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Description

This 1967 NBC News special report explores the evolution of the Civil Rights Movement in the United States, just three and a half years after the March on Washington. Civil rights leaders and activists such as Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Stokely Carmichael, Charles Evers, Floyd McKissick, and others, share their views, from moderate to militant, about what Black Power represents today. This full and unedited version of the documentary contains strong language that may be offensive to viewers.

Keywords

Black Power, Civil Rights Movement, Civil Rights, Blacks, African Americans, Whites, Race, Protest, Demonstration, Violence, Nonviolence, Racism, Racist, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., MLK, Segregation, Desegregation, Stokely Carmichael, SNCC, Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, Crispus Attucks, NAACP, National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, Eugene Patterson, Atlanta Constitution, Atlanta, Georgia, 16th Street Baptist Church, Bombing, Birmingham, Alabama, Church, Charles Evers, Medgar Evers, Natchez, Mississippi, Poverty, Confederacy, Confederate Statues,

Citation

MLA

APA

CHICAGO MANUAL OF STYLE

Transcript

After Civil Rights -- Black Power
SANDER VANOCUR, reporting:
Once, this was the sight and sound of the Negro protest movement. Today, you no longer hear this song of promise. What you hear, is a cry of anger, bitterness.
Unidentified Man: The Arabs got power.
Crowd: Yeah!
Unidentified Man: The Jews got power.
Crowd: Yeah!
Unidentified Man: The red folks got power.
Crowd: Yeah!
Unidentified Man: We have got to get black power.
Crowd: Yeah!
Unidentified Man: We have got to get…
Crowd: Black power! Black power!
Unidentified Man: We have got to get…
Crowd: Black power!
Dr. MARTIN LUTHER KING, Jr.: I have a dream… I have a dream… I have a dream…

VANOCUR: Four years have now passed since Dr. King stood on these steps and spoke those words. Yet it all seems so long ago and in some ways so unreal. What happened to the dream? It ended as all dreams must end when it confronted reality. Perhaps the nation was living in a dream world. During those years from the Supreme Court’s school desegregation decision in 1954, to the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965, it was out of touch with reality to the extent that it believed that court decisions and the mere passage of laws would give Negroes true and meaningful equality with all deliberate speed. But when the court decisions had been handed down and the laws had been passed, and Negroes were guaranteed those rights promised to all Americans by the Constitution, they were merely brought to the starting line of the race. But when they took their places at the starting line, and then lifted up their heads, they found that most of their white countrymen were already eighty yards down the track. But the race had to be run. In the South, where in many rural counties, Negroes outnumber the whites, the emphasis was on voter registration and registration was power. Negroes knew it and so did the whites and soon the pattern of politics in the South was changed by the very fact that the Negro vote could no longer be ignored. It had become an important factor in southern politics.

Unidentified Man: Will bear true faith in the allegiance to the same, so help me God.

VANOCUR: If there was progress in the South, there was violent resistance in the North. The nation suddenly learned what it should have known, that racial prejudice was not just a southern problem, it was nationwide. If whites in the North could formally comfort themselves by pointing an accusing finger at the South, they could do so no longer. School segregation by neighborhood, violence against Negroes moving into all-white communities, these were facts, real and immediate, and resistance to Negro demands was every bit as determined in Cicero as it had been in Birmingham. White backlash produced frustration and confusion. This turned, in time, to disappointment, bitterness, and anger. And this produced counter-reactions, expressed in the call for Black Power. As a radical movement, it became linked to opposition to the war in Vietnam. Its most articulate spokesman, Stokely Carmichael.

STOKELY CARMICHAEL (SNCC): The first man in this country to die for the War of Independence was a black man named Crispus Attucks, a black man who died for the war. He was a fool. He was a fool. He got out there and got shot for white folks while his brothers were enslaved all over this country. He should have been getting his brothers together to take care of natural business. After the American Revolution was over and the white folk got their independence, they tapped the black people that fought on the head and gave them a medal and said, “Good work, [expletive], now get back to where you belong.” So along came the Civil War and the Great Emancipator, Abraham Lincoln, wouldn’t even let us fight in the Civil War because he said we weren’t fit to fight. Frederick Douglass had to go tell Lincoln to let us fight and they only started to let us fight when the South was winning. In segregated units and we fought in the back. We weren’t satisfied, weren’t satisfied, no. Along came World War I, and they started to draft people and they weren’t drafting us, so our organization spoke up, “Draft us! We want to fight! We good Americans! Yes!” The slogan was, “We’re going to make the world safe for Democracy.” And while our grandfathers and our fathers lined up to make the world safe for Democracy, and we didn’t even
know how to spell the word. And along came World War II. Our uncles went to Poland, to fight in Poland, died trying to stop Hitler from killing white Polish people and last summer, when we walked into Cicero, young Polish punks done throw rocks at us and called us [expletive], called us [expletive]. We weren’t satisfied, no, sir. We were going to prove what good Americans we were. So the Korean War came along and communism must be stopped at any price and it was our blood that paid that price. Our uncles and brothers came back with one legs and one arms to walk into a store and have some foreigner slam the door on his face and say, ‘[Expletive], get out my store.” Yes, sir. In the Vietnam War, America is going to prove something to us. We ain’t fightin’. We ain’t fightin’.

There’s no need for us to go and bomb schools in Vietnam. We need to build schools in our ghettos, that’s where we going to be working, that’s where we going to be working. There is no need to go to Vietnam and shoot somebody who a honky says is your enemy, we’re going to shoot the cops who are shooting our black brothers in the back in this country. That’s where we’re going to fight. There’s no need for us to go anywhere and fight for Democracy. We are working for our liberation and it’s going to be in this country, it’s going to be in this country.

VANOCUR: In Atlanta, where Carmichael’s organization has its headquarters, a warning to Negro extremists from the editor of the Atlanta Constitution, Eugene Patterson, Pulitzer Prize-winner and vice chairman of the Civil Rights Commission.

Mr. Patterson, the columns you’ve been writing lately in the Atlanta Constitution, you seem to be warning Negroes to not fall in the trap that southern whites fell into, which is namely violence. What’s motivated you?

EUGENE PATTERSON (Editor, Atlanta Constitution): I’ve been a little worried about the manifestations of Black Power, which indicate that staying within the democratic process is becoming less attractive to the Negro. I experienced this in the white South, where the difficulty of ending segregation led many whites into-- outside the democratic process and into violence. I think this led to their self-defeat, I think it always will in this country.

VANOCUR: Several years ago, you wrote a memorable editorial after the bombing of the Birmingham Church, in which four little girls were killed, and they found the shoe of one little girl who the editorial has called, “We hold this shoe in the name of all of us who don’t condemn violence in a way contributed to that.” Is it possible that you might be writing one day the same kind of editorial about Negroes who commit violence?

PATTERSON: I would hope that the Negro in America would also remember those days, because the democratic process, the institutions of this country I think, have been sufficient to give a start toward a better break in life for the American Negro and I am convinced it will bring him full equality and justice ultimately. I recognize his reasons for being impatient. I am not against impatience. I am not against protest. I am not against any group in America, certainly the Negro, who has so far to come, I am not against this man demanding his rights and working toward them, and bringing pressures to bear for them. What I’m saying is that when you carry any group of Americans across the boundary that separates the democratic process from the jungle, when you threaten to burn a city, or to shoot a man, when you threaten violence, either by implication or outright, then I think you’re contributing to the defeat of
whatever cause, whatever cause, moral or immoral, it is that you are attempting to change.

VANOCUR: I’ve heard so many definitions of black power in this country, and I’m not really what it is.

PATTERSON: I think black power is probably pretty much what Dr. King was preaching five years ago, which is political unity, get the vote, use the vote to gain your rights, develop pride and self, develop a sense of history, develop a willingness to solve your own problems and stop leaning so much on the white man. But I think also you have to stay within certain bounds, that you have to realize that there is a point of diminishing return in most affairs in life and this includes protest movements. And so in the time of hard work that lies ahead, I would like very much to see more of a dialogue within the Negro community itself on this issue of violence and nonviolence, racism and brotherhood. We are still too divided by race in this country and I think every step we take to fragment it and divide it further is a step toward folly for the American people and the American institution. And I think every step we take toward integration, toward brotherhood, toward working together, toward absorbing the twenty million Negroes right into the great melting pot of this nation, then I think we’re on the road toward the light.

CARMICHAEL: But now some white youths are hung up with democracy because they’re deluded and they think there really is such a thing as democracy in this country and so they begin to stop the war on questions of morality, that it ain’t right to kill. Now that’s a lot of junk, it’s not either right or wrong to kill, killing is. The question is who has the power to kill? That’s all. A policeman in a black community is a licensed killer, he’s a licensed killer. A black man attacking a policeman is a rioter. Yeah. That’s called the black man don’t have the license to kill. But when I die, I’m going to die with my boots on and it’s going to be in this country and it’s going to be fighting for what I know is right, for the liberation of black people, nothing else, nothing else. And what we’re going to say across this country from Muhammad Ali to a little black boy in Cardozo High School, “Hell no, we won’t go.”

Crowd: [chanting] Hell no, we won’t go! Hell no, we won’t go! Hell no, we won’t go! Hell no, we won’t go! Hell no, we won’t go!

VANOCUR: Stokely Carmichael’s voice is the most strident. But there are other voices of black power. And in a minute, we shall hear some of them.

This is where it began, the rural South, and here where it began for the Negro, the problem remains. There’s no ghetto here, just poverty, the worst kind of poverty, the kind of poverty that you won’t find in even the most depressing ghettos of the North, the kind of poverty that makes you wonder can this be the United States of America, the richest country in the world in the year 1967? It is not just material poverty, there is also a poverty of the spirit, but it is changing. There is a quiet Negro revolution going on in states like Mississippi, in hundreds of hamlets, places that southerners call “wide places in the road,” where you can see it, you can feel it and you can hear it.

The revolution is quiet. It is also armed. Churches had been bombed and burned too often.

Church Goers: [singing]

CHARLES EVERS (NAACP): Thank you very much. We don’t believe in black power. That’s the wrong word. That’s a dirty word. What we believe in, it just happen that we have, what? We just happen to have accidentally have population power. And we’re here because we’re concerned about getting a share, it’s going to be fair and square with all of the suits.
VANOCUR: Charles Evers is the NAACP field director in Mississippi. The man who had the job before him was his brother, Medgar, killed in an ambush in the summer of 1963.

EVERS: We are here to serve notice on all of those who have been so brutal to us in the past, that your day is gone, and because here in Jefferson County, we outnumber you any way you come. We got you outnumbered physically, we got you outnumbered mentally, and we got you outnumbered economically, and about to outnumber you politically. We’ve got to vote right, walk right and talk right and let America know that we not going to let nobody turn us around. To start off with, we let them know that we going to take that old Confederate statue we got standing out there. We’re going to put a statue of a man who lived and died for all Americans and somebody like maybe George Washington or maybe Medgar Evers or somebody who died that all men may be free.

VANOCUR: Evers does not call for black power. Instead, he uses the power of blacks, in five counties of southwest Mississippi, where blacks outnumber whites. In Fayette, in Jefferson County, where Evers lives, he’s built a shopping center, modest by white standards, but significant as a symbol of the growing Negro economic and political power in Mississippi. White politicians aware of this growing power openly seek Negro support in the August Democratic Primary in which Negro candidates are also running. Along with political power, the Negroes possess economic power which can be dispensed or withheld. Evers is leading a boycott in nearby Natchez in an effort to get white merchants to hire more Negroes and the city to grant greater Negro representation on the police force, the fire department, and the school board. The current boycott is already having its effect. Negro housing in some parts of Mississippi is unbelievably squalid, but even this is slowly changing. Credit, a commodity always difficult for Negroes to obtain, suddenly has become easier to come by. The Farmers Home Administration, an agency of the U.S. Department of Agriculture, is granting low interest, long-term loans, which are being used by Negroes to build decent homes. But the building is not just the matter of new homes, it’s also a process of developing the Negroes’ abilities.

Unidentified Woman: …doctor and his wife. The year was 1913 and the pair had come to ministers to Natchez who had never known any other medical treatment that was given by the local witch doctors. They set up their…

VANOCUR: As part of the effort of self-improvement, Negroes are taking advantage of literacy programs, this one conducted by Star, a private, non-profit organization operating in Mississippi with funds from the federal poverty program and encouraged by Charles Evers.

Unidentified Woman: …Europe and Africa.

Unidentified Man: All right, pause for a minute now. That is “strife.” Let’s go again. Read it again. “His label…”

Unidentified Woman: His label of love in the jungle was made undoubtedly hard by the outbreak of war and strife both in Europe and Africa.

VANOCUR: At the site of the old slave block in Natchez, on the Mississippi, where Negroes were once bought and sold, Charles Evers talked about the new South, which his power is creating.

EVERS: We’re now working strongly on our, in our areas in politics, getting them registered, getting them qualified, get voter education, voter registration and the importance of the vote, what it can do. And
this has all really has changed, the gubernatorial-- old patterns, where it used to be, “[expletive, expletive, expletive],” now they talking about better highways and better education and more industries. So you see, this is the politicians-- in Mississippi, the politicians are funny. They look at two things, the ballot and the dollar and in this area, we control both.

VANOCUR: Yeah, but you still go around with a gun. How much has really changed in Mississippi if you still go around with a gun in your car?

EVERS: Now, I don’t want to give the impression it has changed that much. Sure, I have a gun, I have two guns to be exact, I have a rifle and a .38, and it’s all for my protection, and I still feel I’m going to get it sooner or later anyway. But we had to stay on and continue to fight for the thing we know is right, because in every great movement, men have had to give their lives and families have had to suffer. I’m going to live as long as I possibly can and when I can’t live any longer, then I’m going on in.

VANOCUR: How do you feel about the situation with the war in Vietnam and some Negro leaders urging Negroes in Mississippi not to register, saying if you haven’t got democracy in Mississippi, why should you go fight for it in Vietnam?

EVERS: Well, I take a different stand I guess on that, too. I’m against the war in Vietnam, there’s no question about it, all of us are. But I take another position that America doesn’t belong to the whites, it belongs to all of us and if America is in Vietnam wrong, then we all are wrong, then we all, I feel, that we all should defend our country, not the white man’s country, it’s our country. And anyone who takes the position it’s a white man country, then he’d been misled. I feel that we should go and fight for America in Vietnam and we certainly should come back and fight for it here. Now, you’ve probably read what I’ve said, and I mean this, that I’m personally going to ask Negroes in Mississippi not to go to the Army, become June First, but it’s not-- not to defend our country in Vietnam, but it’s because we have ninety selective service boards in Mississippi and there’s not a single Negro on one of them. So what we are saying is, unless Negroes are on the selective service board in Mississippi, we don’t feel it is fair for lily-white boys to send Negroes off to the Army.

VANOCUR: What do you mean when you use the word “black power?”

EVERS: If black power means what I have been told it means, then we’re going to take over and mistreat the whites and abuse the whites as they have done us. Then we are going to be just as guilty as the white man has been.

VANOCUR: Did you feel this way before your brother was killed?

EVERS: I’ll admit that once upon a time that he and I both admired, and we still-- I still admire Kenyatta. I admit that once upon a time he and I had planned to do the same type of thing that Kenyatta had done. Maybe you know his son, his oldest son is named Darrell Kenyatta. But we found out that that wasn’t the way and it wouldn’t do and we couldn’t win by taking an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth, so we found…

VANOCUR: …Mau Mau in Mississippi?

EVERS: We had once thought about that, but as boys, youngsters, because we had been mistreated so badly and if they-- we found that this wasn’t the way because even Kenyatta himself was defeated. And the reason why the whites are losing is because they are wrong and they can’t survive this. So we are
going to do unto others we will have them do unto us. We’re not going to have anyone who is going to do the white people wrong either. This-- this is what’s been wrong all the time. Them bitter rascals have treated us wrong and now we going to treat them wrong. Because if we do right, it’s going to hurt them bad enough. Oh, it’s going to hurt them bad enough. Because they can’t stand to do what’s right. Maybe some of you don’t understand why it’s so important and why [unintel.]. Those are the rascals who have done us so bad and we got to eliminate-- see, we got to build a foundation that you can’t shake. So this time, let’s bring to for the first time in history, that we know of, a woman, and most of all a Negro woman, who will run as Justice of the Peace in District 2, Miss Lee. Come on up, Miss Lee. Give her a hand, give her a hand.

MISS LEE: Thank you, Mr. Evers, our great leader, to our president, Mr. Allen, pulpit guests, officers of the board, and all of those to make up this group. It is indeed a pleasure for me to stand before you tonight to run as a candidate for justice of the peace in District 2. I will give justice to one and all, regardless to the race, the creed, or the color, so let us stand together and let us vote for one another because this is the first time in life that we have had this opportunity. So since we have this opportunity, let us make the best of it. So I thank you.

Unidentified Singer: [singing] We’re going to do what the Spirit says do.
EVERS: Let’s get it live.
Church Goers: [singing] What the Spirit says do, we going to do, oh Lord, we going to do what the Spirit says do.
Unidentified Singer: [singing] We’re going to jail if the Spirit says jail.
Church Goers: [singing] We’re going to jail if the Spirit says jail. If the Spirit says jail, we’re going to, oh Lord, we’re going to jail if the Spirit says jail.
Unidentified Singer: [singing] We’re going to do what Mr. Evers says do.
Church Goers: [singing] We’re going to do what Mr. Evers says do. If Mr. Evers says do, we’re going to do, oh Lord, we’re going to what Mr. Evers says do.
Unidentified Singer: [singing] We’re going to die if the Spirit says die.
Church Goers: [singing] We’re going to die if the Spirit says die. If the Spirit says die, we’re going to, oh Lord, we’re going to die if the Spirit says die.
VANOCUR: In Atlanta, where he was raised as a minister’s son, Dr. Martin Luther King seeks to pursue his dream of Negro equality through nonviolence. His leadership has been challenged and so has his dream.

Dr. MARTIN LUTHER KING, Jr. (SCLC): The black man in America is saying in substance that either you solve this problem and make freedom reality or you annihilate us. This is the choice that America has. Either exterminate us or make it right for us to live and that it boils down to just that, so. And I don’t think that America has degenerated to the point that it will seek to exterminate the Negro so I think white America is going to eventually adjust to living creatively and brotherly with the Negro. But I do think that we will have to work a long time to get even the English language to the point of really recognizing the Negro or the black man as a man because everything black in our language is considered low and worthless and inferior and degrading. If one were to thumb through Roget’s Thesaurus, you would see
125 synonyms for black and they are all negative and low and degrading, and 118 synonyms for white and they’re all high and pure and chaste and everything else that you would consider high, noble, and good. But in spite of this, I think that a strong, vigorous, determined movement can force the whole society to begin the process of accepting the Negro as a fellow human being, as a person and as a man.

VANOCUR: Is this not black power you’re talking about?
KING: I guess that is in the sense that it is a psychological call for manhood. Now, I’ve made it clear that I believe in the concept of black power if it means that, a psychological call for manhood where the Negro is not ashamed of his heritage, he’s proud of it, and where he is not ashamed of being black. He comes to see that there’s nothing wrong with being black and black is as beautiful as any other color, and if it means in amassing political and economic power to achieve our legitimate goals, I can go for it altogether. Unfortunately, the slogan “Black Power” has some negative connotations and those I can’t go with. Certainly I can’t believe in black separatism and often this is one of the connotations and I can’t go along with violence and unfortunately some who have used violence and engaged in riots have shouted “Black Power” in the process. A riot ends up creating minimal problems for the Negro community than it solves and for the larger community and certainly you can’t establish brotherhood through violence because it only intensifies the fears of the white community while relieving the guilt. You can through violence burn down a building, but you can’t establish justice. You can murder a murderer, but you can’t murder murder through violence. You can murder a hater, but you can’t murder hate. And what we’re trying to get rid of is hate, and injustice, and all of these other things that continue the long night in man’s inhumanity to man. But I find that even the other groups that are preaching violence are willing to go along with nonviolence if they feel that something is being gained through nonviolence. And this is where I say that the power structure often aids and abets the few forces that are preaching violence because the only time they would make concessions in many instances is when Negroes riot and then they make a few token concessions and give Negroes in person that the only way you can get anything in the northern community is to start burning the town down.

VANOCUR: What is it about the Negro-- I mean, every other group that came as an immigrant somehow, not easily, but somehow got around it, is it just the fact that Negroes are black?
KING: The fact is that the Negro was a slave in this country for 244 years. That act-- that was a willful thing that was done, the Negro was brought here in chains, treated and burned human fashion and this led to the “thingification” of the Negro. So he was not looked upon as a person, he was not looked upon as a human being with the same status and worth as other human beings and it seems to me that white America must see that no other ethnic group has been a slave on American soil. That is one thing that other immigrant groups haven’t had to face. And so emancipation for the Negro was really freedom to hunger, it was freedom to the wins and reins of heaven, it was freedom without food to eat or land to cultivate and that world was freedom and famine at the same time. And when white Americans tell the Negro to lift himself by his own bootstraps, they don’t look over the legacy of slavery and segregation, I believe we ought to do all we can and seek to lift ourselves by our own bootstraps, but it’s a cruel gesture, say, to a bootless man that he ought to lift himself by his own bootstraps. So I must say that white America must assume the major responsibility for the Negro’s dilemma today. The Negro’s dilemma grows out of white
America’s dilemma. We’ve got to recognize that the black man is the key figure in America now. You either deal with this problem in America or America can bring down the curtains of disaster and doom on its own civilization.

VANOCUR: When you stood that August day in 1963 on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial, you said you had a dream. Did that dream envision so soon a war in Asia preventing the society doing for the Negroes that which you think had to be done?

KING: No, I didn’t envision that then. I must confess that that period was a great period of hope for me and I’m sure for many others all across the nation. But I must confess that that dream that I had that day has at many points turned into a nightmare. And I think the realistic fact is that we still have a long, long way to go and that we are involved in a war on Asian soil, which if not checked and stopped and pause the very soul of our nation. When a nation becomes obsessed with the guns of war, it loses its social perspective and programs, the social uplift suffers, this is just a fact of history so that we do face many more difficulties as a result of the war. It’s much more difficult to really arouse the conscience during a time of war.

VANOCUR: Dr. King, do you find it somewhat surprising that so many people should be shocked that a Nobel Laureate like yourself has come out against the war in Vietnam?

KING: Well, I find that—very paradoxical in a sense that people would praise me so strongly and applaud me so vigorously when I say be nonviolent where Bull Connor’s concerned, when I urge Negroes to be nonviolent toward Jim Clark, and yet condemn me so vigorously when I say that our doses of violence in Vietnam where little children are suffering, where villages and huts are being burned down, are certainly injurious and destructive of many of our values, so there’s no alternative for me on the basis of conscience. I must stand up against this war and just as I’m against segregated lunch counters and segregated public facilities in the House, I mean in the South, I’m against segregating my moral concern and I’m not going to limit my moral concern to civil rights for Negroes in the United States, now that I have humanitarian concerns.

VANOCUR: Without doubting Dr. King’s motives, a Negro leader like the executive director of the NAACP, Roy Wilkens, questions the tactics of mixing Negro equality with opposition to the war.

ROY WILKINS (Executive Director, NAACP): All I can say, is that in the tactics and strategy of the Civil Rights Movement, which is here and now, not in 1970 or ’71, all such devotions to another ideal inevitably detracts from the main show. The main show for us is right here, civil rights. It must be remembered in this connection, gentlemen, that the problems that we seek to attack here will not wait for the end of the Vietnam War, they didn’t wait for the end of World War II, they didn’t wait for the end of World War I. If you’re going to fight for civil rights, you have to fight it year round and year in and year out, no matter what the overriding issue is. We fought it with President Wilson in World War I, we fought it in World War II with President Roosevelt, we didn’t back up on civil rights and we don’t see any reason for downgrading civil rights and elevating the peace movement above it, especially the indignities our people are suffering.

Unidentified Man: [shouting]

VANOCUR: When Roy Wilkens talks about the indignities Negroes are suffering, he is talking about
conditions in cities like Baltimore, where today forty percent of the population is black. It has a problem, as all major cities in the United States have this problem.

Unidentified Man: [shouting]

VANOCUR: Today, few whites enter the ghetto. Most of them are aware of the black ghetto as a place to be avoided, as a place where there is likely to be trouble. Negroes insist that there will be trouble in the ghetto, so long as they have inadequate housing, poor schools, high unemployment, and no money.

Unidentified Man: All right, here I am. What you want? It’s thirty cents a pound. Cash. Is that enough? Give me some money. You got no money today? Look, look, girl, I don’t want no foolishness out of you. All right, just give me your number.

VANOCUR: There are about twenty million Negroes in the United States. Most of them live like this. CORE, the Congress of Racial Equality, picked Baltimore in 1966 as the target city at a time when everyone said it was ready to explode. When CORE came in, most whites feared that the black power advocated by CORE meant violence, it has not. In Baltimore, black power has not been a call to violence, it has been a program of constructive action, economic and political, like ghetto candidates running for the first time in local elections.

Unidentified Man: It all points to the most crucial area that is that behind you, each one of those areas where you see a number, is a heart of political action, and that’s where we begin to develop the kind of black political power we’re talking about.

Unidentified Man: Many people ask, “What is CORE doing?” Well, I want them to point a finger at…

VANOCUR: CORE has also pressed for job equality in Baltimore’s major industries.

Unidentified Man: Only when we grasp this weapon of black power, only when we grasp this weapon firmly in our hands, can we begin to go forth to the battle.

VANOCUR: One of CORE’s major concerns has been young Negro dropouts, many of them with police records. A program to train them as gas station attendants is carried on with a grant from the Department of Labor and the cooperation of several large oil companies.

Despite the success in Baltimore, Floyd McKissick, CORE’s national director, admits that his organization, like other militant civil rights organizations, is in deep financial trouble. Today, CORE’s program in Baltimore is threatened by a lack of funds. Black power, plus his opposition to the war in Vietnam, scares away white support. But McKissick still sees black power as the only way out.

FLOYD McKISSICK (CORE): Black power is really what we are carrying out here in Baltimore. Unfortunately, Black Power is a program, it is a philosophy and a program and a program is really to rebuild a man in a philosophy, build him to love and to love and respect himself and not hate himself because he is not white. And I’m saying that we must be exactly who we are, be proud of who we are, be proud that my hair is like it is and your hair is like it is, too. But you respect me because I am a black man and because we have contributed to the goods and the services in this society and we have given our labor to make this society what it is.

VANOCUR: What are the manifestations of black power within your project’s target city, like the gas stations, for example, is that a manifestation of black power?

McKISSICK: Yes. This is what a lot of people don’t understand when we talk about economic power.
Here we mean the organizing of the people into compact units. Some of the gang leaders are, ironically enough, who went through the training program. Some of the gang leaders that were supposed to be the most explosive people in the community that were going to start the so-called disturbances in Baltimore, went through the training program and after coming out of the training program, they were the first people that went back into community when the Klan marched through last year and got all of the gangs to cool it. And we didn’t have any trouble here. The same guys that were going to be the producers of violence turned out to be the very guys who stopped the violence in the ghetto.

Unidentified Man: This is just the way you’re going to feel when you go in and start laying your story down to get the job. That is the exact same atmosphere, you’re going to be a little nervous and you’re going to feel a little uneasy, but I want you to watch one guy that’s been doing it and he knows just how to get the story down and we’re going to check him out to see if he’s got it down pat. So let’s give a listen for a second. John, come up here, let me see how you make out.

JOHN ABEL: Good afternoon, each and every one. My name’s John Abel and I am speaking on behalf of the Target City Youth Program and I am also a trainee. I’d like to say being in here ten weeks awfully really has learned me a whole lot in this little bit of time. And I also believe that I’m eligible enough to be a manager or an owner of my own service station. It’s no good walking around the street wondering what can you do, you have to learn and earn and stick with what you have started, there’s no harm in trying. Anybody can say they can’t do it, but to my opinion, I think I’m ready to be a manager, thank you.

Unidentified Man: OK, first of all remember, he’s a pro, he’s supposed to know how to do it. Now let’s see just how good he was. We’re going to get a few comments. I want you to tell me what you think he did wrong.

Unidentified Man: Well, to the--

Unidentified Man: Can’t hear you.

Unidentified Man: To my knowledge, and my fact, I do not think that he did anything wrong. Everything was perfect.

Unidentified Man: He put enough life in it, but he could have put, say, in to more life.

Unidentified Man: OK, all right.

Unidentified Man: Well, to my opinion, his presentation was so realistic and so nice that if he was running for president, I’d vote for him.

McKISSICK: You see, we live in two worlds. We got a black world and a white world. And we have never understood and most people don’t understand how I think because they think I should think the way that they think. Now, a kid born in this neighborhood can’t think the way that a white man thinks, you see, or a white kid thinks. We’ve developed what you called defensive thinking in order to make it in a society where we are oppressed daily in everything that we do. And these two worlds have not been able to come together and get a meaningful dialogue. And even when we really tell the truth, if the truth hurts, it’s not accepting. So here you have the ghettos this summer where people feel that nobody listens to the them, black people feel rejected, they feel like they’re being pushed into a corner, they can’t get anyone’s ear, there’s the failure to support them in their endeavors and their undertakings and the youth feel totally rejected, they feel that there is no hope, there’s not a chance. It’s a matter of hopelessness, it’s frustration.
I’d just as soon be dead, some of the kids think. That’s the attitude that they take. On one hand, we say “Let’s be nonviolent. The whole civil rights struggle ought to be nonviolent.” On the other hand, we use violence, this society uses violence to accomplish most of its goals, or the majority of its goals. This country was taken by violence from the Mother Country and then by violence we destroyed the Indians and now by violence we are fighting another war and that’s the Vietnam issue. We know that the white man has the gun. Everybody knows that. And what we’re fearful of right now and we wonder if there’s not a commitment and a hope that riots will occur so that they can shoot down black people in the streets. And what we really have not recognized is that there is now thought control over the black man. They say, “You were wrong and we don’t support you because you don’t think like us.” You ought to support the war. And of course, I don’t believe in supporting the war. So they said, “We don’t like that about him,” which means that they aren’t respecting me for my difference of opinion, my ability to think and to come to a different conclusion. I must think the way that he says I must think. So we lose support for that reason. Some people say, “We don’t like your position on Adam Clayton Powell.” Well, Adam Clayton Powell was the only man that we had in Congress to represent us out of 22 years of buying alimony and installment plans to set up him up in court for us, you take that away from us and then they expect us to be happy and they withdraw funds. I think they’ve got to recognize we go right back to the same point that they have got to let the black man develop his independent pattern of thought, which is going to sometimes hurt him in a sense because we don’t think like them but it certainly ought to be that the understanding that we are never going to think alike in all aspects, not until all other things are equal.

VANOCUR: It is difficult for a white man to talk about black power. One reason is obvious, he is not black. The other reason is less obvious. “Black Power” right now is a kind of disembodied phrase with many shadings and definitions. It means one thing to some Negroes and something else to others. There’s no such thing as yet a Negro community, some great monolithic political and social entity poised in anger and frustration, ready to storm the barricades of white America, screaming, “Black power.” The war in Vietnam has also complicated the white problem of understanding black power. The phrase has become most recently identified with opposition to the war. Blame or credit for this can be given to Stokely Carmichael. He’s the Negro leader whose views on the war are the most radical, but his views are not those of Dr. King, whose views in turn are different from Floyd McKissick’s. And even if the war ended tomorrow, whites would still be confronted with the Negro’s search for black power, which seems to be now, after civil rights, the next phase in their struggle for true and meaningful equality. There are, however, in the search for black power, two elements which white America should be able to understand. One is that Negroes are not searching for something which is alien to our system. All minority groups in this country at one time or another have sought to better their condition by demonstrating their collective power, real or imagined. But what is alien and what will not be understood or accepted is the black power which advocates violence to achieve its aims. The other element is a common denominator among the advocates of black power, and that’s a new pride in being black. It’s part of a search for identity. You find it especially pronounced in Negro colleges and universities, which ten year ago formed the backbone of nonviolence, and where, in the next ten years, black power may be given coherence and form. The only thing which is radical about this search for identity is many Negroes are no longer willing to be
what whites would wish them to be. And that may be precisely what makes so many whites fear the words “black power.”

Unidentified Man: The other day, the law school had its talent show and you know what turned out the talent show? Some sisters and brothers from the church who came to sing gospel to us. And we were pretty and we felt good because that was our heritage, and we are not white, we are black!

Crowd: [cheering]

Unidentified Man: And as black people, we must act according to our nature. You can’t teach a snake not to crawl on its belly. Nor can you teach a baboon not sit on its haunches, because that’s his nature. And it’s nature for black people to have soul and we exhibit that soul in various and sundry ways. Why do you think those brothers and sisters come out here on Friday and sing around that tree? Because that’s the way we do things. And we can’t be ashamed of that, because if we are ashamed of our culture, we become manifestly ashamed of ourselves. And brother, I’m not ashamed of myself because I’m beautiful. Are you hip?

Crowd: [cheering]