

# Civil Rights Leaders: Stokely Carmichael

By Biography.com Editors and A+E Networks, adapted by Newsela staff on 07.21.16

Word Count **952**



Photo of Stokely Carmichael as a senior in high school. Photo: Observatory, yearbook of Bronx High School of Science, Bronx, New York

**Synopsis:** Stokely Carmichael was born in Trinidad and Tobago on June 29, 1941. He became famous as a civil rights activist working alongside Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Over time, he lost faith in the tactic of “nonviolence” and began promoting “Black Power.” He also joined the radical Black Panther Party.

## Early Life And Education

Stokely Carmichael came to New York from Trinidad and Tobago when he was 11 years old. His mother worked on a steamship line and his father, Adolphus, worked as a carpenter and a taxi driver.

Adolphus Carmichael was an idealistic and hardworking immigrant who believed in the American Dream — that he could get ahead through hard work. His son Stokely would later criticize this view of the American Dream as a tool used to keep American minorities poor.

"My old man believed in this work-and-overcome stuff. He was religious, never lied, never cheated or stole. He did carpentry all day and drove taxis all night. The next thing that came to that poor black man was death—from working too hard. And he was only in his 40s," Stokely Carmichael said.

Carmichael attended the prestigious Bronx High School of Science in New York City. He was popular among his classmates, many of whom were the children of New York City's white liberal elite. Still, he was very aware of the racial differences that divided him from his classmates.

While still in high school, Carmichael saw sit-in protests on TV and wanted to join the American civil rights movement. "One night when I saw those young kids on TV getting back up on the lunch counter stools after being knocked off them—sugar in their eyes, ketchup in their hair—well, something happened to me," he recalled.

He joined the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) and participated in protests in New York, Virginia and South Carolina.

Carmichael turned down scholarships from prestigious, mostly white universities to attend Howard University, a historically black school in Washington, D.C., where he majored in philosophy. In 1961, Carmichael went on his first Freedom Ride. The Freedom Rides were integrated bus tours of the South, with both black and white people on the buses. At the time, interstate travel was segregated by law, with blacks and whites kept separate. Carmichael was arrested during the trip and jailed for 49 days. He continued to protest and graduated from Howard University with honors in 1964.

## **Begins Career With The SNCC**

The summer of 1964 was named "Freedom Summer" by SNCC, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee. The group began a campaign to register black voters in the Deep South. In one year, Carmichael raised the number of registered black voters in one Alabama county from 70 to 2,600.

Carmichael felt that the major U.S. political parties were not supporting his registration efforts, so he founded his own party. He chose a black panther for its logo. That image later inspired the Black Panthers, which was a different black activist organization founded in Oakland, California.

With SNCC, Carmichael followed the rule of nonviolent resistance practiced by Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. King and his supporters were morally opposed to violence, believing peace would win public support for civil rights. Nightly TV news showed peaceful protesters faced brutal police and violent hecklers. However, as time went on, Carmichael became frustrated with the slow pace of progress.

Carmichael was elected national chairman of SNCC in May 1966. By then, he had lost faith in nonviolent resistance. He made the SNCC more radical, making it clear that white members were no longer welcome. Just weeks after taking over SNCC, Carmichael faced a life-changing event.

In June 1966, James Meredith, a civil rights activist, began a solitary "Walk Against Fear" from Memphis, Tennessee, to Jackson, Mississippi. In Mississippi, Meredith was shot and wounded, and SNCC volunteers walked on in his place. In Greenwood, Mississippi, an angry Carmichael gave the speech for which he would forever be remembered. "We been saying 'freedom' for six years," he said. "What we are going to start saying now is 'Black Power.'"

## **"Black Power"**

The phrase "Black Power" quickly caught on and became the rallying cry of a younger, more radical generation of activists. In his 1968 book, "Black Power: The Politics of Liberation," Carmichael explained black power: "It is a call for black people in this country to unite, to recognize their heritage, to build a sense of community. It is a call for black people to define their own goals, to lead their own organizations."

Carmichael was moving away from the ideas of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and toward those of the more radical Malcolm X.

Black power was controversial and frightened many white Americans, even those who were sympathetic to the civil rights movement. Dr. King called black power "an unfortunate choice of words."

## **Joining The Black Panther Party**

In 1967, Carmichael traveled to Cuba, North Vietnam, China and Guinea. He left the SNCC and became a leader of the Black Panthers. He spent the next two years speaking and writing essays on black nationalism, black separatism and, increasingly, Pan-Africanism, the idea that all people of African descent share a common bond.

In 1969, Carmichael quit the Black Panthers to live in Guinea, where he dedicated his life to the cause of Pan-African unity. He changed his name to Kwame Ture.

## **Later Years And Legacy**

Carmichael was diagnosed with prostate cancer in 1996, and died on November 15, 1998, at age 57.

A powerful speaker and effective organizer, Carmichael is one of the most important figures of the American civil rights movement. His tireless spirit and radical outlook are perhaps best captured by way he answered his telephone until his dying day: "Ready for the revolution!"