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Run?

THIS WINTER VIKING PRESS will publish twenty-eight-year-old Paul Cowan's account of his disillusioning trip through such major institutions of American liberalism as Harvard University, the civil rights movement and the Peace Corps. Shortly before going to press, RAMPARTS received this note from the author:

"Thanks to his role in launching the McCarthy campaign, Al Lowenstein has become a nationally important politician. Because I am in complete sympathy with his present objective—to make sure that the Democratic Party runs its convention democratically—I have been wondering whether or not to publish an article that is critical of him. Besides, some friends tell me that Lowenstein has changed during the past few years, that he is much more flexible now than he was in 1964. Personally, I am not convinced of that. In late June, I attended the Coalition for an Open Convention which he organized (and at which he swayed delegates from vowing not to support Humphrey). I came away with the impression that he still had more faith in the process of manipulation—if *he* is doing the manipulating—than in the wisdom of the people.

"The piece is not meant as an attack. But the political situation we are in now is too complex and too dangerous to permit oversights and lies. There are hundreds of disputes between people who might have been allies, and these differences have to be understood. They are not gossip but history—the real, human substance of tactics, of strategies, even of ideologies."

[I. OF LOVE AND AL]

THROUGHOUT THE MISSISSIPPI SUMMER PROJECT of 1964, one hope which inspired northern white volunteers like me was that we could sustain a lasting alliance with the black people with whom we worked. Together, we believed then, young whites and blacks could redeem America. The Summer Project seemed to us a turning point in the country's history. We were an army of love, and if we could integrate Mississippi we would have seized hate's

capital. But if we were repulsed, racism would be strengthened everywhere.

In those days Al Lowenstein seemed to be almost as much an embodiment of that belief as Bob Moses, the northern black school teacher who had dedicated three dangerous years to organizing Mississippi Negroes. Al had been one of the very first white people to join with Moses. He had taken great risks to serve the movement as a lawyer and gained the respect of many of the black organizers who knew him. His considerable political sophistication, it seemed, could combine with

the movement's moral fervor to produce a force that would rapidly transform Mississippi.

It was clear to both Moses and Lowenstein that political sophistication was the missing ingredient in the Southern civil rights struggle. They felt that a small movement full of courage and charisma but totally isolated from power in America would never force the segregationists to make substantial changes. For years the few black people who worked with SNCC in the South had been trying to awaken the conscience of the north by exposing themselves to constant physical danger. They hoped that the newspaper stories and the television films showing rabid white men beating nonviolent Negroes would finally force the country to confront itself. But very little had actually happened. By 1963, America's moral nerve still seemed to be dead. The only way it might be restored, Al and Bob agreed, was by white northerners, via the proxy of their children, coming to Mississippi and experiencing racism themselves.

Allard devised the political strategy that would incorporate them. He conceived the Freedom Democratic Party and organized its first campaign, designed to attract attention to the fact that Negroes in Mississippi did not even possess the right to vote. But even then there was a subtle difference between his and Bob's definition of political strategy. To Al, the Freedom Democratic Party represented a temporary device as much as a permanent organization. It would provide a reason for the students to come South; it would attract support in white Washington as well as in black Mississippi, and it might eventually provide the integrationists with enough leverage to reform the regular state party. But to Moses those were incidental considerations. He saw the FDP primarily as an organization for local people, a base on which they—not northern college students or liberal white intellectuals—could build power of their own.

The first FDP campaign was organized in November of 1963, to support Aaron Henry's candidacy for governor. Lowenstein had excellent connections at Stanford and Yale, and from those colleges alone hundreds of student volunteers came to spend two weeks in Mississippi, working alongside local organizers. They were chased by sheriffs, jailed and beaten just as the black activists were. Soon their stories had spread along the campus grapevine throughout the country. By the next summer hundreds of students were journeying South.

Lowenstein and Moses, architects of this achievement, seemed to complement each other perfectly. Al's visionary belief in the inherent decency of America's young people was as intense as Bob's love of the dispossessed Mississippi Negro. Allard, in his mid-thirties, was old enough to remember the Roosevelt years vividly, and he now seemed the medium by which the generous idealism of that period had been carried through the decades. When the summer began Lowenstein seemed to be the white Bob Moses—or, as many of the white students Al had recruited saw it, Bob was the black Allard Lowenstein.

It was in the late 1930's—years before the present generation of students, his main constituency, was even born—that Al developed the creed that would guide him through a lifetime of intense political activity. By the age of ten he was following the Spanish Civil War with the same rapt attention to detail that his contemporaries must have been devoting to major league baseball. He was, of course, an ardent supporter of

by Paul Cowan

the Loyalists, but he hated the communists in Spain as passionately as he did Franco's forces. He was convinced that the Stalinists there were much more concerned with the interests of Russia than with the success of the Republican Army. When Madrid fell, Al wept for hours. The vicarious experience left him with a love for liberal democracy and a passionate hatred for anything that seemed totalitarian.

It was not difficult for a young American with Al's ideals to be patriotic in those years, when the country had just overcome its unemployment crisis and was entering the fight against fascism. And Al was no mere flag-waver. He seemed to feel that he had a special responsibility—like the Just Man among the Jews—to be sure that America's ideals were realized. Accordingly, he made sacrifices that must have seemed insane to his contemporaries. When he graduated from Horace Mann, a New York prep school, he certainly could have gone on to an Ivy League college, but instead he chose the University of North Carolina so that he could combat segregation directly. Several years later he disputed his 4-F classification (for bad eyesight and weak ankles) and entered the Army as a private. That was his duty as a citizen, he felt.

Meanwhile, Al gained stature as a liberal leader. He was elected president of the National Student Association in 1951 (the year before the organization established its formal relations with the CIA) and worked in the Stevenson campaign in 1952. Before his hitch in the Army he served as a legislative assistant to Frank Graham; afterwards, he worked for Hubert Humphrey. But offices bored him. He taught history at the University of North Carolina and Stanford, ran for Congress in New York, and fought apartheid in South Africa, Francoism in Spain, and segregation in Chapel Hill and Mississippi.

HIS GREATEST FOLLOWING was always among students. As teacher, lecturer, elder statesman of the NSA, he was always able to persuade young people to accept his liberal ideas. By 1963, of course, students at gatherings like the annual NSA Congress were looking for more than resolutions to support. These were the clean-cut, moderate young people whose college careers would have been entirely uneventful just five years earlier. The freckle-faced descendants of Tom Sawyer, the high school football stars, the cashmere coeds, class presidents, members of student Christian associations, Young Democrats and Republicans, college newspaper editors—young Americans whose consciences, filled with the egalitarian rhetoric of high school civics courses, forbade them to join segregated fraternities, insisting instead that they support liberal causes on their local campuses; these young people, inspired by the rhetoric of the New Frontier to examine their motives as carefully as possible, finally discovered that even their liberalism had been timid and were moved to confront injustice in that part of America where it was most blatant. For them, as for me, Allard was a sort of Johnny Appleseed of activism.

He was more, of course. His style was perfectly suited to the people he sought to reach. They were hungry for information, and he always seemed to be in touch with the distant world they read about in the newspapers. He had come from one place that was in the headlines, would be off somewhere else the next day, and could always describe intimate conversations with important public officials. That air of urgency made him

especially magnetic to young people in search of a commitment. Even as late as 1963, the lost mood of the 1950's still pervaded most campuses; that mood was what we were trying to escape. And Al seemed a living, vibrant alternative to the parents and professors who counseled their young to be cautious today so that they might gain suburbia tomorrow.

One felt far freer to talk with him than with most of the celebrities who came to the campus. At the age of thirty-six he still had the manner of a student leader. His appearance was as sloppy as that of the most casual undergraduate, and he was always making small quips about his socks which didn't match, his shirt which hung out over his pants, his thick glasses which, he claimed, had the same transparency as the bottom of a coke bottle. When you met him you quickly felt at ease. And flattered, too, for he seemed more interested in sustaining a bull session with undergraduates than in sharing midnight sherry with their faculty advisors.

[II. MAN IN MOTION]

IN THE MONTHS AFTER THE SUMMER PROJECT, my opinion of Lowenstein began to change. He had become disillusioned with the Mississippi civil rights movement, and as I heard his bitter criticisms of people like Bob Moses I became convinced that the ideas he had brought to the college campuses were in fact not much different from the ideas that many of his contemporaries were bringing to government in those early days of Lyndon Johnson's Great Society. Like his former boss Hubert Humphrey, like so many Democrats who loved to recall the glorious 1930's, Lowenstein regarded the progress that had occurred in America during the New Deal as a model for development that could be imposed on deprived and segregated societies everywhere, from Jackson to Johannesburg. And if substantial, radical change could always be brought about by democratic means, without bloodshed—as Lowenstein's generation of liberals insisted—it followed that revolutionaries presented as deep a threat to progress as did reactionaries. That was precisely the argument that the Great Society administrators used to justify the war in Vietnam and the invasion of the Dominican Republic. And it was also the basis of Lowenstein's deepening distrust of Bob Moses and the rest of the SNCC staff.

Allard had always been interested in the Summer Project primarily as a way to attract the attention of northern liberals to the plight of poor Negroes in Mississippi. Once his counterparts inside government realized that there was injustice in America, Al seemed convinced, they would know how to solve the problem. So he tended to see the students and black people who worked in the state as part of a large, well-controlled public relations campaign, rather than as independent human beings who might develop their own analyses of their complicated experiences.

As I watched Lowenstein's admiring friendship with Moses dissolve into a bitter quarrel, I grew increasingly suspicious—not only of Allard, but of myself as well. Could none of us work in alien cultures without fighting the people we had set out to support? Perhaps the assumption behind the brand of liberalism that Al still embraced and I had not yet rejected—the patriotic conviction that America really was a special country, the last, best hope of mankind—was finally so inflexible that it made us incapable of dealing with black people on any terms but our own.

I SPENT A LOT OF TIME with Al in those months, arguing about the movement, debating the effect of our work in Mississippi, but still hoping that his conclusions might somehow afford me a perspective into which I could fit my own confusing experience. My own relationship with my black project director in Mississippi had been a bitter one, and I was still very unhappy about it. Al seemed so eager to talk about his dissatisfaction with the movement, so eager to discuss each detail of his disagreement with Moses, that I felt he must be as interested as I was in finding a way to redefine one's political identity. But in fact he wasn't at all interested in examining himself in order to change or grow. He knew exactly who he was and what he was doing. In his opinion, people like me were potential witnesses for the prosecution: we might add circumstantial evidence to his assertion that the movement had been subverted by people who were less interested in helping Mississippi Negroes than in using the segregation and poverty that existed there to foment angry, violent confrontations throughout the country.

Like any good lawyer, Lowenstein built his case on suggestive incidents, often letting the general conclusions present themselves. Since he did not argue in court, but at restaurants, parties and in university lecture halls, the specific, technical, organizational questions that concerned him sometimes seemed out of proportion to the passion with which he discussed them. For example, throughout the autumn after the Summer Project, he kept arguing that the National Lawyer's Guild, which was supposed to be a left-wing group, had less justification to represent the movement in Mississippi than the moderate Legal Committee to Defend the Constitution. In Mississippi, the issue would have seemed irrelevant since there had not been much tension between the two organizations, both intent on fighting the corrupt, segregated legal system; but in the north, where political intrigue was a way of life, the argument seemed significant. Al could deliver a half-hour speech relating SNCC's support of the Lawyer's Guild to the influence that extreme left-wingers possessed throughout the movement. He could supplement his speech with names, dates and organizational affiliations. To white students who had gone to Mississippi with the naive expectation of fighting racism, Lowenstein's performance was particularly disturbing. I remember an unhappy girl interrupting him in the midst of his argument one night to cry out in misery, "I wish you would quit telling us about all this. I learned so much from the Summer Project; now you're telling me that what I thought we believed in was a lie." Al reminded her that all his life he had made a practice of fighting injustice. He wished that more people had spoken out against left-wing extremists during the '30s, before it was too late and Senator McCarthy caught hold of the issue.

INTO THE AUTUMN, AL REMAINED angry over the fact that while he and SNCC were recruiting for the Summer Project, the campaigns on some campuses had been run by radicals whom he distrusted, another sign of SNCC's conspiratorial nature. Al was convinced that the Southern Conference Educational Fund (SCEF), whose directors had been called communists, was unduly influencing the movement's leadership; he could list dates and places of meetings between SCEF officials and SNCC staff. He was

convinced that members of SNCC's immediate board of directors had communist connections, and he was quite exact about his charges. He was always sure that some important plot against the liberals had been hatched at a meeting he hadn't attended, and he could usually produce a batch of notes taken by some friend sent in his stead to support his contention. There was a simple pattern to his disclosures: evil people had gained control of a movement that promised to do much good for America, and the innocent black peasants and misguided white students had to be saved from the communists.

The more I heard Al talk the less I wanted to be saved by someone like him. The problems that concerned him seemed bureaucratic, not human: he appeared to be more worried by the possibility that there might be a few communists in the movement than by the undisputed facts of segregation and poverty in Mississippi. He seemed interested in the students, the black staff members and the local Negroes, not as people but as pieces in the organizational chess game he seemed so intent on winning. Though I had wanted very much to admire him—had expected him, as a matter of fact, to provide a solution to my own political quandary—I soon began to see him as a sort of political firefly: all glow and no heat. There was a great deal of motion, but not very much person. It seemed as though he used his suspicions of bureaucratic manipulation, of conspiracies and betrayals, as a means of avoiding direct human relationships.

He always had to be at the center of a crowd, never one of a group of friends, and for that reason he was always transforming small social acts into nightmares of frantic confusion. For example, when Allard went to a movie, it was as the leader of a hastily assembled movement. There would be 20 different people to be mobilized, all of them from different parts of the city, all eager to see different films. But Lowenstein felt called upon to unite them behind a common objective—this strange array of Stanford graduate students, African revolutionary leaders, newspaper reporters from North Carolina, divinity students from New Haven. So you would wind up waiting on a street corner for a group of people you had never met (and wouldn't recognize, since Al was invariably half an hour late) and then, frozen and bored, you would learn that the movie that had been chosen in the final caucus was no longer playing in all of New York City. Finally, the group would redivide into its component parts, and each person would see the movie he had originally chosen.

In many ways, I kept thinking, Al was a great man. He acted out the fantasies of his repressed contemporaries—those law school classmates of his, for instance, who talked a liberal line at cocktail parties in Great Neck or Lake Forest—and he devised practical ways for the more courageous generation that followed to express its beliefs. In doing so he not only helped change Mississippi but had a large effect on the rest of the country. But he could never understand the fact that the people he sent into action would be transformed almost beyond recognition. So far as he was concerned, persons who talked publicly about their disgust with the American government—as many Mississippi residents and civil rights workers did after the Summer Project—were dangerously disloyal. Al could not understand that the young people and the black people were making an honest attempt to find their own approach toward changing America; he was convinced that a well-planned conspiracy lay behind our increasingly angry questions, our

increasingly militant behavior. He fought the mythical conspiracy in a way that made him resemble the McCarthyites he despised. The tragedy was that his frenzied attitude lost him the respect and trust of students and black people, the two groups he sought to restore to his beloved, imaginary America.

[IV. BLACK AND WHITE TOGETHER]

MOST OF THE OLDER NORTHERN white liberals who had used their money and influence to support the Summer Project (while spending the summer in Cape Cod) were quickly persuaded by Al's arguments. They had developed a mistrust of the Mississippi movement's black leadership during the Freedom Democratic Party challenge to the regular white delegation at the Democratic Convention in Atlantic City. The predominantly black delegation and the SNCC staff members who accompanied them insisted on making their own political decisions on their own terms and angrily rejected the advice of the northern liberals who had worked with them. It was an unforgivable act as far as many white people were concerned.

After long, tedious negotiations over the right of the regular delegation to represent the state, a compromise had been reached. The segregationists would remain but the FDP would be granted two at-large seats. Liberals like Joseph Rauh, the former Americans for Democratic Action chairman who served as the FDP lawyer, Bayard Rustin and Wayne Morse were convinced that the compromise represented a symbolic triumph for integration in the South. But most FDP delegates and movement leaders like Bob Moses felt that the compromise was totally unacceptable. It did nothing to punish the regular party for segregating the entire democratic process. Instead of sitting in the seats the Democratic Party had reserved for them, the FDP people sat-in on the convention floor. Within a week the movement was irrevocably split.

The northerners simply did not believe that the Southern black people could make wise decisions about tactics for defeating the system that had victimized them for so long. Imagine Hubert Humphrey, whom Lyndon Johnson had appointed to negotiate an agreement between the FDP and the regular state party, whose own hopes for the Vice Presidential nomination were said to rest on his ability to achieve a peaceful settlement, respecting the political view of a semiliterate sharecropper from the Mississippi Delta. Humphrey was used to dealing with *leaders*, like Roy Wilkins, Martin Luther King, or even Bob Moses, not with *people*. Confronted with both Bob and a Mississippi field hand whose grammar and diction were terrible, Humphrey would respond like most of the volunteers who had gone South and regard Bob's opinion as the important one—even though Bob insisted that *no one could speak for the field hand, and that the politicians had to hear him express his own views in his own way*. But Humphrey was too much a part of the traditional political system to understand Bob's argument, let alone comply with it. He could view someone like Fanny Lou Hamer as a compelling symbol, but he could never perceive her as a partner in the active political process. He could intone her name—call her one of those brave black people to whom America owed so much—but he could not respect her ideas. He could not admit her ability to determine the terms of the debt which he insisted the nation owed her.

What was true of Humphrey, whose relationship to the

movement was more political than personal, was even truer of Joseph Rauh, whose commitment to the Freedom Democratic Party was voluntary and intensely emotional. Deeply as he felt about the FDP, though, Rauh still regarded the convention challenge as one step in a long-range strategy that would transform America. When Rauh learned that his friend Hubert Humphrey would be nominated for Vice President if he settled the FDP challenge before it seriously embarrassed the Democratic Party, he had to weigh that fact, too, in terms of overall strategy. It would be more important, Rauh judged, to have Humphrey close to the White House for four years than to see Mrs. Hamer in one of the delegates' seats for four days—and that was the reason he advised the FDP to accept the compromise. When he learned that Mrs. Hamer saw things differently—that she cared more about winning her own battle at the convention than about getting the most liberal traditional politician elected Vice President—he disregarded her opinion. After all, he had been around Washington for a long time and Mrs. Hamer had been a sharecropper all her life: was there any question as to who had more savvy? When the FDP delegates and the SNCC staff insisted on rejecting his advice, Rauh became hurt and angry. Why didn't they show more gratitude to a man who had given so much of his time to their cause? Who were they to jeopardize the future he had worked so long to build for his country?

The liberals' emotions were complicated by the fact that the episode was unique in their experience. They had, of course, lost political battles before—in fact they rarely won—but their defeats had always taken place within a cultural framework which they understood. If the Democratic Party's platform committee prevented Rauh from including a strong plank on disarmament, for example, that was unfortunate but understandable. If the Reform Democrat movement of New York turned down Lowenstein's bid for a congressional nomination, that was sad but explicable within a context Al understood. Those were traditional political battles, manipulated in familiar ways by the sorts of people who always involved themselves in public life. But the sharecroppers and field hands in the Freedom Democratic Party delegation bore little resemblance to the New York lawyers in the Reform Democratic clubs or the Southern white congressmen on the platform committee: it had never occurred to Rauh, Humphrey and the other liberals that the black Mississippians would honestly disagree with the elaborate compromise they had taken such trouble to work out. It was, so far as they were concerned, almost as if a Negro kitchen maid would presume to quit her job because she didn't like the way her employer voted.

The liberals regarded the Southern blacks as beneficiaries, not partners, and expected them to show passive gratitude, not an active interest in making their own decisions. They were so shocked by the behavior of the FDP delegates at the convention that they were willing to believe almost anything about them in the months that followed. And not only the white liberals who had been active in arranging the compromise; northerners everywhere who had supported the Summer Project as an experimental domestic Peace Corps now saw that it contained a political view of its own, one that they could not control. They felt that if people as politically naive as the FDP delegates made a decision so strongly opposed to the judgment of the country's wisest liberals—men like Rauh who time and again had displayed their "concern

for the Negro's cause"—then there must have been something suspicious about the Mississippi movement from its inception. The most plausible view was that the poor black people had been duped by men whose interests had nothing to do with their own. Perhaps, over the years, men with un-American ideas had worked their way into the movement's leadership and craftily sought to win the trust of the unsophisticated.

And that, after all, was the way the communists operated. An entire generation of idealistic radicals had learned that painful lesson in the '30s, '40s and '50s. If they hadn't seen the Reds firsthand—and most of them hadn't—they had learned a little about their activities from the anticommunist intellectuals who published their voluminous confessions in magazines like the *Partisan Review*. In the months after the convention, Lowenstein expressed his generation's gut reaction to the Mississippi movement as clearly as anyone else. "I felt as if I was in Spain and the communists were holding their guns at my back," he said of his relations with SNCC. He wasn't talking about the fight over the compromise, during which he had been neutral, but about an entire year of tensions and disagreements. It was a view shaped by distorted, romantic impressions of another decade's failed liberalism. Lowenstein was his own tragic hero—an Orwell, a Koestler, a Dos Passos. By some odd inversion he was suggesting that such people as Bob Moses were the evil outside agitators, while he and Rauh and the few local black people who supported them were the legitimate indigenous forces.

Whenever Lowenstein talked there was the suggestion that the black people who had been risking their lives fighting for freedom in Mississippi were disloyal to the United States; that the white students who spent the summer assisting them had been removed from the healthy influence of people like Al and turned into unconscious accomplices to that "disloyalty"; and that the liberals who had stayed outside the state, cheering the Summer Project from the safety of the north, were the only element of the *de facto* coalition that had retained its belief in democracy. It was only a suggestion at first; it became an assumption when it spread out into specific rumor, and it turned into a matter of public record when overt allegations were printed by columnists like Drew Pearson and Evans and Novack. Soon the term "SNCC-baiting" gained currency on the left; it was the decade's equivalent to Red-baiting. It was especially difficult to fight because it involved so many *ad hominem* arguments, so much innuendo. To defend the accused was to legitimize the accusation. Who would want to stand up in public and say that "Bob Moses is not a communist" as a response to the hints, the whispers, the half-truths? One would only make the rumors more credible.

[V. BRINGING IT ALL BACK HOME]

EVEN THOUGH I ARGUED fiercely with Lowenstein whenever we were together, in fact I found myself inclined to accept a great deal of what he said. I would argue just as fiercely against my contemporaries who insisted on celebrating the Summer Project without reservations; and sometimes, to be shocking, to be spiteful, to win a little point, I would echo Allard himself and reveal my secret knowledge about SNCC's hidden relationship with the Lawyer's Guild or SCEF. The summer's work had been so confusing, the apparent collapse of the movement so depressing, that I half-believed everything I heard. Like Lowenstein and Rauh, I

was hurt by the hatred black people were beginning to express toward people like me who believed in integration. I could accept the cultural explanation of their efforts to rid the organization of white people, but no rational argument really healed the pain of personal attacks.

So I half thought, half hoped that there might be some truth to the liberals' assertion—even about Bob Moses, the villain of their plot. Not that Bob was a conspirator, exactly, but that the bitterness that had collected within him after so many years of frustration and lonely work had pushed him toward ideas that would undermine the America I still believed in—or at least the America I was again living in, for a few comfortable months in the north had erased my most vivid memories of Mississippi. Bob used to say that when you're outside Mississippi it never seems quite real, and when you're in the state the rest of America seems unreal; though I quoted him often, I had forgotten the implications of his remark. The liberals' opinions still made some sense when I heard them in an apartment in New York City, table talk during a roast beef dinner elegantly served by a uniformed Negro maid. There were no movement people around to defend themselves. Bob Moses, Stokely Carmichael, Ivanhoe Donaldson, Cleveland Sellers: they were still working in Mississippi, risking their lives daily; subsisting on collard greens, sweet potatoes, greasy hamburgers; worrying about starving people, racist politicians and brutal police, not the Byzantine drawing-room intrigues that obsessed their antagonists in the distant north.

There were rumors that year that money had come to the movement from Russia, China, Cuba, Algeria—that was the kind of thing liberals talked about during the months that Lyndon Johnson was deciding to bomb North Vietnam and Dean Rusk was instructing the Marines to invade Santo Domingo—and while I felt contempt for the people who gloried in such gossip, I still accepted the premise behind their accusations. Brought up deep within the liberal tradition, I was as prejudiced against communists, I discovered, as most Southern whites are against Negroes: that was the miserable inheritance of my childhood during the Cold War. There was a level of consciousness on which I, like Al Lowenstein and Joseph Rauh, was convinced that communists spread political disease, that they infected everything they touched. If SNCC had received even a dollar of Moscow gold, then the organization must be polluted—that was what I instinctively thought. (I didn't know that the civil rights movement had received quite a bit more than a dollar from the CIA during those years.)

But my hysteria soon broke. As I compared reports from the real Mississippi with the stories that had originated in the North, I was shocked into realizing just how little the liberals understood about the people they were criticizing. Bob Moses pulled me past my inherited illusions. I saw him a few times, talked frequently with friends who had just come back from the South, and began to recall that Moses was simply not the demon the liberals portrayed. He was not basing his actions on the cold, cruel logic of revolutionary initiative. His decisions were not designed to further some distant, half-visible cause.

In fact, if there was one thing for which people inside the movement criticized Bob, it was that he had become even less of a leader than he was during the Summer Project, more committed to his own idea of pure participatory democracy. He apparently couldn't stand the prospect of becoming an important national figure. The fact that people saw him as the

head of the movement, the source of guidance or of ruthless villainy, violated his deepest belief: that common men were better equipped to decide for themselves than any leader was. He referred almost everyone who sought his advice to the sharecroppers and field hands among whom he had been working for so long. "All our strength comes from the local people," he would remind the volunteers and staff members who stayed in the South through the next fall. The phrase became his theme. "If the people in Mississippi want to organize sewing clubs, we'll help them organize sewing clubs," he told a reporter that year. "If they want to organize cooking classes, we'll help them organize cooking classes. It's their decision, not ours."

If the liberals had focused their attack on anyone else in the movement, their ideas might have seemed more credible. But their misunderstanding of what Bob was trying to say, the future in which he believed, was so profound that it seemed literally paranoid.

They claimed that Bob might be disguising his real intentions beneath libertarian rhetoric. He might be trying to dissemble for his detractors in the north, or craftily asserting his belief in total decentralization in order to create a vacuum which would allow his people to seize control of the entire movement. (Communists know how to take advantage of chaos, said Dean Rusk that spring, explaining the decision to send the Marines to Santo Domingo.) To his enemies, Bob Moses was Stalin—programmed to resemble Jesus Christ. So deep was their suspicion of him that they could no longer imagine him performing a single act out of genuinely decent motives.

One weekend late that spring Bob removed himself forever as a leader. At a SNCC conference in Atlanta, he told the people who had worked with him the longest that he no longer wanted to be known as Bob Moses, and that he was determined to leave Mississippi where he had struggled so long to build a movement. A cult of personality had developed around him, he said, and now it must vanish. People could be free only if they had no leaders, no idols.

He demolished the identity which thousands of people throughout America regarded as their source of moral authority. Bob Moses became Bob Parris; he would never again head an organization but would work in some lonely corner of Alabama—and we were alone. I got very drunk the night I heard about his decision. He was lost to people like me, that was instantly clear, and I knew I would feel his absence even more keenly than I had felt the absence of John Kennedy. His act, however noble, seemed an admission that the vision he had constructed at the start of the decade, during those nights in New York when he listened to Odetta sing of her people and brooded on injustice in Mississippi, was unattainable in America. He had not stepped aside to make room for new leaders; the destruction of his identity seemed a naked admission that Bob Moses had failed. At least Kennedy was trying to bring change when he was murdered; Bob, whose energy and dedication were much greater, was now asserting that no important changes could be inspired in this country by people like himself. America had destroyed the politician who had sent our generation into action; now it was defeating the man who had supplied us with our courage and vision. Bob had renounced his identity, he said, to free others to find their own; but somehow his act merged with that mood of sad, weary resignation some of us already felt, to produce some-

thing close to despair. There was no longer much love in the civil rights movement, much democracy or decency, and Bob's renunciation suggested that the remains of those qualities would quickly drain away. Men like Stokely Carmichael, who had always maintained confidence in Bob and had acted according to his example, would soon reject forever their belief in nonviolence, in reasoned conversation between the powerful and the powerless. They would entirely reject the belief that had supported the Summer Project—that poor Negro communities could be organized into America and that their example would redeem the country; soon they would talk to black America as if it were a separate nation. When Bob erased his image they knew—as Bob had realized during the summer in Mississippi—that the only way to change America was to threaten it, to preach self-defense, not nonviolence, to demand revolution and scorn reconciliation.

WHEN BOB WITHDREW HIS PUBLIC image he revealed to white students like me the depth of the liberals' hypocrisy. It was no longer possible to have faith in the judgment of people who had insisted that the man who changed his name and left the movement because he feared becoming too influential was a calculating, disloyal agent ready to manipulate the poor people with whom he worked in order to attain the objectives of a foreign power. The liberals lived in a different age and a different country from the Mississippi Negroes and black movement organizers—and from people like myself, as I was beginning to realize—and their opinions were irrelevant. Their values might destroy us as they had nearly destroyed the Mississippi movement, but they would never again inspire us. We had to win the country from them, for ourselves.

One evening late that spring, Al Lowenstein was in Chicago to give a speech. Bob's renunciation, the escalation of the war in Vietnam, the invasion of the Dominican Republic, the rebellion at Berkeley and the assassination of Malcolm X were already matters of record. After Al spoke, a group of us gathered in a graduate student's apartment to talk with him. It was the sort of setting in which he always excelled. He was beginning to weave for us his thesis of the far left conspiracy, somehow connecting the Mississippi movement to the Free Speech Movement and the Free Speech Movement to the protest against the war in Vietnam that the SDS was organizing. As usual he argued that the far left was conspiratorial, nihilistic, intent on destroying a great nation. Finally I said, mildly I thought, that I found myself losing all confidence in the American government, and that Al's criticisms of the new protests indicated to me that he had not thought carefully enough about what was happening in the country. His answer was instantaneous. "You're the sort of person who wants to believe that America is a fascist society," he said. "That will help you tear this country down."

Clearly he wasn't speaking to me so much as to the other people in the room, using me to recruit them in the same way he had used SNCC to recruit me just a few months before. At first I was insulted by his comment. I thought I had organized my whole life around my love for America's potential. But the more I thought, the more I realized I should feel flattered.

Epithets like Al's, charges of disloyalty and un-Americanism, were beginning to seem like compliments.

Back-of-the-Book



The Pill of Sisythe

[ENCYCLICALS]

HUMANAE VITAE (“Of Human Life”). *The seventh encyclical of Pope Paul VI. Vatican City: August 1968. Translated from the Latin.*

I HAVE BEEN SUBJECT to the Roman Catholic Church’s teaching on birth control twice during my formal schooling, originating with my high school religion teacher, a florid-faced Brother of Mary whom I always presumed was a homosexual because when proximity allowed, he habitually stroked the pants legs of the boys. When the chapter on sex came due in the course of the semester he appeared disinterested in it, and simply told the class to read the religion textbook and be prepared to explain, in an examination, the basic workings of the rhythm system and the circumstances under which married couples were allowed to use it. I dutifully memorized everything, but never quite understood the functioning of the thermometers and other gadgetry, though I retained a vivid picture of St. Paul’s warning about spilling one’s seed.

However, in my junior year in college I received a most thorough indoctrination in the Church’s position, which came in a manner that for excess of detail and religious ferocity may have

rivalled Stephen Daedalus’ retreat. For the purpose, a guest lecturer was brought into our religion class, a tough, balding Jesuit who had been an Army chaplain and had, as he put it, “seen the world.” He began by dispelling the notion that a chaste priest was unqualified to teach the rules of sex—after all, did a doctor have to endure cancer in order to cure it?

The special lectures lasted three weeks, during which the most remarkable illustrations were chalked on the blackboard. We learned the mathematics of menstrual cycles better than our multiplication tables; we were instructed in the art of interpreting the most minute gradations in the readings on our future wives’ rectal thermometers; we discovered that Freud had taught that artificial contraception was psychologically harmful; and we became schooled in the disposition of unwanted or untimely erections.

We were assured that medical science was on the threshold of advances which would make the rhythm system “fool-proof” (needless to say, such advances never came to fruition and rhythm remains the most frustrating and untrustworthy system of regulating one’s issue), which would mean that Catholic couples need refrain from the full exercise of marital privilege for only a few days each month.

But we were warned, most sternly,

that the immutable and obvious dictates of natural law said that one could never begin an act and not carry it to its natural end. Therefore any activity or thought that might lead one to become excited, our instructor said, was also forbidden during certain periods of the menstrual month. Perhaps somewhat carried away by the anatomical frankness of previous discussions, I was booted out of class for asking if that meant we had to look at a calendar before getting a hard-on.

EITHER BY WAY OF SUCH ritualistic expositions, or via the Sen-Sened breath of the priest wafting through the mesh screen of the confessional booth, most Catholics have had such insensate and barbarous conditions laid upon their personal lives.

But even in America the Church, for all its Irish-Catholic Stalinism, could not enforce guilt when its faithful didn’t feel guilty. Gradually, individually, American Catholics increasingly practiced forbidden methods of birth control, and with the advent of the pill—invented by a nice old Catholic doctor who, incidentally, *looked* like a Pope—the battle for rhythm was, statistically, just about all over. A sardonic monsignor of my acquaintance remarked last year that almost the only large segment of the Catholic population still using the rhythm method were nuns and priests engaged in extracurricular affairs.

But it is difficult to be a Catholic and not feel a little bit guilty, and most of us felt a great sense of relief with the advent of Pope John and the liberalizing decrees of the Ecumenical Council—it was taken for granted that the Church’s outmoded teachings on birth control would soon go. As with the end of prohibition, everybody had a drink to celebrate.

So it was slightly disturbing when Pope John in effect took the decision on birth control away from the bishops by setting up a secretive six-man commission to investigate the subject and report directly back to him. (It is not generally known that John’s commission was quite conservative in make-up—in contrast to the variegated 57-member commission named by Pope Paul.) But the Council debated the issue anyway, with the sentiment being for some form of modification in the Church’s position. Cardinal Suenens of Belgium warned in 1963, prophetically, that the Church