

Book chronicles Carmichael's travails

By Kam Williams
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Although history looks kindly on Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. because of his unwavering dedication to a non-violent philosophy, the masses of Black youth of my generation, those coming-of-age in the turbulent Sixties, were much more inclined to follow militant leaders like H. Rap Brown, Malcolm X and Stokely Carmichael.

Carmichael (1941-1998) was a critical figure in the evolution of African-American politics, as he coined the militant mantra, "Black Power!" He also helped to found the Black Panthers.

In the months just before he died of prostate cancer while still living in exile in Guinea, he dictated his autobiography to lifelong friend and fellow activist-colleague Ekueme Michael Thelwell, now a Black Studies professor at the University of Massachusetts. After five years of transcribing the tapes and editing his copious notes, Thelwell has distilled the passionate firebrand's story down to "Ready for Revolution: The Life and Struggles of Stokely Carmichael" (Scribner Books, 848 pp., illus. \$24.50).

This 800-plus page opus offers a comprehensive overview of both Stokely's private life and of the Black Power Movement he kick started and so profoundly influenced. By having the book narrated in the first person singular, Thelwell was able to remain loyal to the tone of the author's vitriolic voice, capturing all his colorful colloquialisms and the authentic flavor of his inimitable, larger-than-life persona. But much more significantly, this chronological accounting offers an intimate, step-by-step analysis of the entire civil-rights movement from the perspective of a leader who only emerged after years of tireless, unheralded commitment to the cause. He was a foot soldier.

The book starts in Trinidad, where Stokely was born, and works its way to New York City, which is where the seeds of his revolutionary zeal were sown. We learn that the brilliant boy attended the Bronx High School of Science, a prestigious academy for gifted students. Though his parents would have preferred for him to attend Harvard, he opted for Howard University, primarily because of its proximity to the South, which was

then a hotbed of civil disobedience.

At Howard, he joined the Non-violent Action Group (NAG) out of which grew the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). With SNCC, he participated in countless freedom rides, sit-ins, boycotts, demonstrations and other peaceful forms of resistance, even though the selfless activists were routinely beaten and/or arrested

for their efforts. Carmichael describes being tear-gassed to the point of unconsciousness and waking up with a racist "cracker" holding a pump-action shotgun to his head, shouting obscenities and racial epithets with his finger on the trigger.

Understandably, having witnessed wave after wave of arrests, intimidation, maiming and assassination, it occurred to him that he

didn't have to practice non-violence. And after hearing the helpless cries of three generations of Black women marchers being savagely beaten held in another cell, Stokely had had enough. After he was bailed out, he would deliver the famous "Black Power" speech that would electrify the nation and change the course of history.

He went on to found the
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Power to the People: Stokely Carmichael played a significant role in the civil rights-era black power push.

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