

Where Do We Go From Here?
Class or Community?

Martin Luther King, Jr.

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Chapter I

WHERE ARE WE?

On August 6, 1965, the President's Room of the Capitol could scarcely hold the multitude of white and Negro leaders crowding it. President Lyndon Johnson's high spirits were marked as he circulated among the many guests whom he had invited to witness an event he confidently felt to be historic, the signing of the 1965 Voting Rights Act. The legislation was designed to put the ballot effectively into Negro hands in the South after a century of denial by terror and evasion.

The bill that lay on the polished mahogany desk was born in violence in Selma, Alabama, where a stubborn sheriff handling Negroes in the Southern tradition had stumbled against the future. During a nonviolent demonstration for voting rights, the sheriff had directed his men in tear-gassing and beating the marchers to the ground. The nation had seen and heard, and exploded in indignation. In protest, Negroes and whites marched fifty miles through Alabama, and arrived at the state capital of Montgomery in a demonstration fifty thousand strong. President Johnson, describing Selma as a modern Concord, addressed a joint session of Congress before a television audience of millions. He pledged that "We

shall overcome," and declared that the national government must by law insure to every Negro his full rights as a citizen. The Voting Rights Bill of 1965 was the result. In signing the measure, the President announced that "Today is a triumph for freedom as huge as any victory that's ever been won on any battlefield . . . today we strike away the last major shackle of . . . fierce and ancient bonds."

One year later, some of the people who had been brutalized in Selma and who were present at the Capitol ceremonies were leading marchers in the suburbs of Chicago amid a rain of rocks and bottles, among burning automobiles, to the thunder of jeering thousands, many of them waving Nazi flags.

A year later, some of the Negro leaders who had been present in Selma and at the Capitol ceremonies no longer held office in their organizations. They had been discarded to symbolize a radical change of tactics.

A year later, the white backlash had become an emotional electoral issue in California, Maryland and elsewhere. In several Southern states men long regarded as political clowns had become governors or only narrowly missed election, their magic achieved with a witches' brew of bigotry, prejudice, half-truths and whole lies.

During the year, white and Negro civil rights workers had been murdered in several Southern communities. The swift and easy acquittals that followed for the accused had shocked much of the nation but sent a wave of unabashed triumph through Southern segregationist circles. Many of us wept at the funeral services for the dead and for democracy.

During the year, in several Northern and Western cities, most tragically in Watts, young Negroes had exploded in violence. In an irrational burst of rage they had sought to say something, but the flames had blackened both themselves and their oppressors.

A year later, *Ramparts* magazine was asserting, "After

more than a decade of the Civil Rights Movement the black American in Harlem, Haynesville, Baltimore and Bogaloussa is worse off today than he was ten years ago . . . the Movement's leaders know it and it is the source of their despair. . . . The Movement is in despair because it has been forced to recognize the Negro revolution as a myth."

Had Negroes fumbled the opportunities described by the President? Was the movement in despair? Why was widespread sympathy with the Negro revolution abruptly submerged in indifference in some quarters or banished by outright hostility in others? Why was there ideological disarray?

A simple explanation holds that Negroes rioted in Watts, the voice of Black Power was heard through the land and the white backlash was born; the public became infuriated and sympathy evaporated. This pat explanation founders, however, on the hard fact that the change in mood had preceded Watts and the Black Power slogan. Moreover, the white backlash had always existed underneath and sometimes on the surface of American life. No, the answers are both more complex and, for the long run, less pessimistic.

With Selma and the Voting Rights Act one phase of development in the civil rights revolution came to an end. A new phase opened, but few observers realized it or were prepared for its implications. For the vast majority of white Americans, the past decade—the first phase—had been a struggle to treat the Negro with a degree of decency, not of equality. White America was ready to demand that the Negro should be spared the lash of brutality and coarse degradation, but it had never been truly committed to helping him out of poverty, exploitation or all forms of discrimination. The outraged white citizen had been sincere when he snatched the whips from the Southern sheriffs and forbade them more cruelties. But when this was to a degree accomplished, the emotions that had momentarily inflamed him melted away.

White Americans left the Negro on the ground and in devastating numbers walked off with the aggressor. It appeared that the white segregationist and the ordinary white citizen had more in common with one another than either had with the Negro.

When Negroes looked for the second phase, the realization of equality, they found that many of their white allies had quietly disappeared. The Negroes of America had taken the President, the press and the pulpit at their word when they spoke in broad terms of freedom and justice. But the absence of brutality and unregenerate evil is not the presence of justice. To stay murder is not the same thing as to ordain brotherhood. The word was broken, and the free-running expectations of the Negro crashed into the stone walls of white resistance. The result was havoc. Negroes felt cheated, especially in the North, while many whites felt that the Negroes had gained so much it was virtually impudent and greedy to ask for more so soon.

The paths of Negro-white unity that had been converging crossed at Selma, and like a giant X began to diverge. Up to Selma there had been unity to eliminate barbaric conduct. Beyond it the unity had to be based on the fulfillment of equality, and in the absence of agreement the paths began inexorably to move apart.

II

Why is equality so assiduously avoided? Why does white America delude itself, and how does it rationalize the evil it retains?

The majority of white Americans consider themselves sincerely committed to justice for the Negro. They believe that American society is essentially hospitable to fair play and to steady growth toward a middle-class Utopia em-

bodying racial harmony. But unfortunately this is a fantasy of self-deception and comfortable vanity. Overwhelmingly America is still struggling with irresolution and contradictions. It has been sincere and even ardent in welcoming some change. But too quickly apathy and disinterest rise to the surface when the next logical steps are to be taken. Laws are passed in a crisis mood after a Birmingham or a Selma, but no substantial fervor survives the formal signing of legislation. The recording of the law in itself is treated as the reality of the reform.

This limited degree of concern is a reflection of an inner conflict which measures cautiously the impact of any change on the status quo. As the nation passes from opposing extremist behavior to the deeper and more pervasive elements of equality, white America reaffirms its bonds to the status quo. It had contemplated comfortably hugging the shoreline but now fears that the winds of change are blowing it out to sea.

The practical cost of change for the nation up to this point has been cheap. The limited reforms have been obtained at bargain rates. There are no expenses, and no taxes are required, for Negroes to share lunch counters, libraries, parks, hotels and other facilities with whites. Even the psychological adjustment is far from formidable. Having exaggerated the emotional difficulties for decades, when demands for new conduct became inescapable, white Southerners may have trembled under the strain but they did not collapse.

Even the more significant changes involved in voter registration required neither large monetary nor psychological sacrifice. Spectacular and turbulent events that dramatized the demand created an erroneous impression that a heavy burden was involved.

The real cost lies ahead. The stiffening of white resistance is a recognition of that fact. The discount education given

Negroes will in the future have to be purchased at full price if quality education is to be realized. Jobs are harder and costlier to create than voting rolls. The eradication of slums housing millions is complex far beyond integrating buses and lunch counters.

The Assistant Director of the Office of Economic Opportunity, Hyman Bookbinder, in a frank statement on December 29, 1966, declared that the long-range costs of adequately implementing programs to fight poverty, ignorance and slums will reach one trillion dollars. He was not awed or dismayed by this prospect but instead pointed out that the growth of the gross national product during the same period makes this expenditure comfortably possible. It is, he said, as simple as this: "The poor can stop being poor if the rich are willing to become even richer at a slower rate." Furthermore, he predicted that unless a "substantial sacrifice is made by the American people," the nation can expect further deterioration of the cities, increased antagonisms between races and continued disorders in the streets. He asserted that people are not informed enough to give adequate support to anti-poverty programs, and he leveled a share of the blame at the government because it "must do more to get people to understand the size of the problem."

Let us take a look at the size of the problem through the lens of the Negro's status in 1967. When the Constitution was written, a strange formula to determine taxes and representation declared that the Negro was 60 percent of a person.^{1*} Today another curious formula seems to declare he is 50 percent of a person. Of the good things in life he 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

* Superior numbers refer to Notes, page 203.

Negro has a double share. There are twice as many unemployed. The rate of infant mortality (widely accepted as an accurate index of general health) among Negroes is double that of whites.² The equation pursues Negroes even into war. There were twice as many Negroes as whites in combat in Vietnam at the beginning of 1967, and twice as many Negro soldiers died in action (20.6 percent) in proportion to their numbers in the population.³

In other spheres the figures are equally alarming. In elementary schools Negroes lag one to three years behind whites, and their segregated schools receive substantially less money per student than do the white schools. One-twentieth as many Negroes as whites attend college, and half of these are in ill-equipped Southern institutions.⁴

Of employed Negroes, 75 percent hold menial jobs.⁵ Depressed living standards for Negroes are not simply the consequence of neglect. Nor can they be explained by the myth of the Negro's innate incapacities, or by the more sophisticated rationalization of his acquired infirmities (family disorganization, poor education, etc.). They are a structural part of the economic system in the United States. Certain industries and enterprises are based upon a supply of low-paid, under-skilled and immobile nonwhite labor. Hand assembly factories, hospitals, service industries, housework, agricultural operations using itinerant labor would suffer economic trauma, if not disaster, with a rise in wage scales.

Economic discrimination is especially deeply rooted in the South. In industry after industry there is a significant differential in wage scales between North and South. The lower scale in the South is directly a consequence of cheap Negro labor (which ironically not only deprives the Negro but by its presence drives down the wages of the white worker). The new South, while undergoing certain marked changes as a result of industrialization, is adapting the forms of discrimina-

tion that keep the Negro in a subordinate role and hold his wage scales close to the bottom.

The personal torment of discrimination cannot be measured on a numerical scale, but the grim evidence of its hold on white Americans is revealed in polls that indicate that 88 percent of them would object if their teen-age child dated a Negro. Almost 80 percent would mind it if a close friend or relative married a Negro, and 50 percent would not want a Negro as a neighbor.⁶

These brief facts disclose the magnitude of the gap between existing realities and the goal of equality. Yet they would be less disturbing if it were not for a greater difficulty. There is not even a common language when the term "equality" is used. Negro and white have a fundamentally different definition.

Negroes have proceeded from a premise that equality means what it says, and they have taken white Americans at their word when they talked of it as an objective. But most whites in America in 1967, including many persons of goodwill, proceed from a premise that equality is a loose expression for improvement. White America is not even psychologically organized to close the gap—essentially it seeks only to make it less painful and less obvious but in most respects to retain it. Most of the abrasions between Negroes and white liberals arise from this fact.

White America is uneasy with injustice and for ten years it believed it was righting wrongs. The struggles were often bravely fought by fine people. The conscience of man flamed high in hours of peril. The days can never be forgotten when the brutalities at Selma caused thousands all over the land to rush to our side, heedless of danger and of differences in race, class and religion.

After the march to Montgomery, there was a delay at the airport and several thousand demonstrators waited more than

five hours, crowding together on the seats, the floors and the stairways of the terminal building. As I stood with them and saw white and Negro, nuns and priests, ministers and rabbis, labor organizers, lawyers, doctors, housemaids and shopworkers brimming with vitality and enjoying a rare comradeship, I knew I was seeing a microcosm of the mankind of the future in this moment of luminous and genuine brotherhood.

But these were the best of America, not all of America. Elsewhere the commitment was shallower. Conscience burned only dimly, and when atrocious behavior was curbed, the spirit settled easily into well-padded pockets of complacency. Justice at the deepest level had but few stalwart champions.

A good many observers have remarked that if equality could come at once the Negro would not be ready for it. I submit that the white American is even more unprepared.

The Negro on a mass scale is working vigorously to overcome his deficiencies and his maladjustments. Wherever there are job-training programs Negroes are crowding them. Those who are employed are revealing an eagerness for advancement never before so widespread and persistent. In the average Negro home a new appreciation of culture is manifest. The circulation of periodicals and books written for Negroes is now in the multimillions while a decade ago it was scarcely past one hundred thousand. In the schools more Negro students are demanding courses that lead to college and beyond, refusing to settle for the crude vocational training that limited so many of them in the past.

Whites, it must frankly be said, are not putting in a similar mass effort to re-educate themselves out of their racial ignorance. It is an aspect of their sense of superiority that the white people of America believe they have so little to learn. The reality of substantial investment to assist Negroes into the twentieth century, adjusting to Negro neighbors and

genuine school integration, is still a nightmare for all too many white Americans.

White America would have liked to believe that in the past ten years a mechanism had somehow been created that needed only orderly and smooth tending for the painless accomplishment of change. Yet this is precisely what has not been achieved. Every civil rights law is still substantially more dishonored than honored. School desegregation is still 90 percent unimplemented across the land; the free exercise of the franchise is the exception rather than the rule in the South; open-occupancy laws theoretically apply to population centers embracing tens of millions, but grim ghettos contradict the fine language of the legislation. Despite the mandates of law, equal employment still remains a distant dream.

The legal structures have in practice proved to be neither structures nor law. The sparse and insufficient collection of statutes is not a structure; it is barely a naked framework. Legislation that is evaded, substantially nullified and unenforced is a mockery of law. Significant progress has effectively been barred by the cunning obstruction of segregationists. It has been barred by equivocations and retreats of government—the same government that was exultant when it sought political credit for enacting the measures.

In this light, we are now able to see why the Supreme Court decisions on school desegregation, which we described at the time as historic, have not made history. After twelve years, barely 12 percent school integration existed in the whole South, and in the Deep South the figure hardly reached 2 percent.⁷ And even these few schools were in many cases integrated only with a handful of Negroes. The decisions indeed mandated a profound degree of genuine equality; for that very reason, they failed of implementation. They were, in a sense, historical errors from the point of view of white America.

Even the Supreme Court, despite its original courage and integrity, curbed itself only a little over a year after the 1954 landmark cases, when it handed down its Pupil Placement decision, in effect returning to the states the power to determine the tempo of change. This subsequent decision became the keystone in the structure that slowed school desegregation down to a crawl. Thus America, with segregationist obstruction and majority indifference, silently nibbled away at a promise of true equality that had come before its time.

These are the deepest causes for contemporary abrasions between the races. Loose and easy language about equality, resonant resolutions about brotherhood fall pleasantly on the ear, but for the Negro there is a credibility gap he cannot overlook. He remembers that with each modest advance the white population promptly raises the argument that the Negro has come far enough. Each step forward accents an ever-present tendency to backlash.

This characterization is necessarily general. It would be grossly unfair to omit recognition of a minority of whites who genuinely want authentic equality. Their commitment is real, sincere, and is expressed in a thousand deeds. But they are balanced at the other end of the pole by the unregenerate segregationists who have declared that democracy is not worth having if it involves equality. The segregationist goal is the total reversal of all reforms, with re-establishment of naked oppression and if need be a native form of fascism. America had a master race in the ante bellum South. Re-establishing it with a resurgent Klan and a totally disenfranchised lower class would realize the dream of too many extremists on the right.

The great majority of Americans are suspended between these opposing attitudes. They are uneasy with injustice but unwilling yet to pay a significant price to eradicate it.

The persistence of racism in depth and the dawning aware-

ness that Negro demands will necessitate structural changes in society have generated a new phase of white resistance in North and South. Based on the cruel judgment that Negroes have come far enough, there is a strong mood to bring the civil rights movement to a halt or reduce it to a crawl. Negro demands that yesterday evoked admiration and support, today—to many—have become tiresome, unwarranted and a disturbance to the enjoyment of life. Cries of Black Power and riots are not the causes of white resistance, they are consequences of it.