The Counter Revolution

By HOWELL RAINES, NY Times, February 1, 2010

IN the pre-digital America of 1960, “viral” was still a medical term. So it was written in countless news articles that the student sit-in movement had “spread like wildfire” on black campuses across the South. On the morning of Feb. 1, 50 years ago today, four black freshmen at North Carolina A&T State University seated themselves at the all-white lunch counter in a Woolworth’s dime store in Greensboro. Within hours, news of this bold act by the Greensboro Four, as they would come to be called, had grapevined its way from A&T to the campuses of historically black colleges in Atlanta and Nashville.

All Franklin McCain, Ezell Blair Jr., David Richmond and Joe McNeil did was ask for coffee and doughnuts and politely decline to move until they were served — and try to engage a flustered white waitress and a bumbling store manager in a Socratic dialogue about the meanings of “serve.” Then, just like that, the black preachers who had challenged segregation in citadel cities like Montgomery, Ala., and Atlanta had found their natural allies: thousands of students who would become, before the end of the month, the shock troops of the civil rights movement.

It was always a fractious alliance. Not surprisingly, imposing black elders like the Rev. Martin Luther King Sr. did not like being booed during church rallies for moving too slowly by militant students, many of whom cast themselves as radical Christian activists. But together, the team of preachers and students would show, within the space of three years, that the edifice of segregation was a lot like Georgia’s Stone Mountain, that imposing Confederate monument whose soft, exfoliating rock turns to dust under the hammer.

Now at the remove of 50 years, we can ask how it happened so fast — but not only that. We can also usefully ask how such an idealistic and altruistic movement might fare in today’s media environment. As Jack
Bass, a Southern newspaperman turned historian, observed when we talked the other day, it was a time when everybody watched the three network news programs. It was also a time when hysterical jeremiads about the perils of change were not part of the mainstream news flow.

Sure, conservative columnists like Rowland Evans and Robert Novak clucked about Communist influence on the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, and Paul Harvey seemed vaguely disturbed by dark-skinned youngsters who talked back to Southern sheriffs. But straight, eyewitness reporting dominated television news, and Northern print reporters flooding the region quickly shamed Southern newspapers into covering civil rights in a way that began to look, let us say, balanced — or even, in a few cities, fair.

What seems remarkable in retrospect is the factual authority of network news in those days. Dixie’s politicians, of course, accused the national anchors of bias. But the pictures trumped the home-cooked propaganda, as when you put a spittle-spraying Southern governor up against a Greensboro Four leader like Franklin McCain, in his earnest Sunday clothes, offering a cogent critique of Woolworth’s Southern business strategy as it related to black shoppers nationwide. It took only one national telecast of Nashville students being assaulted at the lunch counters to demonstrate that segregation everywhere depended on the unconstitutional application of police brutality.

With such an agenda of real news, how one dreaded seeing some ponderous network commentator interrupt the reporters to claim his 90 seconds of air time. There was simply no need to put a scrim of opinion between the viewer and fresh news film.

Today, however, there’s no denying that traditional reportage of political and social trends seems almost as out of date as segregation. Surely the civil rights movement would have been hampered by the politicized, oppositional journalism that flows from Fox News and the cable talk shows. Luckily for the South, that kind of butchered news was left
mostly to a few extremist newspapers in Virginia and Mississippi and to local AM radio talk shows that specialized in segregationist rants.

As for the nonpartisan press, it had to race to keep up with events. As it happens, Franklin McCain, whom I interviewed in 1975 about that first sit-in, and I both finished college in 1964, the fraught year that saw the outlawing of segregation in all public facilities throughout the nation. The next year brought the Selma March and the Voting Rights Act, the legislative culmination of the civil protests set in motion by the Greensboro sit-in, which is to be commemorated today in a ceremony attended by Mr. McCain and his two surviving colleagues, Mr. McNeil and Jibreel Khazan (formerly Mr. Blair).

In retrospect, what seems most striking to me is how inaccurate I and many others in my generation of journalists could be when we looked away from the turbulent Southern streets and sought to predict the region’s future and the course of the civil rights movement.

As the sit-ins gave way to the Freedom Rides and then the mass marches, we were often wrong about how long it was going to take to destroy segregation in such bastions of discrimination as Birmingham and the Mississippi Delta. We thought in terms of decades, of finally reaching a new era of racial peace by the turn of the century. Instead, by 1969, the first black student was elected to the homecoming court at the University of Alabama. Symbolically, she was the daughter of the Greensboro Four. Generationally, she was their peer.

We were also wrong, in the long haul, about the transforming effect of the 1965 Voting Rights Act on Southern politics. For a dozen years, it looked as if the New South would be dominated by biracial coalition politics as practiced by centrist white politicians like Jimmy Carter and former civil rights activists like Andrew Young. The coming political order would be bipartisan as well, including progressive Republicans like Lamar Alexander of Tennessee. The last thing we expected was a return to one-word politics, but that’s what evolved. Before 1960, the one word was “segregation.” You could stamp it on the most hapless of
candidates and win an election. After 1980, the one word became “conservative,” as a label for the set of Bible Belt social values that hardened into its present calcified state with the election of Ronald Reagan.

Will this new monolith prove as fragile as Stone Mountain? Lyndon Johnson didn’t think so, having predicted as he signed the Voting Rights Act that he was handing the South over to the Republicans. That legislative instrument turned out to be another retrogressive force in the South, albeit a more benign one than segregation was. In the past 30 years, the law has been distorted to gerrymander the region into safe Congressional districts for a great number of white Republicans and a handful of black Democrats. Who would have predicted that the death of de jure segregation would usher in a new era of political segregation in elective politics?

Given the corrupt state of both Congressional parties, I’m not suggesting that Southern Republicans are bad and Southern Democrats are good. They are all dependent on money from the same corporate donors, and the hatred of one political party for the other has a chemically stable toxicity that has virtually eliminated the biracial voting patterns that emerged in the South in the late ’60s and early ’70s. What I am suggesting is that the one thing the South should have learned in the past 50 years is that if we are going to hell in a handbasket, we should at least be together in a basket of common purpose.

*Howell Raines, a former executive editor of The Times, covered the civil rights movement in the 1960s and ’70s.*