Matt Gleason - Period _ -1/9/05

Straight South

Dick Atlee's Journey into the Civil Rights Movement

Dick Atlee was a college student at the University of Chicago in the 1960's. He was recruited by the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and the Council of Federated Organizations (COFO) to do civil rights work in the South. In 1964 and 1965, he traveled to the cities of Biloxi and Columbia, Mississippi to work on black voter registration projects and to protest the lack of service for blacks at local businesses.

In Mississippi in the 1960's, the number of registered black voters was pathetic. In 1962, only 6.7 percent of eligible blacks in Mississippi were registered to vote. SNCC and COFO organized voter registration campaigns to increase this number, in hopes of giving blacks more of an influence in state and national elections.

Q: What in your own upbringing would drive you to work in Mississippi for black voting rights?

A: Dick said that being brought up in a family on the "radical side of liberal" was certainly influential in his decision to join the civil rights movement in Mississippi. "I was very sensitized to the McCarthy era. Many members of my family were pilloried as communists. The American Civil Liberties Union, which was designed to protect us from these things, caved in and began to call friends and family members communists." He himself was labeled as a communist at a young age by his peers. He cited his distrust for the American "power structure" as one of his reasons for going to Mississippi to help blacks that were victims of the abuse of the same corrupt system. He also remembers that the murders of civil rights activists James Chaney, Andy Goodman, and Michael Svhwerner in Neshoba County Mississippi in 1964 inspired his work there.

Q: What did your family think of you going to the South to work for black rights?

A: Dick said that he thought his family was happy with his decision. They were proud of the work he was doing in Mississippi. Politically, they were very liberal, and they supported the civil rights movement. "I certainly felt that I was living up to the ideals of my family. However this was never a motive for my work there." He explained that although the work coincided with his family's beliefs he went entirely on his own accord.

Q: Where did you get the inspiration to do this work in the South? Was there any leader, black or white, who made an impact on you?

A: As a student at the University of Chicago, "I was still very out of it. I was not aware of the Mississippi situation. Then SNCC held meetings on the campus in October of 1964." The meetings were held with the purpose of recruiting students to join the campaign for black voter registration in the South. Dick said that the leaders were very inspirational and opened his eyes to an unjust situation in which fear and the governmental power structure were denying blacks their rights as citizens.

Q: What was the purpose of your voter registration project and what were the limitations placed on black voters?

A: Dick explained that the voter registration work done in the fall of 1964 in Biloxi, Mississippi was in preparation for the 1964 presidential election between Barry Goldwater and Lyndon Johnson. He said that the work of SNCC and COFO was also to generate support for the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party, a party pursuing black rights that was endorsed by SNCC. Dick complained about how the rules in Mississippi were geared to discourage black voters. "Voters had to take a literacy test, which was just insane. Whites were asked their mother's name, and blacks were asked to recite the entire Constitution. In some places, I think it was only four tenths of a percent of blacks who were registered to vote. Our project was all about challenging the legitimacy of the election."

Q: What types of people were you working with? Have you stayed in touch with any of them?
A: Dick worked under a black project leader named Curtis. Dick also had two female co-workers, a college student and a graduate student, and a black man from Louisiana. He admitted that he never kept in touch with any of the other civil rights workers for very long after the project. He did have a tremendous respect for Curtis. "The first leader that I had in Biloxi was a drunk womanizer…Curtis was different…He was quiet, he really had his head screwed on right about the whole situation." He felt that Curtis hadn't let the drugs and sex associated with the 1960's weigh him down and that he took his job very seriously.

Q: How did southern blacks view your work? Were they appreciative?
A: Dick stressed that it is impossible to group all blacks in America as a whole. He said that the leaders from SNCC were very grateful for the help from northern whites. The majority, though, seemed somewhat resentful for their dependence on help from the white students. "They often said that we should have been working back in the North. The problems weren't as visible in the North, but there was definitely a lot of covert racism going on." He remembered that most blacks he met were very scared. "When we went on our rounds to register voters, a lot of times they would open the door, see us and slam it on us…whites meant trouble for them…they seemed either distantly cordial or indifferent to us. Others were just frightened."

Q: What was the reaction of whites in Mississippi to the work you were doing? Was it sympathetic or hostile?
A: As with blacks, Dick enforced that whites couldn't be grouped as one. However, he said that many white he encountered in Mississippi did not sympathize with the work he was doing there. "Upper class whites wouldn't get involved, and they hated us for giving Mississippi a bad name. They thought of us simply as 'outside agitators.'" He felt that the government was intentionally influencing feelings of hostility towards blacks and civil rights workers. "The power structure was orchestrated so that the press, everything was oriented towards the dehumanization of blacks and the demonizing of whites that helped them." Reminiscing about the violent hostility of whites, he recounted the story of how in a picket line in front of a store in Columbia, Mississippi in 1965, he had had a heated exchange with some unfamiliar white men. He described the men as "white trash," poor rural residents who began yelling obscenities at him. After being arrested for blocking the sidewalk, Dick was taken to jail and put in a cell with the same group of men. They beat him for hours until he was finally released. In another instance, a group of whites surrounded the house where Dick and three co-workers were living. They bombed the front of the house with homemade chemical incendiaries. Dick and the others lay on the kitchen floor at the rear of the house for minutes, while shotgun rounds were fired continuously through windows and walls.

Q: What types of protest did you witness or participate in? Was it entirely nonviolent resistance or did you see any violent protests?
A: In 1965, Dick's work had shifted from voter registration to community protest organization and picketing local businesses in Columbia that discriminated against blacks. The picket lines were peaceful, and

violence was never used as a form of protest. However, the protests often inspired ugly, violent resistance from local whites. In a few cases, scuffles between civil rights workers and white opponents escalated into dangerous conflict. "On a whim, we decided to make trouble to force the hand of the city government on us. We tried to get service at a redneck bar downtown. It was very unpleasant going in. The situation turned immediately hostile…We were refused service and walked out. Cars were waiting for us, and we made a mad dash." Some of the patrons ran out of the bar to their trucks where they grabbed guns and began to chase the group of protesters. "The guy driving refused to be involved directly in the protests. He was in his late 20's, and he knew every street and alley in Columbia. He took off telling us to get on the floor. We heard shooting from the trucks behind us, but we couldn't tell how close the shots were. The driver took us flying down streets, two wheels around corners. We lost the rednecks and eventually he dropped us off at our house…Looking back, it was a situation that was humorously absurd, yet deadly scary."

Q: Do you think that the work you did in Mississippi made much of a difference in the overall civil rights movement?

A: Dick answered by making an analogy to nature, saying, "A drop of water on the beach doesn't have much of an effect on the rocks. But the waves on the beach smooth out the rock over time. If it wasn't for all the drops together the rocks would still be jagged." This was the way that his work had an effect in supporting the progression of black rights. While he may have had little impact personally on the movement, the combined effect of registration workers and protesters was profound. "More than anything it raised attention…it made the racism so blatant." He believes that the work of SNCC and COFO ultimately led to the signing of the Civil Rights Act, a major step forward in the civil rights movement.

Q: How did your experiences in Mississippi during the 1960's influence your thinking about American society and American government?

A: Dick felt that his experiences in the 1960's made him more aware of the hypocrisy of government. He saw the way that a corrupt government used an unfair power structure to persecute a minority. His distrust for the FBI and its prejudiced leaders, begun in his childhood with the prosecution of suspected communists, was strengthened by its activities under the "notoriously anti-black" J. Edgar Hoover. "I have *always* viewed the FBI as my enemy…They are used by the government to disrupt movements transforming society." He stressed that the main point of the 1960's, beneath the drugs and sex, was that "people woke up to the U.S. government." Recent controversy over the Patriot Act and Attorney General nominee Alberto Gonzalez has renewed this feeling for Dick. As was true in the 1960's, he believes that we are now awakening to see the "cracks" in our government. "We live in a time when law enforcement has at its beck and call the USA Patriot Act, and as its head a man who believes that torture is acceptable when the ends demand it, and internationally agreed-upon norms are to be dispensed with when deemed desirable. It's different from the situation in Mississippi forty years ago only in degree. It was a time to fear then. It is a time to fear now."

The interview with Dick Atlee provided vivid images and unique insight into the time period of the 1960's and the movement for black voting rights. His articulate thoughts and answers portrayed a clear purpose. Dick provided an important message about one person's impact as a part of a greater solution. He also linked his experience in the civil rights movement to current struggles over civil liberties in this country.

[For the complete set of my Mississippi 1964-65 letters,
see http://dickatlee.com/issues/mississippi]