

Julian Bond, veteran of early civil rights struggle and pillar of establishment, dies at 75

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The outpouring of media and official tributes for Julian Bond, who died this past weekend at the age of 75, is the latest illustration of the political trajectory of the former leaders of the civil rights movement of the 1960s.

The *New York Times* called Bond a “charismatic civil rights leader” in its front-page obituary. The *Christian Science Monitor* and many other publications referred to him as “a civil rights icon,” and the *US News and World Report* hailed him as “a truly great American activist.” Bill Clinton, Al Gore and numerous others added their tributes. President Barack Obama called Bond a “hero” as well as a friend.

These accolades above all reflect the fact that, for at least the last 50 years of a 55-year career as an organizer, speaker, journalist, commentator and professor, Bond was a stalwart and conscious defender of the capitalist status quo. Like others of his generation, he came to represent a thin privileged layer of the African-American population, a layer that prospered as the hopes and aspirations of millions who fought against inequality were dashed.

Bond, who began his career as a leader of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) in the Southern civil rights movement and ended it as the president of the NAACP from 1998 to 2010, was known even as a young man for his “moderate” approach to the struggle for racial and social equality.

SNCC was recognized in those years for its militancy and its more aggressive utilization of civil disobedience tactics than the established civil rights organizations. There were occasional tensions between SNCC and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) headed by Martin Luther King, Jr. But SNCC, while winning wide support in the North, especially among students, never articulated a program to unite the

working class in struggle for social as well as racial equality.

Julian Bond was born in Nashville, Tennessee, into an educated middle-class family. His father, named after the famous educator Horace Mann, became the first black president of Lincoln University in Pennsylvania, and later held a high post at Atlanta University.

Bond was swept up in the struggles of the 1960s. His first major involvement came in response to the sit-ins against lunch counter segregation that began in Greensboro, North Carolina in 1960. He became a founder of SNCC at the age of 20, and for the next five years was the new organization’s communications director.

This was a time of growing mass struggle. SNCC was particularly involved in organizing African-Americans to demand voting rights in the South, a battle against the whole system of Jim Crow and second-class citizenship, a social order that was backed up by racist terror.

Both Bond and fellow SNCC leader John Lewis left the organization in the mid-1960s, when Stokely Carmichael and other “Black Power” advocates won the leadership and whites were asked to leave. Bond’s opposition to the reactionary black nationalism espoused by Carmichael was based on bourgeois liberalism. While the nationalists capitalized on the growing anger at the political establishment, including the Johnson Administration, Bond was already becoming part of this establishment. He was neither capable of nor interested in advancing a genuine alternative to the demagoguery of Carmichael.

In this regard the tribute to Bond from Andrew Young is significant. Young, among the most conservative elements in the leadership around Martin

Luther King, went on to become mayor of Atlanta and US Representative to the United Nations. According to Young, “when everybody else was getting worked up, I could find in Julian a cool and serious analysis of what was going on.” Even as a young man, it is clear, Bond was determined to cover up the fundamental class questions and political issues raised by the fight against Jim Crow.

In 1965 Bond was among a number of African-Americans who ran successfully for election to the Georgia state legislature. The legislature barred him from taking his seat, accusing him of “disloyalty” because of remarks he had made in support of draft resistance, as the massive escalation of the Vietnam War began.

This set in motion a significant legal and political episode. The case went to the Supreme Court, which ruled in the 1966 case of *Bond v. Floyd* that the barring of Bond was an attack on his free speech rights. The Georgia legislature was integrated for the first time since the Reconstruction Era almost 100 years earlier.

Bond was interested in joining the state apparatus, however, not in fighting against it. He was a member of the state legislature for the next 20 years, and for his whole life he remained a faithful supporter of the Democratic Party. During this period he also helped to found the Southern Poverty Law Center, and served as its president during the 1970s.

His ambitions for a political career beyond Georgia were not realized. He lost a 1986 campaign for the US Congress, beaten by fellow SNCC leader John Lewis, who has kept this seat in Washington for the last three decades. For the rest of his life, as the *Times* puts it, Bond “prospered on the lecture circuit.” The laudatory *Times* obituary notes that Bond “gradually moved from the militancy of [SNCC] to the leadership of the establishmentarian NAACP.”

Bond did not have to move very far. He was among the more conservative elements in the student movement, and quickly adapted himself to the milieu of racial politics once the Democratic Party opened its doors to aspiring black politicians and a few safe black districts were created. After his political career ended, he moved on to a role in the NAACP, whose leaders put him forward as a spokesman since his reputation from the 1960s was better than theirs.

The NAACP was known for its conservatism and its

hostility to the mass movement even when the struggle was under the leadership of the SCLC in the 1950s and 1960s. In this sense Bond’s trajectory has some historical significance. In his last years he was treated as a kind of elder statesman, a symbol of the elevation of a section of the African-American middle class into ruling circles. He naturally hailed the election of Obama, serving as an apologist for every crime committed by the US government under this administration.



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