The original documents are located in Box 21, folder "Thimmesch, Nick - Columns, 1973" of the Stanley Scott Papers at the Gerald R. Ford Presidential Library.

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THE NICK THIMMESCH COLUMN

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FRUITLESS SEARCH FOR ONE AND ONLY LEADER

by Nick Thimmesch

WASHINGTON--There was a big to-do recently, accompanied by modest lament and a few snide remarks, when the Rev. Ralph Abernathy announced that he was resigning from the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, the civil-rights organization made famous by the late Dr. Martin Luther King.

For Abernathy to quit and blame SCLC's troubles on successful blacks was considered, by some, to be symptomatic of an atrophy in the movement to advance black people. After all, the reasoning went, if Abernathy can't take it any more, and he succeeded the great leader, Dr. King, isn't the whole thing coming apart?

Well, it isn't necessarily so, and prominent blacks make the point better than I do.

"Black people haven't had one black leader since Booker T. Washington, and he died in 1915," Roy Wilkins, the NAACP's old pro, told me. "As groups develop and become acclimated and barriers are partially eliminated--all of which happened to us --people tend to find a natural level. We have become engineers, chemists, teachers, heads of college departments--we've become integrated.

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"Working-class blacks have their own daily problems and couldn't be less interested in finding one particular man. If a black man has any intelligence at all, and is regarded as a leader, he knows he is not (ital) the (unital) leader of all black people. We're too diverse to have one leader."

James Farmer, founder and chairman of the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), is a man who braved physical harm in the rough days of the movement. He later served as an official of HEW in the Nixon Administration. Farmer says, "Dr. King did not stand alone as a leader. It was whites who considered him the one black leader. Many segments of the black population, particularly young militants, disagreed with him. The black population is too complex to have one leader. We're growing up and we're more sophisticated."

Herbert Nipson, editor of Ebony magazine, says, "It's almost impossible to have one and only one black leader in America today. There are leaders with charisma who might emerge as strong leaders, but there are others, without charisma, who are just as important because of their influence on established institutions."

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It's good to hear prominent, thoughtful blacks describe the black population this way, because if Abernathy is an example of one black leader, the republic's 22 million blacks are badly represented.

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Abernathy went out with a whimper, not a bang. After blaming SCLC's demise on blacks who occupy "high positions made possible through our struggles," he wrapped Dr. King's shroud about himself and offered self-pity. "These and many other struggles have left me battered, tired and worn," he lamented, "for I bear on my body the marks and bruises of the movement to make men free." Then he uttered the old saw about his head being "bloody, but unbowed." For a final touch, he went to Dr. King's grave site and, with tears streaming down his face, told reporters, "I want to talk to Martin now."

Abernathy's performance would have been moving had he a record of accomplishment to show for the five years he ran SCLC since King was assassinated. But Abernathy has no such record. SCLC is broke and aimless.

He failed to make use of the skills of Andrew Young, now a U.S. congressman from Georgia, and Rev. Jesse Jackson, now an estimable black leader on his own in Chicago where he runs PUSH (People United to Save Humanity). And Abernathy got into money squabbles with Coretta Scott King, the widow, who hasn't turned out to be much of a leader either.

During the Poor People's encampment here in 1968, most demonstrators lived in tents on rain-soaked grounds. MORE/

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Where was Abernathy? A black reporter came rapping and tapping on a motel door near here, and who peered out? Why it was Abernathy himself who elected for air-conditioning and a dry bed so he could better dream the impossible dream.

A leader isn't a leader because he says he's one. He's a leader because the people he's leading say so. Abernathy, like many another self-appointed one and only leader, no matter what his color or identification, turned out to be a mediocre leader indeed.

More important, though, is the fact that black Americans are so busy rising in American life that, as Roy Wilkins says,"they couldn't be less interested in finding one particular man." And James Farmer is right when he asks, "Who is the one white leader?"

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THE NICK THIMMESCH COLUMN

RELEASE DATE: Thursday, August 9, 1973

(NOTE TO EDITOR: This is the fourth of a series of guest columns while Nick Thimmesch is on a fact-finding trip to the Middle East.)

A NEW LOOK AT THE BLACK STRUGGLE

by James Farmer, Director,
Council on Minority Planning and Strategy (COMPAS),
former Director of Committee on Racial Equality (CORE)

The front seat of the bus is hard and rough and the lunch-counter hot dogs are rubber. Yesterday's struggles were sweeter by far than their victories.

Many of the triumphs of the Sixties, it is true, brought some of our Neanderthal practices into the realm of civilization. A decade ago was another world for black lodgers and diners in over a dozen states. In employment and housing, new legal tools of great value have now been forged. A fresh crop of nearly 3,000 black elected officials at all levels, irrigated with the blood of the Sixties, has sprung to life.

But one cannot savor the advances long before the bite of reality takes over. Then the sweet taste turns to bitter ashes. In the vital areas of human living, such as family income and the survival of our babies, relative progress has ground to a halt.

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If any of us were basking in the euphoria of progress, recent reports of the Census Bureau should dispel the mist from our eyes: Between 1969 and 1972 the number of blacks below the poverty line increased by 600,000. The unemployment rate of blacks remains twice that of whites. For the last five years, the median income of blacks has remained only 59% of that of whites, and the infant mortality rate has stayed nearly twice as high. (30.2 per 1,000 live births for blacks and 16.8 for whites.)

In addition, many high schools are still graduating youngsters who cannot read well enough to survive in a work world.

By comparison, yesterday's vanquished problems of the bus seat, the cafe meal and the hotel room pale into insignificance. The more fundamental economic, health and educational issues, all indications tell us, remain substantially unaddressed.

While the Sixties' greatest victory of all, voter rights, does indeed offer solid grounds for buoyancy, we would be dangerously naive to think that the stubborn problems illustrated above will yield (ital) automatically (unital) to the proud presence of the new black faces in elective office.

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Those problems of the Seventies most certainly will not yield to the tactics of the Sixties: Income gaps do not respond to sit-ins and reading levels are not improved by freedom marches. Nor does the black official, however able and committed, have the answers. No one does--not yet at least.

But the answers must be found, and without delay. They are not likely to be found by guesses and hunches or even by trial and error. The need now is for new instruments which can mobilize the intellectual resources available to minorities, for examining the evidence and the data and devising co-ordinated programs and sustained strategies for dealing with today's complex problems. This is no task for an afternoon "rap session" or a weekend convention; it calls for an ongoing effort, a sophisticated process of program formulation.

Working with Howard University, I have established a "think tank," the Council on Minority Planning and Strategy (COMPAS), in an attempt to institutionalize that process. COMPAS intends to focus on various aspects of one multiple question: Where are we, where do we want to be and how do we propose to get there?

When an answer is devised by the best minds, the next step will be implementation.

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If one has a clear idea of how to go from A to B, the next step, of course, is to get there. The act of "getting there" successfully involves the whole dynamics of public policy in the nation. For that reason COMPAS has set up a Public Policy Training Institute in Washington, D.C., where selected tough, creative, minority minds can interact with top scholars, legislators, public figures and opinionmakers--ranging from Ted Kennedy to Bill Buckley, from Jack Anderson to James Kilpatrick, from Ralph Nader to Caspar Weinberger, from John Gardner to James T. Lynn.

Examining the process of public policymaking is essential if one hopes to have an impact on those policies and to effect necessary change. Common Cause and Nader's Raiders may be right: Monitoring and impacting public policy may be the prime requirement of citizenship today.

But we must not only make the system work for us, we must understand the system well enough to prevent its misuse by those who are corrupted by their own power.

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