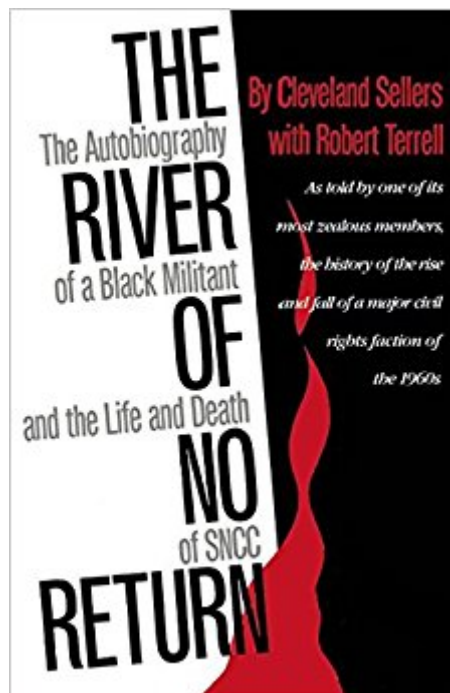




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# The River Of No Return: The Autobiography Of A Black Militant And The Life And Death Of SNCC



## Synopsis

Among histories of the civil rights movement of the 1960s, there are few personal narratives better than this one. Besides being an insider's account of the rise and fall of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), it is an eyewitness report of the strategies and the conflicts in the crucial battle zones as the fight for racial justice raged across the South. This memoir by Cleveland Sellers, a SNCC volunteer, traces his zealous commitment to activism from the time of the sit-ins, demonstrations, and freedom rides in the early 1960s. In a narrative encompassing the Mississippi Freedom Summer (1964), the historic march in Selma, the Democratic National Convention in Atlantic City, and the murders of civil rights activists in Mississippi, he recounts the turbulent history of SNCC and tells the powerful story of his own no-return dedication to the cause of civil rights and social change. *The River of No Return* is acclaimed as a book that has become a standard text for those wishing to perceive the civil rights struggle from within the ranks of one of its key organizations and to note the divisive history of the movement as groups striving for common goals were embroiled in conflict and controversy.

## Book Information

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The River of No Return is, quite simply, one of the two or three most important books to come out of the Civil Rights Movement. [Sellers's] book is as timely now as it was when he wrote it nearly two decades ago."--John Dittmer

I had to purchase this for a college course about African American History. This was a well-written, gripping story about the Civil Rights movement from someone who worked for equality and witnessed racism first hand. A must for every American to read in order to understand a part of our history that most do not know about, regardless of their race. The fact that the settings for the events described in this book took place decades ago, their relevancy to today's events are unmistakable and unfortunate.

Cleve Sellers played a critical role in the growth and self-destruction of SNCC. His autobiography sheds light on this evolution, and provides vivid descriptions of people and events such as his good friend Stokely Carmichael, and the Orangeburg massacre.

This is a reprint of a well-written personal account by a SNCC member and Howard University student. I am glad to see this book back in print. It will give an insight to the young and not so young who, because of the media's almost exclusive focus on Dr. King, have been lead to believe that the only important aspect of the civil rights movement was the "I Have a Dream" speech. Cleve Sellers gives us an up close and personal report on some of the key leaders of SNCC, especially the late Stokely Carmichael (known later as Kwame Ture), who later became, for a short time, the Prime Minister of the Black Panther Party and for many years the primary organizer of the All African Peoples Revolutionary Party. Sellers shares many of the behind the scenes relationships between SNCC and other organizations and details the tactical and ideological differences which engaged the energies of the SNCC membership.

In "The River of No Return: The Autobiography of a Black Militant and the Life and Death of SNCC", Cleveland Sellers and Robert Terrell trace both Seller's own life and the struggles of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee. Key to an understanding of SNCC's fate is the Hamburger Theory, articulated by Ella Baker in her thesis, *More Than a Hamburger*, in which she argued that civil rights workers needed to focus on more than having a burger at a lunch counter and "ought to be interested in a whole range of social problems" (pg. 36). Baker, and those who heard her words, wanted civil rights workers to use the lunch counter protests as a

stepping-stone to a larger movement and desegregate all aspects of society. Further, Baker argued that people would co-opt the students' movement and undercut its power. Unfortunately, Sellers concludes that the Hamburger theory "proved an insufficient focus" for civil rights workers by 1962 (pg. 54). Even with the desegregation of public facilities, the balance of power in the South remained firmly entrenched in the hands of white supremacists. While members of SNCC continued to work to register African Americans to vote, they also realized the two-party system would not make it possible to solve the problems of poor blacks and "there was a need for alternative or parallel political structures" (pg. 115). According to Sellers, the push to develop black consciousness eventually gave way to Stokely Carmichael's black power movement (pg. 167). This effectively rallied those frustrated with more traditional methods of protest, but also signaled the eventual split of SNCC into those who wanted to continue using established techniques and the more radical members. Sellers argues, "Black Power thrust SNCC to the forefront of the struggle for black liberation. Although SCLC, CORE, the NAACP and the Urban League continued to have prestige, SNCC was the premiere organization" (pg. 183). Simultaneously, SNCC members "considered themselves part of an emerging Third World coalition of revolutionaries who were anticapitalist, antiimperialist and antiracist" (pg. 188). Even while developing this consciousness, a protest in Orangeburg, SC in which the police fired on unarmed demonstrators led to Sellers' own arrest and, eventually, the end of SNCC through continued factionalism. Sellers gradually became aware that he, and others involved in various civil rights organizations, were under observation and subject to disinformation campaigns from the federal government as part of the FBI's COINTELPRO operation (pg. 257). Even with all of these difficulties, Sellers concluded in his afterword, "I am encouraged by a revival of interest among SNCC members in writing the SNCC story. The accomplishments during that period were great and there is still much to be told" (pg. 277).

I know Cleve Sellers quite well, he's currently a history professor at the University of South Carolina and his students are fortunate to get firsthand accounts of the Civil Rights movement from a lesser-known, but NOT a lesser player in these events. Readers of his book are fortunate too, for here you have verifiable firsthand accounts from a man who lived through this stuff and paid heavily for it. In about 40 years, the generation who lived through the Civil Rights movement will no longer be with us, and it is good that documents of this kind will be around to let future generations know what it was REALLY like. However, it's worthy to note that his closing chapter, on the chaotic state of Black leadership after the Civil Rights movement, is still dead-on traget although it was written in

1973.

This is a well written account of someone who was on the front lines of the Civil Rights Movement. As Dr. Sellers recounts his life as a "black militant", he gives us first hand insight of not only his, but "others" involvement in this historical movement. His details captured my soul and touch my heart. Not only did I have the opportunity to read the autobiography of Dr. Cleveland Seller, he was also my long time advisor and professor at The University of South Carolina. This book is as well written as his first hand accounts.

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