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# *Up South*

## Civil Rights and Black Power in Philadelphia

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PENN

University of Pennsylvania Press  
Philadelphia

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*For Rosie*



Figure 1. Philadelphia's neighborhoods.

## Introduction: Liberalism, Civil Rights, and Black Nationalism in the Urban North

Philadelphia is rarely depicted as a significant place in the history of the modern civil rights movement. Most histories of the civil rights movement move from the Montgomery bus system to the Little Rock public schools, from Greensboro's five-and-ten lunch counters to the bombed-out churches of Birmingham, from Freedom Schools in the Mississippi Delta to the Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma, Alabama. Even when the focus shifts away from the South, what we remember are the riot-torn streets of Watts, Harlem's Audubon Ballroom, Martin Luther King's open housing marches in Chicago, and Black Panther shootouts with the police in the black neighborhoods of Oakland. While some remember that Chaney, Goodman, and Schwerner—the three Freedom Summer volunteers—were murdered near Philadelphia, Mississippi, in the summer of 1964, few would think of the nation's then fourth-largest city as the site of important developments in the black freedom struggle.

Despite Philadelphia's invisibility within civil rights historiography, the city was home to one of the most successful campaigns for black civil rights in the nation during the 1940s and 1950s. In 1948, civil rights advocates convinced Philadelphia's Republican mayor and its Republican-controlled city council to enact one of the country's first municipal fair employment practices laws. Three years later, these same civil rights advocates, in alliance with a liberal reform movement inside the city's Democratic Party, succeeded in writing "human rights" provisions banning racial discrimination in all municipal employment, services, and contracts into the new city charter. The charter also provided for the establishment of a new agency within city government, the Commission on Human Relations, with responsibility for the enforcement of the city's antidiscrimination laws. For its advocates, the new city charter portended an era of steady progress toward the goal of racial equality in Philadelphia.

By the end of the 1950s, however, the commission's inability to substantively transform racial inequities within the city's labor markets, residential neighborhoods, and public schools led many in Philadelphia's black communities to begin to question the efficacy of government action in the struggle for racial equality. In 1960, the 400 Ministers, a group of black

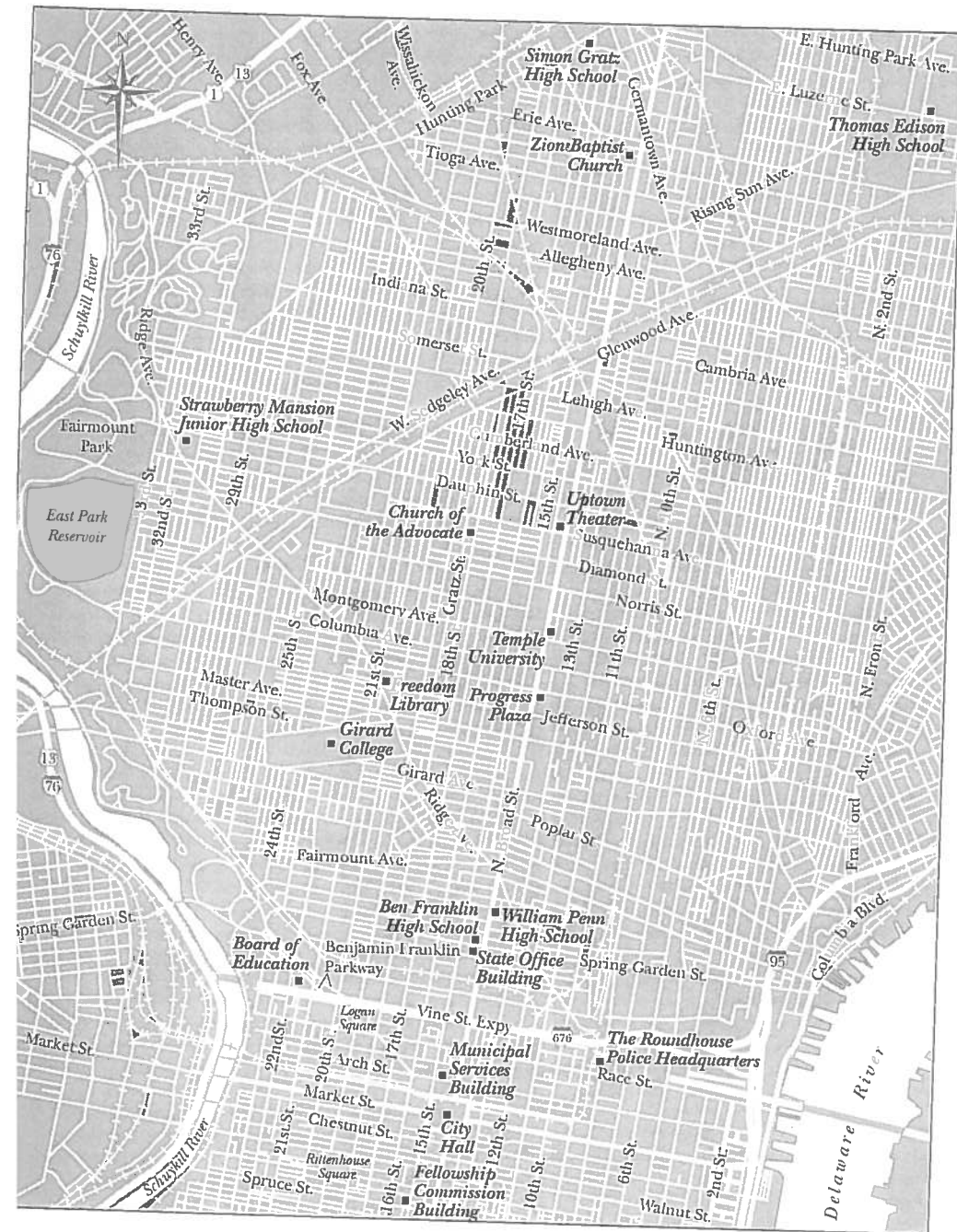


Figure 2. North Philadelphia.

clergy led by a Baptist minister named Leon Sullivan, began a protest campaign they called selective patronage, a series of black consumer boycotts against private employers who failed to provide equal employment opportunities to black workers. By 1963, the ministers claimed to have convinced, through boycotts and the threat of boycotts, more than two hundred companies to change their employment policies.

That same year, selective patronage was superseded by a civil disobedience campaign led by local NAACP president Cecil Moore. Moore targeted the municipal government directly for failing to enforce the antidiscrimination provisions of the new city charter by continuing to contract with construction companies and building trades unions that excluded black workers. Not only did the 1963 protests force the local construction industry to begin to open skilled trades positions to black workers, they also set the stage for a comprehensive reevaluation of workforce desegregation efforts at the national level—a reevaluation that would culminate in the U.S. Department of Labor's adoption in 1967 of an affirmative action program famously known as the "Philadelphia Plan."<sup>1</sup>

Black Philadelphians would continue to mount protests against the failure of government agencies to enforce the principles of equality of opportunity and equal protection under the law in the years that followed. In August 1964, anger at police brutality and the perceived high cost and poor quality of goods in white-owned stores in the city's poor black neighborhoods led to three days of rioting in the large North Philadelphia neighborhood known as the Jungle. A year later, the Philadelphia NAACP led daily protests for more than six months to demand government action to desegregate Girard College, a city-founded but privately run boarding school for orphaned boys in the heart of predominantly black North Philadelphia.

By the mid-1960s, many within the Philadelphia movement had begun to question the efficacy of civil rights protest and the desegregation agenda. Even Leon Sullivan, the driving force behind selective patronage, decided to shift his focus from protest to self-help strategies. The selective patronage campaigns, he argued, had convinced the city's business community that it had to more fully integrate its workforce and therefore that the prime challenge facing the city's black working poor was to develop the skills and work habits necessary to take advantage of these new job opportunities. Preaching that "integration without preparation is frustration," Sullivan declared that it was time to bring "a whole new dimension to the civil rights picture, placing emphasis on production rather than protest."<sup>2</sup> Working within black middle-class traditions of self-help and racial uplift, he established a nonprofit job training program, the Opportunities Industrialization Centers (OIC), and a series of black-owned for-profit ventures. Within a year of its founding, OIC would become an important model for, and beneficiary of, President Lyndon Johnson's War on Poverty because of

its emphasis on helping the poor to help themselves through the provision of social services—"a hand up"—rather than more direct forms of income redistribution—"a hand out."<sup>3</sup> Sullivan's for-profit companies would have an equally significant national impact. During the 1968 presidential campaign, Richard Nixon heralded them as models of "black capitalism," which he called the most important development in the struggle for racial justice in the country.<sup>4</sup>

In February 1966, four months before Stokely Carmichael of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) popularized the slogan "Black Power," activists in Philadelphia formed the Black People's Unity Movement (BPUM). Their goal was to synthesize Malcolm X's call for black cultural pride and community control over the social, economic, and political institutions in the black community with SNCC's commitment to community organizing and indigenous leadership development. In 1967, BPUM activists helped to organize a school walkout by black high school students from across the city to protest the lack of black history courses and black administrators in their schools. A year later, BPUM hosted the Third National Conference on Black Power, and in 1970 the Philadelphia chapter of the Black Panther Party (BPP) served as the organizing committee for the BPP-sponsored Revolutionary People's Constitutional Convention at North Philadelphia's Temple University. It was during the 1970 Black Panther convention that four years of confrontations between Black Power activists and the Philadelphia police reached a crescendo. Following a police raid on the Panthers' North Philadelphia headquarters, police officers forced male party members to strip to their undershorts on the public sidewalk. But while confrontations with the police garnered the headlines, it was within black Philadelphia that the call for Black Power, and in particular the call for community control, had its greatest impact, inspiring a broad range of organizing initiatives designed to democratize black leadership in the city and guarantee a voice for the black working-class majority in the governance of their communities and city.

While distinctive in its timing, the Philadelphia experience was not unique among northern cities. In cities from Boston to San Francisco, civil rights and Black Power activists led protest movements against racial discrimination and oppression in employment, housing, education, and the criminal justice system. Indeed, recent scholarship has begun to rethink the chronological and geographic parameters of the modern civil rights movement. As the editors of *Freedom North*—a collection of historical essays on black movements in the urban North and West in the post-World War II era—have pointed out, the focus on the South and the decade between the Montgomery Bus Boycott and the passage of the Voting Rights Act in 1965 severely truncates our understanding of the civil rights movement and its impact on American life.<sup>5</sup> Racism was never just a southern problem. Nor were civil rights activists ever solely concerned with solving southern

variants of racial segregation and inequality. The strategies and goals that we associate with southern civil rights activism were at the core of a vital political movement that challenged the racial status quo in Philadelphia and other cities of the urban North beginning in the 1940s.<sup>6</sup> This study of racial politics and activism in postwar Philadelphia constructs the history of a local civil rights movement that began in the 1940s and continued through the 1970s. And it argues that the modern civil rights movement was as much a product of the black experience of racial oppression in the urban North as it was of life in the segregated South.

What then happens to civil rights movement history when we broaden our chronological and geographic focus? First of all, the history of civil rights activism in the urban North during the 1940s makes it clear that the goals of the modern civil rights movement, far from being self-evident, were a product of the optimism of mid-century American liberalism about the uses of state power to protect individual rights and encourage upward mobility. Franklin Delano Roosevelt's New Deal had constructed the state as the facilitator of individual opportunity and upward mobility for white Americans, while largely excluding African Americans and other racial minority groups from access to the American Dream. Unlike the social democratic welfare states of western Europe, the New Deal sought to protect individual Americans against the vicissitudes of a capitalist economy by ensuring that opportunities to own a home, open a small business, and attend college were available to all. Of course, the New Deal state also provided temporary assistance in difficult times through programs like unemployment insurance, but these were less important than such programs as federal mortgage guarantees, the GI Bill, small business loans, and Social Security that could be and were trumpeted to the public as investments in individual opportunity and the American Dream.<sup>7</sup>

Inspired by the ideals of the New Deal, civil rights advocates began in the 1940s to see state action to protect the citizenship rights of individual "Negro" Americans as the key to achieving racial justice. Indeed, the expansion of federal power and of government interventions in daily life that took place under the New Deal made it possible to imagine the state—not just the courts, but every branch of government—working to guarantee that blacks and other racial minorities could enjoy the same rights and opportunities as white Americans. It is in this sense that the 1941 March on Washington Movement and President Roosevelt's subsequent Executive Order 8802 guaranteeing equal job opportunities to black workers in defense plants—not the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* decision or the Montgomery Bus Boycott—was the crucial opening salvo of the modern civil rights movement. Not only did E.O. 8802 promise equal opportunity, but it established a federal agency, the President's Fair Employment Practices Commission, whose sole purpose was to guarantee black rights in the workplace. It created a realm, no matter how limited, in which the govern-

ment took as its responsibility the protection of black citizenship rights. And like the New Deal labor reforms that preceded it, it gave the government's seal of approval for popular action to insure equal opportunity in the workplace.<sup>8</sup>

Also fundamental to the developing liberal civil rights agenda was the intellectual redefinition of the "race problem" that took place in the 1930s and 1940s. As scientists began to discredit the idea that there were biological differences between the races, liberals in particular began to view race—to paraphrase sociologist Gunnar Myrdal—as a problem of white attitudes, not of black capacities. If in fact blacks were biologically the same as whites, then not only could white society be faulted for black poverty and underdevelopment but fair-minded whites would eventually recognize black equality if only given the opportunity to interact and compete with blacks on an equal basis. In other words, many liberals came to believe that state policies which brought the races together by providing blacks with the same social and economic opportunities as whites would inevitably lead to the erosion of racial fears and misconceptions that were at the root of interracial hatred and conflict.<sup>9</sup>

Simply imagining a liberal rights-based solution to the race problem was, of course, not sufficient. It would take a national political movement to enact the antidiscrimination laws, establish the regulatory agencies, and promulgate the integrationist ethos that were all necessary if the liberal vision of a colorblind society was to become a reality. As I show in Chapter 1, just such a movement was beginning to emerge across the country during the 1940s. For the most part, it was not a protest movement but rather a movement that emphasized the development of mass membership organizations—membership in both the NAACP and trade unions peaked in this period—and the formation of broad political coalitions. Civil rights advocates in this period focused their efforts on electoral action, legislative advocacy, and public education.<sup>10</sup>

Although they achieved very important national victories in this period, including the desegregation of the armed forces and the Supreme Court ruling banning racial covenants in housing, the power of southern congressional delegations for the most part forced northern-based activists to focus their energies on implementing the liberal civil rights policy agenda at the local and state levels. In cities like Philadelphia, black activists and their white allies had put in place large parts of the liberal civil rights agenda, particularly in the area of employment discrimination, by the mid-1950s. With each victory, the city's liberal civil rights community predicted rapid advancement toward their goal of a colorblind city.

The second way that a focus on the Philadelphia movement changes the national civil rights narrative is by reframing the relationship between the southern movement and northern activism during the late 1950s and early 1960s. In those years, local protest movements developed in Philadelphia

and elsewhere in the urban North.<sup>11</sup> The Philadelphia movement sustained a series of local civil rights protest campaigns over a multiyear period not because of a desire among the city's black residents to mimic the southern protests but rather because these campaigns were rooted in black Philadelphians' direct experience with the limitations of civil rights liberalism. By the end of the 1950s, it had become clear to a great many black Philadelphians that civil rights liberalism could not fulfill its *promise* of equal opportunity for all. What is crucial here is the gap between what civil rights liberalism had promised and the actual changes it was able to bring to the daily lives of black Philadelphians. African Americans did make significant gains in Philadelphia during the 1950s. The city's antidiscrimination laws opened up to African American workers large numbers of jobs from which they once had been excluded. In particular, the expansion of job opportunities in the public sector made possible the emergence of a sizable home-owning black middle class, often in neighborhoods that whites were abandoning for the suburbs. But few in the city's poor and working-class black communities were able to benefit from these achievements. It turned out that, by themselves, bans on explicit racial discrimination in employment and government services and the enforcement efforts of local human relations agencies could not achieve the kinds of structural changes in the local labor and housing markets that advocates of civil rights liberalism had expected. Moreover, the level of municipal investment in antidiscrimination efforts could not compete in their impact with policies that, at every level from the federal government to counties and municipalities and in every region of the country, institutionalized white privilege. In public housing and education, in mortgage subsidies and highway construction, in tax incentive programs for suburban industrial and residential development, in Social Security and immigration policies that excluded farm and domestic workers from the full benefits of citizenship, the preponderance of government activity in the postwar era exacerbated the persistent practice of racial discrimination in local labor and housing markets.<sup>12</sup>

What then emerged in Philadelphia and other northern cities in the early 1960s was a form of civil rights activism that—despite its similarities with the southern movement—constituted a protest movement against the institutions of liberal government for failing to fulfill their commitment to substantive racial equality. While SNCC and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) were appealing for the federal government and the national Democratic Party to intervene on behalf of black citizenship rights in the South, activists in Philadelphia increasingly turned away from state action and biracial coalition politics and toward traditions of black collective action and self-help to achieve substantive advancements in black employment, education, and housing. And while the southern movement proclaimed its belief in the beloved community and a colorblind future, in Philadelphia movement leaders such as Leon Sullivan and Cecil

Moore pursued all-black protest strategies in order to achieve what the city's liberal coalition could not. Twenty years ago, social movement theorist Aldon Morris reconceptualized the narrative of the civil rights movement by arguing that at its core the southern movement was made up of "indigenous" local movements—self-sustaining, locally led movements that were rooted in community-based institutions and employed their own strategies and tactics against local "system[s] of domination."<sup>13</sup> It was just this kind of social movement, albeit one drawing on different local contexts and traditions, that remade racial politics in Philadelphia during the early 1960s.

The third aspect of the civil rights narrative that is transformed by a community study of the Philadelphia movement is our understanding of the reasons for the emergence of Black Power and its impact on the civil rights movement and the broader context of racial politics in United States. In both popular memory and the historical literature of the civil rights movement, Black Power is usually depicted as an outside ideological influence whose incursion into the civil rights movement disrupted the movement's sense of common purpose and goals. Often Black Power activists are described as sacrificing the movement's commitment to mass protest and organizing strategies for the sake of ideological purity and an expressive politics of race pride and unrestrained rage at all things white.<sup>14</sup> Certainly, ideological analysis and debate were important both to the work of national Black Power figures such as Stokely Carmichael and Huey Newton and to many of the local activists who embraced the Black Power project. And there was a kind of psychological liberation at play in what Eddie Glaude has called Black Power's "politics of transvaluation," its subversive reversal of white supremacy's cultural pecking order.<sup>15</sup> What this study seeks to show, however, is that Black Power's cultural and ideological appeal would have meant little had it not provided the basis for the development of alternative movement strategies for challenging racial inequity in American society.<sup>16</sup> Civil rights strategy had been based on the liberal presumption that racism was an unfortunate distortion of American values and institutions and that it could be remedied through specific legal and political reforms. In contrast, the black nationalist tradition viewed racism as constitutive of the American social structure. And therefore, only movement strategies based on intraracial solidarity within the black community, not the goodwill of whites, and committed to the collective advancement of the black community as a whole, not just the liberal vision of equal opportunity and individual advancement, could solve the race problem in America.<sup>17</sup>

Black nationalism, however, served only as the starting point for the strategy and politics of the Black Power movement. Black Power in Philadelphia emerged out of the local experiences of the movement activists who became its most avid proponents. These activists drew on the lessons



learned in a decade's worth of movement activism to build a local movement that fused a black nationalist analysis of the structures of racism in American society with the southern student movement's commitment to community organizing and indigenous leadership development. As SNCC had in the rural South in the early 1960s, Black Power activists in Philadelphia sought to build organizations that were accountable solely to the black community and in which leadership was based not on professional degrees or middle-class status but on one's proximity to and ability to identify with poor and working-class blacks. While many historians have argued that the emergence of Black Power led movement activists to abandon their commitment to the democratic empowerment of local communities, in Philadelphia it was Black Power activists who brought what Charles Payne has called "the organizing tradition" into the local movement.<sup>18</sup>

This community study thus confounds the usual narrative of Black Power in another way. As numerous scholars have documented, Black Power ideology was deeply patriarchal. Much of its critique of American racism focused on its denial of the fundamental prerogatives of manhood to African American men. To the extent that black women had been able to forge histories of self-reliance, work outside the home, and political activism, many male black nationalists regarded these aspects of black community life as evidence that white America had denied to black men their rightful roles as leaders and protectors—to the community's overall detriment. Moreover, a central component of the black nationalist critique of the civil rights movement focused on the insufficient manliness of its leadership as reflected in its commitment to nonviolence—even in the face of racist attacks on women and children—and the disproportionate representation of women in the movement's rank and file.<sup>19</sup> In Philadelphia, however, Black Power's masculinist ideology was contradicted by the commitment to community organizing and indigenous leadership. As had been true for SNCC in the rural South, the vast majority of neighborhood leaders with whom Black Power activists worked in Philadelphia were women. Thus, Black Power activists' commitment to promoting community-based leaders contributed to a significant shift in the gender balance of black leadership in Philadelphia. Before the mid-1960s, black political and movement leadership in the city had been dominated, with a few extraordinary exceptions, by men from the black community's professional class. In contrast, the black movement organizations of the late 1960s produced a cohort of neighborhood-based working-class women activists with citywide constituencies and influence equivalent to the most prominent of male Black Power leaders.<sup>20</sup>

At its most fundamental, the Black Power movement in Philadelphia challenged the decision-making structures that controlled public and private investment in the city. Drawing on Malcolm X's call for community control, Black Power advocates argued that decisions that affected the city's

black communities should be made within those communities, not in government offices. Philadelphia's Black Power activists faced a number of significant obstacles, including lack of a consistent vision of how a racially just city might look, inconsistent organizational structures, ongoing police surveillance and harassment, and an increasingly powerful and well-organized white conservative backlash against black activism. Still, the city's Black Power movement was able to present a formidable challenge to the weakened, though still powerful, liberal coalition. On issues ranging from public education and urban renewal to police brutality and welfare, advocates of Black Power rejected liberalism's faith in antidiscrimination laws and technocratic government in favor of the principles of community-based leadership, participatory democracy, and racial self-determination.

This study concludes by challenging the view that it was the overheated rhetoric of Black Power, and more generally the rising demands of black activists in the late 1960s and 1970s, that derailed the civil rights movement and contributed to the collapse of the New Deal coalition by precipitating white flight from the Democratic Party. As Thomas Sugrue and others have demonstrated, the roots of white working- and middle-class racial conservatism in the North and West can be found in a political backlash against the liberal civil rights reforms of the 1940s and 1950s, long before the racial militancy of the 1960s. This study of the Philadelphia movement extends this point in three ways: (1) Black Power activists constructed a vital and effective social movement that remade the political and cultural landscape in American cities during the late 1960s and 1970s in ways that postwar liberalism could and did not accomplish; (2) by the early 1970s, Black Power advocates across the ideological spectrum had begun to adopt a common political strategy based on the mobilization of black electoral majorities and pluralities in major urban areas; and (3) the failure of this urban political strategy was as much the product of urban deindustrialization and of suburban antitax politics—historical developments that can be directly traced to postwar liberalism's policy making—as it was the result of a white working-class backlash against the ethnic political strategies of Black Power.

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*Up South* is divided into three parts. In Part I, "Race, Rights, and Postwar Liberalism," I trace the rise and fall of civil rights liberalism in Philadelphia during the 1940s and 1950s. Chapter 1 describes how black and white liberal activists built a civil rights coalition which, allied with New Deal reformers in the city's Democratic Party, was able to write the principles of nondiscrimination and equal opportunity into the governing charter of the city in 1951. Chapter 2 analyzes the impact of liberal policy making on race and its inability to transform the structure of race relations in the city. Part



II, “A Northern Protest Movement,” discusses the reasons for the emergence of a black protest movement against liberalism in Philadelphia. Chapters 3 and 4 describe how local activists, most notably Leon Sullivan and Cecil Moore, drew on black nationalist traditions of collective action and self-reliance, as well as the strategies of the southern protest movement, to channel black Philadelphians’ disillusionment with liberalism into a powerful local movement. Chapter 5 then shows how a group of local activists, many of them veterans of the southern movement, forged a vibrant Black Power movement in the city—one that effectively synthesized the black nationalist demand for community control with the grassroots democratic politics of the southern student movement. Finally, in Part III, “Black Power in the Postindustrial City,” I analyze the local Black Power movement, its achievements and failures. Chapter 6 discusses efforts to achieve community control over the city’s black public schools. Chapter 7 examines the gender politics of Black Power, both its commitment to establishing an explicitly masculinist leadership for the black community and its paradoxical support for the emergence of a new kind of community-based, working-class, and predominantly female leadership within black Philadelphia. Finally, Chapter 8 explores the complex relationship between the local Black Power movement and the War on Poverty and describes how the logic of community control led many Black Power activists to turn to electoral strategies in the 1970s.

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“Up South” was the punch line to the many stories black Philadelphians, and their counterparts in other northern cities, told each other about their encounters with racism in the North. Charyn Sutton, a student activist who worked both in interracial movement groups during the early 1960s and in the emerging Black Power movement, describes the Southwest Philadelphia neighborhood in which she grew up as “Up South.” In her childhood, racial segregation was enforced not by law, but by the unspoken rules that told you not to walk on that block or go to that public swimming pool. Another veteran of the student movement remembers SNCC activists joking about coming “Up South” when they headed north for a respite from the racial terror of the segregated South. And in his new memoir of his years in the Black Panther Party, Mumia Abu-Jamal described the culture of postwar Philadelphia as more akin to the jim crow South than to our public memory of the North as the promised land of freedom.<sup>21</sup> Racial oppression was, of course, not the same in Philadelphia as it was ‘Down South.’ Both the forces of racial domination—and the means they used against black people—were different than those faced by African Americans in the South. But to live “Up South” was to confront structures of racial inequality and exclusion on a daily basis. This is the story of the efforts of two generations of black Philadelphians to turn the city of “brotherly love” into a place of promise and opportunity for all.

## Part I

# Race, Rights, and Postwar Liberalism

*Chapter 6*

## Community Control of the Schools

Give the white-dominated school system an eviction from the black community.

—*Philadelphia CORE leaflet, November 17, 1967*

On the morning of Friday, November 17, 1967 at 9:50 A.M., someone pulled the fire alarm at Bok Vocational High School at Ninth and Mifflin Streets in South Philadelphia. By the time students and faculty were allowed back in the building, a group of about two hundred students had begun to march the ten blocks to Southern (South Philadelphia) High School at South Broad and Snyder Streets where another hundred students joined their march. From Southern, the students headed north, some on foot, some on the Broad Street subway, toward Center City. Their destination was the Board of Education's main administration building at Twenty-First Street and the Benjamin Franklin Parkway, on the far northwestern edge of Center City. A second stream of marchers began at Germantown High School in the Northwest section of the city. More than 200 students walked out of Germantown during the 10 A.M. lunch period and began marching down Germantown Avenue, many wearing skullcaps in the school's green and white colors and gold "Black Power" buttons. Just before reaching the corner of Broad and Erie, the Germantown students met up with a group of marchers from Gratz High School. Some of the now nearly five hundred students then took the Broad Street subway to City Hall, while others marched south on Broad toward William Penn and Ben Franklin High Schools, twin single-sex schools located just north of Center City, before heading west to the parkway (Figure 12). A third stream of fifty marchers began at Kensington High, an all-girls school in the lower northeast section of the city. The Kensington marchers walked three miles to Edison High, their all-male counterpart, before heading to the school board building. From the west came marchers from West Philadelphia, West Catholic, Overbrook, and Bartram High Schools.<sup>1</sup>

By 12:30 P.M., the crowd of demonstrators had swelled to more than

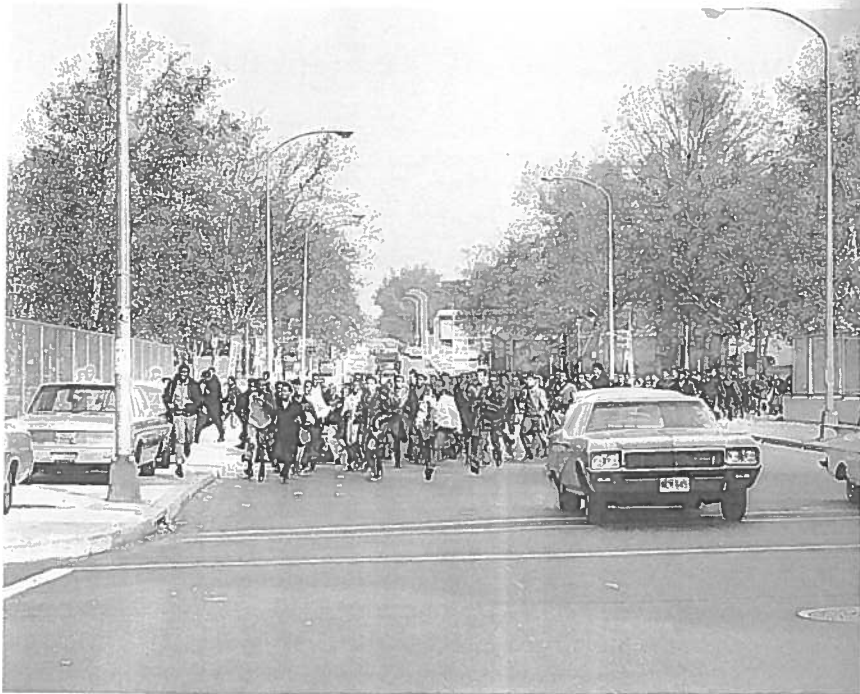


Figure 12. High school students running across the Benjamin Franklin Parkway toward the Board of Education, November 17, 1967. Urban Archives, Temple University Libraries.

3,500 students from at least twelve high schools marching around the Board of Education building.<sup>2</sup> According to a number of observers, the mood within the crowd of student protesters was festive as they waited for their leaders to return from the negotiating session. Like a number of adult activists, Paul Washington had arrived early in the demonstration “to show my support and to be of assistance.” He left midmorning because he felt that “everything was proceeding so peaceably that my presence would not be needed.” The *Bulletin* described the demonstrators as treating “the affair as a picnic.” The students “laughed, asked news cameramen to take their pictures and danced before television cameras.” Others chanted “beep, beep, bang, bang, boom, boom, Black Power” and carried signs calling for “more Black Power in the School System.” Joan Countryman, who had just begun working in the school district’s community relations division, remembers students calling out to their friends from different schools. “Who’s here from West?” CORE activists distributed a leaflet that called for “Community Control” of black public schools as the only way to fix a school system in which the black dropout rate was nearly three times

that of white students. “If the Philadelphia school system defeats your child now,” the leaflet read, “he will remain defeated for the rest of his life . . . Give the white-dominated school system an eviction from the black community.”<sup>3</sup>

Shortly after the first demonstrators arrived at the Board of Education building, a committee of student activists, representing twelve high schools, and a number of adult advisers—including BPUM’s Mattie Humphrey and Edward Robinson and Paul Vance from a black teachers group called the Educators’ Roundtable—entered the building to meet with the school superintendent, Dr. Mark Shedd, and Richardson Dilworth and the Rev. Henry Nichols, the president and vice president of the school board respectively. There are conflicting stories as to how this meeting came about. According to Walter Palmer, the meeting was pre-arranged. The student committee had developed a list of twenty-five demands and had rehearsed its presentation to the school board officials with his and Humphrey’s help. Others suggest that the request for the meeting came from school board officials who, impressed with how orderly the student protesters were, asked Humphrey if she would identify a group of student leaders who would be willing to meet with Dr. Shedd.<sup>4</sup> What is clear is that the student leaders and school board officials met for most of the morning in a room with large windows that overlooked the still-growing crowd of students in the streets below. In the meeting, the students presented a number of demands, including the addition of black history courses taught by black teachers, the assignment of black principals to black schools, increased black representation on the school board, exemption from the requirement that students salute the flag, and the removal of police and nonteaching assistants from all schools. According to Palmer, who was not in the meeting, at one point a student leader from Bok opened one of the large windows to yell out to the student protesters that the school board officials had agreed to twenty-four of their twenty-five demands.<sup>5</sup>

Despite the festive atmosphere on the student picket line, police officials seem to have become increasingly uneasy as the size of the crowd continued to grow. Palmer believes that police officials had not expected a very large group of students to show up that morning and thus made no attempt to keep cars from the metered parking spots in front of the building. He also remembers the police radios crackling with increasingly desperate reports of large numbers of students departing high schools across the city. At Dilworth’s request, the only police officers on the scene when the morning began were members of Lieutenant George Fencel’s plainclothes civil disobedience squad which had earned a reputation for maintaining cordial relations with black protesters. Dilworth and Shedd were clearly eager to maintain a dialogue with the students. Commissioner Rizzo, however, had urged a more aggressive approach, recommending that the school board

seek a court order banning Walter Palmer and CORE's William Mathis from leading the rally. While Mathis would claim that Lieutenant Fencil had repeatedly complimented him on the students' good behavior throughout the morning, there was clearly concern within the police department over the size of the crowd.<sup>6</sup>

The only violent incident of the morning occurred just before noon. While reports differ, it seems that one male demonstrator began running over the tops of cars parked in front of the administration building. When members of the civil disobedience squad moved to arrest the young man, a group of about two hundred demonstrators surrounded the plainclothes officers. A young woman attempting to free the young man was then beaten and arrested. And when Rev. Marshall Bivins, a white Episcopal priest, sought to protect the young women, he too was beaten and arrested.<sup>7</sup>

What happened next continues to be a matter of some dispute. CORE's Bill Mathis would later testify that he successfully convinced Fencil to order his officers to retreat in order to give Mathis time to calm protesters who were moving dangerously close to the police lines as they played to the local news television cameras. According to Commissioner Rizzo, however, he received reports from Fencil that the protest "was getting out of hand," that the number of demonstrators was continuing to grow, and protesters were banging on parked cars and windows of the school board building. The commissioner, who had spent the morning at City Hall for the swearing-in of 111 new police sergeants, decided to load the sergeants into two police buses and head for the school board building. Rizzo and the sergeants arrived just as school board vice president Nichols was coming out of the building to investigate the disturbance. According to Nichols, he asked the commissioner to put away his nightstick and move the uniformed officers back from the school district building. Believing that Rizzo had agreed to this request, he then began trying to move the student demonstrators back. Rizzo, however, suddenly ordered his officers to charge the demonstrators with billy clubs drawn. The commissioner would later contend he ordered the charge because he saw the group of protesters surrounding the plainclothes officers begin to throw sawhorses that were used to reserve parking spaces for school board officials at the police. However, none of the journalists or other independent observers who were at the scene were ever able to confirm the commissioner's account. What local television news footage did seem to confirm was the charge of Nichols and a number of demonstrators that they had heard Rizzo order his officers to "get their black asses."<sup>8</sup>

The police charge was so vicious that many who witnessed it, including school board workers on their lunch hour, were reduced to tears. At its center, swinging his billy club freely, was Commissioner Rizzo. Most of the demonstrators, of course, had no idea of the events that led to the police

charge. As Walter Palmer describes it, riot police with batons drawn suddenly, "without warning [and] without provocation," began pushing the students from the parkway toward the building, essentially trapping them. According to the police, Palmer yelled out to the crowd, "If they fight you, hit them back," a charge that Palmer now confirms. The police would also claim that Mathis began to shout "Kill Rizzo! Kill Rizzo!" through a bullhorn. Some students began to throw stones and bottles. Most, though, simply ran. Many were beaten as they ran from the charging police officers. According to a Fellowship Commission report, between twenty and thirty black students and adults were treated for injuries following the demonstration. Kenneth Blake, a sixteen-year-old student at Ben Franklin High, would receive five stitches under his left eye after being clubbed by this group of officers. One black school board employee was knocked to the ground and had his right sleeve torn off for urging the police to retreat. There were reports that some police officers laced their violence with racial epithets. One officer beat Dozier Smith, a seventeen-year-old school board maintenance worker, as he tried to enter the building. When he tried to explain that he had only come to pick up his paycheck, he was told to "shut up, nigger." From a window in the school board meeting, BPUM's Ed Robinson called out to two officers to stop beating a girl. One officer yelled back, Robinson would later testify in a police brutality suit, "Come on down here, nigger, and you'll get it."<sup>9</sup>

Many of the students, running from the police charge, headed into the midst of the Center City business district where they literally ran into office workers walking to and from their lunch hours. As they ran, some groups of demonstrators broke car and store windows and attacked white passersby, some as far as twelve blocks from the school board. A thirty-five-year-old telephone engineer was hospitalized with facial fractures and impaired vision in one eye after being attacked by two teenage boys as he walked toward his office five blocks from the school board. Two blocks further away, an eighteen-year-old white female college student was attacked by a group of black girls. A punch loosened two of her front teeth and her hearing aid was broken. One girl then helped her to her feet while telling her friends that they "shouldn't have done this." Another group of demonstrators ran through the City Hall courtyard chanting Black Power slogans where they were met by police with submachine guns and dogs. A number of buses, subway cars, and subway stations were vandalized by students as they headed back to their neighborhoods. According to the police, a total of twenty-seven pedestrians were treated for minor injuries after being assaulted by black youths. In addition, twelve police officers were treated for injuries.<sup>10</sup>

By the end of the afternoon, the police had arrested fifty-seven people for actions related to the demonstration. For their comments in the midst of the police charge, Bill Mathis and Walter Palmer were charged with

inciting a riot and held on \$50,000 bail, while BPUM youth leader Richardson was accused of leading the crowd of 200 to 300 demonstrators that sought to prevent the initial arrest of the young man on the car roof. According to Ed Robinson, who was Richardson's uncle, he saw the police club and arrest his nephew after he sought to throw himself over a girl who was being beaten on the sidewalk. Robinson himself was beaten at police headquarters at Ninth and Arch Streets when he went to inquire about his nephew.<sup>11</sup>

### BPUM's High School Organizing

The November 17, 1967 demonstration was the culmination of a three-month organizing campaign carried out by BPUM's education committee and a network of student activists that the group had helped to organize. Continuing the curriculum reform efforts of the Freedom Library, the BPUM education committee promoted the efforts of black parents and teachers to win greater community say over the workings of the public schools that served the city's black communities, while seeking to bring BPUM's message of self-love and intraracial solidarity to young people across the city. Among the school reform organizations with whom BPUM worked was the Educators' Roundtable, a black teachers group whose members often invited BPUM's Ed Robinson and Walter Palmer to speak to their classes on black history topics, and the Educational Self-Help Centers, a War on Poverty-funded network of neighborhood-based and parent-run tutorial centers that the Philadelphia Tutorial Project had organized.<sup>12</sup>

BPUM's student organizing efforts also benefited from an explosion of interest among young African Americans with all things black nationalist. The November 17 demonstration came at the end of a three-year period that had seen Malcolm X's assassination, Muhammad Ali's refusal of induction into the military and subsequent loss of his world boxing title, the national furor over SNCC's embrace of the "Black Power" slogan, and the Black Panther Party's armed march into the California state legislature.<sup>13</sup>

By 1967, BPUM had become the center of black youth organizing across the city. At BPUM rallies and workshops, teenage activists from black neighborhoods in South, West, and North Philadelphia and Germantown were introduced to the cultural politics of race pride, black history, Africanist practices and values, and intraracial unity. And BPUM's adult activists encouraged the students to take these lessons back into their high schools, to press for the introduction of black studies courses into the curriculum, and to demand recognition of their right to form black student clubs and to wear African-oriented clothing. As Walter Palmer describes it, BPUM was equally committed to recruiting "corner kids"—leaders of the "corner" youth gangs in black working-class neighborhoods across the city—and members of student government to its events. "These corners," he argues,

were "not gangs, they were neighborhood and community . . . young people who protect[ed] their entire community. Their turf [was] their mothers, their fathers, their brothers, their sisters, the elderly, their neighbors and themselves. They look[ed] forward to the time when they will protect the community, the turf." In fact, there was significant overlap between the corner kids and student council activists. "Some corner kids were in student government, some weren't." As an example, he points to Ronald White, a member of the student council at Ben Franklin High School who as "Billy-Boy" ran the Tenth and Poplar corner. White represented Franklin in the November 17 meeting with Dr. Shedd.<sup>14</sup>

BPUM thus presented movement activism and the politics of racial unity as an alternative to gang battles, much as Cecil Moore had done in 1965. The key figure in BPUM's youth organizing was Edward Robinson's nephew, David Richardson. A 1965 graduate from Germantown High School, Richardson's parents divorced when he was young and he grew up very close to his two uncles, Edward and his brother Calvin Robinson, who also worked as a sales agent for Provident Mutual Insurance. According to Richardson's mother Elaine Richardson, her son first began working to reduce gang tensions in East Germantown when he was in junior high. After high school, Richardson enrolled at Temple University, but soon dropped out to work for his uncles in the insurance business. And like his uncles, he used the flexibility offered by work in sales to pursue his interest in community activism. His mother, Edward Robinson, and Walter Palmer all agree that David Richardson saw Palmer as a mentor. "Dave want[ed] to know everything I know," Palmer recalls. Donning Palmer's uniform of a dashiki and a kufi, Richardson not only brought young men from the Germantown 'corners' into BPUM, he also used Palmer's connections to network with young activists throughout the city.<sup>15</sup>

The decision to organize a student campaign to press for the adoption of black history curricula, recognition of black student unions, and other school reforms seems to have been the result of at least two overlapping conversations within BPUM. First, a group of high school students led by David Richardson approached Palmer for help in challenging school dress and behavior codes that banned African clothing, 'afro' haircuts, and African names. At roughly the same time, members of BPUM's education committee were debating the relative merits of establishing independent schools to teach black history and culture—the classic cultural nationalist position—versus working to implement black history curricula in the public schools attended by most black children. A year earlier, an attempt to establish a black independent school in the city had failed to attract enough tuition-paying children to survive, thus buttressing the argument of those like Edward Robinson and John Churchville who had long argued for a focus on public school reform. But, of course, the school board had been ignoring the efforts of Robinson and others to lobby for black history

curricula for decades. As Robinson remembers it, it was Palmer who argued that organizing high school students was the way to win changes in the public school curriculum.<sup>16</sup>

### The Summer of 1967

BPUM began the student campaign in the summer of 1967 with a series of training sessions.<sup>17</sup> At the same time, BPUM activists participated in a series of Black Power rallies and confrontations with the police that drew large numbers of black youth into the local Black Power movement. For six straight Saturdays in June and July, street-corner rallies in different parts of South, North and West Philadelphia attracted hundreds of young people to hear Black Power speakers denounce the racism of the Philadelphia police department and of white-owned stores in black neighborhoods.

The street-corner rallies were the result of a surprising alliance between BPUM and Cecil Moore who until this point had been an avowed integrationist. Over the previous year and a half, however, Moore had become increasingly isolated within both the Philadelphia and national NAACP chapters. In October 1965, the national office had announced plans to divide the Philadelphia branch into five neighborhood units and to replace the position of local branch president with a citywide council of branch leaders. Gloster Current, the NAACP's national director of branches, would repeatedly insist that the purpose of the breakup was not to undercut Moore, but to make the local organization more responsive to "individual problems" and to enable it "to stimulate the development of area leaders." Not surprisingly, Moore and his supporters viewed the national office's real intention as "to discredit and destroy militant, independent-thinking chapters." Moore's suspicions were confirmed in June 1966 when Kivie Kaplan, the NAACP's national chairman, blamed Moore for the decline in branch membership from more than 20,000 in 1963 to 7,000 in 1965. "It's apparent," Kaplan declared, "that Moore's job here hasn't been good." In response Moore accused Kaplan and the rest of the NAACP's national leadership of seeking to destroy Negro unity in Philadelphia, "the capital of the civil rights movement in the North," and vowed to challenge the national organization's actions at the 1966 NAACP convention.<sup>18</sup>

After failing to overturn the national board ruling at the 1966 NAACP convention, Moore turned to the courts to maintain his position as president of the Philadelphia NAACP. For nearly a year, he would succeed in delaying the breakup of the branch with a series of temporary court injunctions. In May 1967, however, the Pennsylvania Supreme Court ruled that it lacked jurisdiction over the NAACP because the organization was headquartered in New York. Shortly thereafter, the national NAACP announced that it had transferred the Philadelphia branch charter to the new North Philadelphia branch, which would remain under Moore's leadership, and

that it planned to form new neighborhood branches in West, South, Northwest, and Northeast Philadelphia. Then, in July, the national office suspended Moore from the North Philadelphia branch presidency for allegedly diverting branch funds, including membership dues that were owed the national office, to his legal practice and to partisan political activities. By the time a subcommittee of the national board heard Moore's appeal of his suspension in the summer of 1968, the breakup of the Philadelphia NAACP was a fait accompli.<sup>19</sup>

Throughout the two-and-a-half-year battle over the plan to divide the Philadelphia branch, Moore directed a constant barrage of criticisms at his opponents in both the national organization and the local branch. His opponents, Moore charged, were "part-time Negroes" interested only in defending the interests of the black elite. By this point, however, Moore had adapted his attacks on liberals to the new language of Black Power.

Hell, I've been preaching and practicing black power . . . for years. When I took over the leadership of the NAACP, I put most of the whites out. If they are liberal and really want to help, let them walk one pace to the rear and one pace to the right. I think the so-called white liberal is a phony anyway. The only reason he gives money to the civil rights movement is to salve his conscience.<sup>20</sup>

Faced with the loss of his organizational base, Moore began to reach out to Black Power advocates in the city. In the spring of 1967, Moore announced the formation of a new civil rights group, the Society of United Leadership (SOUL), whose stated mission—"to preserve black unity in Philadelphia"—explicitly mimicked BPUM. In part, Moore's outreach to BPUM was motivated by his desire to run as a third-party candidate for mayor in that November's general election. In March, the one-time Republican had announced plans to lead an all-black third-party ticket, the Political Freedom Rights Party (PFRP). Moore's goals for the PFRP were less to win the election than to demonstrate the potential appeal of black independent electoral campaigns. Without significant campaign funds or a paid campaign staff, Moore's campaign consisted of a series of street-corner rallies in black neighborhoods. Young people were thus at the center of Moore's campaign strategy. Shortly after declaring his candidacy, Moore appeared at the 1967 Freedom Show, a rock-and-roll benefit show sponsored by WDAS and Georgie Woods, where he was greeted with chants of "We want Cecil" as he told the mostly young audience, "if you're really interested in Negro pride, vote for me for mayor, and I'll make you proud."<sup>21</sup>

What really solidified Moore's alliance with Black Power activists, however, was Mayor Tate's May 22, 1967, announcement that he was appointing Frank Rizzo to be the city's new police commissioner with a mandate to crackdown on black militancy and street crime. Tate was facing a difficult



reelection campaign against Arlen Specter, the thirty-seven-year-old Republican district attorney who combined a strong law-and-order record with a commitment to government reform that had demonstrated appeal to the liberal reform community. By promoting Rizzo—and supporting the new commissioner's "get-tough" policies—Tate clearly hoped to reinforce his support in the city's white working- and lower middle-class neighborhoods as a buffer against the loss of liberal Democrats to Specter.<sup>22</sup>

Having attained the office he had long sought, Rizzo immediately set out to demonstrate his aggressive approach to containing black protest. "If Stokely Carmichael comes to town," he told a meeting of media executives, "we're ready for him. We'll put him away. We've got a whole roomful of tapes on this guy as evidence." What the commissioner's threats meant in practice became evident a few weeks later when five hundred helmeted riot police descended on a South Philadelphia black neighborhood after a dispute between the owner of Royal Hardware on South Street and a black customer led to a mini-riot of bottle tossing. This show of force, a black lawyer told *Greater Philadelphia Magazine*, "demonstrated to the Negroes of this city that [Rizzo] has special plans for them should trouble develop in a Negro area. The only way he could convince them that all those blue steel helmets are not for exclusive use in Negro neighborhoods is to do the same thing in a white area protecting the rights of a Negro."<sup>23</sup>

Not surprisingly, the city's black militants could not let Rizzo's show of force pass. Cecil Moore, Walter Palmer, and Nation of Islam minister Jeremiah X immediately called for a rally on June 17, the following Saturday, in front of Royal Hardware to protest both the store's treatment of black customers and Rizzo's draconian police tactics. On that day, two hundred mostly young protesters chanted "We want Cecil Moore" as they waited for Moore and the other scheduled speakers to appear. When the speakers arrived, however, Lieutenant Fencil served them with an injunction banning them from speaking on South Street that evening. Declaring their intention "to stay on the streets," Moore and the BPUM activists then announced plans for a series of Black Power rallies to take place on street-corners around the city every Saturday for the remainder of the summer. The first two rallies took place on June 24—one at Seventeenth and Columbia near the epicenter of the 1964 North Philadelphia riot and the other at Sixteenth and South, just one block from Royal Hardware. The *Bulletin* estimated that two hundred people turned out for the Columbia Avenue rally and three hundred for the one on State Street. The following Saturday, there were rallies in West Philadelphia and at a different South Philadelphia site. For the remainder of July, Moore and BPUM held rallies at various sites throughout North and West Philadelphia; a second injunction prevented them from organizing gatherings along the entire South Street business corridor.<sup>24</sup>

In one sense, the street-corner rallies resembled the hundreds of mass meetings that Moore had led during his four and a half years as NAACP president, complete with crowd-pleasing attacks on his black middle-class and white liberal opponents. On July 1, for example, Moore described his former mentor, Austin Norris, as "a professional police informer and a professional traitor." But in a more fundamental way, these rallies represented a major shift in Moore's approach to movement leadership. Whereas Moore had always dominated the NAACP's rallies, now he shared almost equal billing with representatives of the city's growing Black Power movement. The emerging alliance between Moore and the Black Power advocates conveyed instant credibility on emerging figures like Walter Palmer. At the June 24 rally on South Street, Moore declared: "We got unity here. We got everybody here today. We got the Black Muslims, the Black Unity movement, and we got my brand of the NAACP, not the absentee brand." That same day, Palmer urged those at the Columbia Avenue rally not to "be fooled by these Uncle Tom Negroes . . . these superior Negroes . . . these white folks Negroes, because one day they are going to wake up and we are going to be like Jomo Kenyatta, leader of the Mau Mau, we will kill Uncle Tom first." For Moore, the Black Power themes of racial unity across class and ideological lines reinvigorated his anti-elitist discourse. The one-time integrationist told his supporters in West Philadelphia on July 1 to "vote black, buy black, eat black, be black."<sup>25</sup>

Tensions remained high between the police and black activists throughout the month of July. On July 26, for example, the police dispersed a crowd that had gathered at a South Philadelphia police station to protest the arrest of a black teenager following another protest outside a white-owned store. As he was being placed in a squad car, the teenager called out to others on the street to come to his aid. By the time the squad car arrived at a nearby police precinct, an estimated two hundred people had gathered to demand his release. When two hundred riot-helmeted police reinforcements arrived at the police station, the crowd broke into small groups, some of which raced through neighboring streets breaking windows. Over the next three hours, twenty-three people were arrested as 350 uniformed and plainclothes cops spread through the area.<sup>26</sup>

But it was the riots that erupted that month in Newark and Detroit that provided Rizzo with the rationale he needed to take extraordinary measures against black activism. On July 27, Mayor Tate announced that, on the recommendation of his police commissioner, he was issuing a "proclamation of limited emergency." Citing "the violence that has flared in other cities throughout the country," the mayor declared that the proclamation would prohibit gatherings of twelve or more in the city until August 11 "unless further extended." The mayor used a recognizable racial code to signal that black activists were the proclamation's real targets when he promised that it would only be enforced against crowds where there is a



“potential” for violence. Rizzo, on the other hand, did not bother with racial codes. Police “intelligence,” he told a press conference, “indicates that . . . militant Negro groups” were planning to incite a riot in Philadelphia. A black bar owner, Rizzo reported, had told the police that “members of a militant Negro group” had urged him to turn up the volume on a jukebox in order to bring the police to the bar. Their plan was to initiate a riot when a police officer arrived to investigate the noise. According to the commissioner, there had been thirty-two violent incidents—including firebombings and attacks on policemen—in the city since the beginning of June and the police had confiscated two hundred firebombs and fifteen rifles in that period.<sup>27</sup>

In Rizzo’s view, the most dangerous of these militant groups was Max Stanford’s Revolutionary Action Movement (RAM). In 1966, J. Edgar Hoover had publicly described RAM as “a highly secret all-Negro, Marxist-Leninist, Chinese Communist-oriented organization which advocates guerrilla warfare to obtain its goals.” Shortly thereafter, Stanford and fifteen other RAM members were arrested in New York for an alleged plot to assassinate the NAACP’s Roy Wilkins and the Urban League’s Whitney Young. Following his release in the New York case, Stanford announced his return to Philadelphia with a series of articles describing RAM in *Nite Life*, the black tavern weekly. His purpose in returning to Philadelphia was to establish the Black Guard as RAM’s youth and self-defense wing. “The purpose of the Black Guard,” Stanford wrote, “is to stop our youth from fighting among themselves, teach them a knowledge of our history . . . [and] prepare them . . . to protect our community from racist attacks.” Not surprisingly, Stanford’s return quickly came to the attention of the police department. During the summer of 1967, the police would undertake a campaign of surveillance and harassment against RAM that would lead to the group’s demise in the city. In a memorandum to J. Edgar Hoover, the special agent in charge (SAC) of the FBI’s Philadelphia office reported that “police units . . . controlled by the FBI” had carried out the campaign against RAM and argued that the success of the campaign suggested that “similar operations” could work “in other cities where close police[-FBI] cooperation exists.”<sup>28</sup>

Publicly, the police department insisted that it had decided to take action against RAM only after receiving information from an informant that the group hoped to incite a riot in Philadelphia on July 21, 1967. According to the police, a teenager had flagged down a police car to report that RAM activists had told him that he “better get [his] blackjack out and get Molotov cocktails out . . . because there was going to be a riot Saturday.” Within hours, the police raided a North Philadelphia home belonging to the family of George Anderson, the former Philadelphia SNCC staff member who had recently been exonerated in the dynamite case, and arrested his two teenage brothers for mimeographing posters that urged

blacks to unite and “kill the real enemy—the white American and the Uncle Toms.” Then, on July 26, Stanford was arrested along with six teenagers in front of the Black Guard’s North Philadelphia headquarters on charges of conspiring to incite riot. Acting as the attorney for Stanford and the other six, Cecil Moore charged “that the concern for a riot was politically inspired by the mayor and an incompetent police commissioner who were trying to capitalize on what happened” in Newark. “Jim Tate and Frank Rizzo,” he declared, “told policemen to go find me information about a riot.”<sup>29</sup>

Over the next month, the police would arrest a total of thirty-five alleged RAM activists. Four were arrested at a West Philadelphia theater “for trying to stir up a crowd” at a jazz concert. According to the FBI memorandum, others “were arrested and released on bail [and then] were re-arrested several times until they could no longer make bail.” One activist who was arrested for “passing out RAM literature at a local school” was interrogated and then charged with illegal drug use because of “alleged needle marks.” In addition, the police stopped all cars that visited a specific residence and identified their occupants, who then, in the words of the Philadelphia SAC, “became . . . target[s] of harassment.” One unnamed police official told the *Bulletin* that Rizzo had vowed to “break the back” of RAM by arresting all of its members. These police tactics were necessary, the police commissioner insisted, because the department had uncovered evidence that RAM was planning two terrorist attacks on government institutions. The first involved a fantastic plot to foment a race riot and then put cyanide in the food distributed to the police officers and firefighters placed on riot duty. The second was a more conventional plot to bomb City Hall, the city’s federal courthouse, and the Police Administration Building and to assassinate Mayor Tate, Commissioner Rizzo, District Attorney Arlen Specter, President Lyndon Johnson, and FBI Director Hoover.<sup>30</sup>

Two characteristics of revolutionary Black Power organizations made them vulnerable to agent provocateurs and other forms of police subversion. First was the widespread fascination with tactics of guerrilla warfare utilized by third world revolutionary movements. Frantz Fanon and Malcolm X, perhaps the two most influential theoreticians on the Black Power movement, both argued that violence had to be a central component of the struggle against white supremacy.<sup>31</sup> In a leaflet entitled “Arise! Awake! Your Future Is at Stake,” RAM declared that “as other oppressed peoples of the world push toward freedom, their struggle will inspire the Afroamerican to become more militant in the fight against the universal slaveholder.” RAM’s membership of college students and working-class teenagers, however, lacked both the discipline and the military know-how to turn their revolutionary rhetoric into anything resembling effective action. Second was the eagerness of Black Power activists to identify with the “brothers on the block,” the petty criminals and underemployed work-

ers who congregated on the street-corners of the ghettos of the urban North. Stanford, for example, declared that RAM “saw the need for a movement that would give our brothers and sisters from the street a voice and positions of leadership.” Black Power activists were often so predisposed to believe the militant ardor of brothers with authentic “street” credentials that informants recruited from prisons and police holding cells easily infiltrated their groups.<sup>32</sup>

### A Fall of Student Protest

Despite the ongoing police harassment of Black Power activists, the summer of confrontation had helped BPUM to develop a wide base of support within the city’s high schools. By the time school opened in September, BPUM’s student activists had formed a council with representatives from high schools and junior highs across the city. Throughout the fall, the council met at the Church of the Advocate to develop its demands and its strategy for broadening support for each school’s black student union. Palmer remembers the process as one of assigning specific organizing tasks and then reviewing their results. “Here’s the message; here’s how you do it . . . Report back.” In addition to organizing the schools, the citywide council also developed mechanisms for getting its message out by word of mouth and leaflet on corners and in housing projects in black working-class neighborhoods across the city.<sup>33</sup>

By the end of October, the student council was ready to take action. On October 26, activists at Gratz High School in North Philadelphia pulled a fire alarm and broke a door chain so that students could exit the school building through a normally locked door to attend a noontime Black Power rally in front of the school. Three hundred students marched in front of the school, listened to speeches by Walter Palmer and Bill Mathis and carried signs with slogans like “the School Board Doesn’t Serve the Black Community” and “We Need an Independent School Board.” Following the rally, Palmer and leaders of the Gratz student group met with the school’s vice principal and Dr. Ruth Hayre, superintendent for the school system’s District 4 (which covered North Philadelphia). The students’ demands included courses and assemblies on black history taught by black teachers, changes in the school dress code that would allow them to wear African clothes, hats, and jewelry, improvement in the quality and reductions in the price of school food, easing of school discipline, and, reflecting growing opposition to the war in Vietnam, a halt to military recruiting in the school and the requirement that students salute the American flag during school assemblies. During these negotiations, hundreds of students walked out of class and began to chant Black Power slogans in the school halls. In addition, numerous fires were lit in wastepaper baskets. After the police were summoned, the school was closed seventy-five minutes early

and the students were ordered to leave the area or face arrest. Fourteen hundred students stayed away from Gratz the next day, but the school was able to return to a normal schedule after it was announced that students would be allowed to wear African clothes and to abstain from saluting the flag if they provided evidence that their objections were based on religious beliefs.<sup>34</sup>

A week later, three hundred black students walked out of classes at Bok Vocational High School in South Philadelphia and met in the school auditorium where seven gave speeches demanding the inclusion of Afro-American history as a major subject in the school curriculum. The students’ grievances also included the lack of a single black administrator at Bok and the requirement that they salute the flag. In response, the school’s new principal promised to include Afro-American history subjects in “our regular American History course” and to offer a black studies course as a minor elective. The students, however, rejected his proposal.<sup>35</sup>

High schools like Bok, Gratz, and Germantown had long been the focus of interracial tensions that resulted from the changing racial demography of the city. While the student population of each school was more than two-thirds black by 1967, each was located in a neighborhood that was either undergoing massive racial change or, in the case of Bok, feared the loss of a white neighborhood identity. Gratz was located near the border between Nicetown and Tioga, neighborhoods on the western edge of North Philadelphia. The home ward of Mayor Tate, Tioga was one of the few North Philadelphia neighborhoods to maintain a white identity and population through the 1960s. However, racial gerrymandering enabled students from Tioga to attend Germantown High, more than three miles away, and thus to avoid increasingly black Gratz. By 1967, 99 percent of Gratz’s 4,200 students were black. At the same time, black migration to Germantown and neighboring Mount Airy—the city’s only successfully integrated neighborhoods—along with a white exodus to parochial and private schools had transformed Germantown into a 70 percent black school.<sup>36</sup>

For black students at these and other high schools in neighborhoods experiencing racial transition, the school day was often a series of conflicts with overwhelmingly white school faculty and administrators as well as the dwindling number of white students. At South Philadelphia High School, for example, a white English teacher was reported to have made racially derogatory comments in an April 1967 faculty meeting. Before the teacher could be forced to apologize for having said that blacks are “inferior” and “have smaller brains” and that the best way to increase black parent involvement in the school was to offer them whiskey, fights broke out at the school that led to the hospitalization of twenty-three white students and one black student.<sup>37</sup>

The situation was even more difficult for black students at Bok. Located in an Italian-American working-class neighborhood, students came to

Bok—as they did to the city’s two other vocational high schools—from across the city. Unlike the other two schools, however, Bok’s student population was more than 80 percent black. Civil rights activists had long argued that the school system tracked the vast majority of its black vocational students into low-paying occupations. Unlike the two other vocational schools, Bok’s curriculum included relatively few union-sponsored apprenticeship programs. And even these were reserved primarily for white students. A 1968 *Tribune* study revealed that black and Puerto Rican students held only 18 of the 220 slots in the school’s electrical construction apprenticeship program. Meanwhile, a four-year study of black achievement in the Philadelphia schools conducted by a local educational rights group revealed that the average Stanford Achievement Test scores of graduating Bok seniors had actually declined over the course of their years at the school.<sup>38</sup>

For Bok’s black students, however, the most difficult problem was often getting to and from school. Most commuted to the school by subway and then faced a more than ten-block walk through a hostile neighborhood to the school. “It’s kind of scary,” one black student told the *Tribune*, “when you have to move through a place like South Philly by yourself and everybody hates you and you know it. Even the little kids would stop and stare at us like we’re some kind of animals ‘cause their mommas would tell them that we was animals. They didn’t want us to go to school there and we didn’t want to go to school there, but we have to.” Women students reported being called “black bitches” and having trash thrown at them as they walked to school. “And you better not say anything back,” one said, “or they will sick their dogs and cats on you.” The neighborhood’s white residents, however, insisted that they were the ones being terrorized by the black students. One neighbor complained about black students who “walk[ed] in groups” as they left the school. “You have to move over or get hit and maybe knocked down by them. They curse in front of you. Sometimes they break antennas off automobiles. We can’t even sit out on the steps of our homes when they pass; we get called names.”<sup>39</sup>

### The Possibility of Educational Reform

Despite the problems facing Philadelphia’s black high schools, the 1967 protests came amid an atmosphere of optimism about the possibility for racial changes within the school system. In May 1965, voters had approved a revision of the city’s Educational Home Rule Charter which shifted the power to appoint members of the school board to the mayor from the board of judges of the common pleas court. That September, Mayor Tate appointed a new nine-member board led by his predecessor, longtime reform mayor Richardson Dilworth. A year later, in January 1967, the new school board thrilled advocates of school reform with the appointment of Dr. Mark Shedd, who had earned a reputation for racial liberalism for over-

seeing the desegregation of the Englewood, New Jersey, public schools, as the new superintendent of schools. Dr. Shedd assumed his new position on September 1, 1967, and immediately impressed black Philadelphians by enrolling his four children in the predominately black public schools near his family’s Germantown home rather than in one of the neighborhood’s many prestigious private schools. Shedd, wrote a reporter for the *Tribune*, was “practicing what he preaches about meaningful integration . . . [and] setting an example for white parents throughout the city.” While the rhetoric of the Gratz and Bok protests was consistent with the anger of black youth in urban communities across the country, the specificity of the student demands reflected their belief that leadership of the school system was prepared to address their grievances.<sup>40</sup>

In the days following the October 1967 student protests, a committee of adult education reformers organized by BPUM and led by Sylvia Meek, the education specialist for the Philadelphia Urban League, and Mattie Humphrey sought to organize a meeting between the student leaders and Dr. Shedd. Simultaneously, top administrators at the school board asked Charles Askew, a teacher at Germantown High School, to leave the classroom to initiate a process of dialogue with the student activists and with BPUM. As a concession to the students, Askew was given approval to allow BPUM to organize rallies featuring mayoral candidate Cecil Moore and activist-comedian Dick Gregory during school hours at four different high schools in the week before the November 7 municipal election.<sup>41</sup>

On November 3, the last Friday before the election, Moore and Gregory spoke to rallies at Germantown, Gratz, Ben Franklin, and Southern High Schools as well as to a noontime rally in the City Hall courtyard. Publicly, a school board official described the rallies as “real social studies in action.” In fact, they were a major concession to the militancy of the black student activists. At Germantown High, Moore urged the students to press the school board to add black history courses to the curriculum. “The Irish have St. Patrick’s Day,” he said. “The Jews have Yom Kippur and all we have is blue Monday, and if we take that day off, the Man will dock our pay.” Claude Lewis, one of the *Bulletin*’s few black reporters, reported that the Gratz students, whom he described as dressed in African clothes and with “natural haircuts,” responded enthusiastically, shouting “Black Power” and “tell it like it is, baby.”<sup>42</sup>

On election day, Cecil Moore did miserably, receiving less than 10,000 votes of 700,000 cast, while Mayor Tate, and by extension Rizzo, survived the difficult campaign against Arlen Specter, albeit by a margin of less than 11,000 votes. Despite running a vigorous law-and-order campaign—to the chagrin of many of his white liberal supporters—Specter failed to swipe sufficient numbers of the city’s white ethnic voters from the Democrats. But if Moore’s hopes for reinvigorating black electoral politics were disappointed, his campaign’s impact on high school activism was profound. On

November 11, black students at Bok once again walked out of class, this time to attend a meeting to discuss their next steps now that they had rejected the principal's first proposal. The next day, eleven of the Bok student activists were suspended.<sup>43</sup>

According to Walter Palmer, BPUM's student council had always planned to lead a citywide march on the school board building and had already begun to spread the word about the November 17 walkout when the Bok students were suspended. City and school officials seem to have first learned of the march when a flier entitled "Black Students Unite" began to appear at schools across the city at the beginning of the week. The flier called on black students to support the "protest of 16 brothers and sisters expelled for thinking black is beautiful and black is best" by walking out of their classes on Friday and converging on the school board building.<sup>44</sup>

### Children or Marauders?

In the aftermath of November 17, public debate focused on the appropriateness of the police actions and whether or not the students had posed a threat to the city. School board president Richardson Dilworth, for instance, charged that "things were under control until Commissioner Rizzo, without our request, saw fit to loose a couple of hundred men, swinging clubs and beating children." Cecil Moore called on black children to stay away from school "until school buildings are relieved of the disciples of an intemperate, sadistic, incompetent policeman like Rizzo." Over the next week, groups and activists across the city's liberal and civil rights communities, including the Philadelphia Urban League, the Fellowship Commission, and the Greater Philadelphia Council of Churches, demanded that Mayor Tate fire the police commissioner. Commissioner Rizzo, in response, evoked the image of a city overrun by marauding black youth. "These children ran through the streets of Center City, beating everyone in their path . . . I leave it to you to judge who was violent and whether these are children."<sup>45</sup>

The events of November 17 clearly reinforced Rizzo's popularity in the city's white ethnic communities. Within hours of the demonstration, Rizzo aides told the press that the police switchboard had received more than three hundred calls in support of the commissioner's actions. What appears to have been a carefully organized campaign to support the police commissioner took place over the days and weeks that followed. Calls of support for Rizzo's stand against Black Power and black teenage lawlessness continually jammed the City Hall switchboards. Twenty-five white teenagers from South Philadelphia held a spirited pro-Rizzo rally, first in front of police headquarters and then in the City Hall courtyard. The Fraternal Order of Police (FOP) collected signatures for a petition that read: "we . . .

support . . . the splendid way in which Commissioner Frank Rizzo and his men handled a near-riot situation last Friday . . . . We also feel that the remarks made by certain members of the Board of Education and the school superintendent were stupid." A *Tribune* photograph captured a uniformed on-duty police officer collecting the signatures of "scores of white persons." Among those issuing public declarations of support for the commissioner were three members of the school board, city council president Paul D'Ortona, John Harrington, national president of the FOP, the national director of Catholic War Veterans, the Philadelphia Committee to Support Your Local Police, and the West Philadelphia Chamber of Commerce.<sup>46</sup>

Key to the mobilization of white support for the police was Commissioner Rizzo's masterful use of the media. The commissioner had long viewed the media as a crucial element in his campaign against black militancy. Media coverage of black militancy and urban unrest, he told an October 1967 press conference, "was the best thing that ever happened to the law authorities . . . . I believe that by fully informing the public of the riots we will be able to deal with the rioters with community support. So let them write about the [H. Rap] Browns, the [Stokely] Carmichaels, and the [Cecil] Moores. I encourage it." In the week following the rally, the commissioner blamed the violence of November 17 on both dangerous black militants and the inability of school board president Dilworth and Superintendent Shedd to control unruly teenagers. Dilworth and Shedd, he charged, had allowed "the agitation" to go on "for weeks" and had "permitted [the] cries of Black Power." If school officials "could control their pupils," he argued, "we wouldn't need the police. Dilworth and Shedd are absolutely remiss . . . . Why don't they do their jobs?" At the same time, he expressed absolute confidence in his police officers. The police, he said, "did a beautiful thing." Rizzo concluded the press conference by challenging his opponents' claim to moral leadership. "I am serving notice," he said, "that the Philadelphia police will not permit rule by mob. I am the commissioner and I will make the decisions."<sup>47</sup>

Charles Bowser, whom Mayor Tate had appointed as the city's first black deputy mayor at the same time he promoted Rizzo, has described the public support that Rizzo received as essential to the commissioner's ability to keep his job in the weeks following November 17. According to Bowser, Tate had never liked the commissioner and was prepared to fire him now that he had been reelected. "We've got the bastard now," Bowser remembers the mayor telling him on the phone from vacation in Florida. But the flood of pro-Rizzo calls and letters forced the mayor to ignore those who called for him to fire the commissioner.<sup>48</sup>

### The Black Power Student Movement After November 17

While debate over the behavior of the police and student protesters dominated public discussion after the events of November 17, 1967, the demon-

stration was perhaps most significant for the shift it marked in efforts to improve the quality of public education for black children in Philadelphia. In the weeks and months that followed, black students, parents, and community activists continued to negotiate with the Shedd administration for increased black community participation in the governance of black schools as well for changes in school curriculum and codes of conduct. Despite vigorous opposition from white administrators and teachers as well as from racially conservative politicians, the emerging alliance between black activists and the central school administration would achieve significant reforms in black schooling in the city.

Although Commissioner Rizzo's criticisms led Dilworth and Shedd to seek and receive an injunction barring Walter Palmer and William Mathis from organizing or conducting demonstrations at or near any public school during school hours, the injunction did not prevent the school leadership from continuing to negotiate with the student demonstrators. In the days following the demonstration, black student activists and their adult supporters held a series of closed-door meetings in black neighborhoods across the city to formulate their next steps. One group of thirty students met at the Church of the Advocate to formulate a list of demands and then announced plans for a student-only mass meeting at the Fifty-Ninth Street Baptist Church in West Philadelphia.<sup>49</sup>

By the end of November, negotiations had resumed between the student activists and Dr. Shedd, this time in a private home belonging to a prominent black insurance salesman in the city. The superintendent quickly agreed to organize a series of six retreats in which black students and community representatives could meet with principals from the city's predominantly black high schools to discuss racial tensions in the school and their impact on teacher-student relationships. One school district official described the "initial spirit" of the retreats as "one of confrontation, and . . . [verbal] assault on the principals." Still, the retreats resulted in the formation of community-parent-student committees at a number of the high schools whose charge was to work for curriculum changes and improvements in racial climate. For example, Frederick Holliday, the black principal of Gratz, appointed community representatives to a special committee to develop black history curricula for the school. At Ben Franklin High, students, faculty, and parents participated in an all-day planning conference. At a similar meeting at Edison High School, Randolph Scott, second vice president of the student senate, called on teachers and parents to work with the students to ease racial tensions in the 85 percent black school. "We feel," he said, that "the teachers, students, and parents can handle this without Rizzo."<sup>50</sup>

The retreats also led to a change in policy on the formation of black-only student groups within the schools. At Gratz, Principal Holliday provided a basement office to the school's Black Student League. At Germantown

High, students were allowed to establish a club called the Young Afro-Americans (YAA) with David Richardson as their adviser after Richardson helped to settle a gang fight that had erupted at a school dance. Both school clubs sought to use the discourse of racial unity to bridge divisions within black student bodies. At Germantown, for example, the students organized a memorial service for Malcolm X during school hours and limited attendance to black students, teachers, and administrators. The Gratz club addressed a recruitment flier to "All Brothers Who Belong to a Corner" and described the group as "a gang that has realized who the real enemy is and the real enemy ain't no 15-V [the Fifteenth and Venango Streets gang] or 21-W [the Twenty-First and Westmoreland Streets gang]." The flier concluded with a call to revolution. "The revolution is nothing but a BIG gang war."<sup>51</sup>

Not surprisingly, the Shedd administration's strategy of seeking to work with black student activists in the high schools generated significant opposition. In late November, Frank Sullivan, president of the Philadelphia Federation of Teachers (PFT), published an open letter accusing the school administration of failing to deter "disruptive elements in our schools who thrive on disorder and the opportunity to inflict hurt on others." Sullivan charged that a school board directive to high school principals not to carry out "reprisals" against student demonstrators had led to a collapse of discipline in the schools.<sup>52</sup> The police officer assigned to Germantown High claimed that the presence of David Richardson and the Young Afro-Americans club in the school had only made the school's gangs "more cohesive." A new controversy arose in January 1968 after the school district announced plans to hire eleven field agents to act as mediators in racial disputes. Among the proposed agents was Charles Askew, the Germantown High teacher who had served as a school district liaison to BPUM during the fall. Askew had been particularly outspoken in his criticisms of PFT president Sullivan for his hostility toward the student demonstration. An unsigned flier distributed to faculty mailboxes at a number of schools accused Askew of admitting to an "inherent hatred for whites." Under pressure from Mayor Tate and the city council, the school board rejected the appointments of Askew and a second candidate to field agent positions.<sup>53</sup>

Despite the opposition of the teachers' union, black student activists continued to make demands on both the administration of their own schools and the school district as a whole. During the spring of 1968, YAA demanded the removal of three vice principals and nonteaching assistants from Germantown High. The Black Student Council at Olney High School, which served the transitional neighborhoods of upper North Philadelphia, issued sixteen demands that ranged from more black history books and courses and an end to police brutality in the school to integration of the school cheerleaders and newspaper staff. Then, in April, a group of black



high school students proposed that they be allowed to take over a summer school program for middle school students in North Philadelphia. In contrast to teachers and administrators who would continue to “turn off” black students with curricula that was “irrelevant” to life in the ghetto, the student activists argued that, with the aid of school custodians and advisers of their own choosing, they could do a better job of inspiring the younger students to learn. When the school district argued that it lacked the \$2 million it would need to fund their proposal, the students replied: “why can’t we have some of [the school budget] to try to help ourselves instead of spending it all on the same old garbage?”<sup>54</sup>

### Decentralization as an Alternative to Desegregation

This period of black student activism took place at a time of heightened frustration—within both the Shedd administration and the city’s civil rights community—over the persistence of “de facto” segregation in the public schools.<sup>55</sup> By the time of the November 17 demonstration, both the Shedd administration and many in the civil rights community had begun to shift their focus from school desegregation to efforts to improve school quality. This is not to suggest that Shedd and Dilworth were disingenuous in their commitment to integrated schools.<sup>56</sup> Rather, the school improvement policies pursued by the school district under their leadership were predicated on a belief that there was little that the system could do to achieve substantive progress toward desegregation, particularly with a student population that was nearly 60 percent black. Thus, the district’s 1968 Desegregation Report insisted that the school’s prime responsibility was to “provide a successful educational experience for black children, with or without integration.” Citing “the black community’s demand for community involvement in its schools,” the report argued that decentralization “is the best way to deliver black children from the clutches of educational failure.” Along with the district’s other school improvement programs, decentralization was the only way to improve racial balance within the district’s schools without causing more white students to leave the system. “The present distribution of population and location of schools in Philadelphia,” the report contended, “are such that integration cannot be achieved . . . by physical or organizational means alone.” Too many white families were choosing to move to the suburbs or to send their children to one of the city’s high-priced elite private schools or to one of the more moderately priced Catholic schools. In this context, the report concluded, the only way to achieve substantive school integration would be for the state to erase the “artificial boundaries” that separated the Philadelphia schools from their suburban neighbors. Over the next five years, school officials would seek to work with black student, parent, and community activists to make the public schools more sensitive to the needs of black students.<sup>57</sup>

The history of efforts to change the school district’s teacher transfer policies demonstrates the sense of hopelessness many felt about efforts to desegregate the schools. In 1963, the Pennsylvania Human Relations Commission found that more than half of Philadelphia’s public elementary schools had faculties that were more than 80 percent of the same race and ordered the school district to take steps to desegregate its teaching force. The school district agreed to assign new teachers in ways that would promote the desegregation of school faculties, but refused to order the forced transfers of any currently employed teachers. Citing a shortage of 1,200 certified teachers, the district argued that forced transfers would lead to a rash of teacher resignations and early retirements.<sup>58</sup> Instead, the board implemented a voluntary teacher transfer program which allowed teachers to refuse any transfer. During the 1964–65 school year, however, only 94 of the district’s 10,600 teachers agreed to change schools. Then, in October 1965, the school board voted to table a proposal from its own Citizen Advisory Committee on Integration to implement a forced teacher transfer program that would have sent low seniority teachers of one race to schools whose faculties were more than 90 percent of the other race. Finally, in December 1967, the state Human Relations Commission ordered the district to implement a mandatory teacher transfer program. The district drafted such a policy but abandoned it in September 1968 in the face of a threatened teachers’ strike. Instead, the board adopted a policy of “last resort” that stated that the superintendent could force teacher transfers if and only if voluntary measures failed to produce the necessary result.<sup>59</sup>

In the spring of 1967 a coalition of seventy-five civil rights and black community groups urged Philadelphia voters to reject the school board’s request to amend the school district’s charter to increase its borrowing authority for school construction. The Coalition for Integrated Quality Education argued that that the capital program, by continuing to build neighborhood schools, would “cement segregation” within the school system. Predicting that two-thirds of schools built under the proposed capital program would be segregated, the coalition distributed thousands of “vote no” fliers throughout the black community.<sup>60</sup> In place of “segregated neighborhood schools,” the coalition urged the school district to adopt a Philadelphia Urban League proposal for education parks that would combine multiple elementary, middle, and high school facilities on a single campus site. As envisioned by their supporters, education parks would bring together students of different races across neighborhood lines, while neutralizing white fears of integration with state-of-the-art facilities and the best quality teachers.<sup>61</sup>

The school board’s response to the “vote no” campaign was to announce in March 1967 that it had decided to support a truncated version of the education parks proposal. Specifically, the board added plans for three education parks to the neighborhood school capital program. The

first of these parks was to be sited on North Broad Street in the heart of North Philadelphia as part of the city's Model Cities program; the other two would be located in the Northwest section of the city and near the border between North Philadelphia and the primarily white working-class neighborhoods of the lower Northeast. This concession to the demands of the civil rights community won the endorsements of the majority of the city's interracial and white liberal reform groups for the school's capital program. In the May 1967 primary, Philadelphia's voters approved the school debt question by a margin of 57 to 43 percent.<sup>62</sup>

For Superintendent Shedd, the proposal for a "Model School District" in North Philadelphia was the perfect opportunity to shift the focus of debate from desegregation to questions of school quality in the city's black neighborhoods. In a May 1967 speech, Shedd called school decentralization "a logical response to local demands." The creation of clusters of schools "small enough to be manageable," he argued, would lead to increased "chances for individual initiative and satisfaction." School principals and classroom teachers would be able "to develop that pet program or pet idea they have always had," while individual schools would be able to develop programs "with a relevance and sensitivity to local needs not otherwise possible." The combination of modern school buildings, high quality teachers, and community input, he concluded, would enable the North Philadelphia Model School District to develop an educational experience "tailor made" to meet the needs of underprivileged black children. As he envisioned it, the model district would operate autonomously from the rest of the school system, with its own superintendent and an independent school board consisting of community representatives and education experts from Temple University.<sup>63</sup>

Conflicts over the district's boundaries and the level of community participation in its governance ultimately kept the model school district from coming to fruition. Still, the model district was just one component of Shedd's program of administrative decentralization and increased community involvement in the school system. Most dramatically for the future of school politics in the city, the school board decided to open its meetings to the public and to significantly increase the number of public hearings it held. At the same time, the district secured federal funds to hire school-community coordinators to work in schools in the city's poverty areas. In 1967, the district designated four elementary schools as "Community Schools" whose facilities were to be available in nonschool hours for community-oriented programming. In addition, the district turned Hartranft Elementary School in North Philadelphia over to a community corporation for use as a community center. A community-based campaign to prevent the establishment of a "split-shift" school day at all-black Sayre Junior High School in West Philadelphia led to the formation of a Community Advisory Committee at the school. With the support of the central administration,

the advisory group negotiated for significant "community control" over school policy, as well the right to run a staff development program that would send "faculty and community members together onto the streets and into the police stations, the bars, the barber shops, and the homes in an effort to make Sayre's teachers and . . . program more relevant to the experiences of the school's children." A similar community committee was established to oversee the development of a new middle school in Germantown. Finally, community activists in the Mantua section of West Philadelphia convinced the central school administration to establish a community-run "small scale" middle school in their neighborhood.<sup>64</sup>

Still, Shedd's decentralization program failed to satisfy advocates of school desegregation. In March 1970, the state Human Relations Commission found the district's school desegregation plan "unacceptable in that it would result only in a minimal amount of desegregation." At the same time, the commission rejected the district's argument that true racial balance could only be achieved through a merger with the surrounding suburban district. Desegregation, the commission insisted, was a local responsibility, "in keeping with the spirit of local control." In October, the commission filed a complaint in state court against the district for "allow[ing] the existence of public schools . . . which are racially segregated." According to the complaint, the percentage of Philadelphia public schools that were 95 percent of one race had risen from 42 to 49 over the previous two years and the percentage of black students in such schools had risen from 54 to 57. The district, the commission argued, could desegregate five thousand students just by altering school attendance boundary lines.<sup>65</sup>

### The Bok Crisis and Fissures in Philadelphia's Democratic Coalition

More damaging to Shedd's decentralization program, however, was the almost symbiotic relationship between black student and community activism and white resistance to educational change. Rather than satisfying a universal demand for schools that simultaneously promoted educational achievement and community involvement, the Shedd administration's reform efforts exacerbated the growing racial tensions over education policy in Philadelphia. A prime example of the Shedd administration's inability to defuse racial tensions over the public schools was the crisis that engulfed Bok High School in October 1968. The Bok crisis reflected rising anxieties over issues of control, curricula, and safety in the city's schools. For many white Philadelphians, the events of that October confirmed that school officials were incapable of controlling the city's black high school students and their militant activist allies; increasingly, the law-and-order politics of Police Commissioner Rizzo seemed the only hope for the city. For black Philadelphians, there were two lessons of the Bok crisis, neither



of which was particularly novel. First, there were dual standards for police protection for the city's white and black residents. And second, only concerted pressure could force the city government to protect black interests.

So long as white administrators and teachers managed Bok as a school for low achievers, the Italian American residents of the surrounding neighborhood had treated the school's predominately black student population as a minor nuisance. But as black student and community advocates began to demand a greater voice in the school's governance, the area's residents organized to demand that school and city officials respond to their complaints about the behavior of Bok students.

A series of racial conflicts plagued South Philadelphia through the summer and early fall of 1968.<sup>66</sup> Then, on Wednesday, October 2, a group of black youths stabbed a white student from Bishop Neumann, a Catholic high school in South Philadelphia, in an elementary school yard less than five blocks from Bok. False rumors that the boy had died circulated through the neighborhood. Even though the black student arrested for the stabbing did not attend Bok, the incident led neighborhood residents to begin an organizing drive to close the school. "That's when the white citizens gathered," one resident told a reporter, "and decided to voice their opinions." The neighbors made their case against the students both as white citizens and as members of a distinct ethnic group. "Italians are peace-loving people. But you try to touch me or my kid; that's when my Dago blood starts to boil. Touch us and we'll fight back." And fight back they did. The day after the stabbing, neighborhood residents threw rocks at school buses carrying members of the Bok football team to a game at Southern High. During and following the game, incidents of fighting and bottle-throwing broke out among the students. The next day, three to four hundred students from Bok attempted to storm the gates in front of Southern High but were convinced to leave by a vice principal. Two hours later, fights broke out between black students and white neighborhood residents on a number of corners near Bok. To the black students, these incidents were proof that the police were allied with the white neighborhood residents. "A group of black kids coming home from [the] football game were beat up by white kids," one student told the *Tribune*, "And who do you think got arrested? The black kids."<sup>67</sup>

After a quiet weekend, two hundred black students walked out of Bok on the morning of Monday, October 7 to protest the neighborhood harassment. The students headed for the subway and took it to the Muntu Cultural Center, a community center operated by the Black Coalition, the city's newest Black Power organization, in West Philadelphia. At the center, the students met with a number of prominent Black Power activists including Stanley Branche, the coalition's executive director, "Freedom" George Brower of the Young Militants, and RAM's Max Stanford. The students then returned to Bok under the protection of Branche and RAM's Black

Guard. Once back at the school, the students gathered in the auditorium, without the consent of the school administration, to listen to speeches from Branche and other representatives of the Black Coalition. The students then left the school without incident. However, rumors spread through the neighborhood that the Black Panthers had taken over the school.<sup>68</sup>

The next day, the Black Coalition held a press conference in front of Bok to declare that if the police did not provide more protection for the students, then the Black Guard would. Afterward, the coalition's leadership and a group of Bok students met with police and school officials to raise concerns about the lack of police protection for students walking to and from the school as well as about a number of specific incidents of police brutality. Still, a large group of white protesters were waiting for Bok's students as they emerged from the school on Tuesday afternoon. As the protesters threw stones, the police were forced to escort the students away from the school, first on buses and then on foot when they ran out of buses. During the afternoon, fights broke out throughout the area, leading to the arrests of a number of neighborhood residents. That evening, a group of four hundred neighborhood residents marched on the area's police precinct to demand the release of those who had been arrested, the permanent closing of Bok, and increased police protection in their neighborhood. The protesters carried signs reading "White Power Is Boss," "Close Bok Or Else," and "Italian Power." According to one of the march's leaders, Charles Pasquale, an insurance salesman, area residents had petitioned for three years for greater police protection around Bok and the area's elementary schools. Commissioner Rizzo spoke to the crowd, urging them to leave things "to the police," and giving them his "word [that] we're going to give you protection until this is resolved."<sup>69</sup>

Ironically, white opponents of the Shedd administration incorporated the rhetoric of decentralization into their demands. White parents picketing Southern High called for greater parent involvement in the school in order to improve school discipline and protect their children from black student attacks. As proof that their demands were not racially motivated, Bok's neighbors argued that they had no trouble with black students from the local area. "It's not the South Philadelphia colored," one resident told a *Tribune* reporter, "but those youth from North and West Philadelphia who come here and cause trouble."<sup>70</sup> Rather than assure white Philadelphians that the quality of black schools could be improved without threatening the educational experience of white children, Shedd's decentralization plan simply buttressed white fears that blacks were taking over the schools. The more that the school board demonstrated sensitivity to the concerns of black activists the more parent groups from the city's white working- and middle-class neighborhoods charged that efforts to appease the black community were destroying the public schools.

By Wednesday, a clear pattern of protest and counterprotest had emerged. Black students who felt harassed and threatened as they attempted to make their way through South Philadelphia's neighborhoods to Bok and Southern High Schools exacted their revenge once inside the school walls. At ten o'clock that morning four black students attacked a white student with a metal object on the fourth floor of Southern. The victim had to be rushed to a local hospital where he was treated for a possible skull fracture.<sup>71</sup> At the same time, rumors spread that students at predominately black high schools were prepared to avenge the attacks on Bok students by attacking students from predominately white schools. For example, students from West Philadelphia High were rumored to be planning attacks on students from West Catholic High. In North Philadelphia, it was to be students from Gratz and Benjamin Franklin attacking Olney High students. Shortly after noon, a group of three hundred black students from Southern High began marching toward Bok with the expressed intent of supporting their fellow students. Police from the civil disobedience squad and members of the school district's field staff were able to convince them to return to Southern by promising to arrange a meeting with their principal. At about the same time, other members of the field staff were able to convince members of the Black Student League at Edison High School not to walk out of school. Across town, the principal of West Philadelphia's Overbrook High reported that there had been three assaults on white students by black students. Finally, eighteen blacks—twelve adults and six juveniles—were arrested and charged with carrying concealed weapons in cars that were heading toward Bok and Southern. The police claimed to have found four pistols, two knives, and a gallon of an inflammable liquid.<sup>72</sup>

By 2:45 that afternoon, a crowd of one thousand white adults was blocking the streets in front of Bok. The crowd chanted "We want [George] Wallace," "Burn Bok," and "Come on nigger" to students trying to leave the school for the day. Some carried signs with slogans like "White Is Boss" and "All the Way with Wallace." Neither Police Commissioner Rizzo nor the area's Republican city councilman Thomas Foglietta were able to convince the crowd to disperse. To the white protesters, the violence of black students justified their actions. When Foglietta pleaded that "we're not going to accomplish anything by violence," someone in the crowd responded: "they [the black students] do it." It would take until past 4 P.M. to bus all but one hundred of the school's black students to the Broad Street subway line.<sup>73</sup>

The last group of students, however, insisted on walking through the neighborhood to Broad Street. They would challenge "whitey." As numerous fights broke out, a contingent of thirty police officers sought to separate the two groups and to force the students to return to Bok. Three black students were beaten in the process, one so badly that at first it was

reported that he had been stabbed. Finally, Stanley Branche convinced the remaining students to return to the school by arguing that they were outnumbered and outgunned. Twenty-three white protesters were arrested during the melee. Still, Robert Poindexter, the school system's highest-ranking black administrator, charged that the police had failed to respond as forcefully to the white demonstrators as they had on November 17, 1967. "It is especially tragic," Poindexter argued, "since the black students were just beginning to believe that they would get real protection from the police."<sup>74</sup>

At eight o'clock that evening, more than one thousand neighborhood residents met in Bok auditorium with Commissioner Rizzo, Clarence Farmer, executive director of the Commission on Human Relations, and officials from the school district and the Catholic archdiocese. The white residents' demand was simple: close the school permanently. The group chanted "Close down the school or we'll burn it down" and "We want Wallace." A group of young people had to be escorted from the meeting because of, in the words of one journalist, "their shouting and threats." Rizzo was widely applauded when he criticized school board president Dilworth and the other members of the school board for failing to attend the meeting. "I think the superintendent also should be here," Rizzo said, "and I think you people ought to insist that they belong here." At that very moment, Dr. Shedd and the school board were meeting with two groups of community activists—one led by Walter Palmer and the other consisting of twenty white South Philadelphia residents—both of which demanded that the district close Bok and Southern for the rest of the week. After five hours of what one school board official described as "heated discussion," the board acceded to the community activists' demands and agreed to close both schools.<sup>75</sup>

Even with Bok and Southern closed, interracial school violence continued for the rest of the week. On Thursday, three more white students were slashed and five others injured at Overbrook. At 11:30 A.M., two hundred students walked out of Edison, an all-male school, and marched first to Kensington High, their sister school, and then to majority-black Dobbins Vocational High. Meanwhile, fearful white students had to be bused home from Edison. The student protesters' stated plan was to march from Dobbins to South Philadelphia, picking up additional students at Ben Franklin and William Penn High Schools along the way. However, "Freedom" George Brower and other Black Coalition staff members arrived at Dobbins at 3:30 P.M. and succeeded in convincing the group to disperse. Throughout Friday, there were reports that black students from North Philadelphia's public high schools planned to march to Roman Catholic High School, a predominately white school on North Broad Street, to protest the treatment of black students in South Philadelphia. Thirty students wearing Edison High jackets raced through an assembly at Olney, whose student

population was 30 percent black, urging the black students to walk out of school. More than four hundred did, but they were then met by large numbers of white students. Scuffles broke out and seven students, three whites and four blacks, were hurt, while four others, three white and one black, were arrested. Eventually, buses had to be brought in to take the black students safely home. Soon thereafter, 1,500 students marched out of Ben Franklin High for a planned march to Bok. However, student leaders, with the support of Walter Palmer and William Mathis, convinced the marchers to return to the school auditorium where they met to discuss problems at Franklin. In return for the march's cancellation, the school principal promised that classes at the school would be canceled on the following Monday so that the students could attend seminars on racial problems in the city schools.<sup>76</sup>

Meanwhile, demonstrations were spreading throughout South Philadelphia's white neighborhoods. The largest took place on Sunday afternoon. A crowd that ranged in size from 800 to 1,300 marched for up to five hours to demand the closing of Bok. A speaker on a sound truck with a "Wallace for President" sticker led the march. The speaker, who refused to give his name to reporters, urged area residents to join the march by appealing to their sense of white racial identity. "We don't care if you're Polacks or Jews. We want Whites!" Many in the march wore "Wallace for President" buttons and chanted "White Power, White Power." Others in the Italian American community looked closer to their ethnic roots for a model of leadership. When Councilman Foglietta returned to the neighborhood on Monday evening to propose a settlement to the crisis that would involve shuttle buses taking Bok students to and from the Broad Street Subway, someone in the crowd called out: "We need a new Mussolini."<sup>77</sup>

Some in the Democratic Party hierarchy were also beginning to take up the neighborhood residents' cause. City Council President Paul D'Ortona declared he would "begin an investigation from top to bottom of the school system" and threatened to delay a \$30 million tax package for the school system. An outspoken opponent of the school district's desegregation efforts and a strong supporter of Commissioner Rizzo, D'Ortona framed the issue solely as one of school discipline. "The kids," he charged, "are telling the [school] board how to run the schools. There is no discipline in the schools." Charles Peruto, a party activist and lawyer for the Bok neighborhood residents, called on the school board to expel students guilty of serious misconduct and to exclude "outside agitators" from the schools. After a weekend of demonstrations, Mayor Tate too joined the chorus of school board critics. The school district, he declared, had invited the crisis by allowing "extremists to agitate the children in the auditorium of the schools."<sup>78</sup>

As white protesters marched through South Philadelphia, black adult activists worked feverishly to find a solution to the crisis. On Sunday, one

hundred black parents led by the Philadelphia chapter of the National Welfare Rights Organization (PWRO) held a rally at Mayor Tate's North Philadelphia home to demand that the National Guard be brought in to protect their children. On Sunday evening, Mayor Tate met with both members of the school board and a delegation of black leaders led by the Black Coalition's Stanley Branche, while Commissioner Rizzo met with 150 white South Philadelphia residents. Both officials promised that there would be adequate police protection in the area surrounding Bok when it reopened on Monday. Police would protect the black students as they rode public transportation and walked to and from Bok and Southern. In addition, the police would erect barricades in a one-block radius around Bok and would allow only students and school personnel to pass through. The police, Rizzo promised, were "not taking any nonsense from whites or Negroes." Still, the two hundred parents of black Bok students who met at the Black Coalition's offices in West Philadelphia voted to keep their children at home so long as the area remained "unsafe."<sup>79</sup>

The large police presence and high rates of student absenteeism prevented further outbreaks of violence in South Philadelphia on Monday. Only 425 of Bok's 2,059 students and 600 of Southern's 4,100 attended school that day. The police did arrest seven white men in their teens and early twenties who refused to leave an intersection near Bok, but otherwise neighborhood activists cooperated with police requests throughout the day. Meanwhile, the Commission on Human Relations began to convene a series of meetings between students and neighborhood residents in hopes of finding ways to decrease tensions in the area.<sup>80</sup>

Things were not so calm elsewhere in the city. Large numbers of absentee students were reported at Germantown, Edison, Ben Franklin, Olney, Overbrook, and West Philadelphia high schools. At Edison, two hundred students from the Black Students Association conducted a sit-in in the auditorium. In an effort to prevent "a riot," officials at Edison allowed David Richardson, "Freedom" George Brower, and other Black Power militants to speak to the group. Meanwhile, at Ben Franklin, five hundred students participated in a day of seminars. Led by Ronald White, the Franklin students voted to demand that the district replace the school's 80 percent white teaching force with an all-black faculty. Shortly thereafter, nearly half of the school's white teachers left under police protection. Twenty black teachers remained behind to meet with about two hundred students throughout the night. By the next morning, the students had settled on seven new demands. The most significant of these were that (1) the school be renamed "Malcolm X High"; (2) black faculty members be appointed to run the school's academic and athletic departments; (3) "Afro languages" be added to the curriculum as major subjects; and (4) the school board take steps to end the crisis at Bok and Southern.<sup>81</sup>

On Tuesday, Olney High was the focus of protest. The previous day,

more than 1,700 students had stayed away from the 70 percent white school. Then, on Tuesday morning, Olney's principal allowed the school's Black Students Union to hold an assembly. The students demanded that all white students and teachers leave the auditorium. David Richardson and at least one black faculty member then spoke to the students. The focus of their complaint was that white students from the school were stoning buses carrying black students as they left the neighborhood. At the same time, a series of fistfights between white and black students broke out in the school's lunchroom. At the request of the school principal, Superintendent Shedd then authorized the use of riot police to end the occupation of the auditorium. The students eventually agreed to leave, but only on school district buses with police protection. The following day, black school board member George Hutt agreed to mediate the situation at Olney. He soon reported that progress had been made on a number of the students' demands.<sup>82</sup>

The final mass protest of the Bok school crisis came on the evening of Tuesday, October 15. At 8 P.M., more than two thousand white residents of South Philadelphia gathered in the Bok auditorium to develop a set of demands to present to the school board. By then, the group had decided to moderate its goals. Instead of calling for the closing of Bok, they sought changes in its curriculum that would increase the school's white student population from 12 to at least 40 percent. They also asked that all black students who lived outside a ten block radius of the school be bused to and from school, that increased security personnel be posted at the school, that a ban on all outsiders from entering the school be established, and that all students who distributed "inflammatory" literature be suspended. Using the language of community control, they insisted that Bok and other South Philadelphia public schools should be "for South Philadelphians." A committee of residents presented these demands to Superintendent Shedd at the school board building at midnight. When he replied that he could only promise curriculum changes that would increase the percentage of white students at Bok to 24 percent and insisted that the school board alone could not bus all of Bok's black students, the South Philadelphia representatives returned to the school and joined another one hundred protesters who had decided to stage an all-night sit-in in the Bok auditorium. Participants in the sit-in spoke in openly racist terms to two white journalists from the *Temple Free Press*, an underground newspaper. "We keep our neighborhood nice," one told the journalists, "and we don't like the filthy way niggers live." Another reveled in the appropriation of protest tactics from the black movement. "If niggers can sit in a school, so can we."<sup>83</sup>

The next morning, CHR Executive Director Clarence Farmer convinced the protesters to leave the auditorium in return for a promised meeting with five members of the school board on the following Thursday. At that meeting, Charles Peruto and Henry Nichols of the school board agreed on

the need for increased security personnel at Bok, curriculum changes to recruit additional white students, stronger disciplinary measures against disruptive students "both in and out of the school," and the barring of all outside agitators. Both sides agreed that additional busing would not be needed if these stronger disciplinary measures were adopted. Soon thereafter, circulars were distributed through the neighborhood around Bok praising the renewed relationship between the school board and the community. In the months that followed, the school district instituted significant reforms in the Bok curriculum. Most were designed to attract more white students. However, two union apprenticeship programs that refused to increase their enrollment of black students were ousted from the school and seven others given a month to boost their black enrollments. During the 1968-69 school year, Bok's student population had been 85.2 percent black. By the following year, the percentage of black students had dropped to 76.2.<sup>84</sup>

Like the Ocean Hill-Brownsville controversy in New York City, the Philadelphia school crises of 1967-68 can be viewed as an example of excessive black demands and poorly conceived liberal policies pushing white working-class Democrats into the arms of conservative politicians. As in the debate over busing and neighborhood schools, anxieties over school discipline became evocative issues for those who believed that the liberal wing of the Democratic Party had betrayed the interests of the city's white ethnic voters. Certainly, Frank Rizzo would effectively capitalize on white opposition to Shedd's school reform efforts in his 1971 mayoral campaign.<sup>85</sup> But to solely blame black activists and their white liberal allies for the decline of the New Deal coalition is to overlook the fact that the commitment of working- and middle-class whites to the preservation of localized forms of racial privilege predated the Black Power movement of the late 1960s.<sup>86</sup> In this sense, entrenched white support for racialized hierarchies within public institutions like the Philadelphia public schools was as much a cause of the urban violence of the late 1960s as black radical activism. The violent talk and acts of black activists in Philadelphia were less the spontaneous explosion of a dream deferred than the cumulative result of the constant interracial tensions and violence that existed in the city's schools and on the streets of its working-class neighborhoods. Both sides in the Philadelphia school conflicts—the black students and the white police and neighborhood residents—viewed their own violence as reactive but that of the other side as an inherent part of either, in the case of the black students, their racial makeup or of, in the case of the police and neighborhood residents, their racist beliefs.

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Historians of Black Power have tended to depict the movement as consisting of a series of pronouncements from national figures like Stokely

Carmichael and H. Rap Brown, Huey Newton and Maulana Karenga, Angela Davis and Kathleen Cleaver. Stripped of the contexts of time and place, these pronouncements can be constructed into an ideological debate over whether, in the words of scholar-activist Robert Allen, the movement should be “a rebellion for reforms or a revolution aimed at altering basic social forms.” For Allen, Black Power activists had to choose between “building a mass revolutionary organization” or succumbing to the neocolonial temptations of black capitalism and elective office, while Harold Cruse argued that declarations of revolutionary intent were at best “romantic escapism” and at worst an attempt to start an unwinnable “race war.” What the movement lacked, in Cruse’s view, was recognition of the need to win “political and economic power within . . . urban communities, while seeking cultural freedom and equality there and beyond.”<sup>87</sup>

In a city like Philadelphia, however, Black Power activists could not afford such a sharp bifurcation of strategic choices. Despite the discursive power of cultural nationalist rhetoric, its critique of efforts to reform state institutions had little relevance for Philadelphia’s 150,000 black public school students and their parents. Here again, we can see the importance of community organizing principles to the strategic development of Black Power at the local level. More than the black nationalist critique of integration, it was black students and parents’ experiential knowledge of the limited impact of school desegregation that transformed the black nationalist approach to education reform from a marginal demand into a dominant political issue within the city. By combining the demand for black studies courses with the call for community control of the public schools in black neighborhoods, BPUM activists were able to shift the focus of black educational advocacy in the city from school desegregation to efforts to raise the quality of schooling in predominately black schools. The Black Power educational agenda would never completely supersede desegregation. But with the success of the movement against *de jure* segregation, Black Power advocates were able to establish a political discourse in which questions of integration and separatism had to be debated according to their impact on the average black Philadelphian and on the interests of the black community as a whole.

At its most fundamental, Black Power in Philadelphia challenged the decision-making structures that controlled public and private investment in the city. Decisions that affected the city’s black communities, Black Power advocates argued, should be made within those communities, not in government agencies or Center City office buildings. Philadelphia’s Black Power activists faced a number of significant obstacles—lack of a consistent vision of how a racially just city might look, inconsistent organizational structures, ongoing police surveillance and harassment, and an increasingly powerful and well-organized white conservative backlash against black activism. Still, the city’s Black Power movement was able to present a formi-

dable challenge to the liberal coalition that, though weakened, remained a powerful force in the city. On issues ranging from public education and urban renewal to police brutality and welfare, advocates of Black Power rejected liberalism’s faith in antidiscrimination laws and technocratic governance in favor of the principles of community-based leadership, participatory democracy, and racial self-determination.