Two words that shaped the civil rights movement

By Gary G. Yerkey
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I'm in Greenwood, Mississippi today for a rally to commemorate the 50th anniversary of an event that marked a major turning point in the civil rights movement: a speech by Stokely Carmichael in which he called on his fellow African Americans to demand and achieve "Black Power."

Carmichael said in the speech—delivered to a crowd of hundreds at Broad Street Park in an African American neighborhood known as Baptist Town—that what black people needed was not "freedom now," as urged by Martin Luther King Jr. and his Southern Christian Leadership Conference, but the power to shape their own destiny.

After leveling a blistering attack on the Mississippi state justice system, Carmichael shouted to the crowd that "what we gonna start saying now is Black Power!" Then Willie Ricks, a principal organizer for the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, jumped onto the platform yelling, "What do you want?"

And the crowd roared back, "Black Power!"

Again and again, Ricks cried, "What do you want?" The echoes of "Black Power," according to witnesses, grew louder until they reached a fever pitch.

Carmichael spent the next few years promoting the concept around the country and abroad before moving to Guinea. He died in 1998. Ricks, now 73 and a speaker at the rally in Greenwood today, remains active and engaged.

Several years ago, I met Ricks for the first time at a conference in Selma, Alabama. I did not recognize him at first, this bearded man standing in the back of the college auditorium shouting "Black Power!"

Curious, I asked the person next to me who he was. "Today, he calls himself Mukasa Dada," he replied. "Maybe you know him better as Willie Ricks."

Indeed I did. When I ventured south to join the civil rights movement in the 1960s, Ricks was everywhere. In Georgia, Alabama, Louisiana, Mississippi—there he was, stirring up crowds and stirring up trouble.

Ricks was one of the movement's most fearless, charismatic, and effective organizers—the brains and brawn behind countless sit-ins, marches, demonstrations, and boycotts. He has described his life experience as a series of "beatings, bombings, shootings, fights, and assassinations."

It was Ricks, an early member of SNCC—which Carmichael headed from May 1966 to June 1967—who for years played a pivotal role in ensuring that the notion of Black Power would be thrust into the consciousness of countless African Americans not only in the South but across the country.

According to Carmichael, who has often been (inaccurately) credited with (or blamed for) coining the phrase, the notion of power for black people in the political process and the economy was nothing new. "We'd been talking about nothing else in the Delta for years," he wrote in his book *Ready for Revolution*. "The only difference was that this time [in Greenwood] the national media were there…. As I passed [Ricks before speaking], he said, 'Drop it now. The people are ready. Drop it now.'"

Ricks, a 23-year-old SNCC field secretary at the time, told me not long ago that he joined the struggle for racial justice as a high school student in Chattanooga. He said that he grew increasingly militant following the murder of a close friend during a civil rights demonstration. He said he was soon calling himself a black nationalist and supporting armed self-defense for African Americans. His attitude toward white people has often been described as hostile.

I asked him how he felt about white people today. He said that he has never had anything against individual white people. According to Ricks, his motivation for supporting the eventual expulsion of white members from SNCC was rooted in the belief that the struggle for equal rights needed to be led by black people—and that white liberals should organize poor white people and fight racism in their own communities.

Ricks told me that he believes that black people need to create their own future. He said that he admires King— "a servant of the people"—but that, along with Carmichael and others in SNCC, he simply had a fundamental disagreement with him over tactics.

King acknowledged the “ready appeal” of the phrase “Black Power” for “people who had been crushed so long by white power.” But he called the phrase an “unfortunate choice of words” and urged SNCC to refrain from using it, arguing that it implies that there can be a separate black road to power and fulfillment. “There is no salvation for the Negro through isolation,” King wrote. “In a multiracial society no group can make it alone.”

But Carmichael, Ricks, and their SNCC colleagues were adamant, arguing that King’s counterproposal to use “Black Consciousness” or “Black Equality” as slogans to replace “Freedom Now!” lacked the persuasive force of “Black Power.” They said that the notion should be spread nationwide. And so it was, altering the way that many African Americans viewed themselves and their struggle.