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THE RIOTS OF 1964: THE CAUSES OF RACIAL VIOLENCE

*Roy Wilkins**

This symposium at Notre Dame Law School on riots in Northern cities in 1964 comes two days after the conclusion of the historic Selma-to-Montgomery, Alabama, March for Voting Rights. That there should be, in 1965, anywhere in the United States, a fifty-mile march of citizens to a state capital to present, both through their presence and in writing, a petition for removal of racial barriers to registration and voting is cause not only for eyebrow lifting. It is, without question, a cause for taking a second look at rioting — the 1964 Northern city brand.

The naked racial disfranchisement in Selma and the attendant submarginal treatment of the Negro illustrate how society fosters the complete alienation of Negroes as citizens. It builds in them a sense of skepticism, hopelessness and despair about the possibility of redress or justice through the democratic process. In Selma and in similar localities Negroes have never seen in their cities and states a Negro mayor or sheriff or judge or state legislator or congressman or governor. The democratic process means nothing to them since it produces nothing for them. Nothing seems to halt contemptuous and brutal police action. Payment of taxes does not produce municipal services comparable to those rendered to white citizens.

In Selma the simple, basic American request to be permitted to register to vote at first drew an arrogant designation by the sheriff of a roped-off alley space in which Negro applicants might stand all day while they awaited the pleasure of the registration board. It took a federal court order to secure permission to stand in line on the sidewalk of the city hall. Finally, when Negro citizens tired of the insulting treatment of local officials and prepared to march to the capital to lay their grievance before the state authorities, they were beaten down, ridden down and gassed by mounted possemen and by Alabama state troopers, acting under the authority of Governor George C. Wallace.

The final convincing clincher of the "aloneness" of the embattled Negro has been the brutal and frequently murderous treatment of white persons who dare to show their sympathy for the cause. The bloodiest beatings in the Freedom Ride project in 1961 were meted out to white riders in Alabama while police looked the other way. A white Baltimore postman who was staging a one-man walk for justice from his city to the statehouse in Mississippi was slain on a lonely stretch of Alabama highway. The vilest language and the filthiest treatment at the hands of jailers and prison guards were reserved for arrested white women civil rights workers.

Fresh in memory is the murder March 9 of Rev. James Reeb, a white Unitarian minister, for just being in Selma in sympathy with the demon-

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strators. And only the day before yesterday there was the killing of a white Detroit woman on U.S. Highway 80 in Lowndes County, Alabama, as she was on her way to ferry another group of demonstrators back home to Selma from the huge finale in Montgomery.

Deep in Negro consciousness is the very strong suspicion that, if racial prejudice and its system are so strongly entrenched that protests by white people are struck down, the only thing remaining for the Negro is to strike back. He sees the hopelessness of such action as no worse than the hopelessness of continued endurance of the unendurable. The cited cases and scores like them down through the years in the South, and not as infrequently in the North as some would have it, have driven some Negroes to the view that they must take the law into their own hands, since all the private and governmental powers are either allied against them or are indifferent to their fate.

So we have riotous upheavals. Selma adds to the store of local resentments that build to riot heat. The discouraged and victimized Negro in a Northern city sees in the billy clubs of the local police the billy clubs of the Alabama troopers. A shooting in Ohio becomes a shooting in Mississippi. The police dogs patrolling Philadelphia subways become the dogs of Birmingham. The inevitable excesses of some police in Northern centers become the local police policy *in toto*, identical with that of Shreveport, Louisiana. There is nowhere to turn for relief, so the Negro falls back upon a personal, blind flailing at the world in general, represented by anything or anybody in his path and reach. The fever catches and a riot is on. Sheriff Jim Clark of Selma and Governor George C. Wallace of Alabama are far away, but the ghetto slums with their rats and color bonus rents to absentee landlords, the unemployment, the swelling migration from the shrinking farms, the treadmill of *de facto* segregated schools with their dropouts and their dead-end job promises are all very much around the corner.

Thus, in the riot cities of the North in 1964, except New York, the disturbances were triggered by relatively minor episodes. Alleged traffic violations and the consequent disputes with police are commonplace on the American scene and scarcely a trigger for rioting. In the background, however, was the simmering conviction that the cards — local and national — are stacked against the Negro.

In Harlem in New York City, the action in the streets was stimulated by the killing of a fifteen-year-old Negro boy by an experienced police officer who, ironically, had won special commendation for his restraint in making arrests and in handling prisoners. The Harlem killing will be rehashed in years to come, but Negroes still cannot understand why it was necessary for an armed policeman, not in the rookie class, to slay a schoolboy of fifteen, not engaged in the commission of a felony. They are still angry over the fact that the Police Department refused to suspend the officer pending departmental trial, but permitted him to take an extended sick leave. This one small but significant act undoubtedly spurred the street rioting. It is entirely possible (although not certain) that had the officer been promptly suspended no riot would have ensued.

High among the underlying local causes of rioting in Northern cities is the

high unemployment rate among Negro citizens. As a nation we announce and deplore a national rate of between 4.5 and 6 per cent. The Negro unemployment rate is generally twice the white rate and in some areas as great as five times that rate. This condition is a tinder box. If we break down the Negro rate to the component comprised of teenage and young adults, the picture is frightening. In 1964, 23 per cent of the Negro teenage boys were unemployed as against 15.3 per cent for white boys. But 31 per cent of Negro teenage girls were unemployed as against 11 per cent for white girls — almost three times as great. Seventeen cities, with only one in the South, had Negro unemployment rates of 10 to 17 per cent. Eleven cities, with four in the South, had Negro rates of 8 to 9 per cent. Without including the cities with Negro rates from 5 to 7 per cent, we discover that there are twenty-three Northern cities with Negro unemployment high enough to qualify them for designation as potential trouble spots. If there are no jobs to preserve and no incentives to seek improvement and stability, why not stir a disturbance? Who can lose except those who have?

The degrading condition in ghetto housing, the exorbitant rents for the shelter offered and the cold and evasive indifference of absent owners help to build the conditions and the attitudes out of which riots grow. In my own city of New York in this winter of 1965, families by the score have gone without heat for weeks on end in the deadly cold of the season. Landlords who easily and regularly escape detection, identification and action by municipal authorities year after year collect their profits under impersonal corporate names.

If I were a tenant whose family suffered from lack of heat in winter, from lack of repairs and from other violations of the municipal housing code, and if I received the cold shoulder or the runaround from clerks or petty bureaucrats, I would be ripe for rioting. If we add to this the closing of the escape channels from the ghetto by the invocation of racial bars to the renting and financing of nonghetto housing, then violence is just below the surface of prosaic day-to-day activities.

But the violence and potential violence in Negro communities does not exist in a vacuum. It cannot be isolated from the turbulence which pervades much of American life. Historically, we are a nation in which violence, if not exalted, has been widely and traditionally tolerated. As W. J. Cash points out in his perceptive *Mind of the South*, violence in that region has been a more or less accepted way of life, the approved way of dealing with dissent, especially in the highly emotional and delicate area of race. Since dissent is constitutionally protected, the South early resorted to illegal suppression of this basic right through community approved, and often community organized, violence. The Negro has been the enduring and principal victim of the assault upon inalienable rights to "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness." In a society philosophically committed to the Judeo-Christian ethic of justice and universal brotherhood and politically dedicated to the principle of democratic equality, the only way to sustain the subjugation, enslavement and rejection of the Negro was through violence. Thus the evil of racism which besets the nation is rooted in the continuing denial of the Negro's humanity.

Recent outbreaks of violence deviate in no essential way from the American pattern. In themselves, they are not new. But a new element has been added, namely, the phenomenal development of electronic communications. Today what happens in one locality is instantly and graphically communicated to hundreds of other towns and cities—the beating of Negro demonstrators in Selma or Birmingham or Jackson, the looting of stores during a riot in Harlem or Philadelphia or Rochester. The spark ignited in city *A* is thus transmitted almost immediately to cities *B*, *C*, *D* and to others via radio and television. The actions, the principals and the scene are heard or viewed in millions of homes across the country as well as in the bars and poolrooms where the more volatile and responsive individuals are likely to be gathered. The impact, particularly of television, is electric and the result is more violence.

The rioting in Negro communities in the summer of 1964 was part and parcel of the national pattern of violence. But there were, as has been outlined above, the factors of resentment over national racial injustices, police brutality, ghetto housing and unemployment. To these must be added the lack of wholesome recreational facilities, the protected presence of criminal elements sponsored by out-of-ghetto residents and exploitation by unprincipled merchants and thieving finance companies.

But this was not all. There was also the hard verbal violence of soapbox orators damning the white man for the Negro's multiple woes. In light of the Negro's experience, the damnation, however rashly stated, seemed completely rational to the street corner audiences in the dismal black ghettos.

Although directly involving only a small minority of Negroes in any given community, the riots were a grassroots revolt against intolerable conditions. Neither the conditions nor the revolt were new. Both were as old as the country. There has never been a time in America when conditions were as good for Negroes as for white persons. Nor has there ever been a time when some Negroes were not in some form of revolt against this vile inequity. There was, from the beginning of the Negro's history in this country, resistance to the inferior status imposed upon the race. There were hundreds of insurrections, dating back to colonial times. There was constant flight from slavery. There was participation of free Negroes and fugitive slaves in the abolition movement. There were nearly 200,000 Negro troops in the Union forces during the Civil War.

Since emancipation this struggle has continued mostly through non-violent means and, since 1910, largely under the auspices of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. The NAACP, like the newer civil rights organizations and Negroes generally, repudiates violence as an instrument of change, not only on moral grounds but also because of the pragmatic realization that a disadvantage and impoverished ten per cent of the population cannot hope to win in violent conflict with an entrenched, powerful ninety per cent majority.

What gave last summer's rioting sharp significance was the revelation of the widening dichotomy of expectations within the Negro community. For trained young Negroes the rioting broke out in a period of rising expectations. Opportunities which a few short years ago were closed to Negroes, of whatever

training or background, are now opening up with such speed that it is sometimes difficult to find candidates with the required training to take advantage of the new opportunities. At the same time, the unskilled and untrained Negro is being pushed further into despair by the disappearance of jobs he once filled. Automation has struck a cruel blow at this large segment of Negro workers. Added to this is the stubborn refusal of many skilled craft unions to admit Negroes to their apprenticeship training programs or to membership in the unions which control employment in their respective fields. Without hope of a job, scores of thousands of young Negroes face a bleak future — a future of idleness, of public assistance and/or of delinquency and crime. Little wonder that many of them are attuned to hate messages.

The cycle is vicious and can only be broken by massive governmental intervention, not to cover up the symptoms, but to eradicate the economic sources, to provide quality education for all children, to assure the right to vote and to establish equality of opportunity in every aspect of American life. The cost of the purely beginning programs, although small in terms of the government's budget and in terms of the job to be done, put to rest for thoughtful persons the absurd contention that the Negro should "earn" his rights by correcting conditions himself within the Negro segment of the population. The allocation of government funds to only one New York City project is ten times the annual budget of the NAACP! This huge task is one to be met by government action, supplemented by private organizations including the great church bodies.

There must be action as well on the local levels, in government and in private organizations, looking to housing and employment discrimination and the ingrown practices and popular myths in connection with *de facto* school segregation. Increasing and more detailed and imaginative attention should be given by the churches and by neighborhood clubs, clinics and other institutions to guidance that will improve and strengthen Negro family life.

While the problems are deeply rooted, and few sudden or really effective solutions can be expected, the emergency is immediate and immediate steps must be taken. A prime requisite would appear to be a sense of urgency. When the east coast of Florida had to absorb anti-Castro refugees, we treated the situation with emergency measures. Negro Americans learned with not a little resentment that ten million dollars had been made available to aid Florida municipalities with special problems created by the influx. Special bureaus were set up. A wide range of counsel and actual assistance was offered. Bilingual instruction was provided for the public schools, sometimes necessitating two teachers in a room, one to speak Spanish and one English. Meanwhile the Negro school desegregation was proceeding lackadaisically in slow step with local mores. The children of Negro servicemen were being refused at nearby neighborhood schools despite the federal money made available to local school boards to care for just such an impact. We have tended to treat the Negro situation as one that will "take a long time." We still ask Negro citizens to "be patient." Several days ago in Alabama I was asked if demonstrations did not "harm" racial progress in areas where white people wanted to proceed at a more leisurely pace.

It seems obvious to students of the times that our country has reached the point where it cannot afford a leisurely pace in matters of racial justice. Africa is there, swiftly moving as a continent of free nations. Asia is there. Communist China is a reality not to be ignored. The Soviet Union is there, as are the Middle East and the European satellite nations. And electronics is there, along with the bomb. The picture of what happened in Selma, Alabama, U.S.A., on March 7 was before the eyes of the people of the world no later than March 8.

The puerile protestations of a Governor Wallace in defense of an indefensible system of inhumanity cannot be our policy as a nation, either at home or abroad. The foot-draggers can mar our posture before the world of freedom-oriented nations much more than riotous outbreaks against unspeakable intolerance.

We must not be silent. We must not be indifferent. We must not act with the brand of deliberate speed that has come lately into disrepute. We must act promptly and perceptively on a wide front. The alternative is unrest which at any point could become destructive street action.

Phases of President Johnson's antipoverty program and his aid-to-education bill are pointed directly at the Negro situation. Needless to say, Mr. Johnson's prodding to enactment of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which was asked of Congress by President Kennedy, has been of inestimable aid, as has his memorable and unprecedented message of March 15 on voting rights. His speeches and the action of the civil rights forces have been given body and point by the fact-finding work of the Civil Rights Commission, a distinguished member of which is Father Theodore M. Hesburgh, president of the University of Notre Dame.

The civil rights movement and the breaking away from the colonial rule taking place in Asia and Africa do not foster rioting. They quicken the desire for equality and freedom; they help build pride. The civil rights movement, particularly, channels the Negro's efforts and energies into the constructive task of seeking remedial laws and other reform activity within the framework of our governmental system to achieve what the Constitution indicates belongs to every American citizen.

As long as the civil rights movement is functioning, gaining adherents, building public opinion in favor of equality and making inroads against the wall of prejudice, the Negro is protected from a sense of hopelessness and frustration. It is the latter feeling which makes riots and lawlessness inevitable.

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- (2) establish a "Court of the Union," composed of the chief justice of the supreme court of each of the fifty states, which would have authority to review "any judgment of the Supreme Court relating to the rights reserved to the states or to the people by this Constitution;" and
- (3) take from the federal courts all jurisdiction over the apportionment of representation in state legislatures.

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