

The Complicated Legacy of Stokely Carmichael



By Katrina Smith

Stop being ashamed of being black!" Direct, intellectual, firm, strong, fighter and radical; these are all words that perfectly describe Stokely Carmichael aka Kwame Ture. Carmichael was born on June 29, 1941 in Port of Spain, Trinidad and Tobago to Mabel Carmichael, a stewardess, and Adolphus Carmichael, a taxi driver and carpenter. When he was just a toddler, Carmichael's parents moved to New York and left him under his grandmother's care until he was 11 years old.

When he was 13 years old, he entered The Bronx High School of Science. There were many white students within that school who had very affluent parents living in the Bronx. Carmichael, while friends with his schoolmates, recalls always being conscious of the differences and the privileges they received versus his treatment due to differences in skin color.

Toward the end of his high school career, Carmichael recalled how he became consciously active within his community. He remembered the exact moment where his activism became serious to him. "When I first heard about the Negroes sitting in at lunch counters down South, I thought they were just a bunch of publicity hounds," he recalled. "But one night when I saw those young kids on TV, getting back up on the lunch counter stools after being knocked off them, sugar in their eyes, ketchup in their hair—well, something happened to me. Suddenly I was burning." Soon after watching that video during his senior year in high school, he joined the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE). While in this organization, he participated in many sit-ins in Virginia and South Carolina. Joining socially conscious groups later shaped Carmichael to leave behind a great radical activism legacy that many will speak about forever.

Carmichael was a very smart man. After graduating high school in 1960, he received many scholarships from predominantly white institutions. Although he was appreciative of the scholarships and the opportunities, he chose to attend Howard University to major in philosophy. During his freshman year in 1961, he joined the Freedom Riders, challenging the rules of segregation while traveling. In one of his missions he got arrested in Jackson, Mississippi for entering the "whites only" bus stop waiting room. Carmichael was jailed for 29 days following this incident.

After graduating from Howard University, he began to work with the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). During the summer of 1964 they held a campaign that focused primarily on making sure black people were registered to vote. The committee became so impressed with Carmichael's leadership, intellect and skills that they promoted him to field organizer for Lowndes County, Alabama. Within his first year of being field organizer for Lowndes County, he was able to raise the number of black registered voters from 70 to 2,600. His work and efforts were praised throughout the organization, but not respected by elected officials. Growing upset by other officials' lack of respect for what he was doing for his community he founded his own political party in Lowndes County called Freedom Organization. He created this foundation because he felt as though his people were not represented effectively in Alabama and he wanted to make sure their voices were heard.

In the beginning of his college career Carmichael believed in Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s philosophy of nonviolence and its application to civil rights. He believed at one point, like King, that

being nonviolent meant that people would hear out black people and take them seriously. They felt that civil rights activist wouldn't be harassed as much and accepted by the public. But by being nonviolent, it made the activist more vulnerable to acts of brutality and Carmichael, like many others, became increasingly frustrated that nothing appeared to be happening to improve conditions within the black community.

In May 1966, he was elected national chairman of SNCC. During this time he turned the organization into a strictly radical group after growing frustrated at the pain and the suffering that the African-American community was experiencing. If there were any prior white members in SNCC, he kicked them out and did not allow any other white individuals to join the group either. "We been saying 'freedom' for six years, what we are going to start saying now is 'black power,'" he said after becoming chairman of SNCC.

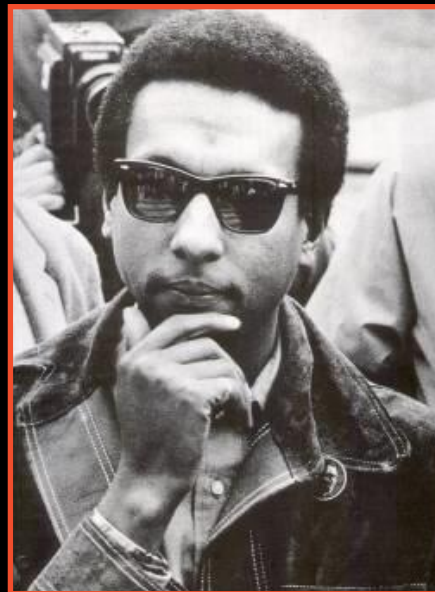
According to Carmichael, the term "black power" was "a call for black people in this country to unite, to recognize their heritage, to build a sense of community. It is a call for black people to define their own goals [and] to lead their own organization."

Carmichael further explained that, "When you talk of black power, you talk of building a movement that will smash everything Western civilization had created." The term black power evoked fear within the white community and King publicly shunned the term calling it, "an unfortunate choice of words."

In 1967, Carmichael left SNCC to join the Black Panthers and became their prime minister. Although he only spent two years with the Panthers, (1967-1969), Pan-Africanism, Black Nationalism, and black separatism defined the reason and purpose of his activism. After quitting in 1969, he moved to Conakry, Guinea, where he maintained residency until he

died. While living in Guinea he changed his name to Kwame Ture to honor the president of Ghana, Kwame Nkrumah, and the president of Guinea, Sékou Touré.

In his lifetime he got married twice. The first marriage was to South African singer and songwriter Miriam Makeba in 1968, they divorced in 1978. His second marriage was to Marlyatou Barry in 1980, together they had a son, Bokar Carmichael. They later divorced in 1982. Carmichael, who battled prostate cancer, said he believed that his cancer "was given to me by the forces of American imperialism and others who conspired with them." Up until his last days, he was known to answer his phone saying, "Ready for the revolution!" instead of hello. He died in 1985 in Guinea. He was 57.



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