pleaded with Carmichael not to continue using the term 'Black Power', Carmichael remembers responding that "this was an organizational decision, not mine. I [said that I] must represent my organization or resign from the position which I hold, and [I said] I was not prepared to [resign]."¹⁰

Naturally, while Carmichael certainly took his new job seriously, this schism points to an issue far deeper than a mere bureaucratic obstacle would. There was a time when King and Carmichael had agreed that nonviolence was the ideal tool, though for different reasons. Now, however, Carmichael indicated that he had virtually given up on nonviolence because it failed to measure up to his practical demands.

Even before King's assassination, the talented Carmichael had become known for (what would become) quintessential, news-hour sound-bites, such as, "We have to move from Molotov cocktails to dynamite,"¹¹ and "we cannot have white people working in the black community,"¹² and "[In Vietnam] we will not kill anybody that they say kill. And if we decide to kill, we're going to decide *who* we going to kill... This is not 1942, and if you play like Nazis, we playing back with you this time around. Get hip to that."¹³

Granted, Carmichael never wholly rejected the utility of nonviolence, but his rhetoric took on a distinctive edge after he coined 'Black Power' in the summer of 1966.

But more importantly, people were listening to him. As Robert Fogelson noted in 1971, Carmichael had, "by virtue of great charisma, attained a rapport with the lower and



⁹ Hampton, 280

¹⁰ Hampton, 291

¹¹ Methvin, Eugene H. *The Riot Makers: the technology of social demolition*. Arlington House: 1970, P.75

¹² Speech at UC Berkely, October 6, 1966.

¹³ Ibid. Editorial cartoon by Herb Block, 3 days into the rioting. *Washington Post*, April 7, 1968, B6.

working classes probably unmatched since the time of Marcus Garvey.”¹⁴ Though admittedly nebulous, the success of such a rabble-rouser could be framed with the maxim, “When the appropriate appeal meets the appropriate susceptibility, membership results.”¹⁵ More specifically, militants like Carmichael not only “articulated the grievances of their people in a forthright and eloquent way, [but they also] said what others have felt but could not say, and they have brought into the open what others have long kept hidden.”¹⁶

Meanwhile, as ‘Black Power’ began to pick up steam, the nation’s worst series of riots¹⁷ broke out during the summer of 1967, leaving the moderates empty handed and completely without leverage. Rioting and unrest in dozens of American cities led many to believe that the mainstream black leadership (such as the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, the Urban League and—to some extent—the SCLC) merely “reflected their own middle-class interests and training. As a result, their thunder was stolen by the more visible community-based militants who charged the moderates with few accomplishments.”¹⁸

Conversely, any progress made in the name of moderation was often seen as negligible, especially when compared to what was being offered—though seldom delivered—by “preachers of hate”¹⁹ or “agitator leaders,”²⁰ as police were known to call the militants.

Even in the broad context of philosophy, by “exploiting the [1967] rioting to demonstrate the futility of working within the existing institutional structure, the militants were challenging the moderates’ ideology,” not just their tactics. As a result, these especially violent and widespread “riots cost the moderate leaders much of their credibility in both the black ghettos and in the white communities.”²¹ In fact, by the end of the summer, between King and Carmichael, “it was not clear which, if either, of them spoke for the black people.”²²

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Rather out of character, Stokely Carmichael had spent most of the year prior to Dr. King’s death in the US capital, based out of SNCC’s office in the heart of the Washington’s “Harlem” and a mere mile and half north of the White House. For years he had been accustomed to traveling the country (and occasionally the world) to learn from his peers and establish an intricate network of activists who supported the civil rights movement and, eventually, Black Power.

¹⁴ Fogelson, 146

¹⁵ Bowers, John and Donovan Ochs. *The Rhetoric of Agitation and Control* (second edition). Waveland: 1993, P.15. Gardner and Avolio frame this rule with the “magnetism/magnetizability” spectrum. See fn 3.

¹⁶ Fogelson, 146

¹⁷ See the *Report of the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders*, Bantam: New York, 1968.

¹⁸ Denisoff, R Serge. “Violence as Protest: a study of riots and ghettos,” Book Review in *Contemporary Sociology* 1(4): 345-46.

¹⁹ Methvin, 501

²⁰ Button, James. *Black Violence: political impact of the 1960s riots*. Princeton: 1978, P.136.

²¹ Fogelson, 130

²² Fogelson, 48

Unlike his peers, however, Carmichael wanted to give equal attention to the urban centers in America's northern half, especially Washington, DC. Having gone to the prestigious, all-black Howard University only a mile east of the city's SNCC and SCLC headquarters, Carmichael felt quite at home in DC's black neighborhoods. Always tethered to the cause, however, Carmichael had an even more important reason to work out of DC: despite having the institutional wherewithal to mobilize blacks in droves, the civil rights movement inside the District was particularly paralyzed by the absence of any mechanisms for the representation of black people and their interests. Looking back, Carmichael described DC as

a city with a black majority administered by congressional committees mostly of white southerners. A classic internal colony. With no representation in Congress, no local government worthy of the name, the population was as effectively disenfranchised as black people in Mississippi. I couldn't wait to take it on.²³

And after nearly a year of focus on little else, he had the pulse of his people and the beat of his neighborhood.

Entrenched as he was in the militant struggle for civil rights, Carmichael could only have one reaction to King's assassination on April 4, 1968. Still at his office, devastated, the twenty-six year-old Carmichael told a group of friends and colleagues, "It's time to end this nonviolence bullshit. We gotta get together."²⁴

SNCC activist Cleve Sellers remembered that "Stokely was very upset. He is volatile and tends to have little control over his emotions when he is angry. His eyes reflected pure rage."²⁵ In contrast, Carmichael recalls, "I couldn't even look at Cleve, the brother was in such pain."²⁶

After gathering himself, Carmichael's first response was to call for a "black strike"—a sort of mandatory closing of all stores to honor King. As he went from store to store in the neighborhood that had become his own, people started following him. More people joined with every new store that was instructed to close. Close in tow, Sellers told a fellow SNCC activist, "We've gotta stay close and keep [Carmichael] from getting in trouble."²⁷

Based on Carmichael's initial behavior, one gets the distinct impression that he had the urge to *do something*, and a strike was simply the response he had chosen. Likewise, everyone was following Carmichael because he was the only one *doing something*, despite how little there was that could be done. The neighborhood looked to Carmichael immediately.

"Stokely, you're the one," a boy shouted to him in the street.

"Now that Dr. King's dead, we ain't got no way but Stokely's way," another said.²⁸

²³ Ture, 571

²⁴ Gilbert, Ben. *Ten Blocks from the White House*. Praeger: 1968, P.16.

²⁵ Sellers, Cleve and Robert Terrell. *The River of No Return*. Morrow: 1973. P.230.

²⁶ Ture, 657. Sellers' depression and Carmichael's rage together reflect the two most common reactions to King's assassination. Sellers' reaction is particularly helpful in putting Carmichael's reaction in context.

²⁷ Sellers, 230

²⁸ Gilbert, 18

According to Sellers, “during the next half hour or so, the inevitable began to happen. Enraged by the senseless assassination, people in the community began to stream into the streets. They were looking for some way to let out their frustrations.”²⁹

Only 80 minutes after King’s death was announced on the radio, glass began to break all around the boiling intersection of 14th and U Streets. Seeing one teenager break a window, Carmichael shouted “This is not the way.” Aided by other SNCC members, Carmichael deterred or neutralized every instance of destruction he encountered. But soon there were not enough SNCC members to address every attempt and vandalism and destruction. “This is it, baby,” one man said, “The shit is going to hit the fan now... We oughta burn this place down right now... Let’s get some white motherfuckers... Let’s kill them all.”³⁰

To which Carmichael replied in a stern and resonating tone,

You really ready to go out and kill? How you gonna win? What you got?
They’ve got guns and tanks. What you got? If you don’t have your gun, go home. We’re not ready. Let’s wait until tomorrow. Just cool it. Go home, go home, go home... This is not the time brothers.³¹

When another youth broke a nearby window, Carmichael ran over to him and impatiently pulled a black revolver out of his belt, showing it to the teenager. “If you mean business, you should have a gun. You’re not ready for the ‘thing.’ Go home.”³² It then appeared as though Carmichael began to gain control of the situation, as if the crowd was starting to lose steam.

And that was when the mob stopped following Carmichael and dispersed into smaller groups. When Carmichael chided another man for calling for vengeance, the man responded, “But we’ve got no leader. We lost our leader. They killed him.”³³ Carmichael quickly retorted, “You won’t get one like this. You’ll just get shot. Go home, go home.”

That seemed to be the breakpoint—the moment when Carmichael realized he would never regain control of the crowd. Much later, however, he would deny ever having control:

I was in no way responsible for the burning of D.C. Hey, Jack, if I had been, why would I deny it? Then or now. Far as I was concerned, this country had coming whatever it got that night. In spades... No one could have stopped it—you kidding?—no one. Nor did I particularly want to. Hey, I was just as angry as anyone... What would we have looked like, as a people, if we had just lapped our tails between our legs and done nothing?... What would we have told our

²⁹ Sellers, 232

³⁰ Gilbert, 21

³¹ Gilbert, 21-2

³² There is some discrepancy about whether Carmichael also said (within these few sentences), “If you don’t have your gun, go home and get your guns... Go home and get you a gun and then come back because I got me a gun... Don’t shoot unless everybody’s got their gun.” This seemingly small difference between actively encouraging violence and resignedly directing a massive tide of frustration (to minimize black bloodshed) would actually be invaluable to determining the potential for conflict resolution. Unfortunately, there is no uncontested account of Carmichael’s wording here. See Methvin, 106.

³³ Gilbert, 23

children? That we grieved and did nothing? Yeah, of course, Dr. King would never have approved. But don't you think that, perhaps more than anyone else, he at least would have understood? In deep, deep sorrow maybe, but surely he'd have understood."³⁴

In the immediate aftermath of the King assassination, more than 75,000 National Guardsmen were deployed in more than 110 American cities to prevent or quell black fury over the loss of their greatest leader. Hundreds of stores and buildings throughout the District's northwest, northeast and southeast sections had been looted, destroyed and burned. Over the course of four days in DC, twelve people were left dead, hundreds of others homeless, nearly 1200 injured, and more than 5000 jobless. Nearly every direct and indirect victim of the rioting and looting was black.

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So how did Carmichael's personality and leadership style incite and/or mitigate the swelling tension immediately after news spread of King's violent death? What can we learn about leadership by looking at Carmichael's words and behavior at the time—and compared to his reflections years later? Filtered through several different lenses (some scholarly, some not), Carmichael's leadership takes on greater nuance—or self-delusion, depending on one's perspective.

First, Carmichael's rhetoric—both within the riot period and across the decades since—is neither consistent nor predictable. As detailed above, Carmichael's leadership in the hours immediately following King's assassination was quite moderate, especially coming from a militant advocate of revolution. Among the dozens of personal accounts of that night, only one claimed that Carmichael explicitly encouraged the kind of violence and the sacrifice dominating the rhetoric of revolutionaries.³⁵

According to every other eyewitness account, Carmichael was suggesting that *if* they want to be violent, they cannot do so half-heartedly because they would be slaughtered. "We're not ready," he repeated again and again.

Whenever he saw people destroying property or preparing to avenge King's death by killing whites at random, Carmichael stopped them, and in one case wrestled a gun away from a man who was trying to amass a death squad aimed at any whites it could find.³⁶



³⁴ Ture, 656-8

³⁵ This, again, refers to the discrepancy between Carmichael saying, "If you don't have your gun, go home," and its more violent mirror, "If you don't have a gun, go home *and get one*," (emphasis added). See fn 32. Political cartoon by Herb Block soon after rioting ended. *Washington Post*, April 9, 1968, A12.

³⁶ Gilbert, 23

Little more than a half hour after the rioting started, Carmichael disappeared, later claiming that he wanted to avoid arrest and accusations that he incited the riot.

Then, strangely, the next morning at a press conference Carmichael's words and speech patterns were more incendiary, frightening and (to many) inspirational than at any time in his life.

White America has declared war on black people... There no longer needs to be intellectual discussion. Black people know they have to get guns... There will be no crying and there will be no funeral. We will give no more tears for any black man killed... When America killed Dr. King last night, she killed all reasonable hope... She killed the one man of our race that this country's older generations, the militants and the revolutionaries and the masses of black people would still listen to.³⁷

When asked what the riots might accomplish, Carmichael responded,

The black man can't do nothing in this country, [so] we're going to stand up on our feet and die like men. If that's our only act of manhood, then Goddammit we're going to die. We're tired of living on our stomachs.³⁸

When asked if King's assassination had made him fear for his life, Carmichael hotly responded, "The Hell with my life! You should fear for yours. I know I'm going to die. I know I'm leaving." At this, the audience applauded.³⁹ His calls to action were even more provocative when interviewed on a Cuban radio station based in Havana.⁴⁰

One explanation for the sharp difference in rhetoric was the audience. A natural political animal, Carmichael knew his audiences and knew how to engage them: by varying his message, along with its delivery, depending on his own whims. The night before, his objective was to prevent more bloodshed, so he gave little attention to public relations. In contrast, the press conference was solely focused on public perception of the events in DC. Carmichael wanted to send a powerful counter-message to the violence expressed in the murder of his mentor. The point was to shock the press, and they fed into it perfectly.

That is, they believed him until it became clear that he was not actually preparing a revolution in the days after King died, despite his promises/predictions to the contrary. And once it became clear that Carmichael would not instigate the revolution he warned about, the mystery about his contradictory and inflammatory rhetoric was settled: he was merely "intent on polarizing uncommitted individuals."⁴¹ Carmichael knew that this was the best opportunity he would ever have to recruit. He polarized the debate to ensure that anyone who did not see the issue as he did would be dismissed as an enemy. As Dr. King once noted, "shallow understanding from people of good will is more frustrating than

³⁷ *Washington Post*, April 6, 1968, A16.

³⁸ Gilbert, 61

³⁹ *Washington Post*, April 6, 1968, A16.

⁴⁰ "More people are now beginning to plan seriously for guerrilla warfare, where we can begin to retaliate not only for the death of Dr. King, but where we can move [toward] serious revolutions with this country to bring it to its knees... The United States must fall in order for humanity to live, and we are going to give our lives to that cause." See Gilbert, 66.

⁴¹ Bowers, 35

absolute misunderstanding from people of ill will. Lukewarm acceptance is more bewildering than outright rejection.”⁴²

But this explanation still fails to explain why Carmichael would warn or encourage others (through the press corps) to continue the rioting, especially if he left the riot scene the night of the assassination because he was afraid of being accused of inciting the riot. If the police had had no such evidence the night before, the press conference gave them ample testimony to justify his arrest. But they refrained, likely fearing even more violence across the city and, perhaps, the nation.

Either way, the fact that Carmichael failed to follow up on his promise to lead an imminent revolution also points to an inherent ambiguity within his own ideology. What, for instance, did he mean when he warned rioters that they were “not ready for the thing”? What was the ‘thing’? A revolution? If so, why were they not ready? Because they did not have enough guns? Likewise, during the press conference, he said that “black people need to get guns,” but what then? A black coup d’etat?

Upon closer examination, Carmichael’s entire philosophy—once it diverged from King’s—was founded upon principles that were intentionally vague and ambiguous, which likely hindered his attempts to ameliorate the tension after King’s assassination. Perhaps to compensate for having so few supporters, conscripting imprecision seemed to be an attempt to lure both moderate and militant activists into thinking that “Black Power” could mean whatever they wanted it to mean. According to David Garrow,

In private, Carmichael and his SNCC colleagues were quite aware of, and happy with, the ambiguous connotations of ‘Black Power’. “The intent, initially, was not to get it boxed into a particular definition,” Cleveland Sellers explained. There was a purposeful “SNCC effort *not* to give it a definition...to make it ambiguous”...so that “it meant everything to everybody.”⁴³

Perhaps such tactics could be explained as scavenging for supporters in a world where King was the undisputed center of gravity. In fact, the problem with the term “Black Power,” King frequently told Carmichael, was its between-the-lines implication of impotence. “In a pluralistic society, to have real power, you have to deny it,” King noted. “And if you go around claiming power, the whole society turns on you and crushes you. But if you really have power, you don’t need a slogan.”⁴⁴ And as a result, both Carmichael’s press conference and the absence of any subsequent revolution together served to discredit his threats and predictions.

Granted, he was angry and his warnings were also intended to frighten “White America” into reforming the “institutional racism” inherent at most levels of American society. Yet even Carmichael himself later wondered if “those beltway apparatchiks actually believed their own propaganda”—that Carmichael’s gang “could take over and plunge the nation’s capital into a race war.”⁴⁵ He simply found it hard to believe that they perceived him as a credible threat despite his fiery rhetoric—and more importantly, that this perception was based on accurate assessments, not egotism or pride. It seems,

⁴² Letter from Birmingham City Jail, <http://www.thekingcenter.org/prog/non/letter.html>

⁴³ Garrow, 707 (emphasis original)

⁴⁴ Hampton, 294

⁴⁵ Hampton, 658

then, that the angry revolutionary was not so revolutionary after all; he merely wanted to exploit the image that the American media painted of him.⁴⁶

And as if sensing Carmichael's insincerities the night before, the hordes of rioters in northwest DC ignored his pleadings after King's assassination. In fact, the mob was (by default) using the very tactics that Carmichael had explicitly espoused for more than two years. To be sure, few in the black community seemed to lose respect for Carmichael, either during or after the riots. But without question, in order to justify ignoring his leadership, the black masses had to have dissociated Carmichael from the methods he had advocated since beginning his tenure at SNCC.

In other words, their trust or faith in Carmichael was no longer relevant; they merely co-opted his ideas (which spoke for themselves) and acted accordingly. In a different light, just as King may have been too loving to affect any change, so too was Carmichael so charismatic that his message took on meaning well beyond the status of the messenger himself. In most cases, leaders whose messages appear at odds with their own behavior often face skeptical or even discrediting audiences.⁴⁷ But strangely, that was not the case here, as Carmichael remained very popular among blacks.

It is important also to note that any inconsistency between Carmichael's previous ideology and his behavior the night King died should not automatically lead to claims that he must have been disingenuous or unconcerned about his followers. Carmichael was, in fact, still the leader of that community; but the one person in the world that connected *all* black Americans—the one that made each of them feel important in the exact same way—had been violently stripped from them moments earlier. With such a painful vacuum, it would be remarkable for any group of people to trust themselves enough to seek out another leader so quickly. True, some claims that there “ain't no way but Stokely's way” resonated, but clearly the emphasis for the community was placed on the “way” or method itself, regardless of the fact that it had been Stokely who had advocated it.

Nonetheless, in this instance of social unrest—like most others—the image “of receptive masses whipped up by an unscrupulous leader is not quite true to life.”⁴⁸ Donald Horowitz, a prominent riot theorist, notes that a given community will only propagate a riot if certain forms of social violence are already approved—if not overtly supported—by that community.⁴⁹ Or, as social theorist Charles King phrased it, there must already be in place

social rules governing how the violent game is played: who is a legitimate target; the level of violence that can be meted out, from destruction of property to murder; and what counts as a sufficient condition for escalating from one level to the next.⁵⁰

⁴⁶ Nor was King any different from Carmichael in this regard; King wanted to exploit the way that the very same media viewed him—namely, as the safe moderate who believed in mercy and would never be more than an incessant nuisance. Among King's many public relations goals was the use of his image to reassure whites into gradual and stable accommodation.

⁴⁷ Gardner and Avolio, 44

⁴⁸ King, Charles. “The Micropolitics of Social Violence,” *World Politics*, 56 (April 2004): 439.

⁴⁹ Horowitz, David. *The Deadly Ethnic Riot*. Berkeley: 2001, P.366

⁵⁰ King, 440

Thus, even if Carmichael had actively mobilized a revolution in the hours after King's death (which he did not), a riot could only have ensued had the necessary ground work already been in place. Accordingly, it would be inaccurate to say that Carmichael and his SNCC colleagues "were the crowd crystal that grew into the Washington riot."⁵¹

As Carmichael indicated both then and now, he was more than furious by the assassination, but he was the only one in any position of leadership who chose to respond to King's death constructively and nonviolently when he sought a show of solidarity from the neighborhood shopkeepers. And sadly, long before Carmichael even had time to do something else—whatever that next task may have been—the rioting and looting had begun and the dominos began toppling instantaneously.

Without question, Carmichael played a role in giving a voice to the marginalized, oppressed and hopeless black men and women in America. The voice he gave was often violent, and for various reasons, Carmichael had trouble publicly drawing the line between violent rhetoric and violent behavior. But the nuances between the two were blurred just as much by white communities that rarely rewarded any resistance, nonviolent or otherwise.

That night in April, the cruelest month, on the shoulders of our greatest leaders, Carmichael was the only one to keep his cool. And yet, he was the one man who had the most reason to feel hollowed out by a nation that did not play fair—a nation that had taken his dear friend, ironically paving the way for the most substantive steps toward equality for black America in four centuries.

⁵¹ Methvin, 106