

The Black Power Defined [excerpt]

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Full text: <http://teachingamericanhistory.org/library/document/the-black-power-defined/>

When a people are mired in oppression, they realize deliverance only when they have accumulated the power to enforce change. The powerful never lose opportunities—they remain available to them. They powerless, on the other hand, never experience opportunity—it is always arriving at a later time.

The nettlesome task of Negroes today is to discover how to organize our strength into compelling power so that government cannot elude our demands. We must develop, from strength, a situation in which the government finds it wise and prudent to collaborate with us. It would be the height of naiveté to wait passively until the administration had somehow been infused with such blessings of good will that it implored us for our programs.

We must frankly acknowledge that in past years our creativity and imagination were not employed in learning how to develop power. We found a method in nonviolent protest that worked, and we employed it enthusiastically. We did not have leisure to probe for a deeper understanding of its laws and lines of development. Although our actions were bold and crowned with successes, they were substantially improvised and spontaneous. They attained the goals set for them but carried the blemishes of our inexperience.

This is where the civil rights movement stands today. Now we must take the next major step of examining the levers of power which Negroes must grasp to influence the course of events.

In our society power sources can always finally be traced to ideological, economic and political forces.

In the area of *ideology*, despite the impact of the works of a few Negro writers on

a limited number of white intellectuals, all too few Negro thinkers have exerted an influence on the main currents of American thought. Nevertheless, Negroes have illuminated imperfections in the democratic structure that were formerly only dimly perceived, and have forced a concerned reexamination of the true meaning of American democracy. As a consequence of the vigorous Negro protest, the whole nation has for a decade probed more searchingly the essential nature of democracy, both economic and political. By taking to the streets and there giving practical lessons in democracy and its defaults, Negroes have decisively influenced white thought.

Lacking sufficient access to television, publications and broad forums, Negroes have had to write their most persuasive essays with the blunt pen of marching ranks. The many white political leaders and well-meaning friends who ask Negro leadership to leave the streets may not realize that they are asking us effectively to silence ourselves. More white people learned more about the shame of America, and finally faced some aspects of it, during the years of nonviolent protest than during the century before. Nonviolent direct action will continue to be a significant source of power until it is made irrelevant by the presence of justice.

The *economic* highway to power has few entry lanes for Negroes. Nothing so vividly reveals the crushing impact of discrimination and the heritage of exclusion as the limited dimensions of Negro business in the most powerful economy in the world. America's industrial production is half of the world's total, and within it the production of Negro business is so small that it can scarcely be measured on any definable scale.

Yet in relation to the Negro community the value of Negro business should not be underestimated. In the internal life of the Negro society it provides a degree of stability. Despite formidable obstacles it has developed a corps of men of competence and organizational discipline who constitute a talented leadership reserve, who furnish inspiration and who are a resource for the development of programs and planning. They are a strength among the weak though they are weak among the mighty.

There exist two other areas, however, where Negroes can exert substantial influence on the broader economy. As employees and consumers, Negro numbers and their strategic disposition endow them with a certain bargaining strength.

Within the ranks of organized labor there are nearly two million Negroes, and they are concentrated in key industries. In the truck transportation, steel, auto and food industries, which are the backbone of the nation's economic life, Negroes make up nearly twenty percent of the organized work force, although they are only ten percent of the general population. This potential strength is magnified further by the fact of their unity with millions of white workers in these

occupations. As co-workers there is a basic community of interest that transcends many of the ugly divisive elements of traditional prejudice. There are undeniably points of friction, for example, in certain housing and education questions. But the severity of the abrasions is minimized by the more commanding need for cohesion in union organizations.

In days to come, organized labor will increase its importance in the destinies of Negroes. Negroes pressed into the proliferating service occupations-traditionally unorganized and with low wages and long hours-need union protection, and the union movement needs their membership to maintain its relative strength in the whole society. On this new frontier Negroes may well become the pioneers that they were in the early organizing days of the thirties.

The other economic ladder available to the Negro is as a consumer. The Southern Christian Leadership Council has pioneered in developing mass boycott movements in a frontal attack on discrimination. In Birmingham it was not the marching alone that brought about integration of public facilities in 1963. The downtown business establishments suffered for weeks under our almost unbelievably effective boycott. The significant percentage of their sales that vanished, the ninety-eight percent of their Negro customers who stayed home, educated them forcefully to the dignity of the Negro as a consumer.

Later we crystallized our experiences in Birmingham and elsewhere and developed a department in SCLC called Operation Breadbasket. This has as its primary aim the securing of more and better jobs for the Negro people. It calls on the Negro community to support those businesses that will give a fair share of jobs to Negroes and to withdraw its support from those businesses that have discriminatory policies.

In Atlanta, for instance, the Negroes' earning power has been increased by more than twenty million dollars annually over the past three years through a carefully disciplined program of selective buying and negotiation by the Negro ministers. During the last eight months in Chicago, Operation Breadbasket successfully completed negotiations with three major industries: milk, soft drinks and chain grocery stores. Four of the companies involved concluded reasonable agreements only after short "don't buy" campaigns. Seven other companies were able to make the requested changes across the conference table, without necessitating a boycott. Two other companies, after providing their employment information to the ministers, were sent letters of commendation for their healthy equal-employment practices. The net results add up to approximately eight hundred new and upgraded jobs for Negro employees, worth a little over seven million dollars in new annual income for Negro families. Along with requesting new job opportunities, we are now requesting that businesses with stores in the ghetto deposit the income for those establishments in Negro-owned banks, and that Negro-owned products be placed on the counters of all their stores. In this way

we seek to stop the drain of resources out of the ghetto with nothing remaining there for its rehabilitation.

The final major area of untapped power for the Negro is the *political* arena. Higher Negro birth rates and increasing Negro migration, along with the exodus of the white population to the suburbs, are producing the fast-gathering Negro majorities in the large cities. This changing composition of the cities has political significance. Particularly in the North, the large cities substantially determine the political destiny of the state. These states, in turn, hold the dominating electoral votes in presidential contests. The future of the Democratic Party, which rests so heavily on its coalition of urban minorities, cannot be assessed without taking into account which way the Negro vote turns. The wistful hopes of the Republican Party for large-city influence will also be decided not in the boardrooms of great corporations but in the teeming ghettos.

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We need organizations that are permeated with mutual trust, incorruptibility and militancy. Without this spirit we may have numbers but they will add up to zero. We need organizations that are responsible, efficient and alert. We lack experience because ours is a history of disorganization. But we will prevail because our need for progress is stronger than the ignorance force upon us. If we realize how indispensable is responsible militant organization to our struggle, we will create it as we managed to create underground railroads, protest groups, self-help societies and the churches that have always been our refuge, our source of hope and our source of action.

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The art of alliance politics is more complex and more intricate than it is generally pictured. It is easy to put exciting combinations on paper. It evokes happy memories to recall that our victories in the past decade were won with a broad collation of organizations representing a wide variety of interests. But we deceive ourselves if we envision the same combination backing structural changes in the society. It did not come together for such a program and will not reassemble for it.

A true alliance is based upon some self-interest of each component group and a common interest into which they merge. For an alliance to have permanence and loyal commitment from its various elements, each of them must have a goal from which it benefits and none must have an outlook in basic conflict with the others.

If we employ the principle of selectivity along these lines, we will find millions of allies who in serving themselves also support us, and on such sound foundations unity and mutual trust and tangible accomplishment will flourish.

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But the scope of struggle is still too narrow and too restricted. We must turn more of our energies and focus our creativity on the useful things that translate into power. We in this generation must do the work and in doing it stimulate our children to learn and acquire higher levels of skill and technique.

It must become a crusade so vital that civil rights organizers do not repeatedly have to make personal calls to summon support. There must be a climate of social pressure in the Negro community that scorns the Negro who will not pick up his citizenship rights and add his strength enthusiastically and voluntarily to the accumulation of power for himself and his people. The past years have blown fresh winds through ghetto stagnation, but we are on the threshold of a significant change that demands a hundredfold acceleration. By 1970 then of our larger cities will have Negro majorities if present trends continue. We can shrug off this opportunity or use it for a new vitality to deepen and enrich our family and community life.

We must utilize the community action groups and training centers now proliferating in some slum areas to create not merely an electorate, but a conscious, alert and informed people who know their direction and whose collective wisdom and vitality commands respect. The slave heritage can be cast into the dim past by our consciousness of our strengths and a resolute determination to use them in our daily experiences.

Power is not the white man's birthright; it will not be legislated for us and delivered in neat government packages. It is social force any group can utilize by accumulation its elements in a planned deliberate campaign to organize it under its own control.