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*The Atlantic*

## Time-Travel Thursdays



*This is an edition of Time-Travel Thursdays, a journey through The Atlantic's archives to contextualize the present, surface delightful treasures, and examine the American idea. (Did someone forward you this newsletter? [Sign up here.](#))*



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(Illustration by The Atlantic; source: New York City tenements (Associated Press))

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This week, [\*The New York Times\*](#) published news of the death of Charles V. Hamilton, the political scientist who co-wrote the book *Black Power* in 1967 with his much more famous colleague and comrade, Kwame Ture, once known as Stokely Carmichael. Hamilton died months ago, and the news was apparently made public only after a close friend of Hamilton's was notified by his bank. During his life, Hamilton took great care to deflect attention and recognition for his work away from himself and toward the Black activists who learned from him. It would seem that he departed this Earth in the same way.

Now that Hamilton can no longer bat away deserved praise for his career, I hope I can offer a small tribute. Hamilton was one of the past century's true intellectual titans and theorists of democracy. Even as a young man, he had a deep and abiding faith in democracy—and in the necessity of agitating to break America's Jim Crow authoritarianism. He decided to enter higher education to inspire students as a self-styled “academic activist,” and [was fired](#) from the faculty of Tuskegee University for his radicalism and because of suspicions of Communist sympathies. But during his time there, he became interested in a group of students who had begun organizing on campus—the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, or SNCC.

During SNCC's 1960s campaign to challenge Jim Crow, Hamilton served as a sort of older brother and academic adviser to the enfants terribles of the group. In photos, Hamilton—always in a blazer and collared shirt, always reading, already balding—is often a foil to Carmichael's slick, militant style. The activists took to calling Hamilton “Doc” or “Doctor” to tease him. But through it all, through Freedom Summer in Mississippi, and through the Lowndes County Freedom Movement in Alabama, Hamilton and his younger comrades

worked hand in hand to create a new politics that situated the plight of Black sharecroppers at the center of a global struggle for true democracy. In 1966, during the March Against Fear, Carmichael introduced the slogan “Black Power” in a speech and crystallized that new philosophy.

Just over a year later, [\*Black Power\*](#) arrived in bookstores and both scandalized and radicalized people across the country. The book, which advocated for nonviolent political change-making, was nevertheless considered so controversial that its publisher, Random House, required a disclaimer before the text, warning that the book’s framework “represents the last reasonable opportunity for this society to work out its racial problems short of prolonged destructive guerrilla warfare.” Yet many sections of *Black Power* have now become a part of America’s lexicon regarding race. Hamilton was one of the first theorists to use the term *institutional racism* in the way we use it today, and months before the Kerner Commission found that racism was the prevailing cause of riots in Black ghettos, Hamilton and Carmichael definitively stated the same. *The Atlantic* [published an adapted excerpt](#) from their book in the October 1967 issue, marking one of the first appearances of *institutional racism* in print.

In 2020, I had the great honor of striking up a Zoom correspondence with Hamilton as I reported [a story on](#) the Black struggle to create a democracy in America. The story begins with the life of my late mother, who was born in Greenwood, Mississippi, the same summer that Hamilton came to the town with SNCC to try to demand the vote. When I spoke to Hamilton, he was in his 90s and already in somewhat poor health, but even through all the hassles and scares of the early

coronavirus pandemic in an assisted-living facility, he kept writing and theorizing. Hamilton was an avid politico, and when he couldn't write, he dictated his thoughts to friends who came by—including a plan he had to draft a new pro-democracy amendment to the Constitution. In a note to me, he wrote: “Black Power opened my eyes.” And in one rare moment, he decided against his usual understatement. With Black Power, “a new period in America’s narrative was born,” he wrote. I am inclined to agree.

I’ll leave you with a few more stories from our archives involving the long intellectual lineage of Hamilton’s “Black Power”:

- [“Strivings of the Negro People,” by W. E. B. Du Bois](#)  
[\(August 1897 issue\)](#)
- [“In My Father’s House There Are Many Mansions—And I’m Going to Get Me Some of Them Too,” by James Alan McPherson](#)  
[\(April 1972 issue\)](#)
- [“Reconstruction Reconsidered,” by James Alan McPherson](#)  
[\(April 1988 issue\)](#)