

Tactical Innovation in the Civil Rights Movement

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Roots of a Tactical Innovation: Sit-Ins

During the late 1950s activists associated with direct action organizations began experimenting with the sit-in tactic. The 1960 student sit-in movement followed naturally from the early efforts to mobilize for nonviolent direct action that took place in black communities across the South. Analysis of sit-ins of the late 1950s will reveal the basic components of the internal organization that was necessary for the emergence of the massive sit-ins of 1960.

In earlier chapters it was demonstrated that the NAACP Youth Councils, CORE chapters, and the SCLC affiliates were the main forces organizing the black community to engage in nonviolent protest. It was emphasized that these groups were closely tied to the black church base. The adult advisers of the NAACP Youth Councils were often women, who supervised the activities of fifteen to twenty young people, but it was not unusual to find men functioning as advisers also. Some of the Youth Councils felt a kinship with the direct action movement and were not rigidly locked into the legal approach of the NAACP.

Tactical Innovation Sometimes people may have intense grievances, they may be fairly well organized, and they may even believe that some authorities might be willing to listen to them, yet they do not protest because they are not quite sure how to do so effectively. The types of protest with which they are familiar may seem too difficult to carry out or may not strike them as likely to make a difference. However, certain tactical innovations—the discovery (or rediscovery) of new forms of protest—may spread very quickly and mobilize many people if these new tactics are relatively easy to adopt, resonate with people's moral views, and seem likely to succeed. The rapid spread of the sit-in tactic in 1960 is an example of how a tactical innovation can sometimes lead to an explosion of protest.

The Southern CORE chapters, operating primarily in South Carolina and several border states, were organized by James McCain and Gordon Carey, were headed largely by local ministers, and

Original publication details: Morris, Aldon D. 1984. *The Origins of the Civil Rights Movement*. New York: Free Press, pp. 188–194.

The Social Movements Reader: Cases and Concepts, Third Edition. Edited by Jeff Goodwin and James M. Jasper. © 2015 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd. Published 2015 by John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.

had a disproportionate number of young people as members. These groups were preparing the way for the massive sit-ins of 1960 by conducting sit-ins between 1957 and 1960 at segregated facilities, including lunch counters.

Early Sit-Ins: Forerunners

On February 1, 1960, four black college students initiated a sit-in at the segregated lunch counter of the local Woolworth store in Greensboro, North Carolina. That day has come to be known as the opening of the sit-in movement. Civil rights activists, however, had conducted sit-ins between 1957 and 1960 in at least sixteen cities: St. Louis, Missouri; Wichita and Kansas City, Kansas; Oklahoma City, Enid, Tulsa, and Stillwater, Oklahoma; Lexington and Louisville, Kentucky; Miami, Florida; Charleston, West Virginia; Sumter, South Carolina; East St. Louis, Illinois; Nashville, Tennessee; Atlanta, Georgia; and Durham, North Carolina. The Greensboro sit-ins are important as a unique link in a long chain of sit-ins. Although this book will concentrate on the uniqueness of the Greensboro link, there were important similarities in the entire chain. Previous studies have presented accounts of most of the earlier sit-ins, but without due appreciation of their scope, connections, and extensive organizational base.

The early sit-ins were initiated by direct action organizations. From interviews with participants in the early sit-ins and from published works, I found that civil rights organizations initiated sit-ins in fifteen of the sixteen cities I have identified. The NAACP, primarily its Youth Councils, either initiated or co-initiated sit-ins in nine of the fifteen cities. CORE, usually working with the NAACP, played an important initiating role in seven. The SCLC initiated one case and was involved in another with CORE and FOR. Finally, the Durham Committee on Negro Affairs, working with the NAACP, initiated sit-ins in Durham. From these data we can conclude that the early sit-ins were a result of a multifaceted organizational effort.

Those sit-ins received substantial backing from their respective communities. The black church was the chief institutional force behind the sit-ins; nearly all of the direct action organizations that initiated them were closely associated with

the church. The church supplied those organizations with not only an established communication network but also leaders and organized masses, finances, and a safe environment in which to hold political meetings. Direct action organizations clung to the church because their survival depended on it.

Not all black churches supported the sit-ins, and many tried to keep their support "invisible." Clara Luper, the organizer of the 1958 Oklahoma City sit-ins, wrote that the black church did not want to get involved, but church leaders told organizers "we could meet in their churches. They would take up a collection for us and make announcements concerning our worthwhile activities." Interviewed activists revealed that clusters of churches were usually directly involved with the sit-ins. In addition to community support generated through the churches, the activists also received support from parents of those participating in demonstrations.

The early sit-ins were organized by established leaders of the black community. The leaders did not spontaneously emerge in response to a crisis but were organizational actors in the fullest sense. Some sit-in leaders were also church leaders, taught school, and headed the local direct action organization; their extensive organizational linkages gave them access to a pool of individuals to serve as demonstrators. Clara Luper wrote, "The fact that I was teaching American History at Dungee High School in Spencer, Oklahoma, and was a member of the First Street Baptist Church furnished me with an ample number of young people who would become the nucleus of the Youth Council." Mrs. Luper's case is not isolated. Leaders of the early sit-ins were enmeshed in organizational networks and were integral members of the black community.

✓ Rational planning was evident in this early wave of sit-ins. As we have seen, during the late 1950s the Reverends James Lawson and Kelly Miller Smith, both leaders of Nashville Christian Leadership Council, formed what they called a "non-violent workshop." In them Lawson meticulously taught local college students the philosophy and tactics of nonviolent protest. In 1959 those students held "test" sit-ins in two department stores. Earlier, in 1957, members of the Oklahoma City NAACP Youth Council created what they called their "project," whose aim was to

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eliminate segregation in public accommodations. The project comprised various committees and groups that planned sit-in strategies. After a year of planning, the project group walked into the local Katz Drug Store and initiated a sit-in. In 1955 William Clay organized an NAACP Youth Council in St. Louis. Through careful planning and twelve months of demonstrations, its members were able to desegregate dining facilities at department stores. In Durham, North Carolina, in 1958 black activists of the Durham Committee on Negro Affairs conducted a survey of "five-and-dime" stores in Durham. It revealed that such stores were heavily dependent on black trade. Clearly, the sit-ins in Durham were based on rational planning.

Rational planning was evident in CORE's sit-ins during the late 1950s. CORE prepared for more direct action, including sit-ins, by conducting interracial workshops in Miami in September 1959 and January 1960. Dr. King assisted in the training of young people in one of the CORE workshops. In April 1959 a newly formed Miami CORE group began conducting sit-ins at downtown variety store lunch counters. In July 1959 James Robinson, writing to affiliated CORE groups and others, stated: "You have probably read in the newspaper about the dramatic all-day sit-ins which Miami CORE has conducted at a number of lunch counters. Up to 50 people have participated at many of these sit-ins." In early September 1959 CORE conducted a sixteen-day workshop on direct action in Miami, called the September Action Institute. Robinson wrote of it: "The discussion of the theory and techniques of nonviolent direct action will become understandable to all Institute members precisely because their actual participation in action projects will illuminate what otherwise might remain intangible." While the institute was in session, sit-ins were conducted at the lunch counters of Jackson's-Byrons Department Store. According to Gordon Carey of CORE, "Six days of continuous sit-ins caused the owners of the lunch counter concession to close temporarily while considering a change of policy." Immediately following that store's closing, CORE activists began sitting in at Grant's Department Store. Carey wrote: "We sat at the lunch counter from three to six hours daily until the 2-week Institute ended on September 20." On September 19, 1959, officials of the

Jackson's-Byrons Store informed CORE that Negroes would be served as of September 21. Four black CORE members went to the store on September 21 but were refused service. Carey's account continues:

Miami CORE determined to return to Jackson's-Byrons every day. The lunch counter has about 40 seats: On September 23 we had 40 persons sitting-in. It is not easy to get 40 persons on a weekday to sit-in from 10 A.M. till 3 P.M., but we maintained the demonstrations throughout the week. One woman who sat with us daily, works nights from 10 P.M. to 6 A.M. Cab drivers and off-duty Negro policemen joined us at the counter.

On September 25, 1959, city officials in Miami began arresting CORE members, and local whites physically attacked the protesters. Carey was told to be "out of Miami by Monday." Yet, Carey reports, "That day we had 80 persons sitting-in—half of them at Grant's." The Grant's store closed rather than serve blacks. On November 12, 1959, CORE made plans to sit in at the "white" waiting room of the Greenville, South Carolina, airport. The action was planned to protest the fact that the black baseball star Jackie Robinson had been ordered to leave the "white" waiting room a few days earlier. On January 23, just ten days before the famous sit-in at Greensboro, North Carolina, the CORE organization in Sumter, South Carolina, reported that its teenage group was "testing counter service at dime store: manager says he plans to make a change." Again, the action in Sumter had long-range planning behind it: A year earlier, at CORE's National meeting of 1959, the Sumter group had reported that students were involved in its activities. The Sumter CORE organization also had expressed the opinion that "emphasis should be on students and children. In future projects [we] hope to attack employment in 10¢ stores, food stores and chain stores."

In the summer of 1959 the SCLC, CORE, and FOR jointly held a nonviolent workshop on the campus of Spelman College in Atlanta. When the conference ended, James Robinson, Executive Secretary of CORE, along with the Reverend Wyatt Walker, James McCain, Professor Guy Hershberger, and Elmer Newfield, headed for Dabbs, a segregated restaurant in Atlanta. This

interracial group shocked everyone by sitting down and eating. In a CORE news release, James Robinson humorously wrote: "We all had agreed that it was the best coffee we had ever had—the extra tang of drinking your coffee interracially across the Georgia color bar is highly recommended!" Besides providing an example for the other workshop participants, these acts of defiance showed everyone how to protest. Marvin Rich of CORE explained: "They were being demonstrated in a public form, so people would just walk by and see it. And people who didn't think things were possible saw that they were possible, and six months later, in their own home town, they may try it out."

Finally, the early sit-ins were sponsored by indigenous resources of the black community; the leadership was black, the bulk of the demonstrators were black, the strategies and tactics were formulated by blacks, the finances came out of the pockets of blacks, and the psychological and spiritual support came from the black churches.

Most of the organizers of the early sit-ins knew each other and were well aware of each other's strategies of confrontation. Many of the activists belonged to the direct action wing of the NAACP. That group included such activists as Floyd McKissick, Daisy Bates, Ronald Walters, Hosea Williams, Barbara Posey, and Clara Luper, who thought of themselves as a distinct group because the national NAACP was usually disapproving or at best ambivalent about their direct action approach.

The NAACP activists built networks that bypassed the conservative channels and organizational positions of their superiors. At NAACP meetings and conferences they sought out situations where they could freely present their plans and desires to engage in confrontational politics and exchange information about strategies. Once acquainted, the activists remained in touch by phone and mail.

Thus it is no accident that sit-ins occurred between 1957 and 1960. Other instances of "direct action" also occurred during this period. Daisy Bates led black students affiliated with her NAACP Youth Council into the all-white Little Rock Central High School and forced President Eisenhower to send in federal troops. CORE, beginning to gain a foothold in the South, had the explicit goal of initiating direct action projects.

We have already noted that CORE activists were in close contact with other activists of the period. Although the early sit-ins and related activities were not part of a grandiose scheme, they were tied together through organizational and personal networks.

The Sit-In Cluster of the Late 1950s

Organizational and personal networks produced the first cluster of sit-ins in Oklahoma in 1958. In August 1958 the NAACP Youth Council of Wichita, Kansas, headed by Ronald Walters, initiated sit-ins at the lunch counters of a local drug store. At the same time Clara Luper and the young people in her NAACP Youth Council were training to conduct sit-ins in Oklahoma City. The adult leaders of the two groups knew each other: They worked for the same organization, so several members of the two groups traded numerous phone calls to exchange information and discuss mutual support. Direct contact was important, because the local press often refused to cover the sit-ins. Less than a week after Wichita, Clara Luper's group in Oklahoma City initiated its planned sit-ins.

Shortly thereafter sit-ins were conducted in Tulsa, Enid, and Stillwater, Oklahoma. Working through CORE and the local NAACP Youth Council, Clara Luper's friend Shirley Scaggins organized the sit-ins in Tulsa. Mrs. Scaggins had recently lived in Oklahoma City and knew the details of Mrs. Luper's sit-in project. The two leaders worked in concert. At the same time the NAACP Youth Council in Enid began to conduct sit-ins: Mr. Mitchell, who led that group, knew Mrs. Luper well. He had visited the Oklahoma Youth Council at the outset of its sit-in and had discussed sit-in tactics and mutual support. The Stillwater sit-ins appear to have been conducted independently by black college students.

The network that operated in Wichita and several Oklahoma communities reached as far as East St. Louis, Illinois. Homer Randolph, who in late 1958 organized the East St. Louis sit-ins, had previously lived in Oklahoma City, knew Mrs. Luper well, and had young relatives who participated in the Oklahoma City sit-ins.

In short, the first sit-in cluster occurred in Oklahoma in 1958 and spread to cities within a 100-mile radius through established organizational

and personal networks. The major sit-ins were (1) connected rather than isolated, (2) initiated through organizations, (3) rationally planned and led by leaders, and (4) supported by individuals. Thus, the Greensboro sit-ins of 1960 not mark the movement's beginning but a critical link in the chain, triggering the black community between the early 1960s to produce such a

In my view the early sit-ins did not mark the movement's beginning but a critical link in the chain, triggering the black community between the early 1960s to produce such a massive sit-in movement between CORE and the NAACP Youth Councils. The SCLC, which had a mass base, had not developed direct action was just emerging strategy during the late 1950s.

As the SCLC developed into a direct action organization between 1957 and 1959, it provided the mass base capable of handling a heavy volume of collective action. The activities of CORE and the NAACP Youth Councils, because they were church-based, had developed solid movements with NAACP Youth Councils. Thus, the SCLC, with NAACP Youth Councils, had developed solid movements by late 1959. The centers usually had seven characteristics:

1. A cadre of social change agents and their congregations. CORE would become the local center, and his church would be the coordinating unit.
2. Direct action organization with a high degree of complexity. In many cities local

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In short, the first sit-in cluster occurred in Oklahoma in 1958 and spread to cities within a 100-mile radius through established organizational

and personal networks. The majority of these early sit-ins were (1) connected rather than isolated, (2) initiated through organizations and personal ties, (3) rationally planned and led by established leaders, and (4) supported by indigenous resources.

Thus, the Greensboro sit-ins of February 1960 did not mark the movement's beginning but were a critical link in the chain, triggering sit-ins across the South at an incredible pace. What happened in the black community between the late 1950s and the early 1960s to produce such a movement?

In my view the early sit-ins did not give rise to a massive sit-in movement before 1960 because CORE and the NAACP Youth Council did not have a mass base. The SCLC, which did have a mass base, had not developed fully. Besides, direct action was just emerging as the dominant strategy during the late 1950s.

As the SCLC developed into a Southwide direct action organization between 1957 and 1960, it provided the mass base capable of sustaining a heavy volume of collective action. It augmented the activities of CORE and the NAACP Youth Councils, because they were closely tied to the church. Thus, the SCLC, closely interlocked with NAACP Youth Councils and CORE chapters, had developed solid movement centers by late 1959. The centers usually had the following seven characteristics:

1. A cadre of social change-oriented ministers and their congregations. Often one minister would become the local leader of a given center, and his church would serve as the coordinating unit.
2. Direct action organizations of varied complexity. In many cities local churches served

as quasi-direct action organizations, while in others ministers built complex church-related organizations (e.g. United Defense League of Baton Rouge, Montgomery Improvement Association, Alabama Christian Movement for Human Rights of Birmingham, Petersburg Improvement Association). NAACP Youth Councils and CORE affiliates also were components of the local centers.

3. Indigenous financing coordinated through the church.
4. Weekly mass meetings, which served as forums where local residents were informed of relevant information and strategies regarding the movement. These meetings also built solidarity among the participants.
5. Dissemination of nonviolent tactics and strategies. The leaders articulated to the black community the message that social change would occur only through nonviolent direct action carried out by masses.
6. Adaptation of a rich church culture to political purposes. The black spirituals, sermons, and prayers were used to deepen the participants' commitment to the struggle.
7. A mass-based orientation, rooted in the black community, through the church.

From the perspective of this study, the period between the 1950s bus boycotts and the 1960 sit-ins provided pivotal resources for the emerging civil rights movement. My analysis emphasizes that the organizational foundation of the civil rights movement was built during this period, and active local movement centers were created in numerous Southern black communities.