

# VIETNAM AND CIVIL RIGHTS



## TWO PAPERS

A TALK WITH BOB PARRIS  
From the Southern Patriot

SHOULD CIVIL RIGHTS WORKERS TAKE A STAND  
Howard Zinn from the SNCC Voice

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THE SOUTHERN STUDENT ORGANIZING COMMITTEE is an association of young, concerned Southerners dedicated to social change.

WE WISH TO JOIN with other individuals and groups in building a democratic society predicated on peace and racial and sexual equality; a society in which every person is guaranteed physical well-being and the opportunity to develop to the fullest extent his native abilities.

SSOC AFFIRMS THE RIGHT of each individual to participate in the decision-making processes in those social, economic, and political areas which directly influence his life. We envision a world dedicated to free speech and unfettered inquiry; a community of love and cooperation in an economy of abundance.

SSOC WAS FOUNDED in the belief that the fulfillment of this vision will require radical changes in many of America's present institutions and prevailing attitudes. We will continually seek new avenues to encourage these transformations.

SSOC was founded in the belief that the South has special problems which create difficulties--and opportunities--for a Southern movement for social change; SSOC will devote a substantial proportion of its resources to the solution of these problems. We also believe that the South possesses valuable traditions, in both black and white cultures, which will enable Southerners to make a unique contribution to a truly democratic America.

--PREAMBLE  
SSOC Constitution



Should Civil Rights Workers Take a Stand on Viet Nam?

by Howard Zinn

(reprinted from the SNCC Voice, August 30, 1965)

The question has burst out suddenly in the movement, with varying responses. The NAACP, through Roy Wilkins, says "Let's not take a stand." The Urban League says very much the same. CORE obviously has a strong rank-and-file sentiment for opposing American policy in Vietnam, but James Farmer pressured them into silence at their recent convention. The SCLC, at its annual meeting, showed great concern, with James Bevel speaking of using non-violence to somehow stop the war. FDP workers in McComb came out with a hot anti-war leaflet, and SNCC people participated in several Washington demonstrations against American policy.

Clearly, people in the movement are torn and troubled, and I would like to initiate a discussion in SNCC on this question.

Let me start by reversing the situation. Suppose one of the peace organizations is approached by a member of the Freedom Democratic Party and asked to take a stand on behalf of the challenge. And suppose the organization says: "Well, we are really with you, but we don't want to commit ourselves openly because our primary concern is peace, not civil rights. We think it might hurt our work for peace if we get tangled up in issues like the challenge." I think movement people would be indignant, and rightly so. They would ask: "Isn't ALL human suffering our concern? Aren't war and discrimination twin evils of modern society? What if all people of conscience separated into many different organizations working for different causes, and insisted on sticking only to their own cause, not giving aid to the others?"

The point is not that a civil rights group should stop what it is doing on racial equality and turn to the issue of world peace. But why can't it continue its main work, and at the same time support to whatever extent it can, people in other parts of the world who are poor and oppressed? I am talking not only about Vietnam, but about the Dominican Republic, South Africa, or anywhere else there is a burning issue of injustice. Vietnam right now is the critical spot in the world, just as Mississippi was the critical spot in the United States in the 1964 summer.

Movement people are perhaps in the best position to understand just how immoral are this nation's actions in Vietnam. One reason, as Bob Parris said recently in Washington, is not that civil rights workers understand so much about foreign policy, but that they understand so much about the United States. They understand just how much hypocrisy is wrapped up in our claim to stand for "the free world". They know how much they had to endure in beatings and bombings before the American government acted to pass civil rights legislation that was a century overdue (and which is still only the first small step towards real equality). And so, to put it bluntly, movement people don't have much faith in what the government says.



Events in Vietnam become easier to understand in the light of recent experience in the South. For instance: the cry of "outside agitator" is raised in both places. Just as the white South finds it hard to believe that Southern Negroes are genuinely dissatisfied, and so attributes the Negro revolt to "outsiders", the U. S. finds it hard to believe that the Vietnamese peasant really is in revolt against the old way of life, and so blames the rebellion on outsiders from the communist nations.

Now it is true that outsiders support the Southern Negro, and even come south to help out. And it is true that North Vietnamese have come south to help the Vietcong rebels. But these facts don't alter the fundamental issue: that in both cases there is a home made uprising against an oppressive system. President Johnson again and again muddles this basic fact with talk about "aggression" when all the people fighting against the U. S. are in their own country and American soldiers are ten thousand miles away from home.

There is another interesting analogy between the plight of the southern Negro and the crisis in Vietnam. In both situations there is the use of special words that arouse hatred and distort reality. In the South the word is "nigger". It destroys the individual human being of tan or brown or black color, who is a man or a woman, a farmer or a teacher, who is a SINGLE person, unlike any other person in the world. The word "nigger" is designed to abolish that individuality, to put millions of people into one inhuman category which makes them an object of hatred and murder.

In American foreign policy, the word is "Communist". The word is a blanket which smothers the true complexity of the world and the individuality of human beings. A "communist" in Russia is not quite the same as a communist in Yugoslavia or in China or in Italy. Stalin was a communist who used terrorism against his critics, but his critics were communists, and today there are communists who oppose such terrorism. And inside each communist country there are wide variations in belief. Yet American marines shoot Vietnamese women and children, our planes destroy the homes of farmers and their supplies of food. All of this is justified by the use of the word "Communist", while the facts indicate that the average Vietcong fighting is an ordinary peasant tired of being ruled in the old way.

And so, young people in the movement can see through the Vietnamese situation with a quick clarity that the middle class intellectuals often do not have. That is why a number of SNCC people have been taking part in demonstrations against American policy in Vietnam. SNCC always prided itself on a special honesty, on not playing it "safe", in saying exactly what it felt like saying. Shouldn't it now say, at this crucial moment, that FREEDOM NOW must be international?

(the end)



## A TALK WITH BOB PARRIS

....One Freedom Worker's Views  
(reprinted from the Southern Patriot, October, 1965)

The basic question regarding the relationship of civil rights and peace, Bob Parris says, is not whether civil rights organizations should take formal positions on the war in Vietnam.

In the first place, he notes, formal resolutions are meaningless unless they grow out of the natural direction of organizations and are combined with action.

Instead, Parris thinks, the correct starting point is for those identified with the freedom movement to consider the underlying philosophy of their own movement to decide what response this philosophy calls for in relation to the war, and what natural courses of action flow from this.

This approach, he thinks, applies to individuals within the movement, to the movement as a whole, and to organizations within the movement--although the problems and questions facing each of these will be different.

There is absolutely no question as to the moral right of people and organizations identified with civil rights to speak out on the issue of war and peace, Parris thinks. Those who question this right should ask themselves some questions, he believes.

"Those who say people identified with civil rights should not become involved in the peace question," he explains, "threaten the Negro with probable loss of what he stands to gain from the civil rights movement if this involvement develops."

That, he points out, raises the question of what are these rights the Negro has fought for through the freedom movement.

"Certainly one of the most basic rights we have been seeking is the right to participate fully in the life of this country," he goes on, "Now if by participating--that is, taking part in the discussions of the great issues that face the country--we threaten the right to participate, we have to begin to wonder whether the right is real."

In addition to the right to take a stand on the peace issue, however, civil rights forces may also have the responsibility to do so, Parris implies.

### Where Are Decisions Made?

This responsibility involves two factors. First, the whole manner in which the war in Vietnam has developed raises important questions about the democratic process in this country. These are questions which should be the concern of every citizen, Parris says, and they relate to the very core of the philosophy of the freedom movement.

"It's a matter of where debate on important issues is to take place in this society and where decisions are to be made," Parris explains.

At present, he notes, there is a general assumption that foreign policy is to be made by the executive branch of the government. Even the Senate, which constitutionally makes foreign policy, has given over this function to the president. Among people generally, many of whom don't distinguish between



the various branches of government, there is just an acceptance of the idea that "the government" makes foreign policy.

"But the civil rights movement, in line with its philosophy, puts forth a different idea," Parris says. "We have always said that people should be involved in all the major decisions that affect them."

Thus, the debate needs to be shifted not only from the executive branch of government to the Senate and the whole Congress but to the entire country. The teach-ins, Parris notes, have been an effort in that direction on the part of the intellectual community.

"But the movement would go further than that (if it follows its natural direction) and say that debate on foreign policy should not be confined even to the intellectual community but extended to the entire country---across the neighborhoods throughout the nation," Parris says.

If the civil rights movement fails to follow the logic of its own philosophy in helping bring this about, Parris implies, it will not only lose an opportunity to contribute to the democratic process for the whole country but find itself up against new dead-ends in its own quest for freedom.

"A real question for the movement in the South in the next several years," he notes "is going to be how the vote, now that more people have it, can be meaningful. We do not want the new politics to be just like the old. People need a chance to vote on real issues. That means, among other things, debate on foreign policy in our election campaigns--something that doesn't really happen anywhere in our country now."

The other factor which creates a responsibility for civil rights forces to speak and act on the peace issue relates to the national psychology of a nation that is waging war.

#### The Rationale for Murder

"What are the psychological conditions under which people can commit organized murder?" Parris asks. "They have to have a rationale. The rationale that the Johnson Administration gives the country today is that the free world is under attack by a world-wide movement that we must fight in Vietnam lest we have to fight it on the freeways of California."

This rationale is very much out of proportion to the complexity of today's world and its problems--problems that intelligent people know cannot be solved with guns, Parris says. But it is bolstered by the concept this country has of itself as the center of defense of the "free world."

And this concept is in turn bolstered, he says, by the fact that this country sees itself as fighting for freedom of Negroes at home.

"Therefore," he says, "people closely connected with the freedom struggle have the responsibility to state that the concept of freedom we are struggling for is not the same concept of freedom at all that is being projected by this country in the Vietnam situation."



"What we must look for all over the world," he states, "is people struggling against governments to bring more power to the people." These, he believes, are the world's "freedom movements", and some way the freedom movement in this country must begin to define its relationship to these movements the world over. Because of the U.S. government's increasing involvement throughout the world, people in the freedom movement here cannot continue to say they are simply interested in domestic issues and thus escape their responsibility to define their relationship to world developments.

Actually, Parris says, the rationale this nation uses to justify war in Vietnam turns out to be "amazingly similar" to the rationale that has been used by the white South to justify its opposition to the freedom movement.

"The South has said its civilization is being attacked by people--outsiders--who want to overthrow it," he notes, and that's what this country says in Vietnam. In this situation in the South, the list of acceptable defenses for those who feel threatened has included organized murder, and so the acceptable defenses for our nation when it feels threatened in Asia includes murder.

#### A Nation in Schizophrenia

For the racist white Southerner, there is a logic in this parallel, he notes. He condones murder in Vietnam for the same reason he condones it at home--he sees a threat to his civilization.

But for the rest of the country, there is a schizophrenia: it says it goes to Vietnam for the same reason it backs the civil rights movement in the South--to support freedom--yet its rationale is the same used by racists to fight the civil rights movement.

President Johnson balances out this dilemma, Parris says, by saying all problems are caused by a few extremists: The Ku Klux Klan in the South, delinquents in Northern ghettos--and, in the world, by a few "extremist" or communist nations.

But those in the Southern movement know, Parris says, that the problem in the South is not just a few extremists. They know that the rationale for murder has the support of the majority who condone it and that therefore it is woven into the very fabric of society.

#### Must Raise the Deep Questions

"I think we must keep raising these deep questions about our own society," he says. "I want this country to be less sure of itself so it can stop making war on other countries to export our system. Another way of saying the same thing is that I want this country to be more sure of itself so it can publicly admit it has real problems and must work to solve them."

"Then maybe we can see that other governments may have similar problems including what we call communist governments," he adds.



That perspective, he implies, might lead to a meaningful approach to the human problems of the world--instead of a separation of mankind into the "good guys" (who are us) and the "bad guys" (who must be killed).

As to what people and organizations in the civil rights movement can do about all this, Parris notes that even critics of their participation in the peace movement concede the right of an individual in the movement to join peace groups. It is involvement in civil rights organizations that they question.

### The People Are Silenced Too

But this objection tends to silence the individual too, Parris says, because American society identifies people primarily as part of a category--a profession, an organization, etc.

"Our society has really lost most of its people," he notes. "What we have are categories, functions. But the civil rights movement must by its own philosophy oppose this concept of person; we believe people are individuals, not just part of categories. Thus a civil rights organization must maintain the right of people who are part of it to function as individuals."

(He notes that SNCC did that when it decided--after much discussion--that he need not take a leave of absence from its staff while he worked on the Washington Summer Action Project, even though SNCC as an organization did not participate).

As for the whole freedom movement, Parris says the relevant question is not whether this movement should join the peace movement; this is not a possibility.

"Rather the question we must ask ourselves is what kind of a movement are we going to be," he says. "Are we going to address ourselves to the broader problems of society? Can we build a wider base for a movement in this country; and actually can the freedom movement as it has existed survive and achieve its goals unless it does this?"

For each organization within the civil rights movement, the matter of war and peace will come up in different ways--and each must find its way in line with its own emphasis and approach, he says.

One thing, however, is sure, Parris says. There is a sickness in this country in its view of the world. And it is possible that those who have been part of the agonies of the South in recent years can understand it better than some others. The white Southerner, like the nation today in regard to the world, he points out, has been twisted and perverted by its fear of the "outsider", the "foreigner", "one different from us", a fear of the "foreigner" telling him what to do, a fear of a "conspiracy" from those "outside forces."

### The Long, Hard Road to Sanity

Today, this white South has at least begun to move toward sanity because it is facing the fact that its problems are much more complex than this and that the basic problem lies not with



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outsiders but with itself.

This possibility of sanity opened up for the South, Parris notes, because it was part of a larger country and people in other parts of it shouted the truth about oppression and its complexities and some of them came South.

"But what do you do when the whole country has a sickness?" Parris asks. "How do you break through then? Are there the people who have the information about the world and its complexities and also the legitimacy to speak? Can they awaken this nation as the South is beginning to be awakened?"

These remain unanswered questions, he thinks--questions that the civil rights movement may yet be able to help answer. And it may be that the South's people, both Negro and white--people who have experienced a period in which the myths their region lived by were destroyed--are better equipped than others to take an honest look at the myths by which the nation lives.

(the end)

editor's note: Bob Parris is one of the nation's best known civil rights workers who has become involved in peace activities.

Parris, as Bob Moses, played a key role in organizing the freedom movement in Mississippi. Late in 1964, convinced that people must be their own leaders, he decided that the national image he had acquired would cripple the emerging Mississippi movement if he stayed there.

He left the state, adopted his middle name of Parris as his last name and moved to Alabama to begin organizing anew.

About this time, the war in Vietnam was intensifying and there was developing in this country a significant student movement against the war--reaching a height in the Easter demonstration that brought 25,000 people to Washington. Many of these young people had worked in the South, and their lives were being shaped by their identification with the Southern Freedom Movement.

Parris saw here the beginnings of a new movement that was an outgrowth of the civil rights movement but was broader than it was and also broader than the issue of peace--a movement big enough to include all people who want a more moral society. He helped initiate the Washington Summer Action Project designed to stimulate communication among people thinking in these terms.

this project culminated in the August 6-9 Assembly of Unrepresented People in Washington, and Parris was one of those arrested when police stopped this assembly from entering the capitol grounds.