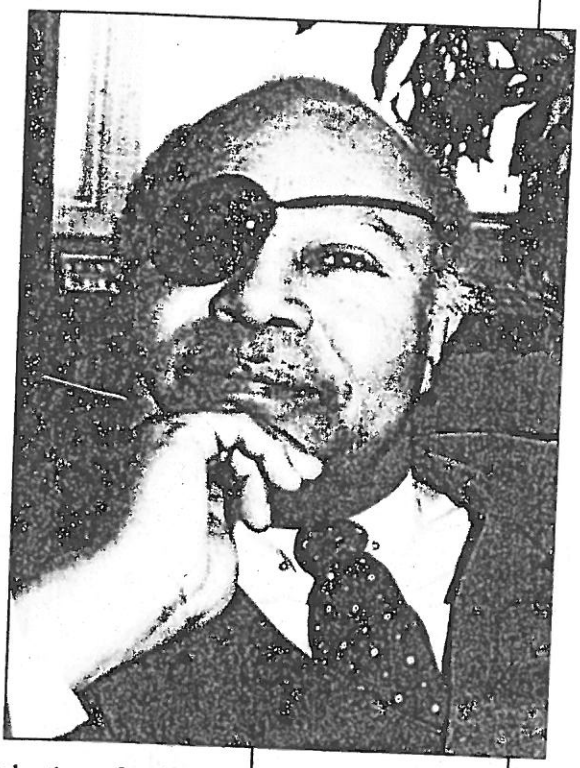
BLACK ISSUES PROFILE

James Farmer: History and Beyond



by Jacqueline Conciatore

Every time James Farmer stands before his class of 250 undergraduates and begins recounting tales of Jim Crow and civil rights, history and future have found common ground.

The man who once led thousands of young Freedom Riders to Mississippi jails in protest over segregation is now annually leading more than 500 Mary Washington College students through the history of the civil rights movement.

The history he relates is of days so filled with possibility and strife they felt like "a lifetime crammed into five years," he says.

It begins with what is probably the first staged sit-in, a May 1942 protest over the refusal of Chicago's Jack Spratt Coffee House to serve Blacks. He and a small band of activists, Black and white, continued such protests against segregation in facilities throughout Chicago, and the seeds of his nonviolent activist group CORE (Congress on Racial Equality) were planted.

It is a history of learning to summon courage. In his autobiography, *Lay Bare the Heart*, Farmer says he almost let the Freedom Riders make their trek through the South without him, out of fear. "If any man says that he had no fear in the action of the sixties, he is a liar," he writes. He and his fellow riders bolstered their courage by singing "We Shall Overcome." ("...song stiffens the spine.") Their self-appointed mission was to break the back of the Mississippi jail system by riding into the state, breaking Jim Crow laws, and flooding the jails to capacity and beyond.

It is a history that includes the media. In an interview in his small office at Mary Washington, he recalled exchanging barbs, through the press, with Malcolm X: "I once accused Malcolm X of being a creature of the media.... Malcolm said, 'Brother James said that about me? Well, you know, he's right. I *am* a creature of the press. And so is *he*.'" Farmer lets out his hearty laugh and adds, "And he was right."

And it is a history that has left some scars. Although he wears a patch over one eye, Farmer is totally blind. He has student essays read aloud to him and delivers his lectures with no other resources than his booming voice and a storehouse of memories from his days with CORE and as one of the "Big Four" — Martin Luther King Jr., Roy Wilkins, Whitney Young and Farmer.

He believes the blindness — the result of a rare eye ailment called retinal vascular occlusion — is partly the result of having been trapped in a church that was tear-gassed by Louisiana state troopers in 1963. After escaping the church, he had to make a clandestine escape from a mob of white men on a manhunt for him.

The history includes a year and a half as assistant secretary of administration for the Health, Education and Welfare Department under President Richard M. Nixon, a post he left due to frustration with bureaucracy and the administration's policies. Those days were followed by an obscurity he found disheartening.

"The media creates leaders and they can kill them," he says. "They can destroy them...destroy them very easily, just stop covering them, and they no longer exist. They become nonpersons. For a period, I felt I was a nonperson. But now, I'm getting covered again. I've had a mass of interviews in the past year. But in the early '80s, I couldn't buy a line of type — *and* in the '70s."

Farmer is encouraged by a recent return of focus to the civil rights movement. In the past two years, anniversary celebrations of civil rights events and retrospective attempts such as the film "Mississippi Burning" have helped, he says. He was director of CORE when three CORE workers were killed in Mississippi, the event on which that movie is based. The film was "useful in that it made many people aware of the fact that three men were killed for civil rights activities in Mississippi. And that was good. It gave them something of the flavor of the times, the excitement, the fear, the bigotry that existed then." But "Mississippi Burning" is "fiction," he says. It overplays the role FBI investigators had in solving the murder, and omits the fact that the real and dangerous investigation was conducted by CORE volunteers, he says.

He sees the attention to the movement and recent well-publicized racial incidents as signaling a change in the tides. "Throughout the '70s, people believed, 'There's no racial discrimination here.' When Blacks would start yelling about discrimination, they said, 'What's your beef?' We got rid of racism. We destroyed racism in the '60s. We did it for you.

"Now people have come to realize in the past couple of years that racism is still very much alive. It is alive and well. Maybe Howard Beach helped them realize that. So I think maybe we are at a point where the nation is ready to begin making more progress in civil rights."

Farmer hopes to establish a Center on Racial Progress and Strategies (CORPS) at Mary Washington, which would "monitor the progress being made in closing the gaps between minorities and non-minorities in income, education, housing and life expectancy."

With large-scale problems such as AIDS and drug use, it is important to monitor state and city progress

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Farmer, *from pg. 5, col. 2*

on minority affairs, he says. "We have multiple problems, so it's more complex, more massive than it has been before.

"That's why I'm anxious to be able to monitor progress. What cities? What states? So we know where we need to beef up activity. As it is now, we're fighting in the dark."

Farmer has faith in today's young people, the age group represented by those he teaches twice a week at Mary Washington. "I question whether there is really apathy on campus," he says. "I think we simply have not presented students with a program. We have not issued a call." He points out that students were effective in protesting apartheid about four years ago and in forcing universities to divest.

Of all the civil rights movement has taught us, Farmer says, the most pertinent lesson is about possibility. "Prior to the civil rights movement of the '50s and '60s, few people would have thought it possible that the changes that took place after the Civil Rights Act and Voting Rights Act could have occurred so rapidly in this country. But they did occur.

"We learned also that the movement for equal rights has its greatest vitality when it is interracial, when there are Blacks and whites and other racial groups and ethnic groups working together. It has to be a cooperative endeavor."

Farmer's CORP plan is still in early and tentative stages. It is a continuation of his lifelong commitment to "making our country whole."

"I will never retire," he says. "If I retired I'd die within six months. I would just sit there and die. I'd be waiting to die. I'll continue as long as I have a breath to breathe." ■