

Vanessa Murphree. *The Selling of Civil Rights: The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee and the Use of Public Relations.* New York and London: Routledge, 2006. vii + 189 pp. \$65.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-415-97889-7.



Reviewed by William Hustwit (Department of History, University of Mississippi)

Published on H-1960s (April, 2007)

Communication Breakdown

The civil rights generation came of age in the postwar United States of televised mass media, an enlarged federal government, and a new sense of nationalism forged by the Second World War and the Cold War. Many of the young civil rights activists understood the new national media and crafted an identity and the propaganda to fit it. By focusing specifically on the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), Vanessa Murphree, a professor of communications at the University of South Alabama, tells the story of one civil rights group's use of pictures and press to help attain its goals. SNCC depended upon a cadre of articulate, charismatic, and savvy leaders, who (like Julian Bond, Diane Nash, Stokely Carmichael, James Forman, and Bob Moses) worked easily within different news media. In five short chapters, Murphree focuses on SNCC's public relations work in its campaigns from the sit-ins to Freedom Summer to Black Power. Murphree, whose research has been shaped by an interest in American media and communications, investigates the connection between forming public relations and the construction of reform movements. Rather than focusing on the mainstream media, *The Selling of Civil Rights* looks at public relations only within the civil

rights community. Murphree examines voter registration booklets, television spots, news releases, and photography and their uses in educating African Americans about their rights and in promoting SNCC to a larger audience. To provide context for the public relations story, Murphree includes a standard historical narrative of SNCC's widespread activities in the South.

The Selling of Civil Rights suffers from three problems, unfortunately. First, the book provides a fairly one-sided account of SNCC. Murphree tells about the distribution of materials and activists' appearances on television networks, but the reader knows little about audiences' reception. It remains unclear how local blacks, the national media, other civil rights groups, whites, and the federal government processed SNCC's literature and ideas. "Although it is difficult to directly measure the success of the SNCC communications efforts from a cause and effect perspective," Murphree writes, "evidence suggests that the impact was significant" (p. 34). Then, however, no evidence emerges. The book concludes that SNCC succeeded in communicating its message even until the end of Black Power; for Murphree, communica-

tion does not involve audience participation but only the act of speaking. Readers may also question the success of Black Power rhetoric winning over black and white audiences. Second, Murphree's research needed to include more SNCC media outlets. She ignores Stokely Carmichael's *Black Power* (1967); the SNCC documentary "We'll Never Turn Back," produced during Freedom Summer; and barely mentions (while showing none of) the pictures of white SNCC photographer Danny Lyons.[1] Third, a more thorough and balanced account could have been provided by more research. Murphree relies on only thirty-seven books, seven articles, one dissertation, and eight interviews. Her archival research mainly resulted from work in the Wisconsin Historical Society's collections on SNCC and Howard Zinn. Film vaults from television networks may have aided Murphree's research as well. Readers would have also benefited from if she had placed SNCC's public relations initiatives in a broader media context, which has been provided by scholars like David Garrow; Brian Ward; Kay Mills; and Gene Roberts and Hank Klibanoff (in a new book).[2]

Murphree is right to be fascinated with SNCC's public relations wing. The organization set out on a variety of difficult campaigns with a small but dedicated group of volunteers. Future work on the relationship between civil rights and the media, nevertheless, will need to consider a variety of perspectives and a host of sources.

Notes

[1]. Charles V. Hamilton and Stokely Carmichael, *Black Power: The Politics of Liberation* (New York: Knopf, 1967).

[2]. David Garrow, *Protest at Selma: Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Voting Rights Act of 1965* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1978); Brian Ward, *Radio and the Struggle for Civil Rights in the South* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2004); Kay Mills, *Changing Channels: The Civil Rights Case that Transformed Television* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2004); and Gene Roberts and Hank Klibanoff, *The Race Beat: The Press, the Civil Rights Struggle, and the Awakening of a Nation* (New York: Knopf, 2006).

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-1960s>

Citation: William Hustwit. Review of Murphree, Vanessa, *The Selling of Civil Rights: The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee and the Use of Public Relations*. H-1960s, H-Net Reviews. April, 2007.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=13076>

Copyright © 2007 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.org.