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CORE:

THE SHOCK TROOPS OF THE NEGRO REVOLT

whip up controversy with militant tactics that call for human barricades and chained pickets.

By Martin Mayer

New York CORE members, wearing "Freedom Now" signs, have themselves chained outside a courthouse.

"What do you want?" cried the young man with the shining brown face, standing at the microphone on the postage-stamp stage in Kansas City's Municipal Auditorium; and the 400 people in the hall shouted, "FREEDOM!"

"Let me hear that again," said the young man. "What do you want?"

"FREEDOM!"

"When do you want it?"

"NOW!" The shout rocked the building.

The young man grinned. "Sounds like CORE people," he said.

It did, and it was. The occasion was a lull in the proceedings of this year's CORE convention. Like all conventions, this one felt a need for assertions of group solidarity, the singing of songs and the chanting of slogans. For CORE members, however, such assertions are central, not peripheral, to the business at hand; and a meeting comes alive when they occur. The basic gesture is the interracial line of crossed arms and clasped hands, the group together in a single gigantic handshake; and the song that accompanies it is *We Shall Overcome*. "CORE," says its general counsel, Carl Rachlin, who has been working with radical causes for a generation, "is a very romantic movement."

Now that CORE has survived the twin shocks of summer riots and the Goldwater nomination, the organization's songs and gestures will again be part of the mid-century American street scene. There may not be so many picket lines as before—"The demonstration," says Gordon Carey of CORE's national headquarters, "can't be the basic tactic for desegregating a school system"—but the commitment is still to "nonviolent direct action," a capacious bag that holds many different tactics.

The pattern was set by the first demonstration in 1942, when a group led by a white University of Chicago divinity student named George Houser descended upon a small restaurant near the university, which had refused to serve Negroes. "We really bollixed that place for a day," says Houser, who was CORE's unpaid national director from 1943 to 1955, and is now executive director of the American Committee on Africa. "It was a small place, and when we sat at the tables we filled all the seats. Finally, the lady who owned it broke down and served us."

Next came a ring of hands blocking access to the box office of a segregated roller-skating rink (ironically called White City); and for this demonstration the Chicago group formed a permanent organization and named it the Congress of Racial Equality.

Such sit-ins and barricades show exactly what is meant by "nonviolent direct action": You do something that drastically inconveniences people, forcing them either to negotiate with you or to be violent against you. The tactic was inspired by the sit-down strikes of the 1930's and by Gandhi's "passive resistance" to British rule; CORE's Chicago founders had been active in the "Quit India" movement.

CORE's "nonviolence" has sometimes taken on a character which Gandhi might have had trouble recognizing. In San Francisco, a CORE group has attacked a chain of supermarkets by loading shopping carts with groceries, then dumping them on the

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'We're more militant than Malcolm X,' says Farmer. 'We're activists.'

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floor around the cashiers' tables. In St. Louis, pickets have blocked access to a bank that had refused to hire Negroes. In Cleveland, CORE members have thrown themselves in front of a bulldozer working on the site for what would be a segregated school; one of them, a young white clergyman, was killed when the driver backed the bulldozer away, not knowing someone was behind him. In New York, CORE members have dumped garbage in the roadway to block a major bridge at rush hour, chained themselves to construction cranes, and jammed the stairs to a union office to keep the officers from going in or out. It was Brooklyn CORE that tried unsuccessfully to tie up traffic on the roads leading to the World's Fair; and it was a congeries of CORE chapters that briefly barricaded the doors to both national political conventions.

Such tactics are possible only in the North, where public opinion is vaguely sympathetic to civil-rights groups and public authority is only mildly hostile. Half of CORE's $900,000 annual budget is spent in the South, and more than half its 40-odd paid "field staff" are there, setting up CORE's own voter-registration and desegregation drives in Louisiana, operating in uneasy alliance with the eager youngsters of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee in Mississippi, working in somewhat happier collaboration with Martin Luther King's Southern Christian Leadership Council in Florida. The three young men murdered in Mississippi were CORE workers, but two of them were from the North, and CORE remains essentially a northern movement. Of the 117 CORE chapters recognized at the national convention, only 24 (mostly very small) are in the Confederate States, where half the Negro Americans still live. An even more striking symbol of the movement's northern orientation is the fact that about two fifths of the members are white; until a couple of years ago, CORE was more than half white. "When I got involved in 1959," says Alan Gartner, a Newton, Mass., schoolteacher who is chairman of Boston CORE and treasurer of the national organization, "Boston was a *de facto* segregated chapter. There were almost no Negroes in it."

A CORE activist forces policewomen to arrest her during a sit-in that blocked trucks from entering a construction site in Brooklyn.

Boston CORE, which is now about three fifths Negro, provides an unusually clear example of the sort of thing a hundred people can accomplish in a city of 700,000, using CORE techniques. "We were sitting around one night in the summer of '63," Gartner recalls, "and one of our people said, 'There aren't any Negroes in the banks.' None of us could think of any time we'd seen a Negro working in a bank, except maybe sweeping floors. First, we surveyed Roxbury, the ghetto, and there were none. Well, if there were none there. . . .

"Our people went to each branch of each bank at least three different days at three different hours. Then we went to the vice presidents in charge of personnel, asked, 'What's your procedure for hiring people? How many Negroes are there in your banks?' We sent Negroes to test the procedures, and they didn't get jobs.

"Then we went to see the presidents of the banks. I think they were genuinely shocked—there really was no policy. The personnel people saw no Negroes, and assumed there *was* a policy.

"We urged not just equal treatment but aggressive recruiting. We've gone through three stages on this employment thing. We used to demand that they stop discrimination. Then we'd say, 'If we sent you a good Negro, will you hire him?' Now we place the burden on the employer—he's in the hiring business, and we're not."

One major bank was reluctant to grant CORE's demands. "We asked for seventy-five jobs in sixty days," Gartner recalls. "First they wouldn't give us a racial count. Then they asked for 120 days, and nothing happened. We took the case to the streets—we picketed their Roxbury branch, then the main office. It was a most un-Bostonian thing to do. We're very lucky in Boston—a picket line still gets a front-page story.

"We called it off on their agreement to hire new personnel at all entry levels at a rate of about one third Negro. We feel they've been acting in good faith. And they've made it socially acceptable in Boston to do business with civil-rights groups."

Most CORE chapters, though their first claim for themselves is always the number of new jobs they have won for Negroes, are divided about how much social acceptability they want. Members are pleased when national director James Farmer is invited to the White House; they are also pleased when he goes to jail. Progress has usually been made by negotiations rather than by demonstrations (if only because demonstrations can reveal the intrinsic weakness of an organization with fewer than 100,000 members nationally, only about 10,000 of them really active in the movement); but the demonstrations are what set CORE off from the N.A.A.C.P. and the Urban League, which also negotiate for the same objectives. Acceptance of the risks of assault and imprisonment permits CORE members to hoot at the N.A.A.C.P. as "black bourgeoisie," and backs up Farmer's claim that "CORE is the hard-cutting