

The Fire This Time

by Jonathan Power

In 1960 one person in ten in the United States was non-white. Today it is one in nine. By the end of the decade it will be one in eight. Of persons under fourteen today it is one in seven. Of persons under the age of one it is one in six.

The American race problem is too large to be swept under the carpet. In fact it is of such a size as to influence the whole course of world politics: for if one thing is clear in this turbulent world it is that the major source of conflict of the latter half of this century will be the race/poverty problem and that America will, in one way or another, be at the hub of it.

Already in America the situation is being polarized to the extent where it is becoming more and more rare for white and black people to do anything together. This was my conclusion after two years in the U.S.: first in the liberal, nearly all white, peaceful university town of Madison, Wisconsin, and secondly in the West Side ghetto of Chicago where no other white people lived and where the crime rate was one of the highest in the country. And since leaving America twelve months ago I have seen the process of polarization accelerate at an astonishing rate. All my white and Negro friends agree that they see no alternative in sight to an escalating number of major explosions that will make Newark and Detroit look like tea-parties. There is in fact likely to be another Vietnam—inside America.

The proportion of Negroes who are prepared to take life as it is handed to them is fast diminishing. No longer are they thankful for small concessions. No longer are they prepared to fight in the way the establishment would like them to. Gone is the time when a Civil Rights leader like Booker Washington could (in the 1920s) give advice to his Negro youth: 'The white man (and his values) are right: we must *earn* equality, must come to deserve civil rights. And the way to become qualified and deserving is to become as much like the white man tells us he is as possible, literally and figuratively.'

America is now at the point where, as Charles Silberman wrote in his book *Crisis in Black and White*: 'Negroes cannot solve the problem of identity, therefore they cannot achieve their manhood, until they are in a position to make or influence the decisions that affect them, in a word until they have power.'

And it seems that for power to be transferred from resting almost one hundred per cent within the white domain to a point where the Negroes at least have a representative proportion of it, violence is

unavoidable. But to understand why this is so we must go back to the time of the birth and creation of the 'American Negro'.

Over three hundred years ago the Negro was extracted from Africa, stripped bare both physically and psychologically and placed in an alien white land. He occupied the most degraded of human conditions: that of a slave, a piece of property. For economic reasons the Negro family was broken up and scattered from auction block to auction block all over America. The Negro male was allowed no family and the Negro woman was systematically exploited and vilely degraded. The plantation system that employed most of the slaves implanted a subservience in the psyche of the Negro that made the majority of them to this day dependent upon the goodwill and paternalism of the white man.

By 1863, when slavery was abolished, the Negro had been stripped of his culture and left empty in a hostile white man's world. Moreover, a system had been erected that was self-perpetuating whatever the legal position of the Negro. This is the caste system.¹ The essence of the American system, as of all caste societies, is that there is no mobility out of one caste into another as there is out of a class. In America it has been maintained by a simple psychological mechanism, that of intimidation. It has included lynching, harassment, abuse of justice in the courts, the withdrawal of jobs and the loss of the vote. (Immediately after the Civil War the Negro had and exercised the vote. It was gradually taken away from him until by the end of the nineteenth century he was completely disenfranchized.) On top of this has been the constant pursuit of the theme that the Negro is unacceptable, dirty, lazy, lacking in ambition, possessed of ravaging sexual impulses and an urge to murder. This has been put out by newspapers, radio, housewives' gossip and from white pulpits. So successful has been this war of attrition that the Negroes have become convinced that they are inferior, that 'white is right'.

It is the light-skinned Negroes with straight hair who are allowed to move to the top of their caste. Of course the white people have suggested, and the Negroes have come to believe it, that such Negroes are better because they have 'white blood'. And until a year ago 'black' magazines pushed the straightening of hair and bleaching creams as major weapons in the Negroes' fight for social acceptability and psychological comfort.²

Sociological research has showed that in the earliest drawings,

¹See the classic study *Caste and Class in a Southern Town*, by the eminent social psychologist John Dollard (A Doubleday Anchor Book).

²The novelist Pauli Murray describes her childhood as a never-ending obsession with colour:

'The world resolved into colour and variation in colour. It pervaded the air I breathed. I learned it in hundreds of ways. I picked it up from the grown folks around me. I heard it in the house, on the playground, in the streets, everywhere.

Always the same tune, played like a broken record, robbing one of personal identity. . . . It was colour, colour, all the time . . . two shades lighter! Two shades darker! Dead white! Coal black! High yaller! Mariny! Good hair! Bad hair! Stringy hair! Nappy hair! Thin lips! Thick lips! Red lips! . . .'

stories and dreams of Negro children there appears the desire to be white and to reject their own colour. The children usually prefer white dolls and white friends; they assign less desirable roles and human traits to Negro dolls. One study has shown that Negro children portrayed in their drawings Negroes as small, incomplete people and whites as strong and powerful. In schools Negro children are often heard to shout at each other 'Black pig' and 'Dirty nigger'.

Later in life, when seeking jobs, the problem surfaces in the form of self-effacement and an absence of ambition. It is all too frequent that Negroes with ability, intelligence and talent do not aspire to higher levels because they fear the responsibility that will be needed to handle success.

The high rate of crimes of violence, broken homes and illegitimacy in Negro communities can be traced to the Negro's self-hatred and self-rejection. Black crime rates are particularly high for crimes involving aggression (and these acts are usually committed against other Negroes), and for escapist deviations such as gambling, drug addiction and alcoholism. 'The worst crime the white man has committed', said Malcolm X, 'has been to teach us to hate ourselves.'

The caste system, by effectively turning the Negro community in on its own problem instead of outward to face the source of the problem, has brought about this highly destructive situation.

Until 1955 the problem was effectively left untouched by Negro and white alike. Efforts such as Marcus Garvey's in the 1920s to organize a return to Africa and to dress up in flamboyant robes (meant as morale-boosters) did not have sufficient spark to set light to what had for so long lain wet and sodden.

Then, in 1955 one Negro woman decided she was no longer going to give up her seat on the bus to the white man who demanded it. This single act of defiance sparked a revolt that resulted in Martin Luther King becoming a national hero; that gave courage to Malcolm X and Stokely Carmichael; that made this summer's rebellions in Newark and Detroit possible.

Because what Rosa Parkes did was to refuse to act as a Negro. And she did this when, by one of those curious accidents of history (there can be no other explanation), there was a number of unusual people living in the same town—Montgomery, Alabama—who too were prepared at that moment in time to leave the rut and support her: Rev. Martin Luther King, Rev. Ralph Abernathy and others.

The struggle in America, eleven years later, has now reached an intensity where Dr King's Christian non-violent approach is being cast aside. As Rap Brown, SNICC's chairman, has said: 'When the honky (white man) asks what he can do for me I tell him that he can give me some guns.'³

³The Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee is the most militant of the Civil Rights organizations. It is essentially a movement of young people. Stokely Carmichael was its previous chairman.

Yet the whole exercise—Dr King, Malcolm X, Stokely Carmichael, Rap Brown—has been following a pattern sparked off by this one incident: the struggle to find dignity through one's own achievements, success through one's own efforts, manhood through one's own prowess, and finally freedom through the liberating and purifying force of violence against the oppressor. The very things that are a negation of the inheritance of caste and slavery.

'Black Power', although one of the most recent slogans to enter the political scene, is what sums up the ambition of all these leaders: power over their own political representatives, their own economic potential and their own social welfare so that no longer will men seek a candyfloss freedom through straightened hair, white prostitutes and flashy cars.

At last, then, the wheels have been set in motion to overturn two hundred years of slavery and a hundred years of caste segregation. Martin Luther King who gave it its initial leadership still feels his methods can bring it to fruition. Others, while acknowledging him as their most important leader and the man who held it all together in its vital early stages, believe now that other methods must take over.

Before we look at these two schools of thought in more detail, however, we must give a brief summary of the Negro situation today after eleven years of struggle in the Freedom Movement.

Very simply, things have got worse not better. Although the last eleven years have seen the appointing of a Negro cabinet minister, a Negro member of the Supreme Court, a Negro member of the Federal Reserve Bank, a Negro General, a Negro bishop, Negro ambassadors and so forth, the fact is that behind the advancement of the few the decline of the majority has continued.⁴

It is as Martin Luther King observed not very long ago:

'Of all the good things in life the Negro has approximately one half those of whites, of the bad he has twice those of whites. Thus half of all Negroes live in substandard housing and Negroes have half the income of whites. When we turn to the negative experiences of life the Negro has a double share. There are twice as many unemployed, the infant mortality rate is double that of whites. There are twice as many Negroes in combat in Vietnam at the beginning of 1967 and twice as many Negro soldiers died in action (20.6 per cent) in proportion to their numbers in the population as whites.'

⁴From 1952 to 1963 (the latest date for statistical evidence) the median income of Negro families compared to white dropped from 57 per cent to 53 per cent. Since 1947 the number of white families living in poverty has decreased 27 per cent while the number of poor non-white families decreased only 3 per cent. The infant mortality rate in 1940 was 70 per cent greater for Negroes than whites. Twenty-two years later it was 90 per cent greater. The number of segregated schools in New York (i.e. over 85 per cent coloured) has doubled in the last five years. There is more residential segregation of the races now than in 1940. Slum housing, the central problem of the vast city ghettos, remains untouched by all the civil rights legislation and poverty programmes.

The 1964 Civil Rights Act that protected Negroes from discrimination in public places, employment and education, the 1966 Act that gave them the vote and the Poverty Programme, although bringing significant changes, have not been enforced rigorously enough nor had enough funds at their disposal to act as a sufficient brake on a problem that has such downhill momentum. At the most one can say the problem is getting worse less fast than it otherwise would have done.

It is within this context that the next step forward has to be taken. Martin Luther King claims in support of the non-violent road that so far this method has been more successful than any other way. Secondly, that violence even on pragmatic grounds is ruled out because the Negro cannot challenge the might of America's entrenched power any more than the Hungarians could take on Russia's tanks.

It is true that before Dr King began there was very little militant action. The Negroes were loosely organized, impotent and afraid. Now a sizeable number of them are prepared to sacrifice themselves, their families, even America, in order to free their people. Also there is the hard reality that the response to the violence in the ghetto has so far produced only recriminations, not programmes.

Dr King has described the psychological importance of his non-violent campaigns:

'The Negro had to win and to vindicate his dignity in order to merit and enjoy his self-esteem. He had to let the white man know that the picture of him as a clown—irresponsible, resigned and believing in his own inferiority—was a stereotype with no validity. Non-violence was grasped by the Negro masses because it embodied the dignity of struggle, of moral conviction and self-sacrifice. The Negro was able to face his adversary, to concede him a physical advantage and to defeat him because the superior force of the oppressor had become powerless.'

And as he wrote after Birmingham:

'The full dimension of victory can be found only by comprehending the change within the minds of millions of Negroes. From the depths in which the spirit of freedom was imprisoned, an impulse for liberty burst through.'

Stokely Carmichael would never have had the courage to say what he says now in the climate of eleven years ago. Negro eyes have, as a result of the Freedom Movement, been opened to the full dimension of the situation. Dr King now sees the time ripe and the foundations laid for a nation-wide campaign of militant non-violence that will choke the major cities of America to a stop if his demands are not met.

Yet Dr King, having opened this spirit of freedom, is faced with the fact that many of his former followers are concluding that non-violence is not a powerful enough weapon for this second haul: the one that goes beyond the 'impulse for liberty' to a seizure of power.

This second school of thought seems now to be gathering more adherents than the first one, at least among the youth in the urban slums of the north. They say they are refusing the Christian way: they are opting for the American way. 'Violence is as American as apple pie', declared Rap Brown during the Detroit uprising. Negroes remember being taught in school to honour white Patrick Henry who saw the need for a violent struggle to gain America's independence and who said: 'Give me liberty or give me death.'

A disillusionment has set in among the young Negroes because, as Stokely Carmichael has voiced, 'We have found you out, you are not nice guys'. They do not believe any more that white America has a conscience to be touched, a prerequisite for the philosophy of non-violence. If they had, things would not be getting worse. They believe that to seek integration means that this will confirm the Negro in his inherited conviction that the white race has still got something to offer *him*. Rather they see the white race as a decadent society, a decadence born in part of the conflict between what white Americans preach and what they practise. There is little point, they feel, in being part of this. Better to destroy it, if that is what is needed to get anywhere. Non-violence, as Dr King has said, is a 'weapon that cuts without wounding'. But now this sizeable element in the Negro population wants to cut and wound. They feel that in order to assert their manhood they should for once in their history act out their real feelings.

They reject Dr King's argument that a violent solution is impossible in the face of white America's might on the grounds that if violence within America is coordinated with Anti-American violence from without they can succeed. If Vietnams can be opened up in Southern Africa and Latin America, three international wars of liberation will make it impossible for America to hold down any insurrection at home, and vice versa. Stokely Carmichael is at present engaged in this task of building a broader international base for taking on America.

It was more or less this policy that was steered through the New Left convention in Chicago in September—a meeting that started by the 200-strong Black Power caucus being given half of the votes in the 2,100 assembly.

In a way it seems useless to say more or to make a comment on this situation. When human relations are at the low ebb they are in America, when white America sees that violence is necessary to preserve what it considers valuable abroad, it is obvious that the ordinary Negro in the street will see little point in any argument but the one for violence in defending the interests of himself, his family and people.

And yet there is one argument left for non-violence. It originates in the thinking of Rev. James Bevel, the closest aide and strategist of Dr King: the man who directed the Birmingham, Selma and

Chicago campaigns and who now heads the group of religious and secular organizations that coordinate the opposition to America's involvement in Vietnam.

It is this: America is paranoid. If pushed by such drastic surgery as the SNICC militants advocate, she would rather destroy the whole world than make the accommodation necessary to give Negroes their power, Vietnamese their independence, Africa their continent and the peasants of Latin America their wealth.

Non-violence, he argues, must be used. This, Bevel says, is both the moral ideal and the pragmatic reality. 'It is us that must understand them', wrote James Baldwin, and Bevel agrees.

The Negro has to supply the virtue to untie the white man's problem. And this will give the Negro the moral strength and the tested supremacy to establish Black Power, the ultimate goal both non-violent and violent militants agree on.

It is an argument put forward from a tightrope. But this does not belie the depth of its soundness.

CONSCIENCE AND COLOUR

is the title of a leaflet put out by the

CATHOLIC INSTITUTE FOR INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS (CIIR)

38 King Street, London, W.C.2

Published at 6d. a single copy, 10s. for 25 copies and £1 15s. for 100 copies, it summarizes the numbers of immigrants, the reasons for their coming, the respective attitudes of immigrant and host communities, the role and teaching of the Church, the possibilities of local and individual action. It also gives a list of national organizations which can be approached for more detailed advice at the local level or for addresses of local groups through which individuals or Catholic organizations can work.