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POLITICAL TRENDLETTER®

Perspective

Ella Baker—A Leader Behind the Scenes

Much of the Early Success of the NAACP and the SCLC Can Be Attributed to the Organizing Efforts of a Courageous Woman

by Britta W. Nelson

As the nation observes the 30th anniversary of the March on Washington for Civil Rights this month, the following article recalls an unsung heroine of that continuing struggle.

In 1909, the founding year of the NAACP, Ella Jo Baker was a six-year-old black girl in Norfolk, N.C., who didn't hesitate to slap a white boy in the face for calling her "nigger." But, as Baker recalled later, she soon realized that hitting an individual with her fists was not enough to overcome racism and segregation. "It takes organization, it takes dedication, it takes the willingness to stand by and do what has to be done, when it has to be done," she said. True to this sense of commitment, Ella Baker devoted her entire adult life to working for social change and racial justice. For almost 20 years, she was one of the most effective organizers for the NAACP. She later worked with the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) in the 1950s and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) in the 1960s. According to Congressman John Lewis (D-Ga.), "Ella Baker did more than any other person to make SCLC become what it was. Without her there would be no story of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee."

Yet few people today have ever heard her name. Baker was a person who worked outside the limelight of public attention since she cared much more about getting the work done than about getting credit for it. She was a central figure in the civil rights movement, and her accomplishments should not remain unrecognized.

The Road to Activism

Born and raised in rural North Carolina and the granddaughter of a slave, Ella Baker grew up in a family that held a strong belief in church and community involvement. Her parents stressed the responsibility of helping people in need and of fighting social and racial injustice, principles which influenced her decision to become an activist.

Baker graduated from Shaw University as valedictorian of her class in 1927, but her family's financial situation prevented her from attending graduate school. Instead of becoming a teacher, then the traditional occupation of educated black women, she went to New York City where

she worked in a factory and did domestic work. Shortly after her arrival, Baker became involved with radical politics and regularly attended political discussions and demonstrations; often defying the social conventions of the day by being the only woman and the only black in attendance. Her political views became increasingly class-conscious. Observing the economic dislocations caused by the Great Depression, she grew skeptical of what she called "the American illusion that anyone who is determined and persistent can get ahead."

With an eye toward putting her philosophical convictions into practice, Baker went to work as an editor for two liberal newspapers, *The American West Indian News* and the *Negro National News*. In 1931, she became national director of the Young Negroes' Cooperative League (YNCL), an organization that established cooperative economic ventures including forming buying clubs to enable poor people to pool their purchasing power. The YNCL was very successful in several states, and Baker soon gained a reputation as an expert in consumer affairs.

This led her, in 1935, to accept a position as the director of the Consumer Education Project in the Works Progress Administration, a New Deal initiative. At the same time, Baker worked with a variety of labor organizations in Harlem, focusing especially on the problems of female domestic workers and on police brutality against blacks. She joined the staff of the NAACP in 1938, already possessing an abundance of organizing experience which would later prove to be very helpful for her work in the civil rights movement.

A Grassroots Agenda

Baker's first position with the NAACP was that of a field organizer. In four years she made over three hundred trips throughout the South—averaging 12,000 miles a year. Her focus was on membership recruitment, the establishment of new NAACP chapters, fundraising, and above all, consciousness raising. Many Southern blacks had been terrorized and intimidated by the Ku Klux Klan and other white racist groups to such a degree that some of them were afraid to even get involved with the NAACP, which was considered a radical organization at the time and, in some states, had been declared illegal.

Since the NAACP's headquarters were in New York, Southern racists denounced its field workers as "Northern

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Ms. Nelson, a recent visiting fellow at the Joint Center, is an instructor of African American history at the University of Munich in Germany.

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troublemakers," often threatening, attacking, and in some cases even killing them. Despite high personal risk, Baker was able to obtain the trust of grassroots leaders and to teach them the importance of organizing their communities. As she recalled, "The major job was getting people to understand that they had power but that they could only use it if they understood what was happening and how group action could counter violence."

Because of her impressive success in this field, Baker was named the national director of branches in 1943. However, as time progressed, she grew critical of the NAACP. She thought that the organization's structure was too hierarchical, the leadership too concerned about recognition from white liberals, and its agenda geared mainly towards middle-class interests, not realizing the potential of mass-based confrontational politics and often neglecting economic issues. Baker's criticism resulted in some improvements, like the creation of several regional leadership conferences and a more inclusive youth program, but tension remained between her and the more conservative NAACP leadership. This and the fact that she accepted the responsibility of raising an eight-year-old niece caused her to resign from her national post in 1946.

In the late 1940s, Baker continued to work for several human and civil rights organizations, founding the first office of the American Cancer Society in Harlem and counseling the NAACP Youth Chapter in New York. In 1954, she became president of the New York City branch of the NAACP, which made her the highest-ranking woman in the organization. Eventually, the old conflicts between her and the NAACP leadership reemerged, and Baker left the NAACP for good.

Strong Leaders or Strong People?

She quickly applied her talents to new civil rights endeavors. In the mid-1950s, Baker collaborated with civil rights activist Bayard Rustin to found a new organization in New York called "In Friendship," which provided financial and organizational support to blacks who were fighting discrimination in the South, including the participants in the Montgomery (Alabama) bus boycott. Supporting the boycott was consistent with Baker's belief in building strong mass movements in the South that would pursue a more confrontational course of direct action than had been pursued by the NAACP, which Baker felt had become increasingly "hung-up in its legal successes."

It was primarily Ella Baker and the "In Friendship" group who convinced Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr., and other Southern civil rights leaders that the momentum of the Montgomery bus boycott had to be continued and used as a foundation to build a mass organization. "After the Montgomery situation...nothing was happening," Baker said. "The question was raised why there was no organizational machinery making use of the people who had been involved in the boycott. I irritated Dr. King in raising

this question. His rationale was that after a big demonstrative type of action, there was a natural letdown, and a need for people to sort of catch their breath, which I didn't quite agree with."

Her idea for a new organization contributed to the formation of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference in 1957, with King as the president and Ella Baker as its "interim executive secretary" (the male leadership of the SCLC was not willing to name a woman to be the official executive secretary). While King was preoccupied with his responsibilities as pastor of Dexter Avenue Baptist Church, delivering speeches and dealing with the media, Baker was the one who built up the SCLC's organizational structure. She set up an office in Atlanta, hired staff, worked with community leaders to prepare voter registration drives, created the SCLC's newsletter, *The Crusader*, and organized the 1958 Citizenship Crusade, a massive drive to educate African Americans in the South on how to participate in the electoral process.

Despite her success, Baker soon encountered the same conflicts with the SCLC leadership as she had had with the NAACP. She felt the SCLC was not "people oriented" enough and should have been more involved in mobilizing people in the poor, rural counties of the South, where blacks were not voting at all. She was frustrated with what she called "slow preachers' methods." She also strongly disapproved of the organization's male-dominated hierarchy as well as its low regard for women and young people, whom she perceived as the movement's future. "I had known that there would never be any role for me in a leadership capacity with SCLC," explained Baker. "Why? First, I'm a woman. Also, I'm not a minister. The basic attitude of men and especially ministers as to the role of women in their church as is that of taking orders, not providing leadership."

But what concerned Baker even more was that the SCLC's centralized structure was centered around King as a singular charismatic leader whose presence at any kind of demonstration would guarantee publicity and success. In her view, the degree of adulation and dependence which the SCLC showed regarding King could not be healthy for the movement. On the contrary, she felt that true, lasting change in the South could only be accomplished by replacing the traditional concept of a "leader-centered group" with "group-centered leadership." "Instead of trying to develop people around a leader, the thrust should be to develop leadership out of the group, and to spread the leadership roles so you're organizing people to be self-sufficient rather than to be dependent upon...a charismatic leader," Baker said. "My theory is: strong people don't need strong leaders."

More Than a Hamburger

When the student sit-in movement began in February 1960, Ella Baker saw her chance to develop this new kind of organization. She convinced SCLC leaders to sponsor a

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conference in April 1960 for the student activists at her alma mater, Shaw University. In her speech, "More Than a Hamburger," she asked students to realize their potential and transform their temporary movement to desegregate lunch counters into a broad and sustained movement to achieve major social reform. The result of this conference was the founding of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). In August 1960, Baker, who, much to King's dismay, had successfully blocked the SCLC leadership's plan to make the student movement an arm of its own organization, left the SCLC to work with SNCC.

Using her extensive network, as well as her organizational and fund-raising skills, Baker helped SNCC become a powerful organization with strong grassroots leadership. SNCC operated successfully in rural counties deep in the racist South, areas where neither the NAACP nor the SCLC had ever been before. With Baker's help, the students organized the now famous "Mississippi Freedom Summer" project in 1964, and their success in raising the political awareness of poor blacks in Mississippi was central to the creation of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party.

Baker became SNCC's ever-present mentor, and her advice often helped the students to keep their focus and their motivation going while overcoming external and internal difficulties. SNCC was not as well funded as other civil rights groups and it suffered from internal conflicts over whether to focus on voter registration or engage in more confrontational approaches like direct action. When others of her generation denounced the students as "too loud and too militant," she replied, "Maybe some of us are willing to forego manners to replace the lack of militancy we have found in the old movement."

Never wanting to take full control and impose her own will on the students, Baker was not able to stop SNCC's decline during the late 1960s. After 1965 some of the new SNCC leaders drifted away from the earlier principles of

group-centered leadership, became frustrated with the unspectacular work of organizing people in the local communities, and gave in to their desires for publicity.

While SNCC became fractured by a rift between the integrationists and a more radical separatist faction, Baker, who had moved back to New York in 1965, remained in touch with some students who still sought her advice. Always an advocate of interracial cooperation, Baker was particularly disappointed with the organization's decision to expel all of its white staff members. SNCC finally fell apart in 1972.

But the legacy of the movement continues. Many former SNCC members, who were inspired by Ella Baker, continue to work for the ideals that she inspired in them. Some founded their own organizations, such as Marian Wright Edelman, president of the Children's Defense Fund. Others became prominent in the political arena, such as John Lewis, congressman from Atlanta, Georgia. Even for members of the younger generation who grew up after the 1950s and 1960s, Baker's life and her teachings can serve as an inspiration: She has shown ways of successfully breaking down barriers which male-dominated leadership structures impose on women activists. She instituted an inclusive style of leadership and creative group organization. Above all, Ella Baker always served as a bridge builder, proving that effective cooperation between young and old, black and white, Northerners and Southerners, is possible, indeed vital to success in the struggle for racial, political, and economic justice.

Baker never retired from the struggle. In her last years, she worked for the African liberation movement and advised numerous civil and human rights organizations. She died in 1986. Once asked where she got the strength to keep going, Baker replied, "I'm part of the human family. I can't help it. I believe the struggle is eternal. Somebody else carries on."

The quoted statements by Ella Baker that appear in this article are from oral history materials from the Moorland-Spingarn Research Center at Howard University.

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