

Sit-ins

The sit-in campaigns of 1960 and the ensuing creation of the [Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee \(SNCC\)](#) demonstrated the potential strength of grassroots militancy and enabled a new generation of young people to gain confidence in their own leadership. Martin Luther King, Jr. described the student sit-ins as an “electrifying movement of Negro students [that] shattered the placid surface of campuses and communities across the South,” and he expressed pride in the new activism for being “initiated, fed and sustained by students” ([Papers 5:368](#)).

The sit-ins started on 1 February 1960, when four black students from North Carolina A&T College sat down at a Woolworth lunch counter in downtown Greensboro, North Carolina. The students—Joseph McNeil, Izell Blair, Franklin McCain, and David Richmond—purchased several items in the store before sitting at the counter reserved for white customers. When a waitress asked them to leave, they politely refused; to their surprise, they were not arrested. The four students remained seated for almost an hour until the store closed.

The following morning about two dozen students arrived at Woolworth’s and sat at the lunch counter. Although no confrontations occurred, the second sit-in attracted the local media. By day three of the campaign, the students formed the Student Executive Committee for Justice to coordinate protests. The Greensboro protesters eventually agreed to the mayor’s request to halt protest activities while city officials sought “a just and honorable resolution,” but black students in other communities launched lunch counter protests of their own (Carson, 10). By the end of the month, sit-ins had taken place at more than 30 locations in 7 states, and by the end of April over 50,000 students had participated.

The sustained student protests in Nashville, Tennessee, were particularly well organized. Vanderbilt University student [James Lawson](#) led workshops on Gandhian [nonviolence](#) that attracted a number of students from Nashville’s black colleges. Many of them, including [John Lewis](#), [Diane Nash](#), and [Marion Barry](#), would later become leaders of the southern civil rights struggle. The Nashville movement proved successful, and the students grew ever more confident in their ability to direct campaigns without adult leadership.

Nonviolence was a central component of the student-led demonstrations, however many protesters were not met with peaceful responses from the public. Although protesters were routinely heckled and beaten by segregationists and arrested by police, their determination was unyielding. King wrote: “The key significance of the student movement lies in the fact that from its inception, everywhere, it has combined direct action with non-violence. This quality has given it the extraordinary power and discipline which every thinking person observes” ([Papers 5:450](#)).

Although many of the student sit-in protesters were affiliated with [National Association for the Advancement of Colored People \(NAACP\)](#) youth groups, the new student

movement offered an implicit challenge to the litigation strategy of the nation's oldest civil rights group. NAACP leaders, for their part, gave public support to the sit-ins, although some privately questioned the usefulness of student-led civil disobedience.

On 16 April, the leaders of the various sit-in campaigns gathered at a conference called by [Southern Christian Leadership Conference \(SCLC\)](#) executive director [Ella Baker](#). This meeting became the founding conference of SNCC. In a statement prior to the opening of the conference, King emphasized the “need for some type of continuing organization” and expressed his belief that “the youth must take the freedom struggle into every community in the South” ([Papers 5:427](#)). The 120 students representing 12 southern states voted to establish a youth centered organization without formal affiliation with any other civil rights group.

In October 1960 Atlanta student leaders convinced King to participate in a sit-in at Rich's, a local department store. King and about 300 students were arrested. The students were later released, but King remained in jail while Georgia officials determined whether his sit-in arrest violated parole conditions King had received a month earlier after driving with a suspended license. After being sentenced to six months of hard labor at Georgia State Prison at Reidsville, presidential hopeful [John F. Kennedy](#) and his campaign manager and brother, [Robert Kennedy](#), helped secure King's release. Their intervention in the case helped contribute to Kennedy's narrow victory over [Richard Nixon](#) in the presidential election.

By fall 1960, there were signs that the southern civil rights movement had been profoundly transformed by the fiercely independent student protest movement. Those who had participated in the sit-in campaign were determined to continue the direct action tactics that were seizing the initiative from more cautious organizations made up of older people, such as King's SCLC.

SOURCES

Carson, *In Struggle*, 1981.

Introduction in [Papers 5:23–40](#).

King, “The Burning Truth in the South,” in [Papers 5:447–451](#).

King, “A Creative Protest,” 16 February 1960, in [Papers 5:367–370](#).

King, “Statement to the Press at the Beginning of the Youth Leadership Conference,” 15 April 1960, in [Papers 5:426–427](#).

Source

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