

# On Stokley Carmichael

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Stokley Carmichael was one of the most renowned militant leaders of the late 1960's civil rights movement. His message of black power, black nationalism and pan-africanism catapulted him into the role as one of the most publicized black revolutionaries. Carmichael learned much from his early and very eventful involvement in the civil rights movement. He quickly moved to the forefront as a black power activist. Although he did not originate the term, black power, and although he shares leadership of the black power thrust with Congressman Adam Clayton Powell and Floyd McKissick of CORE, Carmichael rapidly moved to center stage of a raging controversy that severed friendships, split civil rights organizations and pushed black and white Americans to a new stage in their age old confrontation. No other man, with the possible exception of Martin Luther King, Jr. rose so quickly so fast. No other man sparked such a great tide, simultaneously, of hope, fear, anger and public concern.

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Carmichael is an American by the fact of his mother's citizenship. He was born June 29, 1941 in Port-au-Spain, Trinidad. He spent the first eleven years of his life on the island where the black majority held many important posts. Real control in Trinidad was in the hands of whites, but the dreams of youth are shaped by what they can see and what Stokely Carmichael could see was black policemen, judges and merchants. When in 1952, he followed his family to Harlem, he was struck by the visual contrast. Although Harlem was a black community, white men were obviously in charge, and they flaunted it. It may be that this contrast set the mold of his thinking.

In 1952 Carmichael settled down for a short while in New York in a three room apartment, occupied by nine people. For a time, Carmichael drifted from aunt to aunt in Harlem where he was deeply involved in gang activities. Later after much hard work Carmichael's parents (his father was a

cabdriver and a carpenter and his mother was a maid) succeeded in buying a house in a "good" (white) Bronx neighborhood. As it turned out, the "good" white boys of the Bronx were committing more crimes than his Harlem friends. He became immersed in the all-white gang's criminal activities.

After his father's death, he became very interested in books. At the elite Bronx High School of Science he made excellent grades and was invited into the integrated intellectual groups of New York. While Carmichael was senior at Bronx High, the sit-in era exploded. A few weeks later, Carmichael was picketing Woolworth's. He also went down South to see the struggle firsthand. He was so fascinated by what he saw that he turned down scholarships to several white universities in order to go to Howard University, where he thought he could keep in touch with the movement. At Howard, Carmichael majored in philosophy. After graduating in June, 1964, Carmichael turned



down a chance for further study and became a full-time rebel.

Carmichael defines racism as "the predication of decisions and policies on considerations of race for the purpose of subordinating a racial group and maintaining control over that group." In a theoretical sense, Carmichael continued, "Black power is the massed political, economic, emotional and physical strength of the black community exercised in the interest of the total community and not in the interest of the Democratic party, the Republican party, the Negro middle-class or the individual designated to represent the black community." The foundation of the Carmichael doctrine is political and economic power. But he does not disavow "the power to disrupt" if the legitimate and constitutional rights of black people are violated. This concept is rooted in a new and enlarged vision of the black community which Carmichael defines not by the black elite but by its largest part, the overwhelming majority of poor sharecroppers and slum-dwellers of the South and North. What he proposes is a new social field in which the black community would

be the "focus of black power" and in which all individuals claiming to represent that community would have to seek their power from and recognize their dependence on the power blocks inside that community. Carmichael stressed that he was talking about power and control and not numerical representation. He feels the powerless people acquire power by organizing, by pooling their resources and by moving to find out just how strong they really are.

He also had very strong feelings and ideas about integration. He believed wholeheartedly that integration obscures "the real problem which is the need for a power base in the black community." He contended that integration as presently defined heightens the sense of inferiority of black people. At a deeper level, Carmichael was raising the whole question of the mainstream and he also questioned the possibility of any meaningful relationship with people who presumed to define what integration was and to designate who could be integrated. "For integration to be successful today a black man ought to be." What Carmichael was saying is that the so-called mainstream