

6

THE PREACHER AND THE ORGANIZER THE POLITICS OF LEADERSHIP IN THE EARLY CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT

.

The Negro must quit looking for a savior, and work to save himself.

Ella Baker, 1947

*Leadership never ascends from the pew to the pulpit,
but . . . descends from the pulpit to the pew.*

Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., 1954

Ella Baker traveled to the South in January 1957, as a representative of In Friendship, along with her colleague Bayard Rustin, to help organize the founding meeting of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), an organization that sought to spread across the South the seeds of rebellion that had germinated in Montgomery. Baker was deeply committed to that goal, yet right from the start she had serious reservations about the way in which SCLC was organized and how it approached the task of propagating the movement.

Baker welcomed the political developments that occurred in Montgomery in 1955–56 as the beginning of what she hoped would become a new wave of activism for black freedom based on a strategy of grassroots mass mobilization. She had learned from her work with the NAACP, both in the South and in Harlem, that any viable social change organization had to be built from the bottom up. “Authentic” leadership could not come from the outside or above; rather, the people who were most oppressed had to take direct action to change their circumstances. At best, national organizations could offer activists the resources that they lacked: financial support, media attention, and political education. During her years as a field organizer

for the NAACP, Baker had realized—as the national leadership consistently did not—that the branches were the essence of the organization’s strength. Although the NAACP had been founded in the early twentieth century by northern social reformers and intellectuals, since World War II it had been transformed into a membership organization under whose name activists organized locally in cities and small towns across the South, as well as in northern cities whose black populations were swelling as the Great Migration continued. The national NAACP’s persistent inability, or determined refusal, to reinvent itself in the image of its changing mass base was at the core of Baker’s frustration with the organization throughout the late 1940s and early 1950s.

The new black freedom struggle that had ignited a spark in the South in the mid-1950s had the potential to fulfill Baker’s ideal of a truly democratic organization. The Montgomery boycott began not with a convention of prominent race leaders, as the NAACP had, but because masses of ordinary people had gotten in motion. Veteran NAACP organizer Rosa Parks initiated a calculated protest action on her own, and a small network of activists followed up with phone calls and leaflets to publicize what she was doing. Those with official leadership status were then called on to convene a meeting to plan a more organized response. Women, who Baker believed were the “backbone” of the movement, were critical actors. Joanne Gibson Robinson of the Women’s Political Council had helped launch the boycott, and black domestic workers, many of whom walked long distances to work to support the protest, had been indispensable. Baker believed that the most effective leaders were ones who emerged directly out of struggle. She was delighted that instead of working through the NAACP, which eschewed mass action, Montgomery’s activists formed a new, autonomous, and democratic organization, the Montgomery Improvement Association (MIA).¹

In 1957 the U.S. Supreme Court declared enforced segregation on public busses to be unconstitutional; it thereby delivered a high-profile victory to the Montgomery struggle and gave high-profile status to its most eloquent spokesman, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Ella Baker was most impressed with the rank-and-file activism that had emerged during the bus boycott, and she worked to provide moral support and material assistance to those involved. The eyes of the world, however, were focused on Martin Luther King Jr., the eloquent young minister who had become the leading spokesperson for the campaign. Baker’s initial impressions of King were positive. She recounted to an interviewer decades later that the first time she heard King speak, she was literally “carried away.”² He was earnest and articu-

late, and he struck Baker as less pompous than some of the ministers she had encountered.³ Baker knew that King came from a prominent family in Atlanta and could have followed in his father's footsteps rather than taking the risks that political activism entailed. She respected him for choosing a different path and trying to make a contribution to the movement. At the same time, King's sudden fame did not sit right with Baker, especially given his youth and inexperience. Moreover, he did not seem to want to learn about the process of organizing, at least not from her.

Seasoned political veterans like Ella Baker, many of whom moved in and out of organizations and coalitions depending on existing opportunities and pragmatic tactical considerations, were used to navigating personalities and negotiating ideological differences. However, as her relationship with King and SCLC wore on, issues of organization and leadership took on heightened significance in Baker's mind. In the historiography of the modern Black Freedom Movement, scholars have drawn a line between charismatic leadership models and grassroots activist ones, with a parallel distinction made between mobilizing (for big events) and actually organizing communities to feel empowered to assess their own needs and fight their own battles.⁴ The tensions between these two models of movement building were apparent in Montgomery during the boycott, and they persisted in SCLC as it evolved. Still, Baker was willing to devote herself to the organization, its limitations notwithstanding, to see what could be accomplished. She was even willing to serve as a provisional, rather than permanent, member of the SCLC staff. Her conflicted relationship with Martin Luther King Jr. turned on such questions as leadership and organization, especially the proper roles of national spokespersons and local participants in mass-based struggles. Baker's involvement in SCLC was, from its inception, shaped by pervasive tensions and fundamental contradictions.

.

FORMING THE SOUTHERN CHRISTIAN LEADERSHIP CONFERENCE

In the wake of the victory in Montgomery, an informal network of activist ministers began to take shape. Some had carried out similar protests on a smaller scale in their home states, such as T. J. Jemison in Baton Rouge, Louisiana. Many others had been in touch with King during and after the boycott, as events in Montgomery attracted media attention. Baker had developed her own contacts with the new crop of southern activists through In Friendship, adding to the independent network of militant NAACP organizers she had maintained since the previous decade. Most of these activ-

ists felt greater loyalty to their local struggles and to itinerant organizers like Baker than to any single national or regional organization. The problem facing King, Baker, and other civil rights organizers was that there was no formal organization, national or regional, that could link these various individuals and disparate local groups together and sustain and extend the movement after the Montgomery boycott ended in December 1956.

The idea for a regionwide organization like SCLC germinated in different quarters simultaneously. As Baker herself understood, this idea could not have been traced directly to a single source. Naturally, King and his ministerial colleagues in the South were strategizing about what their next steps should be and how to coordinate their efforts. But they were not the only ones having such conversations. By some accounts, the trio that directed *In Friendship* laid out a blueprint for SCLC in a series of intense late-night conversations in New York. According to Adam Fairclough, “SCLC might not have come into being but for the political foresight of three northern radicals: Bayard Rustin, Stanley David Levison, and Ella Jo Baker.”⁵ Baker recalled that she and her two New York colleagues spent many hours discussing ways that movement leaders might “enlarge upon the gains of the Montgomery bus boycott.”⁶ Rustin and Levison relayed the content of those discussions to King and other ministers involved in the southern civil rights movement, urging them to call a regional meeting to discuss the idea further.⁷ These various efforts gave birth to SCLC. Certainly, activists in Alabama and Georgia did not need New York “experts” to tell them how to mobilize a campaign. Nevertheless, these connections underline the fact that the civil rights movement was not organized in isolation from veteran activists such as Baker, Levison, and Rustin, whose long histories in other progressive struggles dated back to the 1930s.

During the months leading up to and following the victory in Montgomery, Bayard Rustin and Stanley David Levison had become two of Martin Luther King Jr.’s closest advisers. They helped garner important resources for MIA and SCLC and offered tactical and strategic advice, earning them King’s trust and friendship. Neither Rustin nor Levison played a very public role, but both were in King’s inner circle of confidantes. Interestingly, but not surprisingly, their close friend Ella Baker was not. She was certainly as politically sophisticated, articulate, and astute as her male counterparts, and she had twenty years of political experience in the South as well as the North. Yet King kept Baker at arm’s length and never treated her as a political or intellectual peer. As Baker later put it: “After all, who was I? I was female, I was old. I didn’t have any Ph.D.”⁸ Furthermore, she ex-

plained, she was “not loathe to raise questions. I did not just subscribe to a theory just because it came out of the mouth of the leader.”⁹ She “was not the kind of person that made special effort to be ingratiating.”¹⁰ She was well aware, by the mid-1950s, that her forthrightness in the face of authority carried a certain price, limiting her acceptance by those in positions of official power, but it was a price she was willing to pay in order to think and act according to her conscience.

Baker speculated that Levison’s influence over King stemmed from his capacity to raise money and tap resources and that Rustin was most adept at helping King to hone his ideas and garner greater publicity. Baker concluded cynically that “persons who were in a position to provide both financial aid and public relations assistance to the furtherance of the organization or the furtherance of the career of the president [of SCLC] would be certainly high on the list of acceptable advisors.”¹¹ Rustin and Levison were both great admirers of King, and they were as eager to see him ascend as the leader of the movement as they were to see the movement itself grow. They differed with Baker in this respect. In all fairness, King’s relationship with Rustin and Levison does not appear to have been as pragmatic and opportunistic as Baker’s comments implied. There was an intellectual and philosophical bond and seemingly genuine camaraderie among the three men. Simply put, it was probably King’s sexist attitudes toward women, at least in part, that prevented him from having the same kind of collegial relationship with Baker.¹²

The founding meeting of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference took place in Atlanta at Dr. Martin Luther King Sr.’s Ebenezer Baptist Church on January 10, 1957. Ministers from nearly a dozen southern states gathered under the banner of the Southern Leadership Conference on Transportation and Nonviolent Integration. Ella Baker worked with Bayard Rustin to draft statements that framed the issues and set the agenda for the meeting.¹³ The new organization was planned from the outset to be a loosely structured coalition linking church-based leaders in civil rights struggles across the South. It was decidedly not a membership organization so as not to appear to compete with the NAACP, which may have initially taken the edge off the rivalry, but did not eliminate it.

Just as the group was convening, the seriousness of their undertaking was driven home by a night of violent attacks in Montgomery, targeting leaders of the new organization. The home of Rev. Ralph Abernathy, a leader of the boycott who was a close colleague of King, was firebombed while his wife, Juanita, and their young daughter were inside; fortunately,

no one was seriously hurt. While Abernathy was on the phone with his wife, several other explosions rocked the city, hitting churches and the home of Rev. Robert S. Graetz, a white MIA supporter. Abernathy immediately left Atlanta for Montgomery. A sober determination informed the remainder of the discussions held that weekend.

By the meeting's conclusion, the group decided to emphasize nonviolence as a means of bringing about social progress and racial justice for southern blacks; the new organization would rely on the southern black church for its base of support.¹⁴ The strength of SCLC rested on the political activities of its local church affiliates. By giving church activists a sense of connection to one another and by infusing an explicitly political message into the black theology of the 1950s, SCLC envisioned itself as the "political arm of the black church," according to the sociologist Aldon Morris.¹⁵ However they viewed themselves, King and his colleagues represented an activist minority within the politically heterogeneous black church. The majority of black ministers in the 1950s still opted for a safer, less confrontational political path. This was especially true in the climate of the 1950s when any form of dissent was equated with communism and social, if not legal, sanctions were possible.

Despite their embrace of activism, King and the SCLC ministers still defined their political goals squarely within the respectable American mainstream and were cautious about any leftist associations.¹⁶ This was conscious and strategic. They wanted to pose a challenge to white America: "We are law-abiding, God-fearing citizens, now give us our rights." King's stance would change as he and the movement evolved over the ensuing years.¹⁷

The Atlanta group met as the Southern Leadership Conference on Transportation and Nonviolent Integration; it later changed its name to the Southern Christian Leadership Conference. The choice of the new organization's name is a subtle indicator of the Cold War ethos that permeated black politics, as it did white society, during the 1950s. The decision to include Christian in the group's name was not simply an affirmation of people's faith that God was on their side but also a conscious effort to deflect any allegations of communist infiltration or influence, since the materialist worldview of communists meant that they were assumed to be atheists.¹⁸

The cultivated image of a "good citizen"—elegantly clad, well spoken, and generally well educated—was an important marker of respectability for the ministerial leaders that came together to form SCLC. Once it was decided that the new coalition would be an extension of the church, a patriarchal ethos took over. Neither Rosa Parks nor Joanne Gibson Robin-

son nor any of the women who had sacrificed so much to ensure the Montgomery boycott's success were invited to play a leadership role in the new organization. Daisy Bates was eventually given a nominal seat on the board, but, according to Baker, she never was very active. Baker felt that her own involvement was tolerated more than it was appreciated. "Someone's got to run the mimeographing machine," she later observed, only half-joking.¹⁹

The founders of SCLC were concerned primarily, but not exclusively, about access to the ballot box and dignified treatment in public accommodations. But theirs was a world apart from the lives of destitute sharecroppers and their families who constituted a considerable portion of the South's black population—people who could barely afford the fare to ride on public transportation even after desegregation. It was this group that Baker worried most about. After she left Atlanta on January 11, she spent the next five days traveling around rural Mississippi meeting and talking with landless and unemployed black farmers about the painful conditions of their lives. She stayed with Amzie and Ruth Moore and kept a careful journal of the families she met, what their names were, how they lived, how many children they had. This heart-wrenching reconnaissance effort was an attempt to identify families in need of In Friendship's support. Baker soon realized that In Friendship would be hard pressed to make a real distinction between families who were victims of political reprisals and those who were victims of economic violence, pure and simple, since such violence saturated the social and political landscape of the rural South.²⁰ They resigned themselves to provide aid wherever they could without trying to discern whether the need was purely economic or primarily a result of political activity.

The Southern Christian Leadership Conference first stepped on the national political stage as an organization at the Prayer Pilgrimage for Freedom held at the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, D.C., on May 17, 1957, the third anniversary of the *Brown* decision. And Ella Baker was once again instrumental in pulling off a successful large-scale event. Roy Wilkins, Martin Luther King Jr., and A. Philip Randolph were co-chairs of the pilgrimage, which was intended to expose to the nation the crime of racial injustice. Organizers billed it "as a protest to the bombings and violence in the South."²¹ As the planning began, there were palpable tensions between the NAACP and the newly formed SCLC, which the association's national leaders saw as a rival attempting to duplicate or interfere with its ongoing, successful work for civil rights. Once again, the esteemed labor leader

A. Philip Randolph served as peacemaker, bringing Wilkins, the head of the NAACP and Ella Baker's longtime friend and former colleague, to join him and King on a three-man leadership committee for the pilgrimage. Ella Baker and Bayard Rustin were the two staff organizers for the event, coordinating communications and doing the day-to-day logistical work necessary to plan the gathering.

The patriotic and religious tenor of the event underscored SCLC's mainstream political orientation. The slogans and statements surrounding the demonstration were carefully selected to present an image of the resurgent civil rights movement as respectable and nonthreatening. Anticommunism was so pervasive that any type of protest was immediately vulnerable to red-baiting. The NAACP had already caved in to these pressures by establishing a formal policy of exclusion. According to an FBI informant who was surreptitiously spying on her, Baker was indeed worried that certain individuals in New York were trying to "stack the delegation with communists."²² After the event, Rustin and Baker responded defensively to allegations of communist participation. Their response to an *Amsterdam News* article did not even entertain the possibility that such exclusion might be unfair. Rustin and Baker cited a copy of the call for the pilgrimage to the press, tacitly endorsing its Cold War politics: "The Prayer Pilgrimage for Freedom will be a spiritual assembly, primarily by the Negro clergy, and the NAACP. In such an assembly, there will be no place for the irreligious. . . . No communists have been or will be invited to participate in the program either as a speaker, singer, prayer leader, or scripture leader. . . . The Official Call, issued on April 5, 1957, invites all who love justice and dignity and liberty, who love their country, to join in a Prayer Pilgrimage to Washington on May 17, 1957."²³

The Prayer Pilgrimage for Freedom drew a crowd of between 25,000 and 30,000 to the Lincoln Memorial.²⁴ It is difficult to quantify the success of such campaigns. However, President Eisenhower did accede to a request that he meet with civil rights leaders soon thereafter, and the rather tepid Civil Rights Act of 1957 was signed into law in August, eventually putting into place a Civil Rights Commission, which was authorized to review and investigate voting rights abuses.

Ella Baker's work as one of the two staff organizers for the pilgrimage is a graphic illustration of her ability to straddle organizational divides, deliberately ignoring and minimizing rivalries and ideological battles that sometimes raged all around her. Even though she was still on the payroll of In Friendship, which had close ties to SCLC, she worked out of the NAACP

national office on 40th Street in New York. And while she worked in the same office with her old colleague Roy Wilkins, who could barely contain his hostility and resentment toward King, she would only six months later, without seemingly missing a beat or proffering an explanation, accept an offer to work with King's organization in Atlanta on a full-time basis. Essentially, Baker refused to take sides: when there were no fundamental principles at stake, she did not take territorial claims or ego wounds too seriously—instead she seemed to almost float above it all. She indeed had criticisms of both SCLC and the NAACP and of both King and Wilkins. At any given moment as the flurry of activities in the late 1950s was about to feed into the frenetic pace of the 1960s, Baker's organizational affiliations were often unclear. Having been instrumental in the founding of SCLC in January 1957, Baker remained active in the New York NAACP branch and school reform struggle led by Parents in Action and other New York-based groups unaffiliated with the NAACP like In Friendship. It was all a part of the same drama in Ella Baker's mind, with different characters (all of them slightly flawed) engaged in different plots and subplots, but they were performing on the same political stage and had to coordinate with one another. She was clearly in the mind-set of building a movement rather than any one organization.

After the pilgrimage, Baker returned to New York, where she, Rustin, and Levison continued to discuss ways of sustaining the momentum of protests in the South. Following a few months of floundering, SCLC decided to launch its own independent campaign, the Crusade for Citizenship, a nationwide voting rights project they scheduled to kick off in February 1958. Hoping to capitalize on the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1957, SCLC leaders planned a sustained mobilization that would gain national attention for voting rights and for the embryonic organization. The goal of the Crusade for Citizenship was to double the number of black voters in the South and to "challenge blacks to take on the responsibilities of fighting for their rights."²⁵ The campaign's letterhead proclaimed that "the franchise is a citizen's right . . . not a privilege."²⁶ Designed to put black voter rights on the national political agenda, the campaign was also meant to simultaneously mobilize masses of ordinary African Americans against Jim Crow. For a brand-new civil rights organization, the project was breathtakingly ambitious in its scope, although still relatively moderate in the political tack and tone it took.

The leaders of SCLC had crafted the concept of a new campaign, but the organization had no infrastructure, including the material and human re-

sources necessary to move a campaign forward. By January 1958, Rustin and Levison realized that SCLC's plans for the new crusade were in serious trouble, and they doubted that the group had the personnel and tactical know-how to actually make it happen. The campaign was scheduled to start on February 12, Abraham Lincoln's birthday. The kick-off had already been delayed once because plans were not in place, so this date was firm. But SCLC desperately needed to bring someone on board who had the political sophistication and organizational abilities required to make the necessary arrangements in a very short period of time. Levison and Rustin immediately thought of Ella Baker. Baker certainly had the requisite skills and experience, and she was available. She had separated from her husband, Bob, and her niece, Jackie, was almost nineteen, so, as she later put it, she did not have "any encumbrances" to prevent her from taking on this challenge.²⁷

There had been some discussion about the possibility of having Bayard Rustin serve as the executive director of SCLC. After all, he knew the organization, had worked closely with King since the Montgomery bus boycott, could bring considerable organizing experience to the task, and certainly had the commitment. However, given his sexual orientation and the social conservatism and homophobia of the church leaders he would be working closely with, which was compounded by the narrow-minded snobbery of Atlanta's black middle class, he was not a tenable candidate for the job.²⁸ In retrospect, Baker explained that "Bayard was not prepared, nor could his lifestyle have stood the test of going down there and being the person from up here to stay in Atlanta and help to get things going, because Atlanta had not reached that point where a certain lifestyle was accepted."²⁹ This remark hints at how Baker may have felt about Rustin's homosexuality. She always chose her words and deployed her language carefully. By describing the attitudes of black Atlantans as not having reached a certain point of acceptance, she implied that she had reached that point and that others should do so as well. She could have described Rustin's behavior in a negative light or as a flaw or weakness in an otherwise good character, as many of his other friends and contemporaries did, but she did not.

Rustin and Levison agreed that Baker would be the ideal person to organize the Crusade for Citizenship. She had built up a network of contacts throughout the South through her work as a field organizer for the NAACP.³⁰ She had the political know-how and social skills to work with all types of people, from proper, middle-class church members to uneducated sharecroppers. Perhaps most significantly, Baker was a skilled organizer

and was well connected. These talents were exactly what SCLC needed to pull off the Crusade for Citizenship within the tight timeline that had been projected.

Levison and Rustin persuaded King to hire Baker as SCLC's first full-time staff member. The three men met at New York's La Guardia Airport while King was on a travel layover.³¹ King was initially reluctant to hire Baker, because he had a different profile of the type of person who should share the leadership role with him at the helm of the coalition. King indicated that he did not personally believe that the director had to be a minister, but he recognized that many of his clerical colleagues strongly held that conviction. Of course, choosing a minister also meant that the director must be a man. These preferences notwithstanding, there were few other options at that juncture, and King's two advisers were adamant.

King agreed to hire Baker on a temporary basis, until a more suitable permanent director could be found. She was hired not as a field organizer to work with grassroots activists but as the primary—and sometimes the only—staff member for a fragile and sometimes fractious coalition of clergymen led by Martin Luther King Jr. It was not an ideal arrangement. Still, Rustin and Levison could not imagine that Baker would say no, so they did not bother to discuss the particulars with her before making the pitch to King that she be hired. Ultimately, they were right. But Baker did not like the idea of anyone making decisions for her, even friends who knew her as well as Levison and Rustin did: “To be drafted in the sense of having it be said that I would go when I hadn't been consulted . . . I suppose in that aspect of it, my ego is easily touched; not to ask me what to do but to designate me to do something without even consulting me.” The situation, it seemed to her, “was a bit presumptuous” and insulting.³²

The way in which Baker was recruited to work for SCLC was oddly reminiscent of her sudden and surprising appointment as the NAACP's director of branches in 1943. Nevertheless, she accepted the job with King's organization, just as she had accepted Walter White's unilateral decision to promote her in 1943. She agreed to join the SCLC staff because, for her, politics were more important than protocol. She felt strongly that the movement was at a critical crossroads; there was a lot at stake—or at least great potential. While Baker did not appreciate the way in which she was asked to go to Atlanta, she was thrilled by the opportunity to get closer to the action. So, she packed her bags and headed south for what she thought would be another short-term stint, but which turned out to be a much more extended one.

Ella Baker arrived in Atlanta in mid-January 1958, seven months after the Prayer Pilgrimage, to begin her work at SCLC headquarters. But the organization had a headquarters in name only. When Baker arrived there was no office, no phone, and no other staff. "I had to function out of a telephone booth and my pocketbook," she recalled.³³ "Nobody had made any provisions for space, hadn't even thought about it. . . . I had assumed that certainly we might have been able to function with some degree of sustained effort out of the church office of Ebenezer Baptist Church since the Rev. Dr. King, Sr. was the father of the Rev. Dr. King, Jr., but this was not provided for in the full sense."³⁴ Baker had to use the mimeograph machine and other office equipment at the church in the evening, after the regular office staff had gone home. It was a frustrating situation, and her ties with other Atlanta activists were all that kept her sane. Eventually, Rev. Samuel Williams, another minister affiliated with SCLC, secured office space on Auburn Avenue, and Baker purchased enough furniture and supplies to set up shop. This modest headquarters became the permanent home of the new organization.

Baker knew her position with SCLC would be a challenge. When she uprooted herself from her home in New York and migrated to the South in the winter of 1958, she was guardedly optimistic about the new organization. Given the broad-based support that had been mobilized around the bus boycott, Baker hoped that SCLC would be able to galvanize the aspirations of the masses of African American people and ignite the kind of movement that would empower them to transform their lives, their communities, and the nation. Yet she knew from the outset that the philosophy, structure, and leadership of SCLC would be problematic for her, and she suspected that ultimately the new organization might itself become a barrier to carrying out the localized, broad-based work that she envisioned.

Baker worked feverishly from mid-January to February 12 to make the ambitiously conceived Crusade for Citizenship a relative success. She tried to infuse it with her own political meanings and recapture the spirit of rank-and-file activism that had defined the earlier boycott. Some time later, in a report to SCLC's Administrative Committee, Baker secularized the term, insisting that "the word crusade connotes, for me, a vigorous movement, with high purpose and involving masses of people."³⁵

Events were scheduled to kick off in twenty-one cities on the same day. Baker wrote letters, flyers, and press releases to promote these events. She made extensive phone calls to build support for the campaign, identify and coordinate activities, and make sure all the necessary logistics were in

place. Within a few weeks she had a roster of speakers lined up for the rallies, including a few prominent national leaders such as Adam Clayton Powell Jr.³⁶ Securing Powell's support was particularly important, since some other national leaders were reluctant to affiliate openly with SCLC. Taylor Branch, one of King's biographers, points out that such key national figures as Lester Granger and Ralph Bunche declined to endorse the Crusade for Citizenship campaign because they wanted to remain nonpartisan in what appeared to be, and in fact was, a rivalry between the SCLC and the NAACP.³⁷

The Crusade for Citizenship was a pivotal test for the new coalition, the first major regionwide campaign for which it sought to obtain national support and public attention. Initially, SCLC had been very careful to avoid stepping on the political toes of other organizations, most notably the NAACP. The Prayer Pilgrimage was a single event in which SCLC shared the spotlight with the NAACP and organized labor. In contrast, the crusade was being launched by SCLC and its local affiliates and was planned as a sustained mobilization. With this campaign, the embryonic SCLC began to encroach upon the turf of established civil rights groups.

The hard work that went into launching the Crusade for Citizenship paid off, although not to the degree that Baker or her SCLC colleagues had hoped. Ironically, even though the crusade went forward without the NAACP's official endorsement or practical support, it was Ella Baker's NAACP contacts in cities and towns throughout the South who helped her to mobilize a respectable turnout on February 12. The day was marked by church rallies, press conferences, and prayer vigils in nearly two dozen cities. It was a modest beginning that could form the base for future actions. Although King had hired Baker somewhat reluctantly, he had to admit that she worked tirelessly and selflessly on the campaign.³⁸

Since Ella Baker's style of political work placed more emphasis on process than on singular, dramatic events, she understood that follow-up activities would be even more important than the kick-off itself. After returning to New York City to get her affairs in order, Baker returned to Atlanta, agreeing to spend some additional time working to build on the contacts she had made and the expectations that had arisen out of the February 12 mobilization. Ever the field organizer, she was not satisfied by her phone contacts with the various SCLC affiliates, so she packed her bags and traveled around the region speaking at local meetings and conferences and conducting workshops to promote and help initiate local civil rights campaigns in the spring and early summer of 1958.³⁹ The strategy of SCLC was

to encourage massive voter registration, working through local affiliate organizations, and to document and report all instances of harassment or interference with blacks attempting to exercise the ballot. The campaign did make some inroads.

Historian Adam Fairclough presents the Crusade for Citizenship campaign as a major shift in the organization's strategy: "No sooner had SCLC formed than it switched its focus [from nonviolent direct action] to voter registration" in an opportunistic response to the passage of the 1957 Civil Rights Act.⁴⁰ Perhaps for some neophyte activists the shift from nonviolent direct action for integration to political organizing for voting rights was indeed a major one. For Baker, however, this strategic move was more complex. Drawing on the lessons she had gleaned during her NAACP days, she knew there had to be a catalyst for collective action. The everyday routines of racism inspired spontaneous individual acts of resistance, but these were usually limited responses. Sustained, concerted action required a more proactive stance, grassroots organizing, and a focus. For Baker, legislative victories were opportunities for organizing, not ends unto themselves. She saw the Civil Rights Act of 1957, although pathetically weak in its enforcement capacity, as providing an opportunity to draw national attention to the shame of southern racism and the undemocratic, racial exclusion that dominated the political process. Equally important, the Civil Rights Act could become a focal point for mobilizing local communities. Organizing people to testify at hearings was a way to embolden local leaders and prospective activists; it also served to challenge local elites in a public arena to defend practices that had long been shielded by silence from outside scrutiny and pressure. For Baker, mobilizing for voter registration campaigns, documenting the establishment's corruption that undermined such campaigns, and forcing the hand of the otherwise impotent Civil Rights Commission would inevitably lead to direct action. Given the realities of white vigilante violence in the South at the moment when Jim Crow was facing a major challenge, Baker also recognized that direct action might not always remain nonviolent.

.

GENDER INEQUITY WITHIN THE MOVEMENT

Ella Baker launched SCLC's Crusade for Citizenship with a greater margin of success than one might have expected given the time and resource constraints, demonstrating that she had the skills and commitment the nascent organization required. Yet Baker felt that she was never seriously

considered for the job of permanent executive director. At one meeting, a minister from Nashville proposed that Baker be considered as a candidate for the job, but his suggestion fell on deaf ears. “The officialdom didn’t take it seriously,” Baker recalled.⁴¹ The attitudes that King and other ministerial leaders of the SCLC held toward Baker were not unique to her situation; rather, they were a manifestation of the larger problem of sexism within the church, the organization, and the culture. By this time, Baker was well aware that the SCLC ministers were not ready to welcome her into the organization on an equal footing. That would be to go too far afield from the gender relations they were used to in the church. Baker observed that “the role of women in the southern church . . . was that of doing the things that the minister said he wanted to have done. It was not one in which they were credited with having creativity and initiative and capacity to carry out things.”⁴² While Baker may have slightly overstated her case—women did have some power and agency—the basic point still had a great deal of merit.

Clearly, women were instrumental forces in the church, but male leaders seldom fully acknowledged women’s power and often attempted to limit the authority women exercised.⁴³ Many of Baker’s male colleagues, like their counterparts in white society, viewed women as subordinates and helpmates. Even though African American women have historically worked both inside and outside the home and engaged in public, political activity, the culture that prevailed in the 1950s, especially among the black middle class, as among their white counterparts, emphasized the primacy of women’s domestic roles.⁴⁴ According to Baker, the majority of the ministers in SCLC wanted to relate to women in this very limited capacity. They were most comfortable talking to women about “how well they cooked, and how beautiful they looked,” she complained.⁴⁵ Baker’s deliberate avoidance of conventional femininity made a number of her male clerical colleagues rather uneasy. “I wasn’t a fashion plate,” she remarked, “[and] I made no bones about not being a fashion plate.”⁴⁶ More importantly, “I did not hesitate in voicing my opinion and . . . it was not a comforting sort of presence that I presented.”⁴⁷ The conditions under which she worked, especially the sexist and often dismissive treatment she endured from her male co-workers, annoyed and offended Baker. Some days she could barely justify persevering in such an adverse situation.⁴⁸ “I live to serve” was the tongue-in-cheek way that Baker once described herself to a cousin.⁴⁹ This sarcastic statement had a sad ring of truth.

The work that Ella Baker and other women did for SCLC was consistently

undervalued. As the organization grew and additional female staffers were hired, Baker protested that these women were taken for granted and treated unfairly as well.⁵⁰ A rhetoric of racial equality marked the public pronouncements of SCLC leaders, while old hierarchies based on gender inequities endured within their ranks. Baker refused to accept the situation in silence. She criticized ministerial leaders who came to meetings late and left early, disregarding the inconveniences they caused for the female clerical staff. They expected the women workers to cater to them, Baker complained.⁵¹ Although she never publicly named names, Baker also alluded to unprincipled sexual behavior on the part of some male ministers involved in the movement. She confided to one researcher that certain SCLC ministers would come into the office in the afternoon “after spending the morning at some sister’s house doing what they shouldn’t have been doing . . . you see, I know too many stories.”⁵² The ministers’ arrogant assumption that they stood above the moral rules they preached to others cost them Baker’s respect as ministers and as men.

Despite her frustrations and resentments, Ella Baker assisted SCLC leaders in recruiting, screening, and selecting candidates for the executive director post, which they had tacitly deemed her unqualified to fill. She approached several prospective candidates with whom she had worked in the past. John Tilley, who was hired as executive director, was among them. Tilley was a Shaw alumnus and the pastor of a church in Baltimore.⁵³ Baker thought he was a good candidate because he “had a clear voice and good thinking” and some political experience in Baltimore.⁵⁴ Baker and Stanley Levison met with Tilley at an ice cream parlor in Harlem to discuss the organization and the job.⁵⁵ When King met Tilley, he was impressed and agreed to bring him on as the new executive director in May 1958.

The first SCLC meeting after Tilley joined the staff took place in Clarksdale, Mississippi, that same month. The gathering was well attended by some 200 delegates, indicating that in many places the organization’s work was gaining support.⁵⁶ Convening the group in Mississippi was a bold gesture. Mississippi was so well known for antiblack violence that for many southerners it served as a symbol of the crudest and most brutal brand of white racism. Mississippi continued to hold that distinction as the civil rights movement progressed. It was in Mississippi that young Emmett Till had been murdered only three years earlier. It was in Mississippi that three young civil rights workers—Andrew Goodman, Michael Schwerner, and James Chaney—would be ambushed and murdered in 1964. And it was in Jackson, Mississippi, that Medgar Evers, a state NAACP leader who partici-

pated in this SCLC meeting, would be assassinated in his own driveway in 1963. But on the weekend of May 29, 1958, the town of Clarksdale was the site of something hopeful: serious discussions, debates, and strategy sessions about the future direction of the Black Freedom Movement.

Baker went to Clarksdale a few days early to help set up for the meeting.⁵⁷ She was optimistic that things were finally coming together for the new coalition. A permanent director was in place; local NAACP leaders such as Evers had agreed to attend the meeting, despite tensions between SCLC and the national NAACP office; and there were sparks of activity in several cities.⁵⁸ The participation of Evers and Aaron Henry, a fellow NAACP activist, reflected the willingness of NAACP leaders at the state and local level to work with whatever forces were in motion on the ground, often in direct opposition to national directives.⁵⁹ The men and women under attack in the South did not always subscribe to the grandiose objectives and long-term strategies of the national offices and high-level leaders of the organizations with which they worked. Medgar Evers and Aaron Henry never fully agreed with the decision by the NAACP leaders in New York not to form alliances with other civil rights groups, and both men worked closely with SCLC and other groups on particular campaigns.⁶⁰ Baker was pleased with the outcome of the 1958 Clarksdale meeting.⁶¹ She hoped Tilley would be a hands-on leader who would expand the base of supporters beyond the church and embrace some of the more militant community-based leaders, both secular and church-related. Toward that end, she invited him to stay on in Mississippi for a few days after the Clarksdale meeting and familiarize himself with the work Amzie and Ruth Moore were doing in Cleveland, Mississippi, which he did. But even putting Tilley in contact with some of the most embattled freedom fighters in the South could not reinvigorate the coalition.⁶²

The internal problems of SCLC continued after the meeting in Clarksdale. Tilley did not prove to be the stabilizing force that Baker and King had hoped for. Rev. Tilley continued to head his congregation in Baltimore after assuming his new responsibilities in Atlanta, and he was unable to combine or balance these two demanding positions. His commuting back and forth took its toll on Tilley and on the SCLC's work. In less than a year, King was forced to fire him. Again, by default, Baker was asked to take over as acting or interim director; both titles were used.

Internal problems were compounded by external crises. In September 1958, while Martin Luther King Jr. was on a speaking tour to promote his new book, *Stride toward Freedom*, he was stabbed by a mentally ill woman

in Harlem, within walking distance of Baker's apartment on 135th Street. Ella was in town at the time, trying to recover from her own health problems. Suffering from acute back pain, she was stretched out on her living room floor when she heard the shocking news of King's stabbing on the radio.⁶³ Baker immediately rushed to the hospital to see what she could do to help. King survived the attack, but his recuperation took months. Once again, Baker had to pick up the slack. She filled in for King as a speaker on several occasions, answered his correspondence, explained his incapacitation, and served as publicist and accountant for the sale of his book, a job she did not relish.

After a year of hard labor in the SCLC's trenches, Baker was disappointed that so little had been achieved in terms of regionwide coordinated work. She blamed the clerical leaders. They had not given her the resources necessary to run an office or a campaign efficiently. She had to beg for a working mimeograph machine, an air conditioner in the summer, and secretarial help. She then had to deal with the added frustration of King's veto power within the organization. Nothing could be done, she complained, without his approval.⁶⁴ And, to add insult to injury, she was saddled with the responsibility of all promotions of and sales for King's book. Still, Baker did not see too many other political options for herself in 1958–59, especially if she wanted to be based in a black southern community, which she did. So, she persevered.

Baker's 1958 report to the Administrative Committee of SCLC reflected the goals that she would fight to implement throughout her tenure. Baker urged her SCLC colleagues to develop programs for mass action and to target women for activist campaigns. She specifically called for the formation of youth and action teams to help ignite the work. This report was her effort to rally the troops, but the results were modest. Everyone nodded and continued on as they had before. Without support from the principal decision makers in the organization, there was little Baker could do.⁶⁵

On some level, she and the ministers—at least the core of them—were not too far apart in the kind of action they envisioned, but together they could not seem to make it happen. Historian Glenn T. Eskew suggests that Baker was at least in part to blame. He even sees the growing “cult of personality” surrounding King as partly due to the absence of a sustained mass-based campaign, a campaign Baker was responsible for getting off the ground. For Baker, the inverse was true. King's larger-than-life persona inhibited the emergence of local struggles and local leaders.

In December 1958, at the third annual Montgomery Improvement Asso-

ciation Institute on Nonviolence, the program theme was “A Testimonial to Dr. King’s Leadership.” Taylor Branch maintains that “[t]o Ella Baker, frustrated by SCLC’s bare solvency and its paralyzed registration campaign, this sort of activity was not mere froth but a harmful end in itself.” She asked King directly why he allowed such hero worship, and he responded simply that it was what people wanted.⁶⁶ This answer did not satisfy Baker in the least.

Baker felt that SCLC’s increasing reliance on King’s celebrity and charisma had all sorts of hidden dangers. Less polished leaders were likely to receive less recognition and might become disaffected from the struggle. For example, E. D. Nixon, the labor and civil rights activist who played a pivotal role in the Montgomery bus boycott, resented the way that an outsider eclipsed local leaders. In a 1958 letter to a friend, Nixon complained bitterly about King’s fame and his own diminished stature in the movement. It is disheartening, he explained, “when people give all recognition to one because of his academic training and forge[t] other[s] who do not have that kind of training but are making a worthwhile contribution.”⁶⁷ Furthermore, no one person could possibly meet the needs of a growing and increasingly complex movement. Even leaders who were motivated by high ideals rather than personal ambition and adopted a humble rather than top-down style had to make way for many others to assume leadership roles. According to Baker, organizations had to alter their very concept of leadership: “Instead of the leader as a person who was supposed to be a magic man, you could develop individuals who were bound together by a concept that benefited the larger number of individuals and provided an opportunity for them to grow into being responsible for carrying out a program.”⁶⁸

Ella Baker believed that all their lives poor black people had been spoon-fed the notion that the key to their emancipation was something external to themselves: ostensibly benevolent masters, enlightened legislators, or skillful and highly educated lawyers. Such dependency reinforced poor people’s sense of helplessness, Baker felt. Her message was quite the opposite. “Strong people don’t need strong leaders,” she argued.⁶⁹ In Baker’s view, oppressed people did not need a messiah to deliver them from oppression; all they needed was themselves, one another, and the will to persevere. The clerical leaders of SCLC, King included, held a very different notion of leadership. As Baker put it, they saw themselves as the new “saviors.”⁷⁰ As early as 1947, she had insisted that “the Negro must quit

looking for a savior and work to save himself.”⁷¹ She was even more convinced of this by 1958.

Crisis after crisis and sacrifice after sacrifice, Baker’s dissatisfaction with her circumstances grew. She became especially annoyed that many SCLC ministers viewed her as a glorified secretary who was there to simply “carry out King’s orders.”⁷² Although the SCLC needed Baker’s skills, it was not willing to recognize or affirm her leadership. As Eugene Walker put it in an interview with Baker, SCLC ministers seemed to “respect your abilities on the one hand, and fear your independence on the other.”⁷³ To be fair, not all of the SCLC board members felt this way, which in part was what kept Baker going. By 1959, she had built strong ties with SCLC activists in Shreveport and Birmingham, and she had alliances with NAACP people in Mississippi. Yet, despite her independent base, Baker felt so suffocated by the magnitude of King’s personality and presence that she could not make herself comfortable within the organization.

.

BAKER AND KING

The relationship between Ella Baker and Martin Luther King Jr. is doubly significant. First, the incompatibility between the civil rights movement’s most charismatic national spokesperson and one of its most effective grassroots organizers had significant consequences for the development of the movement itself. Baker’s decision to leave the SCLC staff in 1960, her choice to support mass-based, grassroots organizations, and her determination to defend the autonomous, democratic decisions made by militant activists changed the course of the Black Freedom Movement, not least by ensuring that the nascent Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee was not taken over by established civil rights organizations, including SCLC and the NAACP. Second, the conflict between these two civil rights leaders reveals more fundamental conflicts within black politics and African American culture over the meanings of American democracy and the pathways toward social change. If Baker’s criticisms of King were overly harsh and unforgiving, that may be because they were intensified by her disappointed hopes in King himself and by her accumulated outrage against the male leaders who had treated her in demeaning ways over many decades.

In some of her harshest, perhaps even gratuitous, criticisms of King, Baker described him as a pampered member of Atlanta’s black elite who had the mantle of leadership handed to him rather than having had to earn

it, a member of a coddled “silver spoon brigade.”⁷⁴ He wore silk suits and spoke with a silver tongue. His followers were in awe of him, struggling in vain to imitate him or just seeking to be near him. Young ministers would try to dress like him, even sound like him, Baker observed, and their unsuccessful attempts only reinforced the perception that he deserved the deference and adulation he received. King was, in her words, “the man of the hour . . . [and others] got the reflective glory.”⁷⁵ In Baker’s eyes, King did not identify closely enough with the people he sought to lead. He did not situate himself among them but remained above them. What Baker does not give King credit for is the fact that while he may have allowed others to applaud his leadership skills and oratory talents, he did not hesitate to take risks, putting himself and his family in danger repeatedly for the sake of the cause. So, while attention centered on him, so did the rage of those who, like his assassin, blamed him for the movement’s success.

Still, Baker felt the focus on King drained the masses of confidence in themselves. People often marveled at the things King could do that they could not; his eloquent speeches overwhelmed as well as inspired. This disturbed Baker. While she appreciated King’s many contributions to the struggle and valued the considerable talents he brought to bear, she was angered and frustrated by the hero worship that surrounded him. Baker challenged King on this matter repeatedly, arguing that he tolerated, even if he did not encourage, such adulation.⁷⁶

In gauging the fairness of Ella Baker’s criticisms of King, one should keep in mind that she was known for her patience, tolerance, and willingness to work with individuals of diverse ideologies. She had collaborated with other men who were well known for their inflated egos, from George Schuyler to Walter White. And, as King’s biographers have noted, he was in many ways quite humble, given the attention and flattery he received from others. He lived modestly and was initially quite ambivalent about all the attention and accolades that were directed his way.

Why did King provoke Baker so much? Some of her friends and colleagues have asserted that Baker’s conflicts within SCLC resulted as much from different personal styles as from political disagreements. Septima Clark, who admired Baker greatly, felt that sometimes she responded too angrily to insults and slights from the male clerics in SCLC, when these situations could have been handled more effectively in a less confrontational manner. There was undoubtedly a subjective component to Baker’s criticisms of King and the other SCLC ministers whom she felt did not respect her as an equal. Anne Braden, who was much closer to Baker than to

King personally and politically, admitted that “Ella had a blind spot when it came to King. It was just something about him. She and I differed on this.”⁷⁷

It would be misguided to view Baker’s analysis of King’s political flaws too narrowly, however. She did not see King as unique; rather, she saw what she defined as his weaknesses as reflective of prevalent tendencies in American society. At the same time, she insisted that her criticism never translated into personal animus, as some have alleged. Baker remarked that “some of the King family have said that I hated him, but I didn’t.”⁷⁸ King and Baker were bound together, from the very inception of SCLC, by manifold political ties and real interdependence. Their working relationship was close enough—even with King in Montgomery most of the time and Baker in Atlanta—that their fundamental differences became a recurring source of friction.

Still, King and Baker were more alike than Baker was ever prepared to admit. Both were southerners by birth, and both had grown up in the social and spiritual circles of the southern black Baptist church. Both were college-educated intellectuals, articulate spokespersons for the cause of black freedom and social justice, and eloquent public speakers. And both came from class positions of relative advantage. But Baker and King had made very divergent choices about how to utilize their skills and privileges. They translated religious faith into their political identities in profoundly different ways. Above all, they defined the confluence of their roles as individuals and their roles as participants in a mass movement for social change quite distinctly. Baker was a militant egalitarian, and King was a sophisticated southern Baptist preacher.

In Baker’s view, the celebrity status that the movement afforded King was not an aberration but rather a product of a dominant culture that promoted individualism and egocentrism. People “just have to have these high-powered individuals to worship,” Baker pointed out.⁷⁹ “It’s the culture we’re in,” she insisted. “When the newspaper people come around, what do they look for? They don’t look for the solid organizational drive . . . they look for a miracle performer.”⁸⁰ Baker believed that when ordinary people elevate their leaders above the crowd, they devalue the power within themselves. Her message was that we are all, as individuals, products of the larger society, even as some of us struggle to change it. And all leaders, however well intentioned, are susceptible to the corruption of personal ambition. According to Baker, “We on the outside, we want to be important . . . so we ape the insiders.”⁸¹ She argued that activists often unwittingly replicate the values and attributes of those they oppose, which becomes a

detriment to the movement. While many black leaders criticized racial hierarchies in the dominant society, they recreated hierarchies based on class, gender, and personality within the movement itself. Baker insisted that leaders live by the principles they espouse. In this sense, she argued, not only is the personal political, but the political is inescapably personal. Transformation has to occur at the societal and institutional level, but also at the local and personal level.

Ironically, Ella Baker could not see in King what other colleagues and his many biographers saw: a young man, talented, brilliant, eager to serve a greater good but reticent about being lionized, and being pushed and pulled in many directions all at once. In Baker's view, he was indeed a talented young man who had been given a precious opportunity to help organize large numbers of people into a fighting force for change, and instead, she lamented, he settled for mesmerizing them.

• • • • •

MISSIONARIES AND MESSIAHS

King and Baker had been introduced to politics through the same institution: the southern black Baptist church. Since slavery, the black church had been an influential pillar in the African American community and an important arena for black politics. The church provided blacks with the technical skills to enter the political arena: literacy, fund-raising, public speaking, management, and organization. In addition, the church provided its members with a powerful moral language within which to frame political issues, if they so chose. In a high school essay, Baker wrote eloquently, and uncritically, about the important leadership role played by the black church.⁸² Her ideas and analysis of the role of the black church, and of the clergy in particular, had changed considerably over the years, but her understanding of the centrality of the institution in African American life and culture remained intact.

Baker's political awakening began within the black Baptist women's missionary movement in the early 1900s. Her mother was a devoted activist who dragged Ella and her two siblings to missionary meetings throughout their home state of North Carolina. These churchwomen celebrated strength, piety, and quiet, selfless service. Egos and individual accomplishments were downplayed. Humility was a virtue. In contrast, King was groomed from an early age to follow in his father's footsteps into the ministry. Playing a visible leadership role in the church, and thereby oc-

cupying a prominent place in the black community, was an honorable career goal for a young man from such a deeply religious family.

King's and Baker's respective orientations within the church could not have been more different. Ministers were trained to be shepherds of their flocks. The metaphor itself suggests the differences between the notions of leadership that ministers practiced and those that missionary women adhered to. Ministers directed their flocks; missionaries gathered people together. In Baker's view, most ministers expected to say their piece and have their congregations obediently carry out their decisions. Baker saw no model for collective or democratic decision making within the mainstream ministerial tradition. The preacher's presumed authority did not trouble men like King, however. As he himself put it, "Leadership never ascends from the pew to the pulpit, but . . . descends from the pulpit to the pew."⁸³ But Baker saw this flow of authority as a weakness, not a virtue. The socialization of women missionaries meant that they practiced a more democratic and decentralized style of religious service than male ministers did.

Another philosophical position that distinguished Baker from King was the issue of nonviolence. Baker accepted nonviolence as a tactic, but she never internalized the concept as a way of life or made it a defining feature of her worldview. Contrasting herself to her friend Bayard Rustin, Ella Baker remarked: "He had a history of dedication to the concept of nonviolence. I have no such history; I have no such commitment. Not historically or even now can I claim that because that's not my way of functioning."⁸⁴ Rustin's pacifism was rooted in his Quakerism, while Baker's Christian faith carried no imperative to turn the other cheek or love your enemies. For her, nonviolence and self-defense were tactical choices, not matters of principle. "Mine was not a choice of non-violence per se," Baker reiterated.⁸⁵

Indeed, Baker questioned the capacity of nonviolence to serve as a philosophical basis on which to build a movement, even while she was working for the SCLC. She later questioned "how far non-violent mass action can go" as a mobilization strategy.⁸⁶ Her critique of the limitations of nonviolence was informed by her connections with the militant struggles of the 1930s and the self-defense ethos of those she worked with in the 1940s, and it foreshadowed her support of revolutionary militancy in the late 1960s. Baker consistently gave voice to a radical vision for social transformation and encouraged others to join her in the struggle necessary to realize that

vision. The realist in her understood that such a struggle might, at times, become heated and even physical. Engaging in determined conflict entailed utilizing a variety of tactics. Baker felt that oppressed people needed to tap whatever resources they had at their disposal to forge a viable strategy for resistance, especially in the dangerous and violent climate of the Jim Crow South. She was not alone in this view. Some of SCLC's most notable grassroots leaders, including C. O. Simpkins and Daisy Bates, admitted to having firearms for self-defense purposes.⁸⁷

Baker differed with King and other SCLC leaders on questions besides nonviolence and the meaning of leadership in militant mass movements. Bernice Johnson Reagon has suggested that Baker's worldview and political practice can best be defined as a type of radical humanism.⁸⁸ It was radical, in that she advocated fundamental social transformation, and it was humanistic, because she envisioned that transformation coming about through a democratic, cooperative, and localized movement that valued the participation of each of its individual members. Baker's unfaltering confidence in the common people was the bedrock of her political vision. It was with them that she felt the locus of power should reside. This confidence was rooted in her understanding of the complex dialectical relationship between deference and defiance in southern black culture. Despite the facade of subservience and acquiescence to white rule and Jim Crow indignities on the part of southern African Americans, many black people embodied a fighting spirit that needed only a viable outlet to demonstrate and to express itself in subtle ways every day. It was important for political organizers to understand and decode the culture of everyday life, and to tap the reservoir of resistance that resided there, in order to pull people into collective action.⁸⁹ In Baker's assessment, assuming that people were quiescent was a misreading of southern black culture.

In this respect, Baker's views parallel those of the anthropologist James Scott, who writes eloquently about the "hidden transcript" of opposition within oppressed populations and about the danger of not reading that transcript carefully. Scott warns:

So long as we confine our conception of the political to activity that is openly declared, we are driven to conclude that subordinate groups essentially lack a political life or that what political life they do have is restricted to those exceptional moments of popular explosion. To do so is to miss the immense political terrain that lies between quiescence and revolt and that, for better or worse, is the political environment of sub-

ject classes. It is to focus on the visible coastline of politics and miss the continent that lies beyond.⁹⁰

Scott's theoretical work on the nature of popular culture and resistance resembles many aspects of the politics that Ella Baker lived but rarely wrote about. From her point of view, it was a semi-spontaneous action from below—Rosa Parks's reasoned decision to violate a segregation ordinance—that had sparked the Montgomery boycott. It was another semi-spontaneous action—a handful of college students sitting in at a lunch counter in Greensboro, North Carolina, in 1960—that would ignite the next phase of movement activity. These actions were thought through and conscious, but they were both examples of leadership coming from below (the metaphorical pews) rather than from the political pulpits above. These actions also tapped into a subterranean oppositional culture and gave it a political outlet.

Baker's political views were profoundly shaped by her analysis of the complex class dynamics within the black community. As she put it, "There's always a problem in the minority group that's escalating up the ladder in this culture . . . it's a problem of their not understanding the possibility of being divorced from those who are not in their social classification."⁹¹ For this reason, she argued, "I believe firmly in the right of the people who were under the heel to be the ones to decide what action they were going to take to get [out] from under their oppression."⁹² She held fast to her conviction that the most oppressed sectors of society had to be in the forefront of the struggle to change society.

Ella Baker's job tenure with SCLC was more frustrating than fruitful. She was unsettled the entire time, politically, physically, and, to a certain extent, emotionally. She had no solid allies in the SCLC office that she could rely on daily as she had done during her years with the NAACP. Her close and increasingly critical view of King put some distance between Baker and her old In Friendship allies, Levison and Rustin, who adored King. Moreover, she had never really settled into her semifurnished apartment in Atlanta and found herself on the road more than she was there. Emotionally, there were some disconnects as well. Jackie was in college. Baker's marriage had ended in divorce in the summer of 1958 while she was in Atlanta.⁹³ And her health had begun to effect her work. Her eyes were bothering her, as were her back and encroaching arthritis. Still, there were pockets of activity among some SCLC affiliates that persuaded Baker to stay with the organization a little bit longer.