Brown: Activist Who Rapped

By Carl Bernstein
Washington Post Staff Writer

H. RAP BROWN
... remains controversial

He is a tall, gangling man with a drooping mustache and natural, bushy hair. He usually appears at rallies in blue denim jacket and jeans, a black beret cocked on his head. His speeches arouse controversy.

Last week, however, Hubert Geroid Brown made no public speeches.

Instead, there were speculations that someone tried to blow him up in Bel Air, Md., that he had left the country, that he was in hiding somewhere on the East Coast, that he had been kidnaped. A law enforcement official said he had information that Brown was safe in his New York apartment.

Thus even in silence, Rap Brown remained controversial.

The subject of all this attention is a young man whose name was virtually unknown until the spring of 1967, when—at the age of 23—he was named chairman of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee.

Introducing Brown to newsmen that May, Stokely Carmichael was quoted in news accounts as saying of hs successor to the SNNC chairmanship: "You'll be hapy to have me back when you hear from him—he's a bad man."

In August, 1967, a Dorchester County grand jury indicted Brown on charges of inciting to riot, inciting to arson and arson in Cambridge, Md.

"You better get some guns, brother," Brown reportedly told a crowd of 400 persons in Cambridge on July 24 of that long, hot summer. "The only thing the honky respects is a gun. You give me a gun and tell me to shoot my enemy, I I might shoot Lady Bird," he was quoted as saying.

Repeating language he had used in speeches elsewhere, Brown reportedly told the Cambridge audience: "You should burn that school down and then go take over the honkies' school . . . If America don't come 'round, we got to burn it down."

Hours later, parts of the Cambridge ghetto — an elementary school, a church, some shops and homes—were in ruins.

Sixteen days after he spoke in Cambridge, Brown made a similar speech to 800 blacks in the Jacksonville, Fla., ghetto. The Associated Press gave this account of his appearance:

"If Jacksonville doesn't come around, you know what should be done . . . " he told the audience. "You got pennies and you know what to do with them; you know what they'll buy. You know what a penny buys."

"Matches," the crowd shouted back.

"The streets are yours," Brown responded. "Take them whenever you're ready." He added: "You've got to be ready to move against the system. The only way you can do it is to be armed."

Among the few whites in the audience was Florida's governor, Claude Kirk, who said after the speech that "Brown is incapable of inciting a riot." Asked to respond to what a reporter characterized as Brown's "call to arms," the governor said:

"He didn't really say that. That's what I came here to find out."

"The innuendoes are there," Kirk observed, "but there's nothing worth being excited about in that speech . . . I think he knew very well that inciting riot is against the law in Florida and he didn't incite any riot, so there's no problem."

Brown rejects the charges made against him in Cambridge. "I don't start riots," he has said on more than one occasion. "Conditions do."

To the black militants who are his primary constituency, Rap Brown is someone who understands those conditions, who—despite his relative youth—has labored long and hard to eliminate the shackles of poverty and injustice.

"People pay attention because he says the same thing they feel," a Washington friend of Brown said last week. "He's said his dues plenty, in the streets and in the field."

Beyond the oratory, those who know Brown well describe a man who—among blacks—is affable, temperate and delights in weekend basketball games with kids in the middle-class Harlem neighborhood where he lives quietly with his wife.

Al Hart, Brown's publisher at the Dial Press in New York, adds what even many of the SNCC leader's detractors readily concede: "Mr. Brown," observes Hart, "is a remarkably intelligent and very impressive young man."

The son of Eddie Charles Brown, an employee of the Esso Petroleum Company, and the former Thelma Warren, Brown was born in

His Way to Fame

Baton Rouge, La., on Oct. 4, 1943.

He attended segregated primary schools in the working-class Negro neighborhood where he grew up in Baton Rouge, then was graduated from a special high school that held its classes at Southern University. He enrolled in the university as a sociology major in the fall semester of 1960.

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Here, he worked with Stokely Carmichael in the Non-Violent Action Group, an integrated Washington affiliate of SNCC whose activities included picketing suburban establishments that refused to accept Negro patrons and collecting food, money and clothing for Mississippi sharecroppers.

Then, in 1963, Carmichael and Brown went south to Mississippi with other SNCC workers for one of the most daring political actions undertaken by Negroes there since Reconstruction: the Freedom Ballot voter registration campaign.

Organized by Allard K. Lowenstein, now a Congressman from New York, the campaign brought 80,000 black voters to the polls. As field organizers, Carmichael, Brown and other SNCC workers were harassed, jail terms and beatings. Carmichael was jailed.

Brown has spoken often of being beaten in the South.

The next year Brown played a key role as Alabama project director for SNCC in what came to be called the Freedom Summer of 1964.

More than 1,000 students, black and white, went into the deep South, teaching people to read and write, distributing books, setting up cooperatives, registering voters, organizing farm workers in Mississippi, Alabama and southwest Georgia.

By the Selma campaign of March, 1965, the breach between Dr. King's Southern Christian Leadership Conference and the more assertive elements of SNCC—led by Carmichael and Brown—was already being felt in the civil rights movement.

With the election of Carmichael as SNCC chairman in May, 1966, Brown helped his old friend from Washington in developing the Black Power manifesto that was to profoundly alter the character of the movement.

Meanwhile, he had returned to Washington in March, 1965, as a neighborhood worker for the city's antipoverty agency, the United Planning Organization. He resigned from UPO in June, 1966, a month after Carmichael's election as SNCC chairman.

When Carmichael's term as chairman ended, Brown was elected his successor by a 3-vote margin of the deeply divided SNCC steering committee.

Under Carmichael, SNCC had already begun the move from a program-oriented organization to a platform for he black power concept. During Brown's reign as chairman, the transformation became complete.

John R. Lewis, who served for three years as SNCC chairman before his replacement by Carmichael, believes the move away from direct action programs in the South—which also occurred in other major civil rights organizations—was the inevitable result of civil rights bills passed by Congress culminating in the Voting Rights Act of 1965.

With passage of legislation guaranteeing access to public accommodations and the polls, Lewis observed in a telephone interview last week, "there was a feeling on the part of the country that a great many of the problems had been solved."

But Carmichael, Brown and other black leaders began taking the 'black power message around the country in well publicized speaking engagements. No solution would come, they argued, until black people controlled their own destinies, their own communities, their own institutions. The white man, said Brown, was the enemy.

Its action campaigns curtailed, SNCC's separatist direction under Carmichael and Brown inevitably cost it support and money from whites. Brown said he was unconcerned.

"When the honky asks what he can do for me," he told an audience in New York in 1967, "I tell him that he can give me guns."

In the year of the Selma movement, according to John Lewis, SNCC raised more than $1 million, maintained a full-time staff of 350 organizers in the South and gave hundreds—perhaps thousands—of idealistic young whites their introduction to activism.

By 1969, Lewis observed, "I don't think there was an SNCC functioning as an organization in the South . . . I

don't think there were any programs at all."

SNCC officers, once in most major campuses and big cities across the country remained only in Atlanta and New York.

Although there was no SNCC working "as a viable organization," Lewis added, it was by no means dead—as evidenced by Rap Brown's speeches.

"Organizations and institutions die, but a spirit cannot be destroyed and the SNCC spirit still exists," said Lewis. "There's still a great need for an organization like SNCC that raises certain questions that other groups don't. And it's still doing that, through the speeches."

By 1969, Brown's speeches across the country had made him a controversial national figure. He had been indicted in Cambridge, convicted in New Orleans of violating the National Firearms Act (which bars anyone under indictment for a felony from carrying a firearm in interstate commerce) and involved in a complicated series of legal disputes over bail and extradition.

His travel severely restricted by court order, some of his phone conversations admittedly monitored by the FBI, Brown curtailed public appearances.

Working in his apartment near Seventh Avenue in Harlem, he wrote an autobiography, "Die, Nigger, Die," which is proving to be a big seller. The book, for which Brown said he received a $15,000 advance, has sold 80,000 copies, according to Dial Press — 60,000 in a paperback edition released only last January.

Although replaced as SNCC chairman in mid-1968 by Philip Hutchings of Newark, N.J., Brown has remained the organization's primary spokesman and strategist.

Commenting on the automobile explosion that killed two SNCC workers near Bel Air, Md., Monday Congressman John Conyers (D-Mich.) said last week:

"Had Rap Brown been in that car it would have opened the door to an incredible kind of confrontation across the country."