On June 29, 1941, Stokely Carmichael was born in Trinidad and Tobago to Mabel and Adolphus Carmichael. His parents moved to New York for better work when he was just a toddler. At the age of 11, Stokely moved to New York to live with his parents. In New York, Stokely would excel academically and attend the highly regarded Bronx High School of Science. During his high school years, Stokely noted the racism exhibited by his white classmates. Upon graduation, Stokely was accepted and received scholarships from a handful of predominately white universities but he was looking for an experience that differed from his high school years. In 1960 he decided to enroll at Howard University and continue his education at the historically black institution.

Stokely entered his Freshman year at Howard University eager to become more involved in the civil rights movement. He had seen and heard numerous protest that were being conducted throughout the south. This curiosity led him to join the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). He became more active in SNCC events and participated in his first Freedom Ride that summer. While on the trip through the south, the group was arrested in Jackson, Mississippi for entering a “whites only” bus stop waiting room. Stokely was held in jail for 49 days and became the youngest person imprisoned for the protest at the age of 19. Despite the unfair jail time, Stokely’s involvement in the civil rights movement did not cease. He would go on to participate in additional Freedom Rides in Maryland and Georgia.

In 1964, Carmichael graduated from Howard University with a degree in psychology with honors. After graduation, Stokely started working full-time for the SNCC. The SNCC decided to name the summer of 1964 the “Freedom Summer”. Their goal was to register as many black voters as possible across the south. Carmichael was chosen to lead the SNCC chapter in Lowndes County, Alabama. Upon his arrival, the county only had 70 black voters registered. A year later, the number of black voters rose to 2,600 voters registered. This number was 300 more than the number of white voters in the county. Despite the dramatic increase in new voters, Carmichael did not receive the response he hoped for from the Democratic or Republican parties. Stokely would create his own political party named the Lowndes County Freedom Organization as a result. He chose a black panther to be the official logo for the party, which would provide inspiration for the Black Panthers later.

As a member of the SNCC, Stokely practiced non-violence and the teachings of Dr. Martin Luther King. His belief in the non-violent movement would start to dwindle over the next couple of years due to the violence and death he observed while practicing non-violence. First, there was the disappearance of James Chaney, Andrew Goodman, and Michael Schwerner in Mississippi. The men were civil rights workers and remained missing for two months until the FBI found their dead bodies in August of 1964. In August of 1965, Jonathan Daniels was shot to death with a shotgun. Daniels was white man who happened to be working with the SNCC in their efforts throughout the south. Carmichael would be jailed numerous times during this period as well. In May of 1966, Stokely became the National Chairman for the SNCC. A month later in June, Carmichael would lead a march from Memphis, Tennessee to Jackson, Mississippi that would be called the “Walk Against Fear”. The march was intended to be a solo march by a man named James Meredith to help encourage voter registration. Meredith happened to be the first African American student to attend the University of Mississippi. During his march, Meredith was shot by a white man and unable to finish the march. Stokely along with Dr. Martin Luther King Jr and other leaders decided that the group should continue the march for Meredith. Upon their arrival in Mississippi, the march had gained approximately 15,000 people and helped register over 4,000 African Americans to vote. Once the group reached Greenwood, Mississippi they were met by racists white residents and the police who harassed the group severely. The group of marchers attempted to sleep in a park that night but were arrested, Carmichael included. After being detained for a few hours, Stokely was bailed out and completely enraged and exhausted. He would give a legendary speech at the same park that would spark a new civil rights movement. In his speech, Carmichael stated “We been saying ‘freedom’ for six years, What we are going to start saying now is ‘Black Power’.”. The term ‘Black Power’ would become the rallying cry of militant black organization across the nation, most notably the Black Panthers.

In the years that followed his famous speech in Greenwood, Stokely decided to travel the world and interact with world leaders all over the world. When he returned the United States in 1967, he departed from the SNCC and became the Prime Minister for the militant Black Panther Party for Self-Defense. His affiliation with the Panthers and the Black Power movement caused for him to be a target of the United States government and the FBI similar to other Panther members. Due to the constant surveillance, Carmichael would move to Guinea and change his name to Kwame Toure. He continued to speak at public appearances occasionally in the United States but his main goal became trying to unify Africa nations. On November 15, 1998 Kwame Toure, also known as Stokely Carmichael, died in Guinea due to cancer.

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