Congress of Racial Equality or CORE

The Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) was founded in 1942 as the Committee of Racial Equality by an interracial group of students in Chicago, Illinois. Many of these students were members of the Chicago branch of the Fellowship of Reconciliation (FOR), a pacifist organization seeking to change racist attitudes. The founders of CORE were deeply influenced by Indian nationalist leader Mahatma Gandhi’s teachings of nonviolent resistance.

CORE started as a nonhierarchical, decentralized organization funded entirely by the voluntary contributions of its members. The organization was initially co-led by white University of Chicago student George Houser and black student James Farmer. In 1942 CORE began protests against segregation in public accommodations by organizing sit-ins. Also in 1942 CORE expanded nationally. Farmer traveled the country with Bayard Rustin, a field secretary with FOR, and recruited activists at FOR meetings. CORE’s early growth consisted almost entirely of white middle-class college students from the Midwest.

From the beginning of its expansion, CORE experienced tension between local control and national leadership. The earliest affiliated chapters retained control of their own activities and funds. With a nonhierarchical system as the model of leadership, a national leadership over local chapters seemed contradictory to CORE’s principles. Some early chapters were dominated by pacifists and focused on educational activities. Other chapters emphasized direct action protests, such as sit-ins. This tension has persisted throughout CORE’s existence. Through sit-ins and picket lines, CORE had some success in integrating Northern public facilities in the 1940s. With these successes it was decided that, to have a national impact, strengthening the national organization was necessary. Farmer became the first national director of CORE in 1943.

In April 1947 CORE sent eight white and eight black men into the upper South to test a Supreme Court ruling that declared segregation in interstate travel unconstitutional. CORE gained national attention for this Journey of Reconciliation when four of the riders were arrested in Chapel Hill, North Carolina, and three, including Rustin, were forced to work on a chain gang. In the aftermath of the 1954 Brown v. Board of Education decision, CORE was revived from several years of stagnation and decline. CORE provided the 1955 Montgomery bus boycott in Alabama with its philosophical commitment to nonviolent direct action. As the Civil Rights Movement took hold, CORE focused its energy in the South.

CORE’s move into the South forced the leadership to address the question of the organization’s place within the black community. Although whites still remained prominent, black leaders were sought out for high-profile positions. CORE remained committed to interracialism but no longer required that new chapters have an interracial membership; CORE largely expected little white support in the South. While middle-class college students predominated in the early years of the organization, the membership was increasingly made up of poorer and less-educated African Americans.

CORE provided guidance for action in the aftermath of the 1960 sit-in of four college students (who were not CORE members) at a Greensboro, North Carolina, lunch
counter and subsequently became a nationally recognized civil rights organization. As pioneers of the sit-in tactic, the organization offered support in Greensboro and organized sit-ins throughout the South. CORE members then developed the strategy of the jail-in, serving out their sentences for sit-ins rather than paying bail. In May 1961 CORE organized the Freedom Rides—bus trips throughout the South that attempted to desegregate buses and bus stations—modeled after their earlier Journey of Reconciliation. Near Birmingham, Alabama, a bus was firebombed and riders were beaten by a white mob. After this event, CORE ended the rides; however, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) resumed the rides in Mississippi. Some CORE officials resented SNCC for taking credit for the Freedom Rides, but CORE continued to locate field secretaries in key areas of the South to provide support for the riders.

By the end of 1961, CORE had 53 affiliated chapters, and they remained active in Southern civil rights activities for the next several years. CORE participated heavily in President Kennedy's Voter Education Project (VEP) and also cosponsored the 1963 March on Washington. In 1964 CORE participated in the Mississippi Freedom Summer project; two of the three activists killed that summer in an infamous case, James Chaney and Michael Schwerner, were members of CORE.

By 1963 CORE had already shifted attention to segregation in the North and West, where two-thirds of the organization's chapters were located. In an effort to build CORE's credibility as a black protest organization, leadership in these Northern chapters had become almost entirely black. CORE's ideology and strategies were increasingly challenged by its changing membership. Many new members advocated militancy and believed nonviolent methods of protest were to be used only if they proved successful.

As the tactics were being questioned so was the role of white members. In 1966 CORE endorsed the term *Black Power*, and by 1967 the word *multiracial* was no longer in the CORE constitution. Finally, in 1968, Roy Innis replaced Farmer as the national director, and Innis soon denied whites active membership in CORE and advocated black separatism.

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