Abernathy, Jackson and SCLC

"How long will Mr. (Jesse) Jackson and his rapidly growing Operation Breadbasket continue in what some of his followers call a 'tail-wagging-the-dog' relationship with its near static parent group, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC)"? That, said New York Times news analyst Thomas A. Johnson last month, is a key question that should be answered within the next year. Johnson also reported that in a speech to the third annual Black Expo in Chicago, "the noble Mr. Jackson often praised a long list of 'black giants', but he did not mention the name of the Rev. Ralph David Abernathy, Dr. King's successor and Mr. Jackson's superior in the S.C.L.C."

Jackson's omission, and Johnson's assumption that SCLC is "near static" are not isolated occurrences. And that, apparently, has not been lost on Abernathy himself. Speaking in Mississippi early this month during the closing days of that state's election campaign, Abernathy told an approving audience that "there are some mean and vicious people around this country who are saying that SCLC is dying. But they gonna have to eat their words tomorrow (election day) because we gonna do our thing in Mississippi." What Abernathy seemed to be saying was that a strong black voter turnout in Mississippi would be proof positive that his organization is still strong. But the turnout did not prove to be that strong, and there was considerable question, in any case, about SCLC's causal connection to the result. Local black leaders in Sunflower and Bolivar Counties, where SCLC concentrated much of its effort, said the campaign effort was locally organized and that SCLC's role was decidedly secondary. "We appreciated SCLC's help," said Eddie Lucas, campaign manager for Mrs. Fannie Lou Hammer, a candidate for state senate. "But for the most part, they just helped with legwork and printing of campaign literature."

But one thing Dr. Abernathy did demonstrate in Mississippi was that his charisma with Southern black audiences may be unsurpassed. In a series of speeches condemning the white power structure in Mississippi, Sen. James Eastland in particular, along with President Nixon and Vice President Agnew, Abernathy was mobbed time and again by wildly cheering black crowds.

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