

On the Tail of the Panther: Black Power and the 1967 Convention of the National Conference for New Politics

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Addressing the opening night rally of the National Conference for New Politics (NCNP) Convention on 31 August 1967, the executive director William F. Pepper informed the several thousand delegates that:

Historians may well count your presence here as the most significant gathering of Americans since the founding of our nation. Never before have so many Americans, from so many different living conditions, come from so many diverse sections of the land to dedicate themselves to the rebuilding, indeed to the reclamation of their government and their destinies.

Pepper concluded his remarks by declaring that “it may well be that what you begin here may ultimately result in a new social, economic and political system in the United States.”¹ Outside the auditorium a bongo group was chanting “Kill Whitey.”² The convention was one of the most ambitious attempts to forge a broad political alliance of antiwar organisations, New Left insurgents and the radical wing of the civil rights movement in 1960s America. It was planned by the NCNP, a co-ordinating organisation that hoped for a fundamental reconstitution of the American socio-economic and political order.³ Scholars have largely ignored the NCNP, and although

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¹ William F. Pepper, “NCNP Convention Address,” 4–6, NCNP Records, State Historical Society of Wisconsin (SHSW).

² Walter Goodman, “When Black Power Runs the New Left,” *New York Times Magazine*, 24 Sept. 1967, 28.

³ “Don’t Mourn For Us ... Organize ... The call of the National Conference For New Politics” (published programme), *Political Activities of the Johnson White House, 1963–1969. Part*

the 1967 convention makes brief appearances in the literature it is generally portrayed as a farcical horror show. However, the motives behind, events of, and reaction to the convention reveals much about “the movement” in late sixties America.

It is a weakness of the current historiography that the New Left, civil rights and antiwar movements tend to be treated separately. Only rarely are these three elements of “the movement” brought together by scholars – and then often inadequately by focusing on Martin Luther King, Jr. or, less often, the presidential campaign of Robert Kennedy.⁴ Studies that more thoroughly examine the complex relations between the peace, New Left and black liberation movements are sorely needed. A more detailed understanding of the NCNP’s doomed attempt to bring together antiwar liberals, New Left radicals and African American activists, casts light on some of the important problems encountered by the American left during the 1960s. The NCNP, like the wider movement, faced difficulties in establishing black–white co-operation during the Black Power era; and the arguments over to what extent, if at all, radicals would work within the American political system, or co-operate with white liberals, proved debilitating. Moreover, the task of prioritising issues proved extremely problematic; whilst it proved possible to organise around a particular demand, such as ending the Vietnam War, the movement was unable to achieve any useful consensus over more broad

1: *White House Central and Confidential Files. Series A: Candidates, Campaigns, Elections, and Parties*, ed. Paul L. Kesaris; guide compiled by Robert E. Lester (Frederick, MD: University Publications of America, c. 1987), reel 27, frame 1328. (hereafter referred to as *Political Activities I A*).

⁴ See, for example, Henry E. Darby and Margaret N. Rowley, “King on Vietnam and Beyond,” in David J. Garrow, ed., *Martin Luther King, Jr.: Civil Rights Leader, Theologian, Orator* (Brooklyn, NY: Carlson Publishing Inc, 1989), vol. 1, 43–50; Adam Fairclough, “Martin Luther King, Jr. and the War in Vietnam,” in David J. Garrow, ed., *Martin Luther King, Jr.: Civil Rights Leader, Theologian, Orator* (Brooklyn, NY: Carlson Publishing Inc, 1989), vol. 2, 19–39; and Herbert Shapiro, “The Vietnam War and the American Civil Rights Movement,” *Journal of Ethnic Studies* 16 (4) (1989), 117–41. Many of the best books on the New Left and antiwar movements – such as Charles DeBenedetti, *An American Ordeal: The Antiwar Movement of the Vietnam Era*, Charles Chatfield Assisting Author (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1990); James Miller, *Democracy Is in the Streets: From Port Huron to the Siege of Chicago* (Cambridge, MA and London, England: Harvard University Press, 1994); and Tom Wells, *The War Within: America’s Battle Over Vietnam* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1994) – mention the civil rights movement only briefly. Doug Rossinow, *The Politics of Authenticity: Liberalism, Christianity, and the New Left in America* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998) is one of the few studies that attempts to link the three movements.

aims.⁵ The NCNP convention confronted each of these problems, but this article will focus on the most important – racial cleavage. The dramatic and divisive role that race played at the convention is illustrative of the complex relationship between black and white radicalism in the 1960s.

I

The NCNP evolved out of a series of meetings involving peace, civil rights, and student leaders, which were held over the summer and fall of 1965.⁶ The organisation's purpose was to bridge the gap between radicals and antiwar liberals, which it hoped to accomplish by bringing about coalition between New Left and antiwar groups, the civil rights movement, and reform Democrats. It was envisaged that this alliance would be centred on the common goals of ending poverty, racism and the war in Vietnam.⁷ The make-up of the NCNP's executive committee reflected the desire for inclusiveness – it covered the left-of-centre political spectrum. Students for a Democratic Society's Paul Booth, and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee's Julian Bond were joined by reform Democrat Simon Casady, Arthur Waskow of the Center for the Study of Democratic Institutions, and SANE's Benjamin Spock; antiwar liberals Anne and Martin Peretz provided a sizeable amount of funding. Designed to co-ordinate "new politics" activity, the NCNP aimed to provide communication links through literature, newsletters and meetings, to "help coalesce the many peace, poverty, and militant civil rights groups with student demonstration groups, disaffected intellectuals, social welfare, labor and religious organizations."⁸ The organisation announced that:

New Politics is an organized effort to return decision-making to the people by providing a democratic way to take effective political action at a time when the conventional American politics of party labels and personalities has become sterile.

⁵ For the purposes of this discussion, the black freedom movement will include groups such as SNCC, CORE and Black Power advocates, as well as Martin Luther King – they all went beyond the demand for integration to argue for more fundamental changes to the "American System." The New Left – of which SDS was the principal organisation – also called for a restructuring of American society, based on the ideas of participatory democracy. They viewed the Vietnam War as a symptom of deeper problems with America. The antiwar movement included many New Leftists and African Americans, but was also made up of pacifists and liberals – represented by organisations such as the Fellowship of Reconciliation, the War Resisters League and SANE. The antiwar movement was constantly divided between its radical wing who argued for a "multi-issue approach" to antiwar activities, and moderates who wished to focus solely on ending the war.

⁶ *Political Activities I A*, reel 27, frame 1316.

⁷ Letter, Arthur Waskow to Anne Stadler, 3 Jan. 1967, Arthur Waskow Papers (unprocessed) Box 1, NCNP Folder 3, SHSW.

⁸ Memorandum For The Record, 15 July 1967, *Political Activities I A*, reel 27, frame 1317.

New Politics encourages the coalition of the many different groups and constituencies into a dynamic movement whose combined resources can have impact on the future politics of the nation.⁹

This coalition was based around four broad objectives: ending the Cold War and US military intervention abroad, establishing racial equality, encouraging world disarmament and constructive relations with Third World revolutionaries, and using America's growing productive capacity to meet the needs of her inner cities and depressed rural areas.¹⁰

II

During 1966, believing that left-wing dissent needed to be transformed into political power, the NCNP called on Americans to support "new politics" candidates against the "'old politics' of military intervention abroad and racial and economic injustice at home."¹¹ The NCNP backed candidates who spoke clearly for "peace and a full scale assault on the root causes of poverty."¹² The organisation was not simply against the conflict in Vietnam, it was also for a genuine war on poverty which would particularly help African Americans, and it believed that this could not happen whilst America continued to wage war in Asia – "it is now abundantly clear that the cost of the war has doomed hopes of any meaningful attack on our slums and ghettos."¹³

The energetic and innovative primary campaign waged by Robert Scheer against Congressman Jeffrey Cohelan in California's seventh congressional district came to embody the "new politics" of 1966. Helped by the peculiar circumstances of the constituency, which encompassed both the radical Berkeley campus and part of the Oakland ghetto, Scheer, the 30-year-old foreign editor of *Ramparts*, took on the liberal incumbent under the slogan of "*Withdraw the Troops. End Poverty.*"¹⁴ Ultimately, Cohelan managed to eke out a narrow victory over Scheer's radical insurgency.¹⁵ Interestingly, the NCNP

⁹ "Don't Mourn For Us ... Organize ... The call of the National Conference For New Politics" (published programme, c. July 1967), *Political Activities I A*, reel 27, frame 1328.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, frame 1328.

¹¹ NCNP Letter, c. June 1966, WHCF, Name File, "National Conference L-P," box 26, Lyndon Baines Johnson Presidential Library (LBJ). ¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ *Ibid.*, this position contrasts with the advocates of the "Freedom Budget," such as Bayard Rustin, who took the line that America could afford both guns **and** butter.

¹⁴ Thomas Powers, *The War at Home: Vietnam and the American People, 1964–1968* (New York, 1973), 124.

¹⁵ For a detailed account of the campaign, see Serge Lang, *The Scheer Campaign* (New York; Amsterdam: W. A. Benjamin, 1967).

gave only limited backing to Scheer, reluctantly furnishing him with \$1,000 in the final weeks of the campaign. In fact, the NCNP's strategy for the 1966 elections was muddled and it had entered the electoral arena "haphazardly."¹⁶ In the late summer of 1966, Simon Casady complained to other members of the NCNP board that the organisation had made hasty decisions about the primaries, and he expressed his fear that "somehow no one quite finished the job of designing NCNP and thinking through its purpose and objectives before they decided to launch her and sail her to the moon."¹⁷ In many ways this lack of direction – which manifested itself in the continuing debate over whether to run third-party candidates, work within the two-party system, or focus on "local organising" – would plague the organisation throughout its existence.

III

The most important event in the short history of the NCNP was its national convention. On 11 July 1967 the organisation issued a call for a planning convention to "end the reign of Lyndon Baines Johnson" – many antiwar liberals now felt that defeating Johnson was a moral imperative.¹⁸ The press reported that the convention hoped to set up a political party to run candidates in the 1968 elections, but that was only one option under consideration. Running local presidential tickets, a temporary national ticket, or focusing on community organising were also on the agenda. The invitation to the convention ambitiously proclaimed "we intend to build a different American future ... to end the destruction of Vietnam ... to begin the building of 'Mankind' ... to end poverty, fear and despair at home ... We intend to make our government accountable to us."¹⁹ Any democratic group committed to "some form of organizing work in the community" and willing to "conceivably endorse an independent candidate at some time" was eligible to participate.²⁰ The NCNP invited New Left radicals, antiwar protesters, and militant black activists to "take over" the convention – which they duly did. The proceedings began amidst high hopes, many of the delegates

¹⁶ Letter from Don McKelvey to Waskow, 21 Sept. 1966, and Waskow's reply of 27 Sept., Arthur Waskow Papers (unprocessed) box 1, NCNP Folder, SHSW; Paul Booth memo to NCNP Board, 24 June 1966, Donna Allen Papers [folder 4, memo and reports, 1966–68], SHSW.

¹⁷ Simon Casady memo to NCNP board, Donna Allen Papers box 2 folder 4, SHSW.

¹⁸ *Political Activities I A*, reel 27, 1316.

¹⁹ *Newsweek*, 11 Sept. 1967, "Third Parties: First Things First" (editorial), 15, and "Call to Convention," WHCF, name file, "National Conference, L-P," box 26, LBJ Library.

²⁰ Goodman, "When Black Power Runs the New Left," 28.

believed that “nothing less than the nation’s rebirth was on the agenda.”²¹ In the aftermath of the convention, however, the optimism had vanished. C. Clark Kissinger, an SDS community organiser who had helped chair the gathering, stated that “it worked out pretty well in the end – no one was killed,” whilst radical student leader Todd Gitlin declared that “the main moral of the happening is that it should not have happened at all.”²²

The several thousand delegates representing some 200 different organisations (including the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, SNCC, the Congress of Racial Equality, the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party, SDS, Vietnam Summer, SANE) who convened in Chicago varied enormously. The convention, held in Chicago’s Palmer House Hotel, attracted much of the “curious left” in America.²³ The various groups also arrived committed to different political strategies. The Socialist Workers Party (SWP) and the Trotskyites favoured creating a third party. SDS and Vietnam Summer, disenchanted with electoral politics and its “co-opting” effects, favoured local organising. Although SDS members attended the convention, most were opposed to the “super-movement” approach. The California Delegation (also known as the New Politics Group) favoured leaving each state free to have a national ticket if it wanted, whilst concentrating energies on local community action.²⁴

The opening night rally at the Chicago Coliseum did not augur well. After William Pepper’s dramatic introduction, co-chairman Julian Bond, introduced by Ossie Davis as a “black terror in tennis shoes,” spoke briefly, left quickly, and took no further part in the convention.²⁵ The highlight of the evening was the keynote speech, which was given by The Revd Dr Martin Luther King, Jr., although this turned out to be something of a disappointment. According to one report, King “read from a lengthy script which did not deal with a single real issue of the convention.”²⁶ He left the convention

²¹ NCNP press release (for release 4 Sept. 1967), [“press” file], NCNP Records (unprocessed), box 1, SHSW; William F. Pepper, *Orders to Kill: The Truth Behind the Murder of Martin Luther King* (New York: Carroll & Graf, 1995), 8.

²² “Symposium: Chicago’s ‘Black Caucus,’” *Ramparts* 6: 4 (Nov. 1967), 101, 113.

²³ Kopkind, “They’d Rather Be Left,” 3.

²⁴ Renata Adler, “Letter From The Palmer House,” *The New Yorker*, 23 Sept. 1967, 58.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 68; indeed, Julian Bond’s commitment was less than total. In a letter to Arthur Waskow on 25 May 1967 he apologised for missing yet another board meeting, and declared himself to be “probably the most non-chairing chairman in organizational history.” Letter from Bond to Waskow, 25 May 1967, Arthur Waskow Papers (unprocessed), box 3, NCNP folder 2.

²⁶ Stanley Levison, a senior and trusted advisor to King, had long opposed the strategy of working with elements of the peace movement that had no power. Levison had instead promoted the tactic of working with senior politicians such as Robert Kennedy and

shortly after delivering his speech, and later complained to an aide that the Black Nationalists were trying to take over and drive the whites out.²⁷

Several weeks before the convention was due to begin, it had appeared as if the black movement was going to be very poorly represented in Chicago. African Americans were viewed as a key new politics constituency, and the radical civil rights movement was idealised on the left as America's leading revolutionary force. Therefore a concentrated effort was made to encourage black participation. In early August civil rights leaders including Julian Bond, Floyd McKissick and Fannie Lou Hamer signed a letter urging blacks to ally with "progressive" whites at the convention. The letter stated that "political alliances" were "necessary and crucial," and that "the necessity for cooperation between black militants and white progressives has not passed, nor can it be overemphasized at the New Politics Convention."²⁸ This hasty effort to add legitimacy to the convention by involving black groups had unforeseen consequences.

The issue of race dominated the convention. Early on, 350 black militants walked out to attend their own conference. Approximately 400 remained and formed a caucus – although there were black delegates, representing other groups, who did not join it. The official plenary session, which began on the Friday, was dominated by debate over the role of blacks in the convention. The Black Caucus, meeting in secret, presented the delegates with an ultimatum – they had to accept without alteration a thirteen-point list of resolutions, or the blacks would walk out. They stated that, "we, as black people, believe that the United States system is committed to the practice of genocide, social degradation, to the denial of political and social self-determination

William Fulbright to try and end the war in Vietnam, rather than with the amorphous and controversial peace movement. King, reluctant at being linked with the New Left prior to the convention, clarified his position in July – he was "solely related to the convention merely as a guest speaker at its mass rally," his presence there was not "an endorsement of any decision made by the convention," and he had "no relationship to the general policy or strategy" of the NCNP (conversation between Levison and Andrew Young, 10 July 1967, *The Martin Luther King, Jr., FBI File Part II: The King–Levison File*, ed. David J. Garrow, Guide compiled by Martin P. Schipper (Frederick, MD: University Publications of America, 1987), reel 7, frame 399 – hereafter referred to as *FBI*). According to David Garrow, a reluctant King accepted the invitation to speak largely because one of the primary initiators of the convention was Martin Peretz – husband of SCLC's top financial contributor, Ann Farnsworth (David J. Garrow, *Bearing the Cross: Martin Luther King, Jr. and The Southern Christian Leadership Conference* (London: Vintage, 1993 – orig. published William Morrow and Company, Inc, 1986), 713 n. 49). Frank Speltz, "Never Come Near (electoral) Politics," *Washington Free Press*, 23 Sept. 1967, 11.

²⁷ Martin Luther King to Stanley Levison, 1 Sept. 1967, *FBI*, reel 7, 563.

²⁸ NCNP News Release, "Black Activists Urged To Attend New Politics Convention," 10 Aug. 1967, NCNP Records, SHSW.

of black people, and cannot reform itself. There must be revolutionary change.”²⁹ The Caucus demanded 50 per cent representation on all convention committees, and called on the convention to support: all wars of national liberation around the world, the reinstatement of Adam Clayton Powell to his congressional seat, black control of black political groups in black communities, the making of “immediate reparation for the historic, physical, sexual, mental, and economic exploitation of black people,” the setting up of white “civilizing committees” to eliminate white racism, the rebuilding of the ghettos, support for the Newark Black Power Conference resolutions (which most delegates had not seen), and the condemnation of the “imperialist Zionist war.”³⁰

The summer of 1967 was a trying time for advocates of interracial cooperation. Urban riots had left many dead and increased racial tension. Furthermore, Black Power was the source of much conflict at the NCNP convention. The civil rights movement had come under increasing strain from 1965; the constant violence that civil rights workers faced and the seemingly hypocritical actions of the “liberal” federal government persuaded many on the radical wing of the black freedom struggle that nonviolence and cooperation with the Johnson administration should be replaced by a strategy that combined self-defence and racial pride with independent black political action.³¹

July 1967 saw the first National Black Power Conference, held in Newark in the aftermath of a six-day riot.³² The conference illustrated the radicalism reached by black militants; at a mass meeting on the first day of the conference, Alfred Black (Newark’s Commissioner of Human Rights) set the tone by declaring that “a black man today is either a radical or an Uncle Tom.”³³ The delegates, from all over America representing forty-five groups, ranged politically from moderates to revolutionaries.³⁴ The conference

²⁹ Andrew Ridgeway, “Freak-Out in Chicago: The National Conference of New Politics,” *The New Republic*, 16 Sept. 1967, 10.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 10. The Israel resolution was amended and toned down in the dying hours of the convention.

³¹ Edward J. Bacciocco, Jr., *The New Left in America: Reform to Revolution, 1956 to 1970* (Stanford, CA: Hoover Institution Press, 1974), Ch. 3.

³² Robert Weisbrot, *Freedom Bound: A History of America’s Civil Rights Movement* (New York and London: Plume, 1990), 263.

³³ Bacciocco, Jr., *The New Left in America*, 193; and Thomas A. Johnson, “McKissick Holds End of Violence is up to Whites,” *New York Times*, 22 July 1967, 11.

³⁴ Jesse Jackson (SCLC), Alexander Allen (Urban League), CORE’s Floyd McKissick and Omar A. Ahmed, representatives of SNCC, and Black Nationalist Ron Karenga were among those present; see L. H. Stanton, “The Black Power Conference – A View From Inside,” 27 July 1967, *Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) Papers. Part 3: Scholarship, Educational and Defense Fund for Racial Equality, 1960–1976. Series B: Leadership Development Files*,

attempted to lay the basis for future programmes, and to establish unity between African Americans that the philosophy of Black Power was predicated upon; and it passed a series of resolutions that included calls for self-defence, and black control of education and welfare in black communities.³⁵ Most controversially, a resolution was approved calling for the establishment of a national dialogue on the feasibility of establishing a separate homeland in the United States for black people.³⁶ It was in this radicalised and emotionally charged context, with a rapidly shrinking middle ground, that the NCNP sought to forge an interracial left-of-centre coalition.

On the Friday night, “in an orgy of confession about their childhood feelings toward Negroes,” the white delegates debated the ultimatum. After lengthy debate, they voted by a margin of three to one to accept the black demands, much to the chagrin of white liberal commentators – Renata Adler declared that the adoption of the thirteen points constituted a version of white paternalism that would shock a South African plantation owner.³⁷ Whilst countless journalists attacked the decision to accept the ultimatum as a product of paternalism or white guilt, many of the delegates voted for points that they personally disagreed with, because they felt that a wider and more important issue was at stake – the issue of black–white unity. A Maryland woman who asked not to be identified said that, whilst she did not agree with the black demands, she felt that they had to make a gesture.³⁸ Hank Werner of the Milwaukee Organizing Committee explained that “the vast majority knew that what was being discussed had, in fact, little to do with the nature of the 13 points, but rather with the nature of the movement.”³⁹ The non-black ad hoc committee to support the resolution of the Black Caucus explained that trying to change the specifics of the thirteen points was “completely missing the point” and urged delegates to “vote with the spirit of it.”⁴⁰ The ultimatum had been presented as a test of the white delegates’ commitment to work with the black movement, and nothing less than an unequivocal endorsement of the thirteen points would have prevented the

Associate Editor, Randolph Brown; guide compiled by Dale Reynolds (Frederick, MD: University Publications of America, 1984) – hereafter referred to as *CORE papers*, reel 9, frame 00053; and Robert C. Maynard, “New Wall Rising Between the Races?” *Washington Post Outlook*, 30 July 1967 in *CORE papers*, reel 9, frame 00059; also Martin Arnold, “Newark Meeting on Black Power Attended by 400,” *New York Times*, 21 July 1967, 34.

³⁵ See Black Power Manifesto and Resolutions, *CORE papers*, reel 9, frames 00026–00051.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, frame 00050.

³⁷ Adler, “Letter From The Palmer House,” 80, 57.

³⁸ Richard Blumenthal, “New Politics at Chicago,” *The Nation*, 25 Sept. 1967, 274.

³⁹ Letter from Henry J. Wineberg, past member of NCNP executive board, Oct. 21, 1967, NCNP Records (unprocessed), box 1[1967 Convention #3], SHSW.

⁴⁰ “Support the Resolution of the Black Caucus,” NCNP Records, SHSW.

Black Caucus from walking out. Following the vote, the blacks rejoined the convention. On the Saturday evening, the plenary voted down the proposal to form a third party; and a proposal to run a third ticket was narrowly defeated by a complicated system of weighted voting by 13,519 to 13,517.⁴¹

That evening, the Black Caucus which had been meeting in secret with shaven-headed bodyguards on the doors, demanded half of the convention votes in addition to 50 per cent representation on all the committees. It is not entirely clear who was controlling the Caucus; William Pepper has recently claimed that government agents were manipulating it in an attempt to destroy the NCNP.⁴² There were numerous senior civil rights figures present, including Hosea Williams (SCLC), James Forman and H. Rap Brown (SNCC) and CORE's Floyd McKissick. But the chairman of the group, chosen by "African consensus," was Carlos Russell, a former antipoverty worker from Brooklyn.⁴³ In speeches before both the Caucus and the white delegates, James Forman declared that there could be no "new concept of politics, no new coalitions" unless the most dispossessed assumed the leadership and supplied the direction to the new form of politics. He concluded that "the best thing that anyone white can do for us is merely to support that for which we call."⁴⁴ McKissick's relationship with the NCNP can perhaps be best described as confusing. In a letter sent to black leaders, he had pleaded with them to attend the convention, arguing that a political alliance with

⁴¹ Powers, *The War at Home*, 267.

⁴² D. J. R. Bruckner, "Half of New Politics Parley Votes Given to Black Caucus," *Los Angeles Times*, 4 Sept. 1967, 264. Kenneth O'Reilly has shown how the federal government spied upon, infiltrated and set out to undermine and discredit numerous black and radical organisations throughout the sixties. Former NCNP executive director William Pepper, has claimed that a combination of CIA operation CHAOS, the 113th Military Intelligence Unit and local Chicago groups controlled the Black Caucus and fuelled the black-white hostility which engulfed the convention, thereby rendering it politically impotent. See Kenneth O'Reilly, *"Racial Matters": The FBI's Secret File on Black America, 1960-1972* (London: Collier Macmillan Publishers, 1989), esp. Chs. 4, 7, and 8, and William F. Pepper, *Orders to Kill: The Truth Behind the Murder of Martin Luther King* (New York: Carroll & Graf, 1995). The federal government was certainly concerned about the potential threat posed to Lyndon Johnson by the convention and possible attempts to form a political party. A confidential memorandum of July 1967 outlined the nature of the "menace" and a proposed plan to deal with the threat was reiterated. It included setting up a special office to discredit leaders of the movement, the use of political intelligence to head off the threat, leaking information to the press, and clamping down on federal funding to local groups. The use of District Attorneys, the FBI, and other intelligence units in the campaign against NCNP was also encouraged, See Memorandum for the Record, 15 July 1967, 3-5, *Political Activities IA*, reel 27, frames 1318-1320.

⁴³ Weisbrot, *Freedom Bound*, 254.

⁴⁴ James Forman, *The Making of Black Revolutionaries* (Washington, DC: Open Hand, 1985), 499-502.

white liberals was necessary if blacks were to make real political gains.⁴⁵ McKissick's relationship with the Caucus militants was ambiguous – he apparently made a brief appearance to try and persuade them not to submit the thirteen-point proposal and ultimatum.⁴⁶ On the Friday, in a speech before the convention, McKissick declared that the establishment of a third party was not in the interest of blacks and would not receive their support. McKissick stated that black people could not be part of anyone else's platform – they would have to decide their own strategy, but whites should support them.⁴⁷ Following the Caucus's demand for half of the convention votes, McKissick announced that he did not care what decision the delegates made because he did not think that blacks should form any political alliances with whites at that time.⁴⁸ Both McKissick and Forman placed the black liberation struggle in an international context, and argued that black people should provide the platform and leadership in the *New Politics*.

The demand for 50 per cent of the votes was presented in terms of an "equal voice," even though the blacks would gain effective control of the convention since they would vote in one bloc, whilst the whites would be split. Numerous speakers declared that such control was right, because the white radicals had no power base outside the convention, whereas the blacks could summon up their "17 million ghetto brothers." Bertram Garskoff of Ann Arbor Citizens for Peace declared that "we are just a little tail on the end of a very powerful black panther. And I want to be on that tail – if they'll let me." Offering a fascinating insight into the mind-set of white liberals concerning race, Garskoff went on to explain that once whites had surrendered power, they should "trust the blacks the way you trust children." Perhaps realising the paternalistic overtones of his words, Garskoff added, "now I don't mean to say it like that because these are very sophisticated people and they've taught the whites here a hell of a lot."⁴⁹ Arthur Waskow argued that 1,000 liberals were trying to become good radicals by castrating themselves, and rejected the argument that once given the votes the blacks would co-operate.⁵⁰ Finally, when the whites acquiesced in the early hours of

⁴⁵ Bruckner, "Delegates Open Battle at New Politics Parley," *Los Angeles Times*, 31 Aug. 1967, Part I, p. 8.

⁴⁶ William P. Gerberding and Duane E. Smith, *The Radical Left: The Abuse of Discontent* (Boston, 1970), 43.

⁴⁷ D. J. R. Bruckner, "Third Party Not in Negroes' Interest, CORE Leader Says," *Los Angeles Times*, 2 Sept. 1967, 2–6.

⁴⁸ D. J. R. Bruckner, "Half of New Politics Parley Votes Given to Black Caucus," *Los Angeles Times*, 4 Sept. 1967, 10.

⁴⁹ Blumenthal, "New Politics at Chicago," 274.

⁵⁰ Goodman, "When Black Power Runs the New Left," 125; Blumenthal, "New Politics at Chicago," 274.

Sunday morning by a margin of two to one:

Pandemonium broke loose. The black people broke into hysterical cheering over their victory ... Carlos Russell then received the delegates' credentials for 28,498 votes; he seemed moved almost to the point of tears, and almost the entire body were cheering their heads off. Some sort of unity between black and white, no matter how tenuous, had been achieved. Without this unity, no convention could possibly go forward.⁵¹

William A. Price, writing in the *National Guardian*, declared that "the first major political bond between blacks and whites in 20th Century U.S. – based on equality of partnership – was forged in the grand ballroom of Chicago's Palmer House."⁵²

The reaction to this "capitulation" in the press and from historians was predictably unsympathetic – the whole business was dismissed as the product of white guilt. Historians Zaroulis and Sullivan declared that "in an orgy of self-abnegation that amounted to self-hate – what the Weathermen would later call ridding themselves of 'white skin privilege' – the white majority at the convention thus soured most potential support for the NCNP from the much-maligned (white) liberals throughout the country."⁵³ A *New York Times* editorial explained that "only an unprincipled desire for a mythical unity at all costs" could explain the "flagrant example of organizational surrender to the blackmail of Negro extremists."⁵⁴ Marvin Garson, writing in the *Berkeley Barb* described the Black Caucus' demands as "politically embarrassing ... inarticulate ... and completely humiliating." He claimed that the ensuing debate had been demagogic; and that speeches in favour of adopting the thirteen points and the 50 per cent voting rights were exercises in masochism, with frequently heard statements of white guilt.⁵⁵

IV

Although on the face of it, black demands for half of the convention votes when they constituted only 15 to 20 per cent of the convention delegates, seemed profoundly undemocratic, the issue was a little more complex. In their initial ultimatum, the Black Caucus had complained that the NCNP had not "involved Blacks meaningfully in the initiation, planning or operation"

⁵¹ Karl E. Klare, "New Politics No More?" *Westside News*, 14 Sept. 1967.

⁵² William A. Price, "New Politics of Black & White," *National Guardian*, vol. 19: 49 (9 Sept. 1967).

⁵³ Nancy Zaroulis and Gerald Sullivan, *Who Spoke Up?: American Protest Against the War in Vietnam, 1963–1975* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company Inc., 1984), 128.

⁵⁴ *New York Times*, Sept. 4, 1967, 20.

⁵⁵ Marvin Garson, "The Whites: A Clown Show," part I, *Berkeley Barb*, 15–21 Sept. 1967, 9.

of the convention.⁵⁶ There was certainly a good deal of truth to this claim. The last-minute effort to involve African American activists in the convention, coupled with a parliamentary structure that failed to take account of the post-Black Power political reality, proved catastrophic.

Whilst most white delegates viewed the convention as a paradigm of democracy, with voting weighed according to the size of “active” group membership, to many blacks “it looked like another manipulated vehicle to win white political power with a little help from the black movement.”⁵⁷ The Black Caucus accused the NCNP of “political paternalism,” and declared that “blacks must define for themselves, the role, if any, they are to play at this convention, and the terms on which they will participate with whites.”⁵⁸ Under the criteria constructed by the overwhelmingly white NCNP leadership, a “suburban peace committee with twenty members had participating strength equal to that of a ghetto organizing project with twenty activists,” yet the effects of these two groups on their communities would be very different.⁵⁹ The black position was that they had to be treated as equals. In theory, “a majority of the whites” could have “bound a majority of the blacks to a given course of action against their will.” In hindsight, Arthur Waskow conceded that the blacks had been correct in refusing to “bow to any majority but their own.”⁶⁰ Concern about being “used” by white radicals (and liberals) was not limited to blacks attending the NCNP convention. In July 1967 Robert F. Williams, the militant black freedom fighter then living in exile in China, had warned that the New Left was “seeking hegemony over the black revolution.”⁶¹ Concern over white “co-optation” also seriously impeded attempts to build a multi-racial movement against the Vietnam War. In January 1968, when one of the first black antiwar groups – the National Black Antiwar Antidraft Union (NBAWADU) – was formed, it was for the purpose of building a “secure black base for antiwar activity to *eliminate the possibilities of being absorbed by the white anti-war movement.*”⁶²

⁵⁶ Andrew Kopkind, “An Exchange on ‘Racism,’” *The New York Review of Books*, 7 Dec. 1967, 37, and Ridgeway, “Freak-Out in Chicago,” 10; Black Caucus Notice, NCNP Records, SHSW.

⁵⁷ Arthur I. Waskow, “Notes on Chicago,” 19 Sept. 1967, NCNP Records (unprocessed additions), box 2, NCNP 1967 Convention folder, SHSW.

⁵⁸ Black Caucus Notice, NCNP Records, SHSW.

⁵⁹ Kopkind, “An Exchange on ‘Racism,’” 37.

⁶⁰ Arthur I. Waskow, “Notes on Chicago,” 19 Sept. 1967, NCNP Records (unprocessed additions), box 2, NCNP 1967 Convention folder, SHSW.

⁶¹ Robert F. Williams, “The New Left: Old Ideas in a New Front,” reprinted in *Black Politics: A Journal of Liberation*, 1: 3 (Mar. 1968), 18. Originally published in *The Crusader*, July 1967.

⁶² Student Mobilization Committee Papers, box 1, folder 1: Minutes, 1967–1972, Student Mobilization Committee Position Papers, Gwen Patton, SHSW, my emphasis.

Rather than giving in to demands that resulted in the Black Caucus controlling the convention, a more reasonable solution, proposed at the time but lost amidst the chaos was a bicameral approach. In reality, “the movement” was split on two important axes. The first of these concerned local organising versus electoral politics. The more emotive division, the one that dominated the convention, concerned race. Marvin Garson declared that “we simply aren’t ready for any organic unit ... the only true unity must be an alliance giving each wing of the movement a veto over any proposals for joint action in areas of mutual concern, and allowing each wing to formulate and carry out its own programs whenever it feels necessary to do so.”⁶³ Arthur Waskow shared this view, and tried to persuade the convention to adopt it.⁶⁴ However, this effort was too late. There were two movements in Chicago – one white, and one black. If this political reality had been acknowledged earlier then appropriate arrangements might have been possible. That was not the case, and once the black delegates made their demands, any attempt by the whites to dilute or modify them appeared to be an attempt to control the black movement. By exposing its weaknesses in such a public manner, NCNP opened itself up to massive criticism, which was, at least partly, unwarranted and avoidable.

In trying to be too democratic, NCNP ended up being accused of exploiting the black movement. Whilst there was some truth in this, it is hard to be positive about the acrimonious and bitter debate, fuelled by a mixture of guilt, hypocrisy and radical posturing, that ensued. From the pages of the *Village Voice*, June Greenleaf mourned the loss of peaceful integration as a movement ideal; and she lambasted the hypocritical nature of the convention, with “whites masquerading as either poor or black, blacks posing as revolutionaries or as arrogant whites, conservatives pretending to be communists, women feigning to be oppressed, and liberals pretending not to be there at all.” The scene reminded her of old Communist Party gatherings where members looked for a *Worker* before whom to genuflect, only in 1967 the *Worker* had become the *Black*. David Burner has argued that the convention is a perfect example of the embryonic political correctness

⁶³ Marvin Garson, “The Whites: A Clown Show,” part II, *Berkeley Barb*, 22–28 Sept. 1967, 8.

⁶⁴ Arthur Waskow, letter to the Editor, *New York Review of Books*, 23 Nov. 1967. *Liberation* editor Sidney Lens, who himself favoured a third ticket, believed that the only sustainable structure for the NCNP was one which comprised three (or four) autonomous bodies – encompassing the community organizers, electoral activists, blacks, and perhaps the anti-war National Mobilization – with a liaison committee for raising money, doing research and coordinating. See Sidney Lens, “The New Politics Convention: Confusion and Promise,” *New Politics*, 6: 1 (Winter 1967), 12.

that he argues formed part of the “radical experience” at the end of the sixties.⁶⁵

When the plenary reconvened following the acceptance of black demands for 50 per cent of the convention votes, the Black Caucus was expected to endorse a national third ticket for 1968 – which many blacks apparently favoured.⁶⁶ However, in a “surge of fellow-feeling,” the Caucus submitted a proposal that supported an earlier compromise – allowing third tickets where there was local support, but which left the primary focus on community organising.⁶⁷ Nevertheless, the debates over the black demands had left the whites drained and dispirited. There was a comparatively short debate on tactics for 1968 “and beyond,” and peace tickets were only expected in six or seven states. This constituted a clear victory for the white community organisers who feared that a national campaign would detract from their efforts to build a genuinely revolutionary movement at the grass-roots level. It disappointed many delegates from moderate peace groups who had thought that a national third party with black support could hold the balance of power in 1968.⁶⁸

In the short time found to discuss the *New Politics*, the delegates did manage to pass resolutions urging immediate withdrawal from Vietnam, supporting draft resistance, the struggle of Mexican Americans and the poor of Appalachia, and backing Adam Clayton Powell; plans were also made for that October’s demonstration at the Pentagon. However, most of the convention had been spent arguing about the role of blacks.⁶⁹ The remaining substantive problems were left in the hands of a 26-man steering committee, which was to continue to co-ordinate *New Politics* activities through the NCNP. This new board was split into two sections – one to concentrate on community organising, the other to promote candidates in elections. The board also had the authority to call another convention in 1968 to consider nominating a third-party ticket.⁷⁰ Unsurprisingly, no such convention took place. In fact, the NCNP national office finally closed in April 1968 due

⁶⁵ June Greenleaf, “Static on the Left: Politics of Masquerade,” *The Village Voice*, 12 Oct. 1967, 5, David Burner, *Making Peace With The 60s* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996), 166.

⁶⁶ Lens, “The New Politics Convention: Confusion and Promise,” 5.

⁶⁷ Adler, “Letter From The Palmer House,” 87.

⁶⁸ Blumenthal, “New Politics at Chicago,” 275.

⁶⁹ Ridgeway, “Freak-Out in Chicago,” 12.

⁷⁰ D. J. R. Bruckner, “Board to Promote New Politics Candidates in Elections Named,” *Los Angeles Times*, 5 Sept. 1967, 2.

to severe financial problems caused mainly by the unfavourable publicity generated by the convention.⁷¹

At the end of the traumatic weekend some delegates, both black and white, felt that the convention had laid the groundwork for a *New Politics* in America – not all believed that the NCNP was necessarily a spent force.⁷² Perhaps the greatest achievement of the event was that no major group had walked out – “the coalition did not quite jell at the Palmer House, but it didn’t fly apart either. It can be built,” wrote Sidney Lens.⁷³ Most delegates admitted that the proceedings had been farcical, but the “handout” to the Black Caucus was a symbol, a necessary gesture of goodwill for establishing two wings of the political movement.⁷⁴ However, many blacks wondered why they had chosen to ally with a white group that lacked both financial power and popular support.⁷⁵ CORE’s Roy Innis was blunt: “why should I negotiate with the whites here? They’ve got nothing to deliver. I’d rather bargain with the power structure.”⁷⁶

V

The problems with the NCNP convention were partly rooted in the internal tension within the organisation itself. Lacking a clear programme or ideological position, the convention brought together disparate groups from varying ends of the left-of-centre political spectrum. Rather than focusing on the one issue that more or less united the delegates, the war in Vietnam, the convention became an amorphous gathering of “the movement” – “the NCNP convention failed because failure was built into the attempt.” The movement was too heterogeneous and socially diverse, and contained too many differing political perspectives, to agree on a single multi-issue programme.⁷⁷ For example, it proved impossible for the radical left to collectively

⁷¹ 10 Apr. 1968, memo to NCNP board from William F. Pepper, Donna Allen Papers, box 2 folder 4, SHSW. The organisation was about \$20,000 in debt.

⁷² Contrast, for example, the thoughts of C. Clark Kissinger and Todd Gitlin with Peter Weiss, Maurice Zeitlin, Carlos Russell and Carlton B. Goodlett in “Symposium: Chicago’s ‘Black Caucus,’” *Ramparts* 6: 4 (Nov. 1967), 99–114; and the editorial in *The Nation*, 25 Sept. 1967, 261, felt that NCNP would find a way to participate effectively in political campaigns. The Peace and Freedom Party – formed partially as a result of the NCNP convention – can be counted as a small success and continuation of the New Politics movement.

⁷³ Sidney Lens, “Some Thoughts on the NCNP Conference,” Paul Booth Papers, box 1 folder 13, SHSW. ⁷⁴ Ridgeway, “Freak Out in Chicago,” 12.

⁷⁵ Blumenthal, “New Politics at Chicago,” 275. ⁷⁶ Weisbrot, *Freedom Bound*, 256.

⁷⁷ Fred Halstead, *Out Now! A Participant’s Account of the American Movement Against the Vietnam War* (New York: Monad Press, 1978), 320.

deal satisfactorily with the problem of prioritising issues, as the question of women's liberation at the convention revealed. There were just too many competing agendas.⁷⁸ Moreover, the organisers and paymasters of the NCNP wanted something different from many of the delegates. William Pepper had advocated a King-Spock ticket at the Spring Mobilization for Peace in April 1967, but many of the delegates favoured community organising. Although the convention has been seen as a failure because the attempt to form a political party or run a third ticket did not succeed, the fact that this was not necessarily the central aim has frequently been overlooked. C. Clark Kissinger wrote afterwards that the original concept of a "small working conference of New Politics organizations concerned with strategies for local electoral insurgency" was fine, but once "presidential fever" set in it snowballed out of control and the whole movement was invited.⁷⁹ Inviting the entire movement, whose constituent groups had competing priorities and differing tactical perspectives, was a recipe for disaster. Convention delegates Henry Etzkowitz and Gerald Schatlander, for example, complained that the "old-line radicals" were so doctrinaire that they were unable to conceive of working for anything other than a third ticket or party, whilst the new-line radicals of, for example, SDS, were so alienated from mainstream politics that they rejected electoral campaigning of any kind. Thus the convention proved its irrelevance to the realities of power in American life.⁸⁰ As one (black) member of the California Democratic Council explained, "the whole thing has been a nightmare to me ... No revolution has ever succeeded without the middle class and the professionals."⁸¹

The convention revealed that "the movement" was too large and diverse to organise anything other than massive street demonstrations at the national

⁷⁸ The convention offers an insight into both the problems involved in trying to decide which issues to place importance on, and the sexism that pervaded the New Left. Sara Evans has explained how the refusal of the convention to take the issue of women's liberation seriously helped to spawn the feminist movement. See Sara Evans, *Personal Politics: The Roots of Women's Liberation in the Civil Rights Movement and the New Left* (New York: Vintage Books, 1980), 197–99.

⁷⁹ "Symposium: Chicago's 'Black Caucus,'" 101.
⁸⁰ *New York Times*, 23 Sept. 1967, 30; as Andrew Young (an original signer of the "Call to the Convention") put it in a conversation with Martin Luther King and Hosea Williams on the Black Caucus at Chicago, "These cats don't seem to know the country has taken a swing to the right." See Adam Fairclough, *To Redeem the Soul of America: The Southern Christian Leadership Conference and Martin Luther King, Jr.* (Athens and London: The University of Georgia Press, 1987), 344; Robert Scheer explained that contempt for the middle class, born of self-contempt, would simply cut whites off from their political constituency – until the radicals could reach "normal America," he said, "we're not going to develop a base and we're going to be useless," Blumenthal, "New Politics at Chicago," 276.

⁸¹ Zaroulis, *Who Spoke Up?*, 129.

level. It would be left to Allard Lowenstein to co-ordinate an effective mainstream political opposition to the war. There was not enough area of agreement concerning areas other than Vietnam on which to build a successful multi-issue radical movement. Black–white hostility compounded the differences, but the “unruly diversity of New Left groups stretched the very notion of coalition beyond workable bounds.”⁸² In 1967 there were two distinct branches of the movement – with separate interests. The white branch was obsessed with Vietnam, American imperialism and student affairs; whilst the black branch was concerned with destroying a culture of oppression and creating a new kind of identity for African Americans – a job that had to be done by blacks. Ironically, there was a need to treat the two wings of the movement as “separate but equal,” in a bicameral approach.⁸³

The convention debates over the demands made by the Black Caucus offer a fascinating insight into the problems of black–white relations in late sixties America. Certainly it was becoming impossible for liberal whites to work with militant blacks. It is certainly the case that white guilt and paternalism provided some of the motivation behind the decision of the white delegates to accept the black demands. Paul Booth acknowledged that most “radicals” at the convention were “liberals trying to show they’re different from their parents, or the people back home.”⁸⁴ Charles V. Hamilton condemned the motives of guilt that lay behind the votes in favour of the black demands. In defining Black Power, Hamilton acknowledged that whites would be needed for coalition, but that they had to realise that blacks were going to “insist on an equitable distribution of *decision making power*,” since anything less would serve only to perpetuate a “welfare mentality.” However, such an equitable distribution had to result from “a conviction that it is a matter of mutual self-interest, not from the feelings of guilt and altruism that were evident at the” convention.⁸⁵

The Black Caucus did not want to “run the movement,” but to have black radicals recognised for what they were: the “most powerful and most radical motive force in the US.”⁸⁶ If the convention had been structured differently then there would have been no need for the resolutions, but as it was, “yes”

⁸² Weisbrot, *Freedom Bound*, 256.

⁸³ Writing in the *Village Voice*, 28 Sept. 1967, 9–10, Nat Hentoff wrote that “... the Chicago Conference was extremely useful because what happened there showed with bizarre clarity that organic unity can’t be wished or traded into being.”

⁸⁴ Blumenthal, “New Politics At Chicago,” 275.

⁸⁵ Charles V. Hamilton, “An Advocate of Black Power Defines It,” in August Meier and Elliot Rudwick, *Black Protest in the Sixties* (Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1970), 162.

⁸⁶ Kopkind, “An Exchange on ‘Racism,’” 38.

votes for the Caucus' demands were symbols of trust. This point seems to be borne out by the fact that, once the decision had been made for blacks and whites to be treated as "equals" in the convention, the Caucus articulated sensible proposals, accepted a compromise political strategy for 1968 and appeared prepared to co-operate. Following the decision to give the Black Caucus 50 per cent of the convention votes, the whites were treated with "ostentatious kindness ... the blacks seemed to remove their fearsome bearded masks of hatred."⁸⁷ This reasonableness, overlooked by scholars, was partly owing to the fact that many of the most militant African Americans had left the convention, but it also reflected the more complex nature of the debate – once some form of equality was achieved, a degree of co-operation was possible. It would, however, be a mistake to overestimate the willingness for meaningful co-operation. During the convention, the Caucus had shown almost no desire to negotiate, stifling dissent even within its own ranks.⁸⁸ Black radicals also ignored warnings that many of their demands would damage "the movement." Robert Weisbrot has concluded that the most forceful black critics of the Vietnam War, who had at one point been "ardently courted" by white radicals, had "burned their bridgeheads to the New Left." He concluded that racial animosity caused the "grandly conceived" coalition of black and white radicals to "emerge stillborn."⁸⁹

For those who had hoped for a "grand coalition" of antiwar liberals, radicals and African Americans, that would precipitate a radical political reconstruction of the United States, the NCNP convention was a cause for despair, leading one journalist to write: "we know now that there is not thunder, but only static on the left."⁹⁰ The convention debates offer an important insight into the state of race relations in late sixties America; and the reluctance of the delegates to engage with the traditional political process is a reflection of the depth of disillusionment that existed amongst America's political youth, at least on the Left. The events that took place at the Palmer House in the summer of 1967 help to show how the radical movement of the 1960s was seriously weakened by racial divisions. It is true that the movement was also divided over tactics – principally over whether to work within the two-party system, create a new party or concentrate on building local insurgencies; and radicals were increasingly viewing liberals as enemies, rather than allies. Whilst these problems would undoubtedly have proved hard to

⁸⁷ Blumenthal, "New Politics at Chicago," 275.

⁸⁸ When James Bevel proposed speaking against the resolution condemning the "imperialist Zionist war" some black militants threatened to kill him – see Fairclough, *To Redeem the Soul of America*, 344.

⁸⁹ Weisbrot, *Freedom Bound*, 256.

⁹⁰ Greenleaf, "Static on the Left ...," 18.

overcome, the NCNP convention shows how the issue of race dominated the delegates' deliberations, ultimately destroyed the nascent coalition, and helped produce a climate in which it proved impossible to properly consider tactical issues, or, indeed, the wider goals of the movement itself. It is, perhaps, an irony that the white radical movement, which had been largely inspired by the civil rights struggles of the early 1960s, found itself, by 1967, unable to work effectively with its African American counterpart. In many ways the NCNP convention augured the demise of a New Left which was increasingly alienated from mainstream politics, contemptuous of white liberals and estranged from, whilst simultaneously attracted to, Black Power.