BLACK-JEWISH UNIVERSALISM
IN THE ERA OF IDENTITY POLITICS

CLAYBORNE CARSON

The victories of the modern civil rights movement during the period from 1954 to 1965 were made possible by political coalitions that brought together African Americans and Jewish Americans. Yet ironically, the increasing militancy of that movement also led many blacks and Jews to question assimilationist assumptions that had guided previous racial reform efforts. As black Americans turned from NAACP-led litigation and lobbying efforts to the mass civil rights protests and community-wide mobilizations of the early 1960s, blacks and Jews began to argue publicly with one another and among themselves over fundamental issues involving group identity and advancement strategies. Debate over these issues was particularly intense in urban black communities, where class divisions among blacks and between blacks and non-blacks persisted despite civil rights gains. After the June 1966 Mississippi voting rights march introduced the Black Power slogan to the nation, established civil rights leaders faced increasingly forceful challenges from competitors who derided nonviolent tactics and questioned the racial loyalties of leaders committed to interracialism and the maintenance of black-Jewish ties. In an era of identity politics and cultural conflict, the universalistic values and cosmopolitan perspectives which had characterized the civil rights movement exerted less and less influence over national politics and over the attitudes of African Americans and Jews. On a deeper, more general level, tensions and controversies in contemporary black-Jewish relations have reflected the worldwide decline of transracial, transcultural, and transnational movements seeking to realize egalitarian and democratic ideals.

The Supreme Court's Brown v. Board of Education decision in 1954 and the civil rights advances that followed were the culmination of reformist and revolutionary political movements that for the first time enabled blacks and Jews to play important transformative roles in American politics. The modern civil rights
expectation that a citizenry comprised mainly of Anglo-Saxon Protestants would exercise political power. As the issue of Jewish citizenship tested the limits of democratic universalism in Europe after the French Revolution, so too did the question of extending political rights to former slaves serve as the ultimate test of egalitarian ideals expressed in the Declaration of Independence. Jewish Americans played less prominent roles than did African Americans in nineteenth-century anti-slavery and civil rights struggles, but members of both groups spearheaded twentieth-century civil rights efforts that resuscitated the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments. After World War II, civil rights reform gained momentum as proponents portrayed the southern Jim Crow system as an embarrassing regional anachronism that was contrary to irrefutable social science findings, and vulnerable to a determined legal and intellectual assault on its underlying values. With only a few voices of dissent, African-American leaders united with Jewish leaders in support of racial integration, and few spokespersons for either group questioned whether assimilation was the most feasible strategy for the advancement of their groups. The gradual elimination of prejudices rooted in traditional racial and ethnic identities was seen as consistent with the trend toward the universalization of American democratic principles and of modern mass culture. As sociologist Talcott Parsons explained using his singular academic diction, “only in a highly urbanized, hence individualized and pluralized society does the opportunity emerge for a saliently different minority group to diffuse itself though the society”; or as another observer more bluntly observed: “Perpetuation of ethnic differences is altogether out of line with the logic of American reality.”

As the oldest and best-funded civil rights organization, the NAACP served as the primary national nexus for an interracial civil rights coalition that would achieve major legal and legislative breakthroughs during the 1950s and 1960s. No organization had more black members than the NAACP, and many Jewish leaders saw the group and its legal arm, the Legal Defense and Education Fund, Inc. (LDF), as their principal instruments for promoting civil rights reform. Having attracted substantial Jewish support since its founding in 1909, the NAACP had by the 1940s established cooperative relationships with the major national Jewish groups—including the American Jewish Committee, American Jewish Congress, Anti-Defamation League of B’nai B’rith, and Jewish Labor Committee. This black-Jewish institutional relationship was formalized in 1951 through the creation of the Leadership Conference on Civil Rights. Under the guidance of Roy Wilkins of the NAACP, Arnold Aronson of the National Jewish Community Relations Council, and A. Philip Randolph, head of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, the Leadership Conference would play a crucial role in mobilizing political support for the major civil rights legislation of the late 1950s and 1960s. Moreover, this high-level black-Jewish institutional relationship provided a framework for the involvement of a substantial number of Jewish lawyers, academics, and propagandists in a multipronged assault against bigotry and racial discrimination.
The NAACP’s almost unchallenged dominance of African-American politics at the national level during the 1950s resulted from the decline of serious alternatives to its conventional reform strategy based on litigation, lobbying, and appeals for white support. Although black urban residents faced discrimination and hostility as they competed with other ethnic and racial groups for housing and jobs, their festering resentments did not find a militant political voice until the 1960s. With the decline of black nationalism after Marcus Garvey’s imprisonment in the 1920s and with the Cold War repression of black leftist activism, there was no significant organized opposition to the NAACP and its assimilationist orientation. Gunnar Myrdal’s *An American Dilemma*, published in 1944, had set the tone for postwar civil rights efforts by insisting that African-American advancement would result from the transformation of white racial attitudes and the realization of traditional liberal ideals rather than from racial separatism or a radical transformation of American society. According to Myrdal, it was “to the advantage of American Negroes as individuals and as a group to become assimilated into American culture, to acquire the traits held in esteem by the dominant white Americans.” The unanimous *Brown* decision appeared to represent not only the limit of what white Americans were willing to concede to Blacks, but also an African-American consensus regarding political goals. The cultural and political diversity that would become apparent in African-American communities by the late 1960s was at the time of the *Brown* decision manifested mainly through street corner oratory and apolitical religious sects, such as the Nation of Islam. Malcolm X later recalled that when he became minister of the Nation of Islam’s New York Temple No. 7 in June 1954, his group attracted little interest in Harlem: “You could have said ‘Muslim’ to a thousand, and maybe only one would have asked you ‘What’s that?’”

The 1956 bus boycott in Montgomery, Alabama, marked the beginning of a period of massive and sustained protest movements that sped the pace of civil rights reform; yet it also gave hints of a major departure from preceding civil rights reform efforts. The spread of mass protests in the South provided a new setting for Jewish civil rights activism that was quite different from Jewish involvement in the NAACP’s conventional reform efforts. On the one hand, high-level institutional ties between the major civil rights and the major Jewish organizations remained intact during the civil rights protest era. Indeed, this institutional relationship grew stronger during the 1960s as the NAACP took the lead in transforming diffuse protest activity into coherent reform agendas. Jewish professionals played major roles in the preparation of legal briefs and legislative proposals or in campaigns on behalf of tolerance and racial understanding. Jack Greenberg, who became involved with the LDF in 1948 and later became its director, recalled that a “substantial number” of LDF lawyers and five of the six white lawyers who signed the *Brown* brief were Jewish. If the term “black-Jewish alliance” should be used at all to describe relations between the two groups, it applies most accurately to the involvement of Jewish professionals in civil rights
organizations and to the lasting black-Jewish institutional ties that have persisted, despite the conflicts described below, from the 1940s to the present.

On the other hand, in the aftermath of the Montgomery bus boycott, the expanding southern black protest movement attracted Jewish activists who were different in many respects from the Jewish reformers who supported the NAACP and conventional civil rights efforts. The former were typically younger and more often a product of secular leftist backgrounds than were the latter. The Jewish activists who immersed themselves in the expanding southern civil rights struggle were also unlikely to be representatives of Jewish organizations or even to identify themselves as Jewish rather than white. They were participants in a volatile black-led social movement that produced a set of emergent radical values that challenged the NAACP's conventional reform strategy and its underlying assimilationist assumptions. Jewish activists did not forge a formal alliance with their Black counterparts; instead, for a time at least, they saw themselves as part of a radical community devoted to direct action protests and to organizing community efforts. While Jewish support for the NAACP's conventional strategy remained strong, many Jewish civil rights activists joined their black counterparts in an effort to probe the boundaries of conventional liberalism.

When Martin Luther King, Jr., rose to national prominence during the Montgomery bus boycott, he stood between these competing elements, supporting both the NAACP's efforts to build a broad interracial coalition in support of civil rights reform and grassroots efforts to mobilize the black Americans as an independent force for change. King was a unique leader capable of stimulating racial militancy while also attracting considerable support from Jews who expected that the upsurge of southern black protest activity would benefit the cause of civil rights reform. When King decided to build upon the success of the boycott by establishing the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), he quickly attracted support from a number of Jews, including some who also supported the NAACP. Among his earliest Jewish associates in the civil rights movement was businessman and philanthropist Kivie Kaplan, a Reform Jewish leader, who became a major NAACP fundraiser after joining the organization in 1932, and who would succeed Arthur Spingarn as the NAACP's president in 1966. Kaplan became acquainted with King during the latter's years as a graduate student at Boston University, and after 1956 he supported King's emergence as a nationally known civil rights leader. Stanley Levison, a radical lawyer allied with the Communist Party, contacted King shortly after the end of the boycott and helped him expand his influence outside the South. Levison became King's closest white advisor, serving in New York as a liaison between the SCLC leader and both the Jewish left and the American Jewish Congress. When King was arrested in Atlanta shortly before the 1960 presidential election, a Jewish lawyer, Morris Abram, helped secure his release after arranging for Democratic candidate John F. Kennedy to intervene in the case. King also maintained close relations with Rabbi Jacob Rothschild of Atlanta.
By the early 1960s King had become the best-known civil rights leader, and his firm commitment to nonviolence and interracial coalitions enabled him to allay the concerns that some Jews were beginning to have regarding black militancy. He was a frequent guest speaker at northern synagogues and at meetings of Jewish organizations. Of all the major civil rights leaders, King was also the most effective fundraiser. Lacking the NAACP's membership base, he was nevertheless able to build a strong base of financial support for the SCLC that relied heavily on Christian and Jewish religious institutions and on religiously motivated individuals. For King the effort to establish black-Jewish ties was part of a broader effort to attract ecumenical support for the civil rights movement. A particularly important event in King's outreach efforts was his participation in the 1963 National Conference on Religion and Race in Chicago. At the conference he formed enduring ties with Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, a professor at the Jewish Theological Seminary. Heschel delivered a major address at the conference calling for Jews to see the civil rights movement as an expression of Jewish values. Heschel's decision to join King in the 1965 Selma to Montgomery voting rights march made him a highly visible symbol of Jewish support for the civil rights movement.

While some Jews saw King as a reassuring presence in the civil rights protest movement, other Jews identified themselves with groups such as the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), which challenged King's dominance of the southern struggle. Although SNCC was not nearly as successful as was King in garnering Jewish financial support, it attracted a core of Jewish activists who found more opportunities for sustained involvement in SNCC than in the clergy-dominated SCLC. In addition, the SNCC-dominated Mississippi Summer project of 1964 provided an unprecedented opening for intensive civil rights participation by Jewish activists. The extent and significance of this participation is a matter of dispute, however, for there is no hard evidence regarding the religious orientations of the civil rights activists who became immersed in the southern struggle. Jonathan Kaufman, for example, failed to identify the "historians" who estimated, based on a review of "the records," that "more than half the white Freedom Riders who went South were Jewish, as were two-thirds of the white students and organizers who flooded Mississippi to help register black voters in the summer of 1964." In fact the available scholarly studies of participants in the Freedom Summer found that only a fifth of those applying for the project indicated any type of religious affiliation and that most religiously affiliated applicants were Protestant Christians. In addition, although there is no doubt that Jewish civil rights activism in the southern struggle was disproportionately large, such activism was most often rooted in leftist political backgrounds rather than in religious beliefs. To be sure, leftist backgrounds were more common among Jews than among white Christians, but they were also more common among secular Jews than among observant Jews. Although religious Jews such as Heschel were notably present at major civil
rights mobilizations—such as the March on Washington and the Selma to Montgomery march—a quite different group of Jews were involved in the sustained direct action protests and voter registration projects of SNCC and CORE. The latter group rarely saw themselves as acting on behalf of the Jewish community and rejected the conventional litigation and lobbying strategies of the NAACP and its Jewish allies. Despite the lack of evidence that militant activism in the southern struggle was motivated by Judaism, Murray Friedman of the American Jewish Committee nevertheless has contended that “the Jewish kids who went south were acting out, albeit unconsciously, a Jewish tradition. It is as if these boys were wearing their yarmulkes without knowing it.” Friedman and others have insisted that even secular Jewish activists were influenced by “the egalitarian strains within Judaism”; as one account put it: “While these Jews did not get involved because they were Jewish, there was something very Jewish about their getting involved.” This argument may have validity in explaining the fact that Jews as a group were more likely than other white Americans to support the civil rights goals, but it is hardly sufficient to explain why the least religious Jews were the ones most likely to be drawn toward the radical egalitarianism of SNCC and CORE. Although Michael Schwerner and Andrew Goodman, two of the civil rights workers who were murdered as a result of their involvement in the voting rights campaign, have often been cited as examples of Jewish commitment to the civil rights movement, these two martyrs were actually illustrative of the secular roots of Jewish activism. Lenora E. Berson has categorized Schwerner with college-educated “middle-class suburban Jews, who believed not in God but in the infinite perfectibility of man.” Neither Schwerner nor Goodman received religious funerals, and Goodman’s mother later insisted “that it had never occurred to her that her son had gone south as a Jew.”

In short, the motivations and political orientations of Jewish activists cannot be readily summarized. Jewish activists in SNCC and many of those in CORE moved toward forms of radicalism that often alienated them from their own communities and placed them in opposition to the Jewish supporters of conventional civil rights reform efforts. There was also a measure of self-interest in Jewish participation in a movement that enabled them to affect political change in ways that did not engender anti-Jewish sentiments and that resulted in legislation prohibiting religious as well as racial discrimination. Certainly by the mid-1960s there was a visible and growing gulf between the perspectives of Jews whose attitudes toward the civil rights movement were motivated by a sense of group interest, and those driven by egalitarian idealism. Although black-Jewish conflict was hardly visible before 1966, internal tensions were evident among both African Americans and Jewish Americans regarding the future direction of civil rights reform. The small number of idealistic Jewish activists who had become part of the black protest movement were far outnumbered by Jews who remained at a distance from political ferment occurring within black communities. Before themselves becoming a target of black militancy, Jewish civil rights activists of
the period from 1963 to 1966 found themselves on both sides of the crucial tactical and ideological debates occurring within the black struggle. Jewish civil rights lawyers, for example, were divided along ideological lines. Jack Greenberg, who replaced Thurgood Marshall as head of the NAACP’s Legal Defense Fund, argued strenuously during 1964 against SNCC’s decision to accept legal assistance from the leftist National Lawyers Guild, a group with a large representation of Jewish lawyers, including Arthur Kinoy, Victor Rabinowitz, and William Kunstler. Later in the same year, Joe Rauh, who tried to arrange a compromise with the Lyndon Johnson administration over the seating of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party at the 1964 Democratic Convention, faced opposition from black SNCC workers and their Jewish allies. Despite the fact that SNCC was able to retain significant Jewish participation and Jewish financial backing until the late 1960s, its increasing militancy gradually narrowed its base, although Jewish New Left radicals continued to support the group’s Black Power advocacy.

The increasing militancy of the civil rights movement exposed tensions that existed between African Americans and Jews regarding the usefulness of interracial political strategies and ultimately brought to the surface doubts about the assimilationist values that pervaded liberal racial reform efforts. Even as the civil rights movement achieved major legislative victories during the mid-1960s, there were indications that the liberal-left coalition was beginning to fracture as some observers began to raise questions about the direction of racial reform. Norman Podhore茨’s oft-reprinted essay, “My Negro Problem—and Ours,” published in July 1963, expressed the feelings of many Jews who saw themselves as civil rights supporters, but who were becoming increasingly disturbed by black militancy. Podhore茨’s memories of a childhood encounter in his native Brooklyn with hostile urban black youths became a metaphor for the change in the relationship of Jews to blacks from benefactor and sympathizer to competitor and fellow victim. When Podhore茨 was waylaid by members of an all-black relay team that had been disqualified in his team’s favor, racial antagonism surfaced:

My panic is now unmanageable. (How many times had I been surrounded like this and asked in soft tones, “Len’ me a nickel, boy.” How many times had I been called a liar for pleading poverty and pushed around, or searched, or beaten up, unless there happened to be someone in the marauding gang like Carl who liked me across that enormous divide of hatred and who would therefore say, “Aaah, c’mon, le’s git someone else, this boy ain’t got no money en ’im.”) I scream at them through tears of rage and self-contempt, “Keep your F———n’ filthy lousy black hand offa me! I swear I’ll get the cops.” This is all they need to hear, and the five of them set upon me. They bang me around, mostly in the stomach and on the arms and shoulders, and when several adults loitering near the candy store down the block notice what is going on and begin to shout, they run off and away.
While Podhoretz expressed the personal fears of increasing numbers of Jews, Nathan Glazer’s essay on black-Jewish relations, published in the December 1964 issue of Commentary, revealed a broader ambivalence about the relationship between Jewish group interests and those of African Americans. Glazer’s essay appeared soon after the civil rights movement achieved one of its major victories in the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964; yet it also reflected growing northern white resistance to the shift in the focus of civil rights activism from the southern Jim Crow system to northern de facto segregation and employment discrimination. Glazer recognized that the black-Jewish alliance on behalf of civil rights reform was one of leaders rather than communities. Many urban blacks, Glazer noted, viewed a Jew “not as a co-worker or friend or ally, but, in a word, as an exploiter,” while many Jews resisted “such demands as preferential union membership and…the primacy of integration over all other educational objectives.” Glazer saw the interests of the two groups as diverging. While Jews continued to support the removal of racial barriers, he argued, they did not agree with civil rights leaders who insisted that “color-blind politics” were insufficient to bring about rapid advancement for the black masses. Glazer not only dissented from the policies that would later take the form of affirmative action programs, but he also attacked what he saw as “a radical challenge” by black leaders to the desire of Jews to maintain areas of “Jewish exclusiveness.” He claimed that the civil rights movement was heading in a direction that would alienate most Jews and that would increasingly cause them to view their interests as similar to their “less liberal neighbors” who shared a common “interest in maintaining an area restricted to their own kind; an interest in managing the friendship and educational experience of their children; an interest in passing on advantages in money and skills to them.”

While Glazer’s essay suggests that some Jews were beginning to question the direction of the civil rights movement, a much fiercer debate, reflecting the growing influence of Malcolm X, was beginning in African-American communities. At the time of his assassination in 1965 Malcolm X had only a small following, but his decision to leave Elijah Muhammad’s Nation of Islam and to forge ties with civil rights militants signaled a convergence of black nationalism and the emergent ideas of the southern black struggle. Although Malcolm’s Organization of Afro-American Unity attracted little black support during his lifetime, his posthumously published autobiography and speeches made his ideas a central element in the black consciousness movement of the late 1960s. His cogent criticisms of King and other mainstream civil rights leaders coincided with the insurgent challenges from within the civil rights movement. Thus, soon after the 1963 March on Washington, Malcolm scored points with disaffected urban blacks by charging that white supporters of the major civil rights leaders had placed them in charge of the march in order to stifle “the Black revolution” that resulted when “local leaders began to stir up [Black] people at the grass-roots level.” “The same white element that put Kennedy into power—labor, the Catholics, the Jews, and liberal Protestants…joined the march on Washington,” he insisted at a Northern
Negro Grass Roots Leadership Conference in Detroit. "They didn't integrate it, they infiltrated it. And as they took it over, it lost its militancy." As mass militancy became more common among northern urban blacks, Malcolm's rhetorical militancy provided a means to express the frustration felt by urban blacks who saw few changes in their lives as a result of the civil rights movement. Malcolm set the tone for subsequent debates within black communities by questioning the militancy and racial loyalty of mainstream black leaders.

While Malcolm had often denounced interracialism and occasionally directed specific criticisms toward Jewish merchants in black communities, the deterioration of black-Jewish ties occurred for the most part after his death as his ideas were adapted by black militants who had participated in the civil rights struggle. James Baldwin's essays, published in 1963 as *The Fire Next Time*, reflected the changing sentiments of blacks who did not see themselves as black nationalists yet nonetheless regarded inter racialism and assimilationism with increasing skepticism. In some respects, Baldwin's essays belied Glazer's suggestion that the new black militancy was headed toward assimilation. "White Americans find it as difficult as white people elsewhere do to divest themselves of the notion that they are in possession of some intrinsic values that black people need, or want," Baldwin complained. Although he continued to reject black nationalism, Baldwin reflected the view of many black activists who had become disillusioned with inter racial liberalism:

How can one respect, let alone adopt, the values of a people who do not, on any level whatever, live the way they say they do, or the way they say they should? I cannot accept the proposition that the four-hundred-year travail of the American Negro should result merely in his attainment of the present level of the American civilization.... The only thing white people have that black people need, or should want, is power—and no one holds power forever.  

Jewish participation in the civil rights struggle became an issue as black militancy shifted its focus from a frontal attack on the southern Jim Crow system to a more diffuse effort to deal with the tangible and intangible consequences of racial oppression. By 1966 all the major civil rights organizations had begun to move from their previous focus on the South toward a broader assault on those issues that had not been addressed through civil rights legislation. King's Chicago Campaign illustrated the difficulty of utilizing civil rights protest tactics in a northern urban context. Although some Jews remained civil rights supporters even as the movement came north, Glazer's article foreshadowed the increasing discomfort many Jews felt as the civil rights movement became the Black Power movement. Broad-based Jewish support for the civil rights movement was based on the belief that it pursued ideals that were perceived to be consistent—or at least not in conflict—with the interest of Jews. Harold Cruse's influential polemic
Crisis of the Negro Intellectual, published in 1967, reflected this widespread questioning of the universalist assumptions that had sustained black-Jewish involvement in leftist causes. As one observer commented regarding the changing climate of black-Jewish relations during the late 1960s: “The urban confrontation between Jews and Negroes will result in a further alienation of Jews and in increased hostility between Jews and Negroes. The stores that will be boycotted, the tenements to be hit by rent strikes, the collection agents to be driven out are mostly Jewish, as are the remaining white politicians; for the only whites left in the ghetto, besides the police, are Jews.”

Given this socioeconomic context, it was hardly surprising that black discontent was expressed through anti-Jewish sentiments. Indeed, anti-Jewish invective had long been an aspect of black nationalism, especially in New York, where resentment of Jewish economic power had been a significant factor in the popularity of Malcolm X. The vehement Jewish reaction against black anti-Semitism, moreover, did not result as much from awareness of its existence as from its potential political potency. The novel aspect of the anti-Jewish rhetoric of the period after 1966 was that it came not from isolated orators but from former civil rights activists, who now saw themselves as competing for Malcolm X’s constituency.

Perhaps the most poignant example of this transformation of black civil rights militancy to Black Power militancy involved Stokely Carmichael, who first used the Black Power slogan during the June 1966 Mississippi march that was held soon after his election as SNCC’s chairman. Even as Carmichael began to include references to “honkies” in his speeches during the summer and fall of 1966, Jewish support for SNCC remained largely unaffected. Indeed, at the time when Carmichael first came to national prominence as the best-known Black Power proponent, there were few other black activists with deeper ties to the white Jewish left. He was one of a number of black militants who had been drawn to civil rights activism as a result of his involvement in the New York-centered radical community dominated by African Americans and Jews. While at the Bronx School of Science, Carmichael’s closest friends were Jewish leftists, and his activism began when he joined his Jewish friends in a protest against an anti-Semitic statement made by a United Nations official. His acquaintance with Gene Dennis, the son of a Communist Party leader, led to his initial contacts with black radicals who were party members or sympathizers. During the first half of the 1960s, as Carmichael rose to prominence in SNCC, he continued to work closely with Jewish activists even as he was drawn toward black nationalist ideas. As the chairman of SNCC during 1966–1967 and as the best-known proponent of Black Power, Carmichael was a central figure both in the black-Jewish left and in the black-Jewish conflicts of the period after 1966. Like Harold Cruse, his increasingly anti-Jewish sentiment was rooted in a long personal history of interactions with Jewish leftists. The turning point in his attitudes came after his election to head of SNCC, when he attempted to leave behind his identity as a civil rights activist with interracial, leftist ties and began to establish his reputation as a black
nationalist and Pan Africanist seeking to expand SNCC's influence in the urban North. In northern cities, Carmichael, like other veterans of the southern struggle, confronted Jews not as dedicated comrades but as an urban economic and political elite to be challenged. The transformation of his views was gradual, reflecting his difficulty in balancing his past ties with his overriding desire to mobilize African Americans. He stood uneasily between a black-Jewish radical political culture that now provided a negative referent for his evolving views and an urban black nationalist tradition that had largely eschewed civil rights activism.

As he spread the Black Power message during 1966 and early 1967, he initially depicted Jews as a group to be emulated rather than one to be resented. He often presented the statement of Rabbi Hillel as his favorite quotation: "If I am not for myself, who will be? If I am only for myself alone, who am I? If not now, when? If not you, who?" Speaking of the 1965 racial rebellion in Los Angeles he compared the powerlessness of blacks to the power held by white ethnic groups: "If that were a Jewish community, if that were an Irish community, if that were an Italian community, [Police Chief William Parker] would be done." Similarly, in a widely published Black Power statement titled "Power and Racism," he compared his own socialization with that of a Jewish child: "White Tarzan used to beat up the black natives. I would sit there yelling, 'Kill the savages, kill 'em!' It was as if a Jewish boy watched Nazis taking Jews off to concentration camps and cheered them on. Today I want the chief to beat the hell out of Tarzan and send him back to Europe." On other occasions he would remark: "To ask the Negroes to get in the Democratic Party is like asking Jews to join the Nazi Party." Carmichael consistently rejected the notion that he was a racist or an anti-Semite. When a Jewish civil rights supporter asked whether there was "an inconsistency in not fighting anti-semitism in SNCC but in asking Cohen and other Jews for support," he responded, "As for your question about anti-semitism, it is difficult to 'fight' something unless it exists. Nothing in our policies or programs suggests anti-semitism. SNCC is very aware of the support it has received, both 'physical' and financial, from American Jews and appreciates it."22

Despite such disclaimers, however, Carmichael and other former civil rights activists were determined to present themselves as free to express festering black resentments regardless of the feelings of white or Jewish supporters. Carmichael's former ties to Jews were a liability in his effort to compete with black separatists inside and outside SNCC who were less encumbered with an interracial past. Malcolm X had demonstrated the effectiveness of "Blacker than thou" oratory, and Carmichael became aware of his vulnerability during the insfighting within SNCC over the issue of white participation. Although perceived outside SNCC as an anti-white firebrand, Carmichael was seen by black separatists inside the organization as unwilling to expel the white activists who remained in the group. The separatists were willing to use disruptive tactics and to direct personal attacks against Carmichael, James Forman, and other veteran SNCC leaders in order to
force them to end the group’s ties to whites. As one of the separatists commented: “My loyalty is to the black people and not to SNCC necessarily. It’s to SNCC only in proportion as I determine its loyalty to black people.” The issue of white participation in SNCC was resolved only after a fractious staff meeting in December 1966, at which the separatists refused to allow discussion of other issues until whites were expelled from the organization. The expulsion was finally accomplished by a one-vote margin. After weathering this vicious internecine battle among black militants, Carmichael moved from the class orientation he had brought into SNCC toward a race-first perspective that rejected Marxism and insisted that African Americans must be provided with “an African ideology which speaks to our blackness—nothing else. It’s not a question of right or left, it’s a question of black.”

By the time of the 1967 Arab-Israeli war, Carmichael’s pro-Palestinian sentiments did not in themselves set him apart from the majority of black political activists, but his determination to take an uncompromising public stand on the issue was driven by a combination of personal convictions and internal racial politics. His enthusiastic support for the Palestinian cause was a visible indication of his willingness to break with Jewish former allies and to consolidate his position at the center of an increasingly contentious group of Black Power ideologues. SNCC’s position on the Middle East conflict was itself an expression of the group’s willingness to make a public break with its interracial past. Rather than carefully deliberating the issue and the consequences of taking a public stand on the issue, a few SNCC members quickly prepared an article that seemed designed to provoke Jewish former supporters. Published in the group’s Newsletter, the article compiled thirty-two “documented facts,” contending, among other things, that during the initial Arab-Israeli war “Zionists conquered the Arab homes and land through terror, force, and massacres.” By itself, the Newsletter article would have provoked controversy, but accompanying photographs and drawings by SNCC artist Kofi Bailey heightened its emotional impact. The caption on one of the photographs, which portray Zionists shooting Arab victims who were lined up against a wall, noted “This is the Gaza Strip, Palestine, not Dachau, Germany.” When program Director Ralph Featherstone explained to reporters in Atlanta that the article did not indicate that SNCC was anti-Semitic, he further inflamed the emotions of Jews by criticizing Jewish store owners in American black ghettos. Reacting to the article, the executive director of the American Jewish Congress labeled it “shocking and vicious anti-Semitism.” Rabbi Harold Saperstein, who had continued to support SNCC despite the controversy over Black Power, was among those who withdrew support from the group, explaining that SNCC leaders’ willingness “to become a mouthpiece for malicious Arab propaganda undermines my confidence in their judgment.”

The criticisms of Israel expressed by Carmichael and other SNCC members could not alter the course of Middle Eastern politics, but they did serve a purpose as part of an effort by former civil rights workers to abandon past ties to Jewish
liberals and thereby claim roles as leaders of the black urban insurgency. Carmichael's subsequent willingness to assume increasingly extreme positions against interracial alliances was in part spurred by his struggle to remain the leading ideologue of the Black Power movement. By the summer of 1967 he had been replaced as SNCC's chair by H. Rap Brown, but Carmichael continued to attract attention during his tour of Third World countries, which included a speech in Havana, calling for urban guerrilla warfare in the United States, and a stop at a Palestinian camp. After returning to the United States and assuming the role of Prime Minister of the Black Panther Party, he continued to give the Arab-Israeli conflict a central place in his rhetoric. At a 1968 rally on behalf of imprisoned Black Panther leader Huey Newton, Carmichael insisted, "We can be for no one but the Arabs because Israel belonged to them, to the Arabs, in 1917. The British gave it to a group of Zionists who went to Israel, ran the Palestinian Arabs out with terrorist groups and organized the state and did not get anywhere until Hitler came along and they swelled the state in 1948. That country belongs to the Palestinians. Not only that. They are moving to take over Egypt. Egypt is our motherland—it's in Africa. Egypt belongs to us since 4,000 years ago and we sit here supporting the Zionists." Speaking in 1969 at a convention for Arab students in America, Carmichael admitted that he had once "been for the Jews" but had reformed.

Although Carmichael exemplified the utilization of anti-Jewish rhetoric as an aspect of black leadership competition, he did not succeed in maintaining his leading position among black militants. His race-first emphasis placed him at odds with other Black Panther leaders, who were almost alone among Black Power advocates in their Marxian orientation. In 1969 Carmichael resigned his post in the party and left the United States to begin promoting Pan Africanism from his new base in Guinea. He subsequently revised his position on racial ideology to incorporate concepts of African socialism, but he remained adamant in his opposition to interracial political strategies in general and black-Jewish ties in particular. During his return visits to the United States his public statements at times seemed intended to offend Jews. For example, when he was asked in 1970 by television interviewer David Frost to name the white man he considered a "hero," Carmichael responded by citing Hitler as perhaps "the great[est] white man." On another occasion he remarked: "The vicious, illegal, immoral and unjust state of Israel is occupying our territory Egypt....If Egypt is in trouble we too must be animated with such a love and a desire to serve our people and to serve justice and the cause of humanity that we too must be picking up guns and going to fight in Egypt against Zionism." In a 1972 letter to a white woman who had previously supported his civil rights activities, Carmichael privately speculated on the reasons Jews "have always aroused the hatred of so many people." Recounting the history of Jewish expulsions from England and European nations, he concluded: "There must be a reason!...Their control today of Europe and America is the same as it always has been. We know for example that the cause-
es of W.W. II were planted in the treaties of W.W. I. We are told that at that time the decisions were made by what was then the big four, Britain, France, Italy and U.S.A. The secretaries of the leaders of these four countries except Italy were Jews." In another letter written a few weeks later, Carmichael condemned "the Jews" who used Hitler's atrocities to justify the creation of the state of Israel. "As soon as you say something about the Jews they throw Hitler in your face. You are made to feel guilty, yet when Black people talk about slavery they are the first to say they cannot feel guilty for what their ancestors have done!"

Carmichael's pro-Palestinian stance did not in itself set him apart from other black militant leaders, but his decision to give that issue a central place in his speeches suggests the degree to which, for him and other black leaders, the Arab-Israeli conflict and the issue of Black-Jewish political ties assumed symbolic significance in African-American militant leadership competition. Carmichael's controversial statements on Israel provided a model for the use of rhetorical racism and anti-Semitism by black militants to build support among discontented blacks by focusing attention on the reluctance of more moderate black leaders to speak forthrightly on behalf of "Black" interests. As African-American political rhetoric became increasingly focused on issues of identity and racial consciousness, King and other leaders of the major civil rights organizations found themselves on the defensive as many blacks turned their attention from issues such as discrimination and employment opportunity toward a focus on questions involving racial identity and loyalty. In the aftermath of the 1967 Arab-Israeli war, black leaders were divided less over differences regarding poverty programs and civil rights legislation than over their stands on issues of symbolic importance. As would then be the case in future black-Jewish controversies, Carmichael and other Black Power proponents used opposition to Israel to demonstrate publicly their independence from Jewish control and to undermine the position of leaders who maintained their pro-Jewish positions. The pattern that would be repeated many times thereafter was established in 1967. After SNCC's statement in a newsletter, which normally reached only a few of the group's supporters, gained national notoriety, Jewish leaders called upon established black leaders to issue public condemnations of the statement. Because King was personally committed to the maintenance of black-Jewish ties, he did not require such prompting, but his responses to anti-Jewish statements by blacks nevertheless became part of a public ritual that had less to do with Middle Eastern politics than with the ideological foment occurring within African-American and Jewish communities. After SNCC's anti-Israeli statement appeared, King not only joined with other established black leaders in condemning its anti-Semitic overtones but also argued that anti-Zionism was "inherently antisemitic, and ever will be so." King's responses, and that of other established black leaders, to anti-Israeli and anti-Jewish rhetoric were undoubtedly sincerely motivated, but they further undermined the black support of leaders who resisted the new politics of racial consciousness. King's Poor People's Campaign was a clear expression of his radical critique of
American society, but his reputation as a militant nevertheless suffered during the last year of his life among the angry black urban residents he hoped to mobilize for his nonviolent campaign. Although Carmichael and other proponents of Black Power saw themselves as more responsive to the needs of the black poor than the older civil rights leaders, their emphasis on racial unity often led them to place less emphasis on economic issues than King did. After the initial radicalism of the Black Power militancy encountered severe repression, the black consciousness movement turned inward toward an emphasis on defining racial identity and resolving the issue of who should lead the black community, instead of continuing to challenge white authority.

Because control of the black institutions was a fundamental aspect of the Black Power movement, it was hardly surprising that the Ocean Hill–Brownsville school dispute of 1968 reopened the wounds left by the black-Jewish contention over the 1967 Middle East war. That New York became the setting for this and many subsequent black-Jewish disputes was also not surprising, for it was there that the group interests of African Americans and Jews were most likely to collide. Moreover, the manner in which the efforts of blacks to control public schools in their communities quickly degenerated into ugly charges and countercharges of racism and anti-Semitism was also to be expected given the readiness of individuals on both sides to redefine the complex issue of school decentralization into simplistic group interest terms. Finally, the dispute was made more intense by the fact that Jews who had supported or even continued to support the civil rights movement—teachers' union president Albert Shanker had marched with King in Selma—found themselves in opposition to black civil rights veterans such as former SNCC activist Julius Lester who inflamed emotions when he read a student's anti-Semitic poem on a radio program he hosted.33 One result of the dispute was the appearance of the Rabbi Meier Kahane's Jewish Defense League as a militant voice for Jewish group interest and a challenge to established Jewish leaders that was in some respects comparable to black separatist extremism.

Another response to the rise of black militancy came from Jewish neoconservatives, who made their own claim for ideological dominance in Jewish communities. Nathan Glazer's 1969 article in Commentary set the stage for the Jewish neoconservative movement by attacking not only black militants but also their Jewish radical defenders. As in black communities, Glazer's piece revealed how black-Jewish political ties were becoming a matter of contention among Jews. Glazer called upon "the chief Jewish defense agencies" to act on behalf of their constituencies and ridiculed Jewish radicals who gave support to black militancy: "All they can do is give the blacks guns, and allow themselves to become the first victims."34 Within a few years, the outlines of the neoconservative position against black militancy had been presented in the pages of Commentary and other magazines by figures such as Glazer, Podhoretz, Irving Kristol, Midge Decter, and Milton Himmelfarb. Jewish neoconservatives agreed with their black militant opponents that many of the goals of the black struggles of the 1970s were depa-
tutes from the traditional goals of the civil rights movement, but it was also the case that a profound political reorientation was occurring among Jews. As Jonathan Kaufman noted, the 1967 war "forced a reexamination not only of American Jewish attitudes toward Israel but of American Jewish attitudes toward themselves." For both African Americans and Jews, the 1967 Arab-Israeli war signaled a shift from the universalistic values that had once prevailed in the civil rights movement toward an emphasis on political action based on more narrowly conceived group identities and interests. Kaufman observed that the black consciousness movement of the 1960s stimulated the Jewish consciousness revival of the 1970s. Black Power advocates and supporters of Israel were on different sides of the Middle East conflict, but they agreed their own group must exercise a measure of exclusive political control on matters involving vital group interests.

This sense of Jewish exclusivity on the issue of Israel was threatened in the major manifestation of black-Jewish tensions during the late 1970s: the Andrew Young affair. In 1979 Young lost his position as ambassador to the United States and as the highest-ranking black member of Jimmy Carter's administration when he met secretly with the UN representative of the Palestinian Liberation Organization. Although Jewish leaders sought to avoid actions that would suggest that they had engineered Young's resignation, many African Americans saw it as a clear indication of the power that could be exercised by Jews against a black leader who took an even-handed stand on the Middle East conflict. The controversy reinforced the pervasive feeling among blacks that many of their leaders could not, or would not, speak out on the issues that divided blacks and Jews.

Given this background, the climate was established for the emergence of Nation of Islam leader Louis Farrakhan as a major spokesman for disenchanted and distrustful blacks. Although Farrakhan had been a Muslim leader since the late 1950s, he came to prominence only in 1984 when he injected himself into the black-Jewish controversy surrounding Jesse Jackson's presidential campaign. Jackson's campaign was initially damaged in February 1984 when he admitted to using the terms "Hymie" and "Hymietown" in a private conversation about New York Jews. He apologized for the remarks, which were revealed by a black Washington Post reporter, Milton Coleman, and insisted that he had not made the statements in a "spirit of meanness," but Farrakhan's spirited defense of Jackson brought even more criticisms from Jews. During the spring, Farrakhan further exacerbated Jackson's relations with Jews (and not coincidentally attracted enormous attention to himself) when he used the phrase "gutter religion" in reference to Jews whose actions he opposed. Although, at the time, most press reports focused on Jackson's partially successful effort to distance himself from Farrakhan, a by-product of the controversy was that Farrakhan took a major step toward becoming the principal national voice for black discontent. Having harmed Jackson's presidential aspirations in 1984, he was able to capitalize on his notoriety with such effectiveness that by 1995 he, rather than Jackson, would become the lead speaker and organizer for the Million Man March.
By the time of Farrakhan's emergence as a major African-American leader, the black-Jewish civil rights alliance had come to represent only one facet of a complex spectrum of African-American political alternatives. Leaders such as Farrakhan who did not believe in interracialism and rejected the idea of black-Jewish political ties had refined the technique of using occasional anti-Semitic comments as a means of stimulating anti-Jewish feelings among blacks, of garnering publicity, and of publicly demonstrating their willingness to express controversial views regardless of the feelings of non-blacks. Far more than Jackson and other black leaders who retained a vision of interracialism and black-Jewish cooperation, Farrakhan and those who followed his model benefited from a political climate that emphasized racial identity and loyalty and that reflected a worldwide trend away from universalistic political values.

In retrospect, the radical insurgencies of 1968 can be seen as the culmination of two centuries of reformist and revolutionary activity rooted in the Enlightenment and eighteenth-century democratic movements. The subsequent crises in black-Jewish relations reflected a generalized decline in popular support for socialism and other forms of radicalism that transcended racial, ethnic, and religious boundaries. Activists who had once joined in coalitions in pursuit of universalistic ideals have felt increasingly isolated within their own groups and have been unable to resist the apparent worldwide trend toward greater economic inequality and increasing conflict among racial, ethnic, and religious groups. Politics rooted in segregated enclaves and based on narrowly conceived notions of racial and cultural identity have challenged and in some places supplanted universalistic egalitarianism. The deep passions of ancient "tribal" and racial identities has, in the United States and elsewhere, undermined popular support for multicultural and multiracial democracy. Even African Americans and Jewish Americans—two groups that have historically supported twentieth-century democratizing movements in the United States—have at the end of the century become more noticeably divided among themselves about their nation's multiracial, multicultural democratic experiment.

Notes


5. Although there have been many published estimates of the proportion of civil rights movement funding donated by Jews, hard evidence on this issue is not available. Jack Greenberg has dismissed the notion that donations from Jews were the principal source of movement funding and speculates that the “myth of dominant Jewish financial support for civil rights probably comes from the 1960s when Jewish celebrities gave to SNCC…and CORE and Martin Luther King, Jr. But they scarcely gave in similar amounts to mainstream organizations like LDF, the NAACP, and the Urban League”—Greenberg, *Crusaders in the Courts*, p. 51.

6. See the conference address of Heschel, as well as those of Rabbi Morris Adler and Dr. Julius Mark, in Mathew Ahmann, ed., *Race, Challenge to Religion* (Chicago, 1963).

7. Given the large proportion of secular Jews among Jewish civil rights activists, Murray Friedman overstates the case when he writes that Heschel “stirred not only the Jewish religious community but Jews young and old into direct action, galvanizing the whole spectrum of activists from fund-raisers to lawyers.” See Friedman, with the assistance of Peter Binzen, *What Went Wrong? The Creation and Collapse of the Black-Jewish Alliance* (New York, 1985), p. 191.


12. Berson, *Negroes and the Jews*, pp. 121, 123. Berson quotes NAACP leader Aaron Henry’s disappointment over the failure of Jews to support the civil rights movement: “We thought that naturally we would have the Jews on our side, because the enemies of the Jews were usually found in the same group that opposed us. But we don’t have the Jews supporting us” (p. 121).


14. Although Jonathan Kaufman emphasized Jewish idealism, he conceded:
“Jews benefitted enormously from the terrain shaped by the civil rights movement. Jews were the first to use anti-discrimination laws to gain access to restricted apartment buildings in large cities. The growing tide of tolerance left by the civil rights movement opened opportunities for Jews as well as for blacks in law firms, corporations, and universities”—Broken Alliance, p. 101.


22. Stokely Carmichael to Mrs. Lorna Smith, November 8, 1966, the Stokely Carmichael-Lorna Smith Collection, Stanford University.


31. King’s first statement against black anti-Semitism, entitled “My Jewish Brother,” was issued February 26, 1966, shortly after a CORE activist in New York remarked to an audience that included a number of Jews, “Hitler made a mistake when he didn’t kill enough of you.” King’s statement appeared in many newspapers.

32. “When people criticize Zionism, they mean Jews—this is God’s own truth” (see “Letter to an Anti-Zionist Friend,” Saturday Review, August 1967, p. 76). King provided a more well developed statement of his position and that of the SCLC in a September 28, 1967, letter to Rabbi Jacob M. Rothschild: “The Middle East problem embodies the related questions of security and development. Israel’s right to exist as a state in security is incontestable. At the same time the great powers have the obligation to recognize that the Arab world is in a state of imposed poverty and backwardness that must threaten peace and harmony. Until a concerted and democratic program of assistance is affected, tensions cannot be relieved. Neither Israel nor its neighbors can live in peace without an underlying basis of economic and social development.”

33. Among the many accounts of the Ocean Hill-Brownsville controversy are the following: Berson, Negroes and the Jews, chapter 14; Robert G. Weisbord and Arthur Stein, Bittersweet Encounter: The Afro-American and the American Jew (New York, 1970), chapter 8.


36. Kaufman reported: “Following the end of World War II, there were only two full-time professors of Jewish history and thought at American universities; by 1985, 300 American colleges and universities were offering courses in Judaic studies and twenty-seven offered graduate programs. By the 1980s, polls found, American Jews in their twenties were more likely to attend a Seder than those in their sixties”—Broken Alliance, p. 213.