

# BEYOND THE LOS ANGELES RIOTS

*Although the Watts area of Los Angeles, the scene last summer of some of the worst racial riots in U.S. history, has returned to "normal," those who have given the closest thought to the meaning of the rioting are inclined to agree that it represented not so much an isolated incident as a general warning. If the interpretation is correct, exactly what did Watts foreshadow? And how can other catastrophes, both North and South, be averted? Those questions are examined in the following two articles by the Nobel Prize-winning civil rights leader Martin Luther King and by Murray L. Schwartz, professor of law at UCLA.*

## 1. Next Stop: The North

By MARTIN LUTHER KING

THE FLAMES OF WATTS illuminated more than the western sky; they cast light on the imperfections in the civil rights movement and the tragic shallowness of white racial policy in the explosive ghettos.

Ten years ago in Montgomery, Alabama, seething resentment caused a total Negro community to unite to level a powerful system of injustice. The nation and the world were electrified by their new method of struggle—mass, nonviolent direct action. In the succeeding years the power of this method shook the nation from its somnolence and complacency, changed embedded customs, wrote historic legislation, and gave a whole generation vibrant ideals. In the decade the arena widened, the conflict intensified, and the stakes rose in importance, yet the method was undeviatingly nonviolent.

Yet on the tenth anniversary of non-violence as a theory of social change, with its success acknowledged and applauded around the world, a segment of a Negro community united to protest injustice, but this time by means of violence.

The paradox is striking, but it can be understood: our movement has been essentially regional, not national—the confrontation of opposing forces met in climactic engagements only in the South. The issues and their solution were similarly regional and the changes affected only the areas of combat.

It is in the South that Negroes in this past decade experienced the birth of human dignity—eating in restaurants, studying in schools, traveling in public conveyances side by side with whites for

the first time in a century. Every day Southern Negroes perceive, and are reminded of, the fruits of their struggle. The changes are not only dramatic but are cumulative and dynamic, moving constantly toward broader application.

In the North, on the other hand, the Negro's repellent slum life was altered not for the better but for the worse. Oppression in the ghettos intensified. To the homes of ten years ago, squalid then, were added ten years of decay. School segregation did not abate but increased. Above all, unemployment for Negroes swelled and remained unaffected by general economic expansion. As the nation, Negro and white, trembled with outrage at police brutality in the South, police misconduct in the North was rationalized, tolerated, and usually denied.

The Northern ghetto dweller lived in a schizophrenic social milieu. He supported and derived pride from Southern struggles and accomplishment. Yet the civil rights revolution appeared to be draining energy from the North, energy that flowed south to transform life there while stagnation blanketed Northern Negro communities. It was a decade of role reversal. The North, heretofore vital, atrophied, and the traditionally passive South burst with dynamic vibrancy.

If the struggle had been on a national front, the changes in the North would have been kaleidoscopic. To match the South in relative change, the North in the decade should have been well on its way to the dissolution of ghettos; unemployment due to discrimination should have disappeared; tensions with the police should have been modified or eradicated by long-tested institutions,

and interracial relationships should have been so commonplace that they should no longer have attracted comment or attention. In short, the North needed and was ready for profound progress and, relatively, the changes should have far surpassed those in the South. In fact, however, the North, at best, stood still as the South caught up.

Civil rights leaders had long thought that the North would benefit derivatively from the Southern struggle. They assumed that without massive upheavals certain systematic changes were inevitable as the whole nation re-examined and searched its conscience. This was a miscalculation. It was founded on the belief that opposition in the North was not intransigent; that it was flexible and was, if not fully, at least partially hospitable to corrective influences. We forgot what we knew daily in the South—freedom is not given, it is won by struggle.

IN my travels in the North I was increasingly becoming disillusioned with the power structures there. I encountered the tragic and stubborn fact that in virtually no major city was there a mayor possessing statesmanship, understanding, or even strong compassion on the civil rights question. Many of them sat on platforms with all the imposing regalia of office to welcome me to their cities, and showered praise on the heroism of Southern Negroes. Yet when the issues were joined concerning local conditions only the language was polite; the rejection was firm and unequivocal. All my experience indicated that hope of voluntary understanding was chimerical; there was blindness, obtuseness, and rigidity that would only be altered by a dynamic movement. Ironically, Mayor Ivar Allen of Atlanta and many other Southern public officials, with all their conflicts, came much further in human

relations than mayors of the major Northern cities. Many political leaders in the South had only yesterday been implacable segregationists but found the inner resources to change their convictions. More than that, they had the courage and integrity to speak bluntly to their constituents and furnished the leadership for them to make necessary constructive changes.

**A**NOTHER inescapable contrast is in the role of national and local governments. The national administrations increasingly became more and more responsive to pressures from the South. As our movement, pursuing techniques of creative nonviolence, encountered savage and brutal responses, all branches of the federal government moved to face the challenge with increasing responsibility and firmness. Beyond this, a deeper human understanding of underlying causes became clearer to them and a true sense of identity and alliance emerged. In the North, in marked contrast, municipal and state laws were enacted without passion or evident conviction. Feeble and anemic enforcement amid political machinations made them all but ineffectual. It was worse than tokenism; it was trifling with life-and-death issues with unfeeling clumsiness and opportunism.

What was the culpability of Negro leaders? Southern Negro leaders remained substantially regional forces al-

though inspirationally they emerged as national figures. Further, they projected solutions principally for Southern conditions in framing proposals for national legislation. Finally, they took more from the North in support than they put into it. They found themselves overwhelmed with the responsibility of a movement of revolutionary dimensions and could not assume national command even had their leadership been desired. Northern Negro leaders were content to support the South and many did so devotedly. Others tended to coast with gradualism because the issues being sought in the South had long been solved in the North.

The key error of both Negro and white leadership was in expecting the ghettos to stand still and in underestimating the deterioration that increasingly embittered its life.

The white population is a stranger to the ghetto. Negroes are not only hemmed in in it; whites are shut out of it.

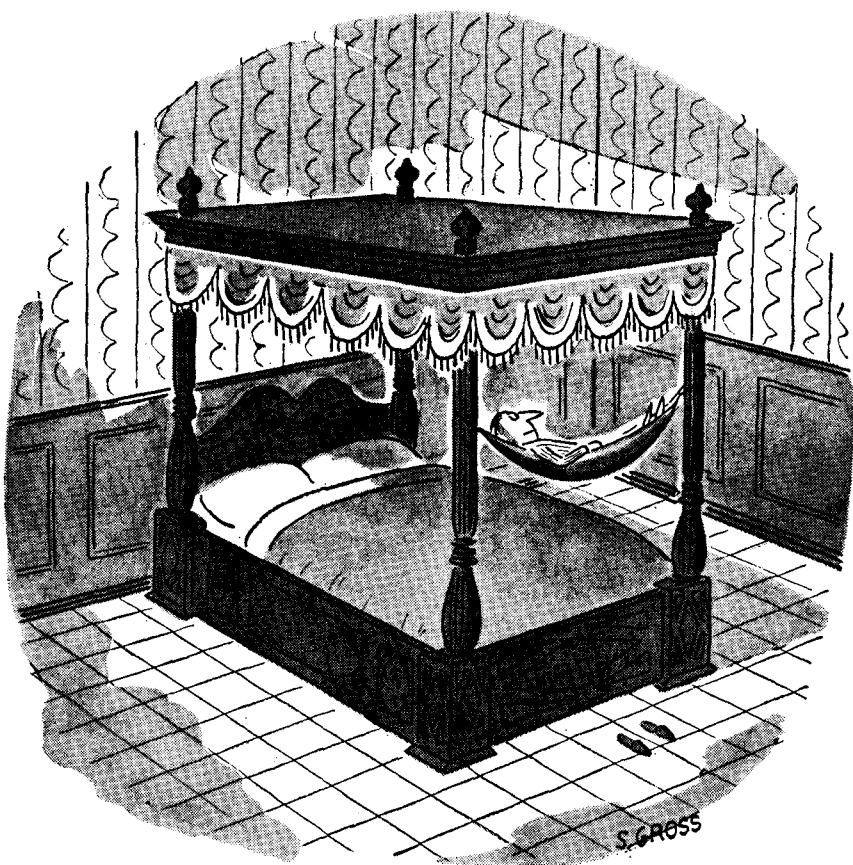
Unemployment and pitiful wages are at the bottom of ghetto misery. Life-sapping poverty roots Negroes in the decayed tenements where rats and filth become inseparable parts of the structures. But dirt alone could not crush a people, especially those who are so widely employed in disposing of it. Unemployment and insecure employment more effectively undermine family life. Not only are the Negroes in general the first to be cast into the jobless army, but the Negro male precedes his wife in un-

employment. As a consequence, he lives in a matriarchal society within the larger culture, which is patriarchal. The cruellest blow to his integrity as a man are laws which deprive a family of Aid to Dependent Children support if a male resides in the home. He is then forced to abandon his family so that they may survive. He is coerced into irresponsibility by his responsible love for his family. But even ensuring food on the table is insufficient to secure a constructive life for the children. They are herded into ghetto schools and pushed through grades of schooling without learning. Their after-school life is spent in neglected, filthy streets that abound in open crime. The most grievous charge against municipal police is not brutality, though it exists. Permissive crime in ghettos is the nightmare of the slum family. Permissive crime is the name for the organized crime that flourishes in the ghetto—designed, directed, and cultivated by white national crime syndicates operating numbers, narcotics, and prostitution rackets freely in the protected sanctuaries of the ghettos. Because no one, including the police, cares particularly about ghetto crime, it pervades every area of life. The Negro child who learns too little about books in his pathetic schools, learns too much about crime in the streets around him. Even when he and his family resist its corruption, its presence is a source of fear and of moral debilitation.

Against this caricature of the American standard of living is the immediate proximity of the affluent society. In the South there is something of shared poverty, Negro and white. In the North, white existence, only steps away, glitters with conspicuous consumption. Even television becomes incendiary when it beams pictures of affluent homes and multitudinous consumer products to an aching poor, living in wretched hovels.

In these terms Los Angeles could have expected riots because it is the luminous symbol of luxurious living for whites. Watts is closer to it, and yet farther from it, than any other Negro community in the country. The looting in Watts was a form of social protest very common through the ages as a dramatic and destructive gesture of the poor toward symbols of their needs.

**L**OS Angeles could have expected the holocaust when its officials tied up federal aid in political manipulation; when the rate of Negro unemployment soared above the depression levels of the Thirties; when the population density of Watts became the worst in the nation. Yet even these tormenting physical conditions are less than the full story. California in 1964 repealed its law forbidding racial discrimination in housing. It was the first major state in the country





to take away gains Negroes had won at a time when progress was visible and substantial elsewhere, and especially in the South. California by this callous act voted for ghettos. The atrociousness of some deeds may be concealed by legal ritual, but their destructiveness is felt with bitter force by its victims. Victor Hugo understood this when he said, "If a soul is left in darkness, sins will be committed. The guilty one is not he who commits the sin, but he who causes the darkness."

Out of these many causes the Negro freedom movement will be altering its course in the period to come. Conditions in the North will come into focus and sharpened conflict will unfold.

The insistent question is whether that movement will be violent or nonviolent. It cannot be taken for granted that Negroes will adhere to nonviolence under any conditions. When there is rock-like intransigence or sophisticated manipulation that mocks the empty-handed petitioner, rage replaces reason. Nonviolence is a powerful demand for reason and justice. If it is rudely rebuked it is not transformed into resignation and passivity. Southern segregationists in many places yielded to it because they realized alternatives could be more destructive. Northern white leadership has relied too much on tokens, substitutes, and Negro patience. The end of this road is clearly in sight. The cohesive, potentially explosive Negro community in the North has a short fuse and a long train of abuses. Those who argue that it is hazardous to give warnings, lest the expression of apprehension lead to violence, are in error. Violence has already been practiced too often, and always because remedies were postponed. It is now the task of responsible people to indicate where and why spontaneous combustion is accumulating.

The Southern Negro created mass nonviolent direct action and made history with it and will go on to far greater gains, holding it firmly as his peaceful sword.

The North, on the other hand, has for several years been spontaneously testing violence. There are many who are arguing that positive gains have followed riots. They hold that in the complexities or urban life the tricks of sophisticated segregation cannot be defeated except by the power of violence. They are so close to white society but so alienated from it and consumed with revulsion toward its hypocrisies that they are disinterested in integration. Black nationalism is more fitted to their angry mood.

I do not believe this thinking will dominate the movement, however. I think it will fail, not because Northern Negroes will settle for a no-win tranquillity and calm; it will fail because

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## 2. A Hard Lesson for the Law

By MURRAY L. SCHWARTZ

**W**HATEVER Los Angeles does, it does in a big way. Inevitably, a Los Angeles riot had to be a major catastrophe. Whether it was the greatest such holocaust in American history may be debatable; that it was one of the most serious is not. A long weekend of deliberate destruction and looting, resulting in the loss of over thirty lives and millions of dollars of property damage, must be included in the annals of major American disasters.

Since the riots, Los Angeles has remained true to form. The number of explanations of the causes staggers the mind: hot weather; anomie; Sargent Shriver and the War Against Poverty; the absence of Governor Brown; the presence of Lieutenant Governor Anderson; the departure of Mayor Yorty to make a speech shortly after the trouble started; the timing of the arrival of the National Guard; the California State Highway Patrol's method of arresting the allegedly drunken driver (the event that triggered the explosion); the timing of relief checks; exploitation by white storekeepers; Proposition Fourteen (a recent amendment to the California Constitution, adopted by popular initiative, which not only wiped off the books all existing fair-housing legislation but permanently disenabled the legislature from enacting such laws); the migration of Southern Negroes to Los Angeles and their intense frustration; police brutality.

The number of investigations and inquiries into the riots has proliferated: the blue-ribbon commission appointed by the Governor and headed by former CIA Director John J. McCone; a federal team of experts headed by Deputy Attorney General Ramsey Clark; an inquiry by the City Council (which not too long before had been expending what appeared to be most of its time and effort in a battle with the Mayor over whether Los Angeles residents should separate trash, garbage, and metal for refuse collection); university-sponsored surveys; a host of private volunteers.

Watts and its Los Angeles counter-

parts are quiet now; they appear to have returned to their pre-riot condition. This is one marked by a high crime rate, high unemployment, and the other customary characteristics of the Northern Negro, Puerto Rican, or Mexican ghetto. It is a condition that was so potentially explosive that arrangements had previously been worked out between city officials and Governor Brown to call out the National Guard in the event of precisely the kind of trouble that did occur.

Watts, however, may not be the typical example of a Negro poverty-ridden area. It bears little resemblance to the Southern Negro community. The residents of Watts vote and attend public school. The state has comprehensive fair employment laws. Watts is also unlike the typical Northern ghetto. The streets are relatively wide; the houses are single or duplex, there are few, if any, large apartment buildings. The shock of a complacent Los Angeles at the intensity of the eruption was equalled by its shock that the eruption took place at all.

**B**ECAUSE of this uniqueness, Watts may be more or less potentially explosive than other ghettos. But surely this is a matter of degree and not of kind. And, just as surely, if the problems exemplified by Watts cannot be solved, we are in for a very bad time.

It is possible, of course, that the violence of Watts was the work of a few who do not represent the community, but this seems unlikely. The participation at the time seemed too general and too enthusiastic. The subsequent reaction of the Watts community, as far as it can be ascertained, does not seem to be one of remorse or resentment against the rioters—which would be expected if the rioters had been unrepresentative. The community's reaction is not like that of the sufferer from the morning-after hangover. It is more like the reaction of a large segment of the American Jewish community during the days of the Irgun and the Stern gang in Palestine. One usual response of that community to the armed resistance and acts of terrorism against the British occupying forces was: "What those fellows did was pretty awful, but . . ." This, too, appears to be the case in Watts—with some question whether a majority in Watts would agree that what was done was pretty awful. And to attribute the riots to the arrest of one or two individuals by the State Highway Patrol is like attributing World War I to the assassination of the Archduke Ferdinand. Catalyst it may have been; cause it was not.

The riots epitomized by Watts represent the ultimate in law defiance. They

