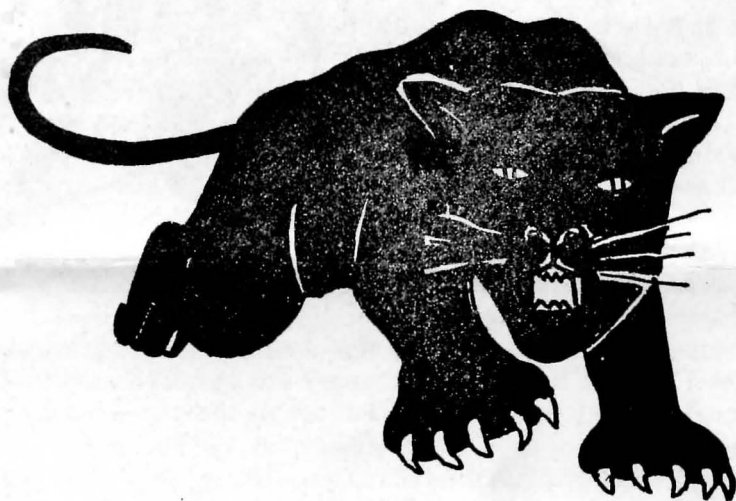


***WHAT
WOULD IT
PROFIT A MAN***



A REPORT ON ALABAMA

EDITORS NOTE: Staff members of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee first went into the Alabama Black Belt in the winter of 1962 in order to begin aiding voter registration drives in Selma and in surrounding counties. Out of these drives, and the murders, beatings and economic reprisals has come a new philosophy for organizing in the black belt. The following report is the product of discussions and organizing by SNCC staff members now working in Alabama. It represents the main current of thought of hundreds of people now living – and suffering – in the Black Belt of the South.



FOR MANY YEARS Negroes in the black belt of Alabama have been the victims of a vicious system of political, economic and social exclusion. Political exclusion is maintained in many ways – the denial of Negroes to the right to vote, service on juries, access to any political offices, and by naked brutality acting under color of law or just a plain white sheet.

Economically, Negroes in the rural black belt have been the prime source of cheap hard labor. They worked the large cotton holdings in Alabama hoeing, weeding, planting, picking for \$3 a day if they were lucky. If they were tenants or sharecroppers they worked under verbal contracts which were designed to always leave the black man in the red. Socially, the Negro in the black belt of Alabama has always had to leave some of himself outside when talking to whites, for he knew that to become “uppity” was to court death. That the above history could be continued ad infinitum for Alabama merely reflects the history of the black man in the United States.

The history of the Negro in the United States, while being a chronicle of victimization, has also been a history of struggle, the latest struggle being the brutalization that Negroes, especially in the black belt of Alabama, received in order to pass the Voting Rights Bill, a right already guaranteed by the 15th Amendment to the United States Constitution.

Since 1961 Negroes in the South have been encouraged to register and vote. They were encouraged by good citizens, civil rights groups and the United States government. Negroes were told that they should risk life and limb so that when they got the right to vote they would be able to throw off the shackles that previously held them bound. Many poor blacks in the rural and urban areas felt that if they could register to vote and exercise that right, they could do something about poor education, unpaved roads, sheriff brutality, economic and political intimidation, the everyday social injustices, and – the whites might even stop calling them “boy”.

IT EVEN BECAME FASHIONABLE in many areas to stand up for the right to vote for “qualified” Negroes who had been disfranchised. After much pressure by the white community and many thousand gone in the black belt communities, the Congress of the United States passed the Voting Rights Act of 1965. A few federal registrars were sent to the South, and many Negroes across the black belt turned out to register and vote – to become first-class citizens, to exercise their right to the franchise, and to participate in the American Dream.

Many people asked, “now that the Negro has the right to vote, could he desire anything else?” Others asked, “what would it profit a man to have the vote and not be able to control it?”

What would it mean for a poor Negro in the black belt to say, "I have the vote and now I can vote Democrat or Republican."

"How can my vote be used to get the things I risked life and limb to gain?"

If we look at the political situation of the Negro as it has developed as a result of protest, many whites are willing to accept Negroes. But they are willing only to accept Negroes who are considered "qualified" by them. That is to say, Negroes who have a good education and a middle-class background. What has developed and is developing in the South is what is known as bi-racial politics. Whereas before only whites dominated the political scene, today bi-racial committees gather moderate whites and middle-class Negroes together to define the art of the possible — politics. To many people in this country, this integrated image is considered good development. However, if we look at the reality, this is a cruel joke.



LET US LOOK at two communities in the North, where, like in the black belt, Negroes are in a high concentration, live in poverty, are the excluded from the society, and have been promised participation in the American Dream (in the South by voting and in the North by definition of its being North). In New York, "image Negroes" are put up to be borough president, serve on many committees, receive judgeships and many other visible and high positions. After the appointment of Negroes to high places many sit back and admire the progress "they", the included, have accomplished. They say, "what more could 'you people' possibly want?" In Watts it's the S.O.S. (same old song). And the Negroes riot.

The fact of the matter is that Negroes, North and South, are not only black, but, more importantly at this stage of the game, poor. They riot because in many instances this is the only political expression left open to them. The tragedy is that when Negroes riot they are politically seen but not heard. So the plot remains the same. And they are continually excluded.

The question which faces those who live and who work in the South is: can the pointed exclusion and fruitless striking out be avoided?

ARE THERE ANY new forms that can be developed to give the poor black a chance to make decisions and to control his own political life?

It is now time for the protest movement to enter the realm of politics. And by protest movement, this does not mean the narrow definition that is given to CORE, SNCC, SCLC, and other such groups. The energy for this political thrust has to come from the victims of this country's political exclusion. It now becomes necessary to develop a political environment where the organization and organizational participation of people becomes more important than the politicians' platform. As it now stands, politics is defined as the art of the possible, inclusive of the few, exclusive of the many. Since the right of people to make decisions about their own lives is the most fundamental right of members of a democratic society, this is the perspective from which the concept of freedom organizations evolved. The Lowndes County Freedom Organization, alias the Black Panther Party, attempts to be such a group.

Lowndes County has a population, according to the 1960 Census, of 15,417 people. Of these, 12,425 are Negro, or 81% of the total county population. Previous to March, 1965, no Negroes in the

county were able to register to vote. After the passage of the 1965 Voting Rights Act, 2,000 Negroes were registered to vote by federal registrar. However, though the whites in Lowndes County have only 1,900 eligible voters, there are 2,500 registered white voters on the books, or over 130% registration.

MOST OF THE NEGRO FAMILIES in Lowndes County make less than \$1,000 a year. Most of them are engaged in sharecropping and tenant farming. The median school years completed by Negroes again according to the 1960 Census, is 5.1 years.

Negroes in Lowndes County have all the elements of deprivation associated with being a poor black.

In an attempt to satisfy their needs – education, decent law enforcement, paved roads, decent housing, good medical facilities, and all the things they hope for themselves and their children – they look to the county courthouse. The question is how to get people into political offices controlling the courthouse who are responsive to their needs.

THE REPUBLICAN PARTY is non-existent. The Democrats, although officially removing their motto of white supremacy from the rooster, have made no other changes in their long-standing policies of racism. In fact, the Chairman of the Lowndes County Democratic Executive Committee, Robert Dickson, Jr., announced that the qualifying fee for the Democratic primaries would be raised 900%, from \$50 to \$500 for the offices of sheriff, tax assessor, tax collector, and from \$10 to \$100 for the offices of the board of education.

Dickson is a defendant in a federal court suit seeking an injunction preventing Lowndes County landowners from evicting

Dickson is a defendant in a federal court suit seeking an injunction preventing Lowndes County landowners from evicting Negro tenants for registering to vote.

Although Negroes are the numerical majority in Lowndes County, the Democratic party only provides them with white candidates who will adhere to a policy of less racism. The Negroes of Lowndes County want a political grouping that is controlled by them. They want a political grouping that is responsive to the needs of the poor, not necessarily the black people, but those who are illiterate, those who have poor educations, those of low



income, that is to say, those who are “unqualified” in this society. To do this, they had to form a group at the county level that represented their own interests.

The L.C.F.O. will attempt to go into areas where no one has bothered to go before, and to talk to people who, up until now, have not been considered worthwhile to deal with or to represent. In order to have these ideas made real, the “Black Panther” program will take shape in the form of control of the court house, so that the poor will be the distributors of any state and federal resources, the taxers of any industry in their county (for example, Dan River Mills in Lowndes County), and the determiners of the quality of education and the money spent for county schools. If they can put this program into action, a program sympathetic to the needs of the poor, tremendous amounts of state or perhaps even federal money can be unleashed for use in the construction of houses, roads, etc.

There has been some criticism of the concept of the freedom organization. First, that it will split the Negro vote. Yet this vote will always be split if Negroes vote in their own economic and political interests. In the past, poor Negroes have always formed the base of a pyramid on which those who are “qualified” are able to gain all the advantages of the Negro vote. Freedom organizations hope to destroy this practice.

The second criticism of the freedom organization, because of the Black Panther symbol, and because the majority of the group is Negro, is said to be black nationalistic. The only symbolic importance of the panther is its determination to be powerful and aggressive. The major emphasis is to bring political power at the county level to the poor and excluded – the color of skin is incidental. The extent to which blackness is seen as a “problem” is one of the manifestations of a segregated and racist society.

THERE ARE THOSE who say that these people are illiterate, uneducated, “barbaric”, and ill-equipped to run a government. We say that these people know their needs and too long have they been ignored. If they cannot find political expression in what is considered a legitimate process, they will express themselves “illegitimately.”

Courtland Cox

The program described in this pamphlet needs your support to continue.

\$100 will: support ten workers for one week; or

pay the rent for the Hale, Wilcox or Barbour county
office for a month; or

supply stencils and mimeo ink for a month; or

pay the gas and oil bills for 13 cars for a week; or

pay for utilities for offices in 14 counties for two weeks.

If you believe in this program, please send your contribution to the:

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Prepared by the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee