

Notes on Civil Rights March: Discipline, Unity Outstanding

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WASHINGTON – "Many whites didn't believe it was possible for so many Negroes to get together without the crowd turning into a mob," one elated Negro remarked shortly after the conclusion of the massive yet peaceful March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom. His statement touched upon two key aspects of the entire demonstration – discipline and unity.

The discipline was of two sorts. The discipline predominating among a large segment of the Negro Marchers was the discipline of middle class America. One could tell by observing such tell-tale signs as dress and decorum that many of the nation's more financially comfortable Negroes have joined their less fortunate brothers in what has been called the American battle of the century – the battle for equal civil rights. Apparently the middle-class Negro has realized that his relative comfort and security in America's suburban ghettos are not strong enough tranquilizers to dull the sting of either outright or subtle second-class status as citizens and as human beings.

But many Negroes at the demonstration were not disciplined by middle class values and manners. Some, especially the large contingent of young Southern Negroes, came to the capital schooled in a new, consciously applied tactic called appropriately enough, "non-violence."

Ordeal in Jail

This reporter was walking down a quiet Washington street with an overall-clad, sign-bearing Negro from Mississippi, young James Lee Pruitt, a member of the Student Non-Violating [sic] Coordinating Committee (SNCC), considered the most militant of the six major national civil rights organizations. Pruitt had come to the capital straight from a Greenwood, Mississippi jail, where he and 13 other SNCC workers were thrown into a 5' by 8' cell with no clothes and greased bodies. They were unable to sit down and had to lie on top of each other on the floor, said Pruitt, and there they remained, unable to summon aid from the outside, for 52 days.

Pruitt had been up all the previous night picketing the Justice Department, and he was tired and hungry. We were walking to the Justice Department building when two hecklers began following us, thrusting jeers and taunts at the husky, weary Mississippian. "I was told not to try to fight back against that kind," Pruitt told me. "We'll just notify the nearest policemen that these guys are looking for a fight and let the officer handle them."

These words came from one who had something over which to become violent. He even kept his composure when three people (two passers-by and a gas station attendant) gave us grossly misleading directions when we asked for the way to the Justice Department building. We were at the time only two blocks from the building, and these residents of the city should have known where it was. I couldn't understand what was going on, until Pruitt turned to me and said: "It's the signs and the color, you see. It attracts wrong directions all the time in the South."

William Rowe, commissioner of youth services in New Rochelle, who acted as a chief marshal at the March, told this reporter that the demonstration was "the best we've ever seen, and I saw plenty of demonstrations when I was deputy police commissioner for four years in New York." He was frankly amazed at the lack of incidents.

He said that the communications system linking the more than 9,000 policemen and marshals was used for what looked like trouble only once, "and that turned out to be a false alarm about (George Lincoln) Rockwell." Rockwell, the self-proclaimed leader of the American Nazi party, showed up to hold an illegal demonstration with 30 (he expected 300) followers and was escorted away before he got started. But no violence erupted.)

Unity Shown

The other major aspect, unity, was demonstrated by the agreement of the six major organizations, which have different views regarding tactics, on the ground rules for the march. There must have been a great deal of compromise and concession and it was publicly admitted that John Lewis, chairman of SNCC, toned down his original speech at the request of other leaders. Yet the moderates were tolerant of dissent, and they allowed marchers to carry other than committee-approved signs and did not suppress unauthorized chants.

The organizations, about which rumors of inter-group rivalries had been circulating, proved that they could all pull together. As one NAACP Legal Defense Fund lawyer put it: "The SNCC kids get into jail and we get them out."

The various integrationist groups have developed a unique kind of respect for one another. When the Mississippi delegation, made up mostly of more militant Negroes arrived, the crowd divided to clear a passageway for the heroes. A kind of pecking order emerged by which those who have conducted the fight for equality under the most trying and dangerous conditions have earned the almost worshipping respect of their less battle-scarred colleagues.

What has the march accomplished? Few people believe it changed many, if any, votes on Capitol Hill. It certainly has not changed the minds of the staunchest opponents to the civil rights bill. However, despite the announced aim of the march to bolster support for the Kennedy bill, it was obvious that civil rights leaders were looking beyond that far-from-Utopian piece of legislation. In fact, John Lewis of SNCC called the President's bill an example of "too little, too late," and Roy Wilkins of the NAACP warned that even the slightest watering down of the bill would reduce it to "pap."

The march accomplished one thing for certain – it showed not only the Congress, but every American, that the Negro is capable of fighting for his rights in whatever manner he chooses. The Negro did not prove yesterday that he is inherently non-violent and peaceful; rather, he proved that he can be non-violent when he has good reason to avoid violence. Wednesday he avoided violence because he pledged he would. He showed, in effect, that he is capable of successfully carrying out whatever tactics he chooses to use in order to force social and economic changes. The march turned out just as the Negro leaders planned it, and they planned it themselves.

The Negro has shown that the resources and organizing capacity, the unity and the discipline which went into Wednesday's march could just as easily be mobilized for a more militant and less "respectable" type of demonstration. The Negro has given America a choice and it is now the nation's turn to make the next move, a move which will determine the future course of the Negro revolt. This is the nature of the challenge which Wednesday's massive yet peaceful demonstration has flung into the nation's reluctant arms.

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