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# The Travail of Southern Radicals: The Southern Conference Educational Fund, 1946–1976

By IRWIN KLIBANER

**D**URING THE 1930S AND EARLY 1940S MANY LIBERALS AND RADICALS, fearful of the growing threat of fascism, abandoned their previous sectarianism in favor of a popular front. Their common desire to advance social reform at home and resist aggression abroad produced a fragile unity that lasted until after World War II. Then, in the wake of the Cold War abroad and the second Red Scare at home the popular front collapsed. A new brand of anticommunist liberalism seized control of the liberal movement and drove popular fronters out of its ranks. The triumph of the new, “vital center” liberals, best represented by Americans for Democratic Action (ADA), so stigmatized the popular front that anticommunist liberalism dominated even scholarly evaluations of it. This essay seeks to rescue the popular front from neglect and to demonstrate its accomplishments in at least one area, civil rights, through examination of one organization, the Southern Conference Educational Fund (SCEF).

Until 1947 SCEF was an organic part of the Southern Conference for Human Welfare (SCHW). Created by southern supporters of Franklin Delano Roosevelt in Birmingham, Alabama, in 1938, SCHW sought to unite the region’s diverse social reformers, white and black, against the economic and political elite responsible for relegating the South to the status of the “nation’s number one economic problem.” By 1948 SCHW was the leading southern reform organization, the most constructive example of popular front politics. In the ten-year span 1938–1948 SCHW had espoused reforms that would eventually change the face of the South: abolition of the poll tax, broad voter registration, encouragement of labor unions, antilynching legislation, a permanent Fair Employment Practices Commission, and federal aid to education.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> See Peter J. Kellogg, “The Americans for Democratic Action and Civil Rights in 1948: Conscience in Politics or Politics in Conscience?” *Midwest Quarterly*, XX (Autumn 1978), 49–63. The most complete account of the Southern Conference for Human Welfare is Thomas A. Krueger, *And Promises to Keep: The Southern Conference for Human Welfare, 1938–1948* (Nashville, 1967).

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The SCHW Board of Directors established SCEF on January 26, 1946, to “improve the educational and cultural standards of the Southern people in accordance with the highest American democratic institutions and ideals.” This could best be accomplished, the directors believed, by working to integrate whites and blacks. From its inception in 1946 SCEF was single-minded in its commitment to end white supremacy. It also shared an old regional distaste for moderation. As former New Deal administrator Aubrey Willis Williams once wryly remarked: “In the South we have no liberals — only conservatives and radicals.”<sup>2</sup>

Because of a heated dispute over administrative authority the Southern Conference Educational Fund became a separate agency entirely in 1947. James Anderson Dombrowski served as director of the newly independent fund and also edited its monthly journal, the *Southern Patriot*. Dombrowski avoided the financial woes that plagued the SCHW by maintaining a sizable cash reserve, a tight budget of thirty-six thousand dollars, and a fund-raising network in northern cities.<sup>3</sup> The officers of SCEF were all southerners; its Board of Directors was aglow with distinguished southern educators, labor leaders, and professionals. Black college presidents Rufus Early Clement, Benjamin Elijah Mays, Charles Spurgeon Johnson, and Mary McLeod Bethune participated equally with white board members Frank Porter Graham, president of the University of North Carolina, Helen Hunt Fuller of the *New Republic*, and Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) officials Paul Revere Christopher and Lucy Randolph Mason. Joining them were author Lillian Smith, George Sinclair Mitchell of the Southern Regional Council, Myles Falls Horton of the Highlander Folk School, Virginia Foster Durr, a founder of SCHW, and Louis Burnham of the Southern Negro Youth Congress.<sup>4</sup> Seeking to nudge the South toward meaningful reforms, SCEF’s program was a limited one, deliberately eschewing grandiose schemes. Not a membership organization, it was a spur to others, working diligently on a limited number of concrete issues such as integrated education and health service.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>2</sup> SCHW Board of Directors, “Minutes,” January 26, 1946, Papers of Carl and Anne Braden (State Historical Society of Wisconsin, Madison, Wis.; hereinafter cited as Braden Papers) (first quotation); Aubrey Williams as quoted in T. Harry Williams, “Huey, Lyndon, and Southern Radicalism,” *Journal of American History*, LX (September 1973), 272 (second quotation).

<sup>3</sup> SCHW Board of Directors, “Minutes,” January 26, 1946, Braden Papers. The circulation figure for *Southern Patriot* as of 1969 was 12,500. Figures for earlier years are not given in the annual reports of the Board of Directors nor were they published in the *Patriot*. An average circulation of about 15,000, declining markedly in the final of its nearly thirty years of existence, is a reasonable approximation. See Southern Conference Educational Fund, “Minutes, Semi-Annual Board Meeting,” November 21–22, 1969, Braden Papers.

<sup>4</sup> Southern Conference Educational Fund, “Executive Board, 1946,” Braden Papers.

<sup>5</sup> James Dombrowski, “Memo to the Board of Directors, SCEF,” October 1947; Clark Foreman to James Dombrowski, November 3, 1947; Dombrowski to Foreman, November 6, 1947; Dom-

Aubrey Williams and James Dombrowski, the most prominent voices on behalf of SCEF in the fifties, were vintage American radicals. Descended from old southern families, they had been idealistic volunteers in France before American entry into World War I. Both entered the Protestant ministry after the war, a career cut short for Williams when his unorthodox views became intolerable to the conservative churchmen of the day. Dombrowski followed the social gospel and radical Protestantism espoused by Karl Paul Reinhold Niebuhr and Harry Frederick Ward in the twenties and early thirties. He received a joint doctorate at Columbia University and Union Theological Seminary in 1936 after participating in the establishment of the experimental Highlander Folk School in 1932. Dombrowski served as a Highlander director until 1942, when he became an officer of SCHW. Self-effacing, soft-spoken, but an energetic, inventive administrator, Dombrowski provided much of the drive that kept SCEF afloat during the doldrums of reform in the fifties. It was Dombrowski who kept SCEF unwaveringly on its course for the abolition of segregation. Broader social reforms, he believed, must await that preliminary accomplishment.

Williams became a social worker in Wisconsin in the twenties, an assistant to John Rogers Commons. In the thirties he enlisted in Roosevelt's New Deal, first as an aide to Harry Lloyd Hopkins in the Federal Emergency Relief Administration (FERA) and then as head of the National Youth Administration (NYA). It was in the latter capacity that he became aware of the desperate situation of blacks, mainly through the tutoring of Walter Francis White of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and several black New Dealers, including Mary McLeod Bethune and Charles Arnold Hill. Williams later helped to persuade President Roosevelt to create the Fair Employment Practices Commission on the eve of American entry into World War II, for which he became anathema to segregationists. In retaliation, they defeated his nomination as director of the Rural Electrification Administration in 1945, ending his official public career. He

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browski to Mary Price, October 19, 1947; SCEF Board of Directors, "Minutes," May 22, 1948, *ibid.*; New Orleans (La.) *Southern Patriot*, V (October 1947). The paper is hereinafter cited without repeating the city. There are no definitive statistics about the number of SCEF supporters. The difficulty centers on the fact that the fund was never a membership organization. It had no local chapters, membership records, dues, or formal meetings aside from the regular *ad hoc* meetings of its Board of Directors. The fund was financed by individual contributions from about three thousand persons, many of whom remained faithful supporters for over twenty years. The Board of Directors varied in its membership over the years. Numbering fairly consistently between fifty and seventy persons, the members were all southerners or residents of the District of Columbia. See Southern Conference Educational Fund, "Questions and Answers About the SCEF," undated, but probably 1954; "Memo on Expansion of SCEF to Friends of SCEF" 1962, Southern Conference Educational Fund Papers (Tuskegee Institute Library, Tuskegee, Ala.; hereinafter cited as SCEF Papers).

then returned to Alabama, where, after briefly nursing hopes of an elective political career, he turned his hand to being publisher of the mass circulation *Southern Farmer*. Despite his business success, Williams had doubts about the values of capitalism. Sympathetic with the small farmers and poor whites of the South, he also had misgivings about them. Ruined by the Civil War and the later industrialization of the South, his social vision constricted by company towns, mill villages, antiunionism, and racism, the poor white, Williams thought, was "a very confused and deluded man . . . the likeliest material in the country for the lumpen proletariat, the mass base for a racist fascist movement."<sup>6</sup>

Shortly after the appearance of SCEF a fateful postwar crisis on the left erupted. SCHW leaders enthusiastically greeted former Vice-President Henry Agard Wallace when he criticized the Harry S. Truman administration's anti-Soviet foreign policy and its apparent retreat from New Deal social programs. Accordingly, some SCHW leaders sponsored a highly successful southern tour by Wallace in June 1947. After Wallace's dramatic December 1947 call to arms announcing his decision to run for President at the head of the newly formed Progressive party, SCHW president Clark Howell Foreman and many other SCHW members enlisted in "Gideon's army." Every liberal and left organization was embroiled in the controversy between supporters and opponents of Wallace.<sup>7</sup>

SCEF, however, steered clear of the dispute. It held aloof from the Wallace campaign, largely because of the efforts of Aubrey Williams, who became fund president early in 1948. Though personally and politically sympathetic to Wallace, Williams was convinced that the best arena for radicals was the Democratic party, particularly after it adopted a strong civil rights plank at the 1948 party convention. He therefore kept the fund out of the internecine conflict on the left. This proved to be farsighted, preserving the fund while SCHW collapsed in the aftermath of the Wallace debacle. By January 1948 SCEF was one of the few voices in the South to support the civil rights recommendations President Truman presented to Congress following his State-of-the-Union address.<sup>8</sup> SCEF swam against the stream of southern opinion. Thwarted

<sup>6</sup> See Williams, "Memoirs," in possession of Dr. Sheldon Hackney (University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, Pa.); also author's interview with Myles Horton, Madison, Wis., November 30, 1970; Alfred Maund, "Aubrey Williams: Symbol of a New South," *Nation*, CLXXVII (October 10, 1953), 289-90; Jack Peebles, "Subversion and the Southern Conference Educational Fund" (unpublished M.A. thesis, University of New Orleans, New Orleans, La., 1970), 8-11; Williams, "Memoirs," 66 (quotation); SCEF Board of Directors, "Minutes," June 12, 1954, Braden Papers.

<sup>7</sup> The details of this split are examined in Mary S. McAuliffe, *Crisis on the Left: Cold War Politics and American Liberals, 1947-1954* (Amherst, Mass., 1978), 3-47.

<sup>8</sup> *To Secure These Rights: The Report of the President's Committee on Civil Rights* (New York, 1947), 137-73; William C. Berman, *The Politics of Civil Rights in the Truman Administration* ([Columbus, Ohio], 1970), 67-78.



in its endeavor to arrange public conferences supporting the civil rights proposals, the fund set about documenting the degrading effects of segregation on southern life.

Through the pages of the *Southern Patriot* fund writers detailed the glaring inequities between white and black schools, libraries, and teacher salaries. Some researchers polled southern state university faculties on their attitudes toward segregation. The polls persuaded fund leaders of the diversity of southern opinion. A good many educators, in advance of general regional sentiment, favored university desegregation, while officeholders and party leaders were most outspoken in support of segregation. This led SCEF to the belief that the politicians were a generation behind the attitudes of their constituents and, furthermore, that segregation was sustained more by laws and ordinances than by race prejudice.<sup>9</sup>

Consequently, Aubrey Williams summoned two hundred southern ministers, educators, writers, and lawyers of both races to Charlottesville, Virginia, in November 1948. The Declaratory Conference on Civil Rights expressed confidence in the Truman program, an indication to others that the South was not uniform in its attitudes. It opposed all forms of racism, emphasizing its detrimental impact upon whites as well as blacks. Stressing the significance of voluntary approaches, the Declaration of Civil Rights at the conclusion of the conference called upon churches and professional, fraternal, and educational associations to alter constitutions, bylaws, and practices so as to guarantee equal rights to all.<sup>10</sup>

The fund did not restrict itself to exhortation. It also confronted segregationists in ways that proved embarrassing to southern power-holders, such as the contest commencing in 1948 over regional education. Ever since the *Gaines v. Canada* decision of 1938 (305 U.S. 337), when the U. S. Supreme Court declared out-of-state legal education for blacks to be inferior to in-state legal education for whites, the Court had been narrowing the constitutional grounds for segregated higher education. Faced with the need to upgrade higher education, largely a result of the demand spurred by World War II from a growing southern white middle class, the southern governors devoted their annual conference to the problem. With several existing educational compacts as a model, the

<sup>9</sup> "Program for the Southern Conference Educational Fund," 1947; "Report of the Director, SCEF," Dombrowski to Adele R. Levy Fund, Inc., October 9, 1947; "Report of the Director, SCEF," November 21, 1948; Dombrowski to editor, *Richmond News-Leader*, December 9, 1948, Braden Papers; *Southern Patriot*, VI (May 1948). See also Monroe L. Billington, "Civil Rights, President Truman and the South," *Journal of Negro History*, LVIII (April 1973), 127-39.

<sup>10</sup> *New York Times*, November 21, 1948, Sec. 1, p. 61; *Richmond Times-Dispatch*, November 20, 1948; *Charlottesville Daily Progress*, November 20, 1948; "Declaration of Civil Rights," Braden Papers.

governors seized upon the financial straits of Meharry Medical College, a black school in Nashville, Tennessee, to authorize the establishment of a regional compact in 1947. They created a Southern Regional Education Board with power to own and operate its own institutions. After several states ratified the agreement, they also sought congressional approval. Early in 1948 Congress was well on the way to granting it. After a favorable Judiciary Committee report in February 1948 the full House of Representatives approved it by a lopsided 266–45 vote. Twenty-seven senators then introduced a sponsoring resolution in the upper house. Opponents, however, apprehensive at the thought of preserving Meharry as a “Siberia of medical education” to which aspiring black doctors might be consigned, began publicly to voice opposition, eventually derailing congressional approval.<sup>11</sup>

Through the pages of the *Patriot* SCEF had played a role by alerting others to the implications of the regional scheme. Aubrey Williams engaged in a lengthy, heated exchange with the director of the regional board, appeared in several southern states attacking the concept of “gradualism” in race relations, and labeled the regional program a transparent segregationist ploy. Capping off the fund’s efforts was a Conference on Discrimination in Higher Education at Atlanta University in April 1950, which featured a controversial panel on the regional plan. Among participants on behalf of SCEF were black sociologist Edward Franklin Frazier, Benjamin E. Mays, and Williams. The fund had also arranged for the attendance of an array of southern faculty, administrators, and students.<sup>12</sup>

The controversy over the regional compact eventually found its way into the courts as a result of a suit brought by a black student denied admission to the University of Maryland School of Nursing in the fall of 1949. When the university used the regional compact providing state support for black students at Meharry as a defense, it erred fatally. On April 14, 1950, a federal appellate court issued a writ of mandamus compelling Maryland to admit the woman to the university on the grounds that “no compact or contract can extend the territorial boundaries of the State of Maryland to Nashville.” In effect, the decision rendered the Southern Regional Education Board null and void as an instrument for perpetuating segregation.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>11</sup> Redding S. Sugg, Jr., and George H. Jones, *The Southern Regional Education Board: Ten Years of Regional Cooperation in Higher Education* (Baton Rouge, 1960), 7–19; *Southern Patriot*, VII (September 1949); *New York Times*, January 19, 1948, Sec. 1, p. 21; *Richmond Times-Dispatch*, January 31, 1948, editorial, “Regional Education for Whites and Negroes” (quotation).

<sup>12</sup> See editorial, “Regional Education for Whites and Negroes,” *Richmond Times-Dispatch*, January 23, 1948; *Southern Patriot*, VII (September 1949); VIII (April and May 1950).

<sup>13</sup> James A. Dombrowski to George V. Denny, November 5, 1948; Aubrey Williams to John R. Steelman, December 14, 1948; John E. Ivey, Jr., to Williams, March 1, 1950; Williams to Ivey,

Inexorably in the early 1950s, as the controversy over civil rights intensified, the spotlight shifted to the U. S. Supreme Court. When blacks looked to the Court for redress SCEF joined them in a common appeal for justice. The fund filed an *amicus curiae* brief in a crucial case aimed at segregation at the University of Texas Law School in 1950, *Sweatt v. Painter et al.* (339 U.S. 629). Eighteen southern lawyers, black and white, from each of the southern states filed in behalf of the plaintiff, "the first time," according to Dombrowski, "a group of southern lawyers had taken a stand against segregation."<sup>14</sup>

In response to an appeal from the NAACP Legal Defense and Education Fund, SCEF assembled educators from southern communities to press for a declaration that segregation was unconstitutional in the public schools of Clarendon County, South Carolina. The Clarendon suit, *Briggs v. Elliott* (347 U.S. 497), though unsuccessful, was a vital step leading to the Supreme Court's undoing of school segregation in the 1954 *Brown* decision. It was notable also for the ringing dissent of federal district judge Julius Waties Waring, a native of Charleston and an outspoken advocate of desegregation among white southerners. The fund publicized Waring's dissent and attempted to rally public support behind him when criticism intensified following his statements in the Clarendon case.<sup>15</sup>

In 1951 and 1952 SCEF focused on the segregated health system of the South. As previously with educators, a poll of hospital administrators and health professionals revealed sentiment for desegregation. The fund nursed the embers, urging the admission of black doctors to practice in all-white hospitals and their acceptance as members of the white medical societies. Dombrowski interceded with northern foundations for financial assistance to those few southern medical schools expressing interest in breaking the color barriers. The *Patriot* publicized cases of discrimination such as an ugly incident involving the Duke University hospital. That institution had refused treatment to a seriously injured young black man who subsequently died because of inadequate treatment. The more it scanned the miserable failures of health service for

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March 6, 1950; Ivey to Williams, March 8, 1950, Aubrey W. Williams Papers (Franklin D. Roosevelt Library, Hyde Park, N. Y.); *Southern Patriot*, VIII (March and April 1950); see opinion, filed April 14, 1950, by Judge Charles Markell of the Maryland Court of Appeals in the case of *Esther McCready v. Harry Byrd et al.*, quoted in Sugg and Jones, *Southern Regional Education Board*, 46; *Southern Patriot*, VIII (May 1950).

<sup>14</sup> Dombrowski to Williams, January 6, 1950, Williams Papers; *Southern Patriot*, VIII (January 1950).

<sup>15</sup> Robert L. Carter, assistant special counsel, NAACP Legal Defense and Education Fund, to George Mitchell, October 13, 1950; Dombrowski to Carter, October 17, 1950; Dombrowski to Waring, June 25, 1951; Waring to Dombrowski, June 26, 1951; Waring to Dombrowski, October 27, 1950; and memo of appreciation from Waring to SCEF for organizing a pilgrimage to his home by southerners, December 1950, SCEF Papers. The case is *Briggs v. Elliott* (98 F. Supp. 529 [1951], 103 F. Supp. 920 [1952]; 347 U.S. 497 [1954]; 132 F. Supp. 776 [1955]).



blacks, the more SCEF concluded that equal educational opportunities for blacks were the key to improving their general social condition. Hence, in 1953 SCEF turned its full attention to eliminating segregation in southern schools.<sup>16</sup>

By the mid-fifties SCEF had firmly established itself as the most outspoken proponent of integration in the South. As southerners whose roots were as deep in the region's past as those of segregationists, SCEF supporters could not easily be dismissed or ignored as troublemaking "outside agitators." By refusing to be silent and by encouraging others to take a stand, SCEF became the conscience of a troubled South.

A critical juncture occurred early in 1954 for the civil rights cause generally, and for SCEF in particular. As the U. S. Supreme Court neared a decision on the constitutionality of public school segregation proponents of the caste system moved in their own fashion to destroy the effectiveness of those southerners still supporting integration. Following a radio debate on school segregation with Georgia governor Herman Eugene Talmadge, Aubrey Williams received a subpoena to appear at a March hearing of a subcommittee of the United States Senate Committee on Internal Security. James Dombrowski and fund board members Myles Horton and Virginia Durr had also been summoned. Irritated by Williams's outspokenness and the activities of SCEF, Talmadge combined with Mississippi Senator James Oliver Eastland to persuade the committee chairman, Indiana Republican William Ezra Jenner, to bring his inquisition to the South. Its clear aim was to "smear" SCEF and former members of SCHW.<sup>17</sup>

The committee had a measure of success. By labeling SCEF as an element of the "Communist conspiracy," it stigmatized the fund among anti-communist liberals. It also intimidated some fund supporters, most significantly SCEF vice-president Benjamin E. Mays, into withdrawing from the fund. Rather than expose themselves to risks by defying the red scare, they preferred simply to resign from the fund. On the other hand, many well-known southern blacks, such as Dr. Herman Hodge Long of Fisk University, director of race relations of the National Urban League, and Bishop Edgar Love of the African Methodist Episcopal

<sup>16</sup> *Southern Patriot*, IX (April, October, and December 1951); X (March and October 1952); SCEF Board of Directors, "Minutes," February 23, 1952, Williams Papers.

<sup>17</sup> Williams, "Memoirs," 3-4; Williams to Senator Hubert H. Humphrey, February 4, 1954; Dombrowski to Leonard Boudin, September 6, 1960: "As a matter of fact, much of the early animus against the Conference [SCHW] was a desire to smear and discredit the New Deal and FDR. . . . Black, as you know, received the first Thomas Jefferson award in 1938. . . . Senator Eastland's attack upon the SCEF in 1954 involving Cliff & Va. Durr, was motivated without doubt by a desire to smear Black." Braden Papers; Williams to Senator William E. Jenner, January 31, 1954, Williams Papers; see also John A. Salmond, "The Great Southern Commie Hunt: Aubrey Williams, the Southern Conference Educational Fund, and the Internal Security Subcommittee," *South Atlantic Quarterly*, LXXVII (Autumn 1978), 433-52.

Church, rallied to SCEF. Over one hundred southerners of both races formed an advisory committee to further the fund's work. Financial contributions picked up considerably as supporters began to take a more active part in SCEF affairs.<sup>18</sup>

Though Aubrey Williams disdained the Communist party, he refused to make a political principle of anticommunism as had so many prominent liberals. Rather, he attempted to convince them that civil liberties were crucial to the civil rights struggle. Williams made this explicit in a letter to his friend and confidant Eleanor Roosevelt, declaring that "I have the feeling that by putting all persons who make any effort to fight for the Negro in a bad light they [segregationists] hope to destroy them and whatever influence they may have." It was all of a piece, Williams asserted, "with their determination to keep segregation in every possible segment of Southern society."<sup>19</sup>

Believing that free speech and association should apply to radicals as well as to liberals, Williams and Dombrowski paid the price for refusing to march with others on the left into what they regarded as a self-defeating anticommunism. Advocating these views in SCHW in the mid-forties they ran afoul of the growing number of those who preferred a "tough-minded" anticommunism to the popular-front ideals of SCHW. Influential among Cold War liberals was Ralph Emerson McGill, editor of the Atlanta *Constitution*, who was openly critical of SCHW, accusing it as early as 1947 of being "Communist-infiltrated." McGill remained a persistent critic of Williams and Dombrowski, carrying over to SCEF his resentments against SCHW. The *Constitution* "red-baited" SCEF's 1950 Atlanta Conference on Discrimination in Higher Education. It was part of an effort to make more acceptable to the white South McGill's gradualist, moderate approach to desegregation by discrediting the more militant, "impossibilist" SCEF.<sup>20</sup>

<sup>18</sup> Williams to Clarence Mitchell, February 8, 1954; Jonathan Daniels to Williams, February 27, 1954; Williams to Mrs. Bethune, March 7, 1954; Williams to Dombrowski, March 7, 1954; Williams to Marshall Field, March 10, 1954; Williams to Benjamin Mays, March 5, 1954, Williams Papers; Williams, "Memoirs," 10-11, 66; SCEF Board of Directors, "Minutes," June 13, 1954, Braden Papers. Dombrowski reported to the board, May 12, 1954, *ibid.*: "It is now apparent that the attack of the Jenner Eastland Committee has strengthened rather than weakened the Fund. At least one or two of our new board members would not have agreed to serve had it not been for this attack upon us. The letters of acceptance from our new members were notable and encouraging."

<sup>19</sup> Williams to Eleanor Roosevelt, March 26, 1954, Williams Papers.

<sup>20</sup> Williams to Ralph McGill, December 9, 1953, *ibid.*; *Southern Patriot*, VIII (October 1950); Williams to McGill, December 19, 30, 1957, Braden Papers; see also McGill to Williams, December 10, 1953: "SCEF is a fellow traveling organization; don't want anything to do with it."; McGill to E. M. Thorne, June 1, 1962: "No, I never joined SC. Many loyal people did—for a while a worthwhile org. Later fell into hands of number of leftists, causing Att. Gen. to list it a Commie front. They threatened to sue me for \$1,000,000 because I exposed them & helped put SC out of business . . ." Ralph McGill Papers (Emory University, Atlanta, Ga.), cited by courtesy of Professor Charles H. Martin, University of Texas at El Paso.

The Eastland hearing also demonstrated how impotent liberal Democrats in Congress had allowed themselves to become. To head off Eastland's probe. Williams had conferred with Senate Democratic leader Lyndon Baines Johnson, who had been his Texas NYA director, as well as with Senators Lister Hill, Hubert Horatio Humphrey, and Paul Howard Douglas. Several Democratic committee members failed to accompany Eastland to New Orleans, but it soon became clear that congressional Democrats were no more willing to restrain him than were the Republicans to restrain Senator Joseph Raymond McCarthy.<sup>21</sup>

By mid-1956 SCEF leaders were quite discouraged over the rift with influential liberal organizations. The NAACP, the Urban League, and others in the liberal establishment had themselves barred Communists and silenced radicals in their own ranks as early as 1950. Attempts by Aubrey Williams to interest Asa Philip Randolph and NAACP leader Roy Wilkins in SCEF's situation proved fruitless. The Leadership Conference on Civil Rights, a clearinghouse of national liberal organizations mapping strategy for the civil rights movement, refused SCEF's application for membership. Friends informed Williams that the fund was on a list of "subversive" organizations in the possession of the AFL-CIO, allegedly compiled in collaboration with Senator Eastland and the liberal Fund for the Republic. Furious at this apparent breach of trust, Williams rebuked the Fund for the Republic's president, Robert Maynard Hutchins, for engaging in his own "J. Edgar Hooverism or McCarthyism." To Eleanor Roosevelt, the one important exception among leading anticommunist liberals who stood by SCEF, Williams voiced a "despair that any white person down here will be willing, or for that matter able, to carry on the fight . . ." in behalf of civil rights because of such back-stabbing.<sup>22</sup>

The U. S. Supreme Court's 1954 landmark decision striking down school segregation, *Brown et al. v. The Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas*, et al. (347 U.S. 483), appeared shortly after the Eastland

<sup>21</sup> Lister Hill to Williams, March 25, 1954; Hubert H. Humphrey to Williams, March 31, 1954; Paul Douglas to Williams, April 13, 1954; Williams to Lyndon B. Johnson, April 5, 1954; Williams to Robert S. Allen, April 20, 1954, Williams Papers; see also Salmond, "The Great Southern Commie Hunt," 438-39.

<sup>22</sup> SCEF, "Minutes," June 3, 1956; Williams to Dombrowski, July 31, 1956; Williams to Robert M. Hutchins, August 13, 1957 (first quotation); Williams to Eleanor Roosevelt, July 26, 1956 (second quotation), Williams Papers. Mrs. Roosevelt was "shocked by the things which come out in your letter to Mr. Randolph. Strangely enough, I mentioned both the Durrs and you in making a speech at an NAACP Board Meeting, saying they should give you every possible support; nobody spoke up to tell me that they were not doing so." Eleanor Roosevelt to Williams, July 19, 1956, *ibid.* See also Dombrowski to Albert Barnett, October 5, 1956; Barnett to Roy Wilkins, December 4, 24, 1956; Wilkins to Barnett, February 4, 1957; John Morsell to Barnett, April 3, 1957; Williams to Barnett, August 1, 1957, Braden Papers; Al Maund to Dombrowski and Williams, July 31, 1957; Dombrowski to Maund, August 2, 1957, SCEF Papers.

inquiry, and a contest over compliance with that decision immediately ensued. SCEF took the field in its, by now, familiar role among southerners in favor of the decision. Black board members called for the organization of a regional conference to encourage compliance by the white South. Anticommunist liberals, on the other hand, sought to undermine this effort. Kenneth Douty, a former socialist active in SCHW and now with the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU), searched for some way to discredit the fund's efforts by sowing "doubts as to Dombrowski . . . with many of the people who must be innocents." CIO official Sidney Hollander, whom Williams had invited to serve on SCEF's advisory committee, sought a statement from Williams to the effect that SCEF "exclude from sponsorship and participation in their activities all Communists and those who subject themselves to the discipline of the Communist Party." Such a declaration, Hollander asserted, "would help protect the organizations, the individuals, and the causes we support from the charge so often made that sentiment for integration in the South is Communist inspired." Williams withdrew his invitation, and the fund pursued its own course.<sup>23</sup>

Segregationists too were spurred into activity. Encouraged by Senator Eastland, who had condemned the Supreme Court for being "indoctrinated and brainwashed by left-wing pressure groups," the first White Citizens' Council was formed in July 1954 in Eastland's home county. The councils soon spread rapidly, and by 1956, at their peak, three hundred thousand white southerners had swelled the ranks of "massive resistance." Aided and abetted by leading southern politicians, the councils created a climate of hate reminiscent of the antiblack savagery of the early years of the century. After several years' respite from reported lynchings, Mississippi witnessed four killings in 1955. Most southern legislatures enacted statutes outlawing the NAACP, penalizing with dismissal all state employees who were members, and barring them from further state employment.<sup>24</sup> SCEF led an interracial delegation calling upon Congress to investigate the infringement of federal rights of Mississippians. The delegation argued for a federal presence to assist blacks

<sup>23</sup> *Southern Patriot*, XII (June, September, and December 1954); XIII (May 1955); SCEF Board of Directors, "Minutes," June 12, 1954; "SCEF Policy Statement," Atlanta, June 12, 1954; "Proposal for holding compliance conference on *Brown*, 1954," Williams Papers; Douty to Ed [Hollander], May 3, 1955, on letterhead of American Civil Liberties Union, Illinois Division (first quotation); Hollander to his son Edward Hollander, May 5, 1955; Hollander to Dombrowski, May 14, 1955 (second and third quotations), Americans for Democratic Action Papers (State Historical Society of Wisconsin, Madison, Wis.).

<sup>24</sup> Numan V. Bartley, *The Rise of Massive Resistance: Race and Politics in the South During the 1950's* (Baton Rouge, 1969), 67, 82–107, 212–24; on the White Citizens' Councils see Dan Wakefield, *Revolt in the South* (New York, 1960), 44 ff.; *Southern Patriot*, XIII (October 1955, Eastland quotation, p. 2); XIV (February 1956); Neil R. McMillen, *The Citizens' Council: Organized Resistance to the Second Reconstruction, 1944–64* (Urbana, Chicago, and London, 1971), 19–40.



and sympathetic whites “condemned to silence” by official intimidation. The plea went unheeded.<sup>25</sup>

Public support for desegregation was more forthcoming in New Orleans, Dombrowski’s headquarters and a focal point of SCHW activity in prior years. In December 1955 the fund succeeded in opening a public school for a public forum on integration. It thus helped to provide a favorable climate in March 1956 for federal district judge James Skelly Wright to void the Louisiana statute that had nullified desegregation by placing the public schools under the police power of the state. In retaliation, the state attorney general invoked a 1924 statute, aimed originally at the Ku Klux Klan, requiring virtually every type of organization to file membership lists with the state.<sup>26</sup>

Southern white hostility had a personal as well as political impact on fund members. In New Orleans several journalists known as SCEF supporters not only lost their jobs but were also blacklisted and compelled to leave the South. Aubrey Williams lost his largest accounts, forcing him to sell the *Southern Farmer*, which he had published in Alabama. New Orleans banks refused to handle SCEF’s accounts, and some bank officers participated in efforts to “run them out” of the city. James Dombrowski discovered that the Federal Bureau of Investigation, alleging “potential subversion,” was investigating white fund supporters who invited blacks to their homes.<sup>27</sup>

Faced with intimidation, deepening isolation, and a lack of support of any consequence among southern whites, SCEF sought an antidote to the tactics of segregationists through the development of black political power. Barring the establishment “of an outright police state,” which it found unlikely anywhere save Mississippi, the *Patriot* thought that “the ballot will eventually silence the racist demagogues in the South.” Once the southern black community had achieved its proportionate voting strength, the outmoded and unrepresentative political structures underpinning segregation would “change faster than litmus paper . . . .”<sup>28</sup>

From 1956 to 1960 the fund publicized southern violations of black voting rights. James Dombrowski and Martin Luther King, Jr., were the only southerners to appear before the 1956 Republican and Democratic

<sup>25</sup> *Southern Patriot*, XIV (February 1956, quotation on p. 1).

<sup>26</sup> Dombrowski to Mr. and Mrs. Marshall Field, September 15, 1955; Dombrowski to Eleanor Roosevelt, September 15, 1955, Williams Papers; *Southern Patriot*, XIII (October and December 1955); XIV (March and April 1956).

<sup>27</sup> Statement by W. F. Riggs, Jr., executive vice-president of Chamber of Commerce, New Orleans Area, in the Robert Barnes Case; Williams to Dombrowski, July 18, 1957; Virginia Durr to Anne Braden, April 20, 22, 1959; Williams to Dombrowski, October 24, 1957; Williams to Marshall Johnson, May 27, 1957; Dombrowski to Williams, May 29, 1958 (first quotation); Dombrowski to Williams, May 28, 1958 (second quotation), Braden Papers; Williams to President Robert W. Elsasser and Board of Directors, Chamber of Commerce, New Orleans, March 30, 1956; Williams to J. David Stern, February 27, 1957, Williams Papers.

<sup>28</sup> Dombrowski to Williams, May 3, 1956, Williams Papers; *Southern Patriot*, XIV (June 1956, first and second quotations on p. 3).



party platform committees to argue for the inclusion of strong civil rights planks in the party platforms. SCEF strengthened its ties with local blacks, particularly with the militant clergy in the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC). A highlight of this strategy was SCEF's convening of a public hearing in Washington, D. C., in the spring of 1958, emphasizing the lack of voting rights for blacks in the South. SCEF's new approach coincided with the creation of the U. S. Civil Rights Commission, and it helped to develop the commission into a responsive advocate of civil rights within the federal government.<sup>29</sup>

The upswing in SCEF activity after 1957 was largely inspired by two new field directors, Anne Gambriel McCarty Braden and Carl James Braden. Both were veteran journalists long active in the Newspaper Guild and interracial church and civil rights organizations in Louisville, Kentucky. Before joining SCEF the Bradens had purchased a house in Louisville in 1954 for a black friend, an act that aroused the fears of white neighbors. A series of violent events followed, culminating in the bombing of the house. Consequently, because of Cold War anticommunist hysteria Carl Braden was indicted under the Kentucky state sedition law. He served eight months of a fifteen-year prison sentence before being released in 1956 when the U. S. Supreme Court, in the case of *Pennsylvania v. Nelson* (350 U.S. 497), invalidated state sedition laws. The Bradens were about to join other southern integrationists in the northern diaspora in 1957 when Aubrey Williams invited them to join SCEF. Much to the fund's good fortune, they accepted his plea to remain in the South rather than depart for "the cleaner land of forgetfulness in the North."<sup>30</sup>

Under their guidance SCEF worked closely with local civil rights groups, kept up a stream of news reports to the national media about southern events, and invigorated northern fund-raising committees. These activities made SCEF a favorite target of conservative Cold War anticommunists. Ostensibly on the trail of the Communist party in the South, the House Committee on Un-American Activities (HUAC) held hearings July 29 and 30, 1958, in Atlanta, where the principal witnesses were Carl Braden and other white integrationists. In addition to his work

<sup>29</sup> *Southern Patriot*, XIV (September 1956); XV (December 1957); XVI (January, April, and May 1958); "Report to SCEF Board Meeting," February 3, 1957; Aubrey Williams, "Report from the South," April 27, 1958, both in Williams Papers; "Minutes of Conference on Local Arrangements," January 21, 1958; memo to all SCEF Board and Advisory Committee members, March 9, 1958; "Reports on Voting Restrictions in Southern States," April 27, 1958; Williams to Civil Rights Commission, April 28, 1958; Anne Braden to Alice Hunter, May 7, 1958; memo from Dombrowski, October 7, 1958, all in Braden Papers.

<sup>30</sup> Anne Braden, *The Wall Between* (New York, 1958), especially Chaps. 1-4; Anne Braden to Harvey O'Connor, April 2, 1957; Dombrowski to Anne and Carl Braden, June 7, 1957 (quotation), Braden Papers.

for SCEF Braden had encouraged opposition to the revival of state sedition laws prominently touted in Congress by HUAC members. When Braden declined to answer questions about SCEF and other civil rights activists Congress indicted him for contempt on August 13, 1958.<sup>31</sup>

For the first time alarmed southern blacks publicly joined white integrationists to insist Congress keep HUAC out of the South. They criticized its harassment of "any liberal white Southerner who dares to raise his voice in support of our democratic ideals." This public stand was significant, the Bradens believed, "toward building the kind of joint Negro-white movement we want to build in the South," a prospect which seemed brighter than at any time since 1954. The Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr., in turn, hoped that the Bradens would "find it possible to become permanently associated with the SCLC," since "our movement must be interracial to be thoroughly effective."<sup>32</sup> As the 1950s ended the southern civil rights movement had developed a momentum propelling it to major victories. With SCEF acting as a significant catalyst, the movement was better organized, self-confident, and more determined than ever before to ring down the final curtain on segregation in the American South.

The civil rights movement captured national headlines in 1960 when a group of black college students held a sit-in at a Greensboro, North Carolina, cafeteria. SCEF was soon in close touch with the new group, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), and greeted it enthusiastically. Also aroused, the Citizens' Councils of America urged the revival of state sedition laws to meet this new challenge. HUAC subpoenaed many persons who had supported the southern student protest movement by picket lines, boycotts, and similar demonstrations outside the South. Through the efforts of a number of white students in its leadership SNCC called upon the Bradens to assist it in formulating a program. It was the initiation of a period of close cooperation between two generations of southern radicals.<sup>33</sup>

<sup>31</sup> "Memo to SCEF Board and Advisory Committee on Conclusion of Southwide Trip," May-July 1958; statement of Carl and Anne Braden to the press, July 27, 1958; Maurice H. Mogulescu to Dombrowski, March 31, 1959; William H. Melish to Anne Braden, May 30, 1959, Braden Papers; *Washington Post* and *Washington Times-Herald*, July 29, 1958; *New York Times*, July 31, 1958, Sec. 1, p. 8; *Southern Patriot*, XVI (September 1958); Walter Goodman, *The Committee: The Extraordinary Career of the House Committee on Un-American Activities* (New York, 1968), 420.

<sup>32</sup> "Open Letter to the U. S. Congress," *Washington Post* and *Washington Times-Herald*, July 31, 1958 (first quotation); Anne Braden to Melish, August 8, 1958 (second quotation); SCEF Board of Directors, "Minutes," January 30, 1960, Braden Papers; Martin Luther King to Anne Braden, October 7, 1959, Exhibit 33 in Joint Legislative Committee on Un-American Activities, State of Louisiana, *Report No. 5, Part 2, April 13, 1964* (Baton Rouge, 1964), 83; King to Carl Braden, October 22, 1959 (third quotation), Braden Papers.

<sup>33</sup> Carl Braden to Dombrowski, April 7, 1960; Anne Braden to Melish, April 28, 1960; Anne Braden to Aubrey Williams, May 4, 1960, Braden Papers; Carl Braden to Dombrowski, September

SCEF, though its own finances were limited, made them available to SNCC at a critical moment in 1962 when all other doors were closed. In return, SNCC stood by SCEF in the following years when the civil rights movement, riding the crest of popular support, was under many pressures from the Kennedy and Johnson administrations and anticommunist liberals to narrow its scope and compromise its goals. SNCC helped to open a wedge for SCEF to continue meaningful participation in the civil rights movement up to 1965.<sup>34</sup>

The years 1960 to 1965 saw SCEF active on many fronts in the South: imparting organizational skills through scores of workshops for movement activists; furnishing legal aid and bail; arranging for teams of northern doctors and health professionals to journey to the South and assist poor blacks in the heart of the black belt; collecting relief funds in northern cities for black communities in West Tennessee and Mississippi that were resisting the economic stranglehold of white planters, merchants, and storekeepers; and, as always, communicating to the rest of the nation the gravity of the southern conflict. Not least among its accomplishments was the nurturing of a generation of young white and black radicals, southern-born and southern-bred, who were to share their talents and energies with other movements spawned in the civil rights struggle: the antiwar movement, community organizing, and, with perhaps the greatest social impact, the feminist movement.<sup>35</sup>

In February 1961 the Supreme Court in a 5 to 4 vote upheld the congressional contempt citation of Carl Braden, resulting from his appearance before the House Un-American Activities Committee. Justices William Orville Douglas and Hugo LaFayette Black vigorously dissented, Black asserting that it “may well strip the Negro of the aid of many of the white people who have been willing to speak up in his behalf.” The imprisonment of Braden and the subsequent campaign for presidential clemency further cemented the ties among SCEF, SCLC,

28, 1960, Exhibit 35 in Joint Legislative Committee on Un-American Activities, State of Louisiana, *Report No. 5, Part 2, April 13, 1964*, p. 87; Anne Braden to Melish, September 5, 1960; Carl Braden to Dombrowski, October 1, 1960, Braden Papers.

<sup>34</sup> Dombrowski to George D. Pratt, Jr., July 7, 9, 1963; Charles McDew, chairman, SNCC, to Dombrowski, April 11, 1962, SCEF Papers. The fund, even in the years when the civil rights movement was at high tide, approximately 1960 to 1965, continued to be shunned by the larger, established civil rights organizations. Among the numerous expressions of concern was the following from James Dombrowski: “In the South as I have indicated in my memo, there is no question that the Southern Regional Council (SRC) works to exclude SCEF from all possible participation in civil rights projects and for many years has counselled its affiliates throughout the South not to cooperate with SCEF in any way. I do not know how much influence the SRC carries in the North, but I suspect it is considerable.” Dombrowski to George D. Pratt, July 9, 1963, *ibid.*

<sup>35</sup> Dombrowski to Pratt, June 26, 1962; Anne Braden to Jim Aronson, editor, *National Guardian*, January 30, 1963, *ibid.*; Irwin Klibaner, “The Southern Conference Educational Fund: A History” (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of Wisconsin, 1971) 301–85; on the roots of women’s liberation in the civil rights movement see Sara Evans, *Personal Politics: The Roots of Women’s Liberation in the Civil Rights Movement and the New Left* (New York, 1979).

SNCC, and local blacks. Martin Luther King, Jr., saw in Braden's imprisonment "the rise of McCarthyism in the South again because all other weapons of the segregationists have failed." Despite many pleas, the Kennedy administration, indelibly staining its record in regard to civil liberties, refused to act. The last victim of HUAC, Braden spent ten months in prison.<sup>36</sup>

What some people considered SCEF's foremost service to the civil rights cause developed, ironically, out of a final desperate attempt to disrupt the fund. On October 4, 1963, police raided the SCEF offices in New Orleans and the homes of James Dombrowski and attorneys for the fund. Dombrowski and the attorneys were arrested for violating the Louisiana Subversive Activities and Communist Control and the Communist Propaganda Control laws, and both personal and organizational files were searched and carted away. SCEF's files quickly found their way to Mississippi and from there to Washington, D. C., to be photostated by Eastland committee counsel and staff.<sup>37</sup>

In a succession of legal maneuvers SCEF sought to overturn state sedition statutes in federal court. Its strategy was to undo the "abstention doctrine," which compelled persons seeking federal constitutional protection to exhaust all remedies in state courts before requesting relief in federal courts. The abstention doctrine had shielded segregationist state authorities who were frustrating civil rights efforts. The fund held the case of *Dombrowski et al. v. Pfister et al.* to be critical to the success of the entire civil rights cause, since the whole fabric of state "Little McCarran Acts" and "Communist control laws" bolstered segregationist authority. Dombrowski aptly summarized its significance, stating that "what we call euphemistically 'the struggle for integration' is not that at all. It is more accurate to speak of the civil rights movement in the South today as a fight for the right to *advocate* integration." SCEF's insistence upon the protection of civil liberties as a prerequisite for success on all civil rights issues was soon vindicated.<sup>38</sup>

On April 26, 1965, the U. S. Supreme Court in the Dombrowski case found in SCEF's favor. It prohibited further enforcing of the Louisiana statutes, declaring them unconstitutionally broad and employed in bad

<sup>36</sup> *Braden v. United States*, 365 U.S. 431 (1960), at 442 (Black's dissent), 446 (Douglas's dissent), quoted in Jared J. Spaeth, "Braden v. United States: A Constitutional Case History" (unpublished M.A. thesis, Butler University, 1968), 76; both the Black and Douglas dissents and King's remark are quoted in *SCEF News*, March 1, 1961; Williams to A. Meiklejohn, April 18, 1961; Williams to President Kennedy, April 19, 1961, Braden Papers; Goodman, *The Committee*, 420-21.

<sup>37</sup> Fact sheets, articles on the raid, undated, Braden Papers; Jack Peebles, "Subversion and the Southern Educational Fund," 45-50; Student Civil Liberties Coordinating Committee, "The Attack on the Southern Conference Educational Fund, a Report," Braden Papers.

<sup>38</sup> Marjory Collins, "Witchhunt Southern Style," *Minority of One*, VI (May 1964), 18-19; *SCEF News*, undated (quotation), and fact sheets, Braden Papers. The case is *Dombrowski et al. v. Pfister et al.*, 380 U.S. 479 (1964).



faith, and it nullified the abstention doctrine. Politically and psychologically the decision encouraged civil rights activists, affording them affirmative relief in federal courts against state prosecution. In 1969, moreover, the state of Louisiana made a full apology to the fund and its officers for the incident, declaring that allegations of "Communist front" activities had been misleading and essentially false. It was a rare and perhaps the only admission in the entire Cold War period of the fifties and sixties of wrongdoing by a government agency.<sup>39</sup>

Following the legal triumphs of the sixties SCEF cast about for new directions. The eclipse of segregation had removed the single issue uniting liberals and radicals in the most successful contemporary example of the popular front. With the retirement of James Dombrowski in 1966 SCEF became part of an emerging new left. The new codirectors of the fund, Carl and Anne Braden, independent socialists, emphasized the organization of southern workers. In the following years the fund sponsored projects among white workers in eastern Kentucky and Tennessee and among black and white Masonite laborers and poultry workers in Mississippi. It was part of a strategy of interracial organizing among southern workers, based upon a faith that black-white working-class unity was the best hope for fundamental social change in the South and the nation.<sup>40</sup>

SCEF's new program encountered difficult problems, this time from its potential supporters. From its inception the civil rights movement had been interracial in organizational structure and social vision. Nevertheless, blacks were not unanimous in their social and political views. At various times black nationalists had challenged the premises of integration and received a respectful hearing, especially in the urban North. The nationalist appeal was particularly persuasive when there were setbacks for integrationists; the great hope aroused by the "freedom summer" of 1964, and subsequently dissipated, was such an instance.<sup>41</sup>

<sup>39</sup> Robert A. Sedler, "The Dombrowski-Type Suit as an Effective Weapon for Social Change: Reflections from Without and Within," *Kansas Law Review*, XVIII (January 1970), 241, 243, 248. Sedler stresses the political significance and uses of Dombrowski-type suits in later years, particularly in the antidraft agitation and other aspects of opposition to the Vietnam War. William M. Kunstler, *Deep in My Heart* (New York, 1966), 243-44; Jack Greenberg, NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund, to A. Kinoy, July 23, 1964, Braden Papers. Carl Braden informed the author of the conclusion to the affair in a conversation in Madison in February 1970.

<sup>40</sup> See Klibaner, "Southern Conference Educational Fund," 404-56; Anne Braden explained her political views to a friend thus: "As to our own politics, I suppose you'd say we are unaffiliated socialists. We believe in socialism and would like to see some constructive way to work toward it. But unfortunately we do not find at this moment any organized socialist movement we can completely give our allegiance to. We sincerely hope that within our lifetimes there will be such a movement." Anne Braden to Dorothy Johnson, November 1, 1960, Braden Papers.

<sup>41</sup> See Joyce Ladner, "What 'Black Power' Means to Negroes in Mississippi," in James A. Geschwender, ed., *The Black Revolt: The Civil Rights Movement, Ghetto Uprisings, and Separatism* (Englewood Cliffs, N. J., 1971), 202-16.



Thousands of white and black volunteers poured into Mississippi that summer to register black voters and to lay the groundwork for establishing the Mississippi Freedom Democratic party as an alternative to the staunchly segregationist regular Democrats. Disillusionment came quickly. At the 1964 Democratic party convention the Freedom Democrats were bitterly disappointed when the Johnson administration and its northern Democratic allies refused to unseat the white-supremacist delegation. When the Republican presidential nomination was won by Barry Goldwater, who openly appealed for support from the white-supremacist South, many blacks refused to support either party. Later in 1964 SNCC broke with these parties by establishing a Black Panther party in Lowndes County, Alabama, deep in the black belt. According to SNCC blacks could neither rely upon half-hearted white allies nor look to the federal government for protection of their rights. As evidence, SNCC pointed to the inadequate performance of the administration in preventing or solving the numerous killings that had occurred in the previous years of intensive civil rights activity in the South.<sup>42</sup>

The new outlook coincided with changes in leadership. Such advocates of "black consciousness" and "black power" as Stokely Carmichael and Cleveland Sellers moved into commanding positions. They reversed the decentralized structure of SNCC, tightened its discipline, and gave up the nontraditional life-styles attractive to many young people in its early years. The organization explicitly repudiated the concept of nonviolence, espousing in its place self-defense by black communities against white terrorism. The SNCC staff informed its white members that they no longer could work among blacks but must return to their own communities, whose "white racism" was the major problem facing blacks. The logical denouement came when Stokely Carmichael asserted that "Integration is irrelevant when initiated by black people in the present society. It does nothing to solve their basic problems." SNCC secretary James Forman declared that integration "means moving Negroes into the mainstream of American life and its accepted value system. I reject this." Accordingly, SNCC refused to cosponsor SCEF's Southern Mountain Project among southern poor whites in East Tennessee, and SNCC members involved in the project began to leave.<sup>43</sup>

The *Patriot* sought to accommodate itself to the new situation. It held that whites in SCEF who still believed in integration must understand that "Unless black people create their own power . . .," integration was out of the question because white supremacy was "the cornerstone of our society." On the other hand, SNCC's new policy directing whites into

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*; see also Thomas L. Blair, *Retreat to the Ghetto: The End of a Dream?* (New York, 1977), 61-73.

<sup>43</sup> *Southern Patriot*, XXIV (May 1966; quotations on p. 3).

white communities, declared the *Patriot* somewhat stridently, “may be providing this generation with the last chance white people may ever have to overcome the racism and white supremacy by which western man has come close to destroying this planet.”<sup>44</sup>

In November 1966 SCEF issued a strong statement of support for black power as a positive development bringing to the surface racist feelings latent in the American consciousness. There were broad democratic implications in SNCC’s sponsorship of black grass-roots political organization, the fund asserted. It was nothing less than a response to a “simple truth . . . [that] the rank and file of Americans have never really controlled their government.”<sup>45</sup>

While sympathetic to the burgeoning nationalism of young blacks, the fund persisted on its own interracial course. Some young whites involved in SCEF projects did, however, criticize interracialism as an “Achilles heel” and briefly touted a “white consciousness” as a counterpart to the new black self-awareness. Sensing the reactionary implications of these ideas, Anne Braden vigorously dissented. While accepting the historical validity of black consciousness as an assertion by blacks of their human dignity, “the last thing in the world we need is ‘white consciousness,’ ” she countered, with “all the evils and destructiveness that indicates.” It was imperative, she believed, to persuade whites that their best interest lay in alliance with blacks to counteract lingering racism. Since all whites, regardless of the inequalities in power among themselves, enjoyed privileges denied blacks, whites must initiate interracial cooperation. So long as the Bradens were at the helm this was a centerpiece of SCEF’s strategy.<sup>46</sup> As blacks recoiled from white “backlash” after 1968, however, SCEF’s interracialism became increasingly vulnerable.

The growth of the Black Panther party in the aftermath of the 1968 urban ghetto revolts was symptomatic of profound discontent in black America. The Panthers were the first organization to appeal to the most desperate segment of the urban black population, streetwise black youth. Trumpeting a revolutionary nationalism and impatient with non-violence, these young blacks could no longer be ignored. To the establishment they were a violent specter in the heart of American cities. For radicals such as the SCEF the Panthers, out of step with the older left’s programs, tactics, and ideology, were a troublesome presence.<sup>47</sup>

Shortly after assuming the directorship of SCEF the Bradens had

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, quotations on p. 3; Carl Braden to William Melish, September 14, 1966, Braden Papers.

<sup>45</sup> “SCEF Board Statement,” *Southern Patriot*, XXIV (November 1966; quotations on p. 3).

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*; memo from Anne Braden to Southern Student Organizing Committee (SSOC), December 1966 (all quotations), Braden Papers.

<sup>47</sup> Blair, *Retreat to the Ghetto*, 86–126, is an excellent account of the rise of black nationalism in this period.

moved its national office to Louisville, where SCEF members assisted local blacks in protests against police brutality and in efforts to improve housing in poor black neighborhoods. SCEF also shared its office and printing press with black organizations. Compelled by their own poverty and the repressiveness of local authorities into increasing reliance upon the fund, some blacks soon came to resent their dependence upon even friendly whites.

In 1971 one such group, the Junta of Militant Organizations (JOMO), suddenly became hostile and attempted to appropriate the SCEF building entirely for itself. In the ensuing uproar JOMO declared that all whites, including white radicals, were oppressors of blacks, thus justifying their "expropriation" of SCEF property as a compensation for past oppression. SCEF urged JOMO to recognize the importance of class as well as race conflict in society. By scorning friendly whites, the fund counseled, JOMO would inevitably find itself "on the side of the oppressor instead of on the side of people who are fighting the oppressor."<sup>48</sup>

Though the incident was soon resolved peacefully, the SCEF appeal to class solidarity weakened under the magnet of race. Members of JOMO and other young blacks established a Black Panther party in Louisville shortly afterward. A period of apparent harmony that brought SCEF and the Panthers together in 1972 to defend seven young blacks arrested in police-instigated drug roundups was short-lived. The SCEF attorney handling the case used familiar radical legal tactics in defense of civil liberties against local police and law-enforcement officials. The Panthers, however, sought to broaden the defense into a revolutionary nationalist campaign on behalf of blacks, in prison as well as in the courtroom, as political prisoners in the continuing conflict between the "submerged black nation" in America and the "white oppressor."<sup>49</sup>

When the trial resulted in the acquittal of all the defendants save one the Panthers refused to be mollified. Continuing resentments strained personal relationships, specifically between a popular young Panther, Ben Simmons, and his wife Judi, who remained loyal to SCEF. In April 1973 Ben Simmons broke into the SCEF offices, threatened his wife at gunpoint, and ransacked the offices after locking the fund members in a closet. Subdued by others who entered the building, Simmons was then committed to a mental hospital after SCEF executive director Helen Greever, administrative assistant Mike Welch, and attorney Bill Allison obtained a medical inquest warrant. The three SCEF officials, all white, thought this wiser than involving the police in the incident. In the eyes of Simmons's fellow Panthers it was conclusive evidence that the white

<sup>48</sup> Memo from Louisville staff of SCEF to Louisville JOMO, July 28, 1971, Braden Papers.

<sup>49</sup> Helen Greever to Michael Clarkson, chairman, Louisville Black Panther Party (BPP), April 17, 1973; BPP leaflet, May 10, 1973, *ibid.*

radicals in SCEF were attempting “to destroy the mind of a brother.” The Panthers circulated a leaflet denouncing SCEF and declaring that it had “created contradictions in the Black progressive movement which no longer could be tolerated.” SCEF was caught off guard again in the events that soon followed.<sup>50</sup>

In July 1973 three young blacks appeared at SCEF headquarters and demanded \$29,000 as “compensation” for the commitment of Ben Simmons. Rebuffed, they kidnapped Helen Greever and her husband, Earl Scott, at gunpoint, took them to a remote spot on the outskirts of Louisville, and threatened to kill them. Scott faked a heart attack and then persuaded one of the kidnappers to flag down a police patrol car, which took Scott and Greever to a hospital emergency room. They then contacted other fund members who immediately obtained arrest warrants for the three Panthers. Two were soon arrested; the third had left Louisville for New York City and later returned to give prosecution testimony. Subsequent inquiries revealed, Helen Greever asserted, that the police had attempted to increase suspicions between the two organizations in order to disrupt SCEF, which the police had long regarded as a “Communist organization.”<sup>51</sup>

SCEF set up a committee to clarify the facts and to analyze the entire relationship among the fund, the Panthers, and the black community. There was bitter disagreement about SCEF’s resort to the police and the state in a dispute with other radicals, even those so demonstrably hostile to the fund. Anne Braden was among those opposed to criminal prosecution of the Panthers “no matter what the circumstances.” To do so, she contended, was part of “a ruling class . . . tactic to put SCEF in the position of prosecuting the Panthers.” While critical of “anti-social acts” against SCEF, she perceived them to be essentially the actions of persons who are “victims of an . . . anti-people capitalist system.” Prosecution, jails, and prison, however, were self-defeating ways of “intensifying the oppression that leads people to anti-social behavior.” Even if police agents were responsible for these events, as some SCEF members had alleged, the fund would be the ultimate loser. The problem was political, “a battle for the minds of men and women,” a contest, Anne Braden was confident “we in SCEF are particularly competent to fight.”<sup>52</sup>

In August 1973 the SCEF committee report, written largely by a young black board member, Walter Collins, sharply criticized the officers of SCEF. Collins supported the Panthers’ actions as “reasonable responses” to the provocations and “brutalizations” of white authorities

<sup>50</sup> BPP leaflet, May 10, 1973 (first and second quotations), *ibid.*

<sup>51</sup> Helen Greever memos, June 15, July 3, 20, 1973, *ibid.*

and to the overall insensitivity of white radicals to blacks. He charged that SCEF had retreated from its strategy of organizing poor and working-class whites in support of the black liberation movement. Instead, he alleged, SCEF had underplayed the significance of white racism by emphasizing a “bogus” black-white interracial unity. A confirmed nationalist, Collins believed both middle-class and working class whites to be the “chief enemies of blacks,” because they had allowed themselves to be used by the “white ruling class” for its own ends.<sup>53</sup>

Collins directed the brunt of his critique at several Communist party members, who, because of the Bradens’ open door to the left, had become board members and fund officers. He focused specifically upon fund officers Helen Greever, Mike Welch, and Jan Phillips. Alleging that they had given priority to the goals of the Communist party over those of SCEF, Collins analyzed the core of the dispute as “an undeclared war between the Panthers who call themselves revolutionary nationalists and members of the Communist party who seem to believe that nationalism is not revolutionary and even if it is, that in America and SCEF it has no place.”<sup>54</sup>

At a full SCEF board meeting in Birmingham, October 6–8, 1973, a majority, made up largely of white new leftists who had joined SCEF in the previous five years, responded enthusiastically to Collins’s criticism of individual communists and the Communist party’s position in favor of interracial unity. They rejected a resolution submitted by Anne Braden to endorse SCEF’s interracialism by freezing the existing proportion of whites on the board and increasing the number of blacks to half its total membership. Collins rejected the suggestion as “tokenism.” The majority then voted to oust Helen Greever and Mike Welch. Collins replaced Greever as executive director and, in his first official action, removed Jan Phillips and Judi Simmons from the staff.<sup>55</sup>

For Carl Braden the entire proceeding smacked of “political hysteria.” As an independent socialist who welcomed a variety of radicals to SCEF he considered the fund’s new course to be a rejection of the policies he had initiated in his tenure as director. Instead, a united front of the left had soured into a “united front against the CP.” Seeing little meaningful difference between the scapegoating indulged in by new leftists against

<sup>52</sup> Anne Braden to SCEF Interim Committee, June 25, 1973, *ibid.*

<sup>53</sup> Special Committee of SCEF Board and Staff, “A Statement of Findings,” undated, *ibid.*

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>55</sup> SCEF Board, “Minutes,” October 19–21, 1973, *ibid.* The ultraleftists in SCEF were members of the October League, a Maoist group that had formerly been one of the factions of Students for a Democratic Society (SDS). Jim O’Brien, who has traced the meanderings of the neo-Leninist groups that arose on the American left in the seventies, states that the league in the fall of 1974 “took sole control of the Southern Conference Educational Fund, a once-broad coalition of southern radicals and reformers,” O’Brien, *American Leninism in the 1970s* (Somerville, Mass., 1978), 31.



the old left in SCEF and those used against him and SCEF by HUAC and Eastland in previous years, Braden resigned.<sup>56</sup> Anne Braden, ever hopeful, remained on the SCEF board. In tandem with a minority caucus she attempted to convince the organization to return to its interracial principles. By June 1974 she, too, was forced reluctantly to concede that "SCEF as it now exists cannot be a cutting edge . . ." for radical change in the South. For her pains, she and several associates were expelled, completing SCEF's decline into sectarianism.<sup>57</sup>

The career of the Southern Conference Educational Fund illustrates the strengths and defects of the popular front. It was most effective when there was a clearly perceived goal that liberals and radicals could accept as an overriding priority. Antifascism fulfilled that need during World War II. In the postwar period and well into the sixties desegregation became the unifying cause. So long as legal segregation remained entrenched SCEF served a meaningful role in the South.

SCEF's struggle with segregationists climaxed an older intraregional conflict between the white supremacists in southern life and those blacks and whites seeking to transform the South into a democratic, nonracist society. SCEF was unique among white southerners in its insistence on working *with* blacks, not simply *for* them. It gave practical expression to the ideal of integration for the greater part of its existence.

As one of the few surviving symbols of cooperation between liberals and the left in Cold War America SCEF fell afoul of anticommunist liberals who for most of its three decades of activity attempted to render it ineffective. They were a serious obstacle to the fund's gaining national support among civil rights sympathizers. Despite this, SCEF was able to maintain vital links with the southern black movement, particularly after 1954, because of its unique organizational skills and significant ties to northern integrationists.

During the height of the civil rights crusade, 1960 to 1965, SCEF, Highlander Center, SNCC, and young white radicals from northern colleges and a smaller group from southern campuses forged a radical coalition that eventually became the southern wing of the new left in the late sixties. Through its efforts the anti-Vietnam war movement came to the South. The fund also sought to renew working-class organization begun by radicals of the thirties in the South, an agitation that was one of the early casualties of the Cold War in the forties.

The deepening polarization of American society after the urban ghetto riots of the mid-sixties and the frustrations of the endless war in

<sup>56</sup> Braden to Board, Staff, and Advisory Committee, SCEF, November 1, 1973, Braden Papers.

<sup>57</sup> Anne Braden to Board and Advisory Committee, SCEF, "The New Myths in SCEF," June 10, 1974; "Policy Position of Minority Caucus, SCEF," July 1974, *ibid*.

southeast Asia had a profound impact on all liberal and left organizations. The urban uprisings gave impetus to black nationalism; black power replaced interracial unity as the rallying cry of those who sought support among urban, particularly young, blacks. Interracial organizations such as CORE and SNCC succumbed to the revival of black nationalism that swept the civil rights movement in the wake of the ghetto revolts.<sup>58</sup>

SCEF, too, felt its impact in the form of internal conflicts that ultimately reduced it to ineffectiveness. A new generation of revolutionary leftists, deeply alienated from a society unable or unwilling to end what they perceived as a brutal, senseless war in Vietnam against a nonwhite people, became dominant in SCEF in the early seventies. The popular-front conceptions of the older leaders of the fund seemed too tame or irrelevant for them. Consequently, unable to formulate a rational, workable program for southern radicals, SCEF foundered. Some of its longtime supporters, most notably Anne and Carl Braden, continued the search for a renewed radical presence in the South in succeeding years through a new entity, the Southern Workers Organizing Committee for Social and Economic Justice (SWOC). The demise of SCEF notwithstanding, popular-front liberals and radicals had made a signal contribution to the transformation of the contemporary South.

<sup>58</sup> For some comparisons see August Meier and Elliott Rudwick, *CORE: A Study in the Civil Rights Movement, 1942-1968* (New York, 1973), 374 ff.