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"THE CPISIS IN AMERICA'S CITIES"

An Analysis of Social Disorder and a Plan  
of Action Against Poverty, Discrimination  
and Racism in Urban America

Presented by

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A million words will be written and spoken to dissect the ghetto outbreaks, but for a perceptive and vivid expression of culpability I would submit two sentences written a century ago by Victor Hugo:

If the 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.

The policy makers of the white society have caused the darkness; they created discrimination; they created slums; they perpetuate unemployment, ignorance and poverty. It is incontestable and deplorable that Negroes have committed crimes; but they are derivative crimes. They are born of the greater crimes of the white society. When we ask Negroes to abide by the law, let us also declare that the white man does not abide by law in the ghettos. Day in and day out he violates welfare laws to deprive the poor of their meager allotments; he flagrantly violates building codes and regulations; his police make a mockery of law; he violates laws on equal employment and education and the provisions for civic services. The slums are the handiwork of a vicious system of the white society; Negroes live in them but do not make them any more than a prisoner makes a prison.

Let us say it boldly that if the total slum violations of law by the white man over the years were calculated and were compared with the lawbreaking of a few days of riots, the hardened criminal would be the white man.

After establishing the general cause of outbursts, it is possible to identify five immediate causes:

1. The white backlash.
2. Unemployment.
3. General discriminatory practices.
4. War.
5. Features peculiar to big cities: crime, family problems, and intensive migration.

I place the white backlash first because the outbursts have an emotional content that is a reaction to the insults and depravity of the white backlash. Many people point out that there have been years of some progress, and this is true. Yet equally true is the fact of an animalistic reaction by a significant section of the white population. In the midst of progress Negroes were being murdered in the South and cynical white jurors automatically freed the accused. In Chicago last year thousands of vicious white hoodlums with murder in their hearts bombarded Negroes with rocks and bottles because they dared to ask to be neighbors. The white backlash told Negroes that there were limits to their progress; that they must expect to remain permanently unequal and permanently poor. The white backlash said Negroes should not confuse improvements with equality. True equality, it said, will be resisted to the death. The so-called riots in a distorted and hysterical form were a Negro response that said inequality will now be resisted to the death.

The second major cause is unemployment because it furnishes the bulk of the shock troops. Government figures reveal that the rate of unemployment for Negroes runs as high as 15% in some cities--and for youth up to 30-40%! It is not accidental that the major actors in all the outbreaks were the youth. With most of their lives yet to live, the slamming of doors in their faces could be expected to induce rage and rebellion. This is especially true when a boastful nation, while neglecting them, gloats over its wealth, power and world pre-eminence. Yet almost 40% of Negro youth waste their barren lives standing on street corners.

I proposed that a national agency be established to immediately give employment to everyone needing it. Training should be done on the job, not separated from it and often without any guarantee of employment in which to use the training. Nothing is more socially inexcusable than unemployment in this age. In the thirties when the nation was bankrupt, it instituted such an agency, the W.P.A. In the present conditions of a nation glutted with resources it is barbarous to condemn people willing to work to soul-sapping inactivity and poverty.

I am convinced that one massive act of concern will do more than the most massive deployment of troops to quell riots and still hatreds. I am not convinced that the statesmanship exists in Washington to do it. Hugo could have been thinking of 20th century America when he said, "There is always more misery among the lower classes than there is humanity in the higher classes."

The third cause is discrimination, which pervades all experiences of Negro life. It pushes the Negro off the economic ladder after he has ascended a few rungs. It stultifies his initiative and insults his being. Even the few Negroes who realize economic security do not attain respect and dignity, because on upper levels discrimination closes different doors to them.

Discrimination is a hell hound that gnaws at Negroes in every waking moment of their lives to remind them that the lie of their inferiority is accepted as truth in the society dominating them.

The fourth cause is the war in Vietnam. Negroes are not only conscripted in double measure for combat, but they are told the billions needed for remaking their lives are necessary for foreign intervention. Democracy at home is starved to seek a spurious democracy abroad. Dictators, oligarchies, are given our resources to perpetuate their rule at the rate of \$80,000,000 per day, but we cannot afford to spend 10% of this on anti-poverty programs.

There has never been an American war opposed by so many. Opposition has now ascended to a clear majority of Americans and merges with the overwhelming majority of the world.

The immoral, insane pursuit of conquest against the will of the people has to diminish respect for government. Among those deprived by government, the disrespect degenerates into contempt and cynicism. In testifying before the Senate last December, I said, "The bombs in Vietnam explode at home. The security we profess to seek in foreign adventures we will lose in our decaying cities."

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There is no need to change a word of that prophesy; rather it needs underlining. To war against your own people, while warring against another nation, is the ultimate in political and social bankruptcy.

Finally, a complex of causes is found in the conditions of urban life. Crime is well organized in the cities and produces an underclass of great numbers. Rackets are the big business of the ghetto, with masses of employees. In any period of unrest they utilize conditions for advantage. Organized crime has a protected sanctuary in the slums, with police tolerance, if not connivance. It becomes a normal feature of life, poisoning the young and confounding the adult. It adds, in substantial numbers, the professional criminal to outbreaks, exacerbating the results. When they merge with the declassed and dispossessed, also numerous in the slums, a large anti-social force is assembled.

Cities are also victims of the anarchic migrations of Negroes. Although everyone knew in the past decade that millions of Negroes would have to leave the land without schooling, no national planning was done to provide remedies. White immigrants in the 19th century were given free credit and land by the government. In the early 20th century a plethora of social agencies helped them to adjust to city life. The economy readily absorbed white workers into factories and trained them to skills. There were obstacles and privations for white immigrants but every step was upward; care and concern could be found.

When the Negro migrated he was substantially ignored or grossly exploited within a context of seering discrimination. He was left jobless and ignorant, despised and scorned as no other American minority has been. The result was aptly described by E. Franklin Frazier in the title of one chapter of his book on The Negro Family, "Into the City of Destruction."

To list the causes is to structure the remedial program. A program is not, however, our problem. Our real problem is that there is no disposition by the Administration nor Congress to seek fundamental remedies beyond police measures. The tragic truth is that Congress, more than the American people, is now running amok with racism. We must devise the tactics, not to beg Congress for favors, but to create a situation in which they deem it wise and prudent to act with responsibility and decency.

Some people assert riots are just such a method. Perhaps it would be well to examine the nature of the outbreaks. They reveal in the first place that the time we have is shorter than many of us believed. Patience is running out and the intransigence and hostility of government--national, state and municipal--is aggravating grievances to explosive levels.

The riots are not simply a reign of terror or a splurge of crime, though both elements are partially present. They are also a wildly emotional protest and a desperate attempt to display the utter desparation that has engulfed many Negroes. The vast majority who actively participated were remarkably discriminating in avoiding harm to persons, venting their anger by appropriating or destroying property.

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There is an ironic purpose in this choice; to attack a society that appears to cherish property above people, the worst wounds to inflict on it are those to property.

The outbursts cannot be considered an insurrection, because insurrections are organized and can sustain themselves for more than a few days. The riots are powered by spontaneous bitter emotions and therefore die out rapidly.

We have not devised the tactics for urban slum reform. We spent ten years in the South using new tactics of non-violence that were successful. But in the Northern cities, with time running out, we failed to achieve creative methods of work. As a result, a desperate, essentially leaderless mass of people acted with violence and without a program.

Where does leadership go from here? Let us state what it is not, first. It is not leadership, nor a program, for self-styled revolutionists to declare insurrection to be the order of the day. The number of Negroes, today, dedicated to armed insurrection are so few it is mere posturing and recklessness to urge this course. Even if one could favor armed revolt, which I cannot, it is a practical policy against oppression only when people support it. It does not become valid policy because a few proclaim it. The call to insurrection does not even educate, because if in the weakness of support it is doomed to defeat, it can lead only to deeper despair and helplessness. Any action involving any form of militancy, peaceful or violent, must be able to win victories or it cannot win adherents.

On the other hand, it is not leadership, nor a program, for conservative spokesmen to tell enraged Negroes not to offend the white majority.

There is probably no way, even eliminating violence, for Negroes to obtain their rights without upsetting the equanimity of white folks. All too many of them demand tranquility when they mean inequality. It would, however, be seriously in error to over-generalize. One positive feature of the recent experiences is that during the outbursts a great many important white elements did not succumb to hysteria. Some very distinguished newspapers, magazines, commentators and TV programs fixed on the basic causes and called for fundamental reform, not revenge or military might. Sad to say, some of the Negro press was more backward than some white papers.

The demands in Congress and the administration for police measures as the primary solution are a sick echo of the solutions proposed as long ago as 1919 in the Washington riots. The Herald (Tribune) called for a, "larger, better-drilled and more ably commanded police organization." The New York Globe anticipated the current Congressional sentiment of, "not rewarding the rioters" in stating on July 23, 1919, "There is nothing to be done but to quiet the rioters by force. We make no pretense nowadays of settling the race question; we simply keep it in abeyance."

Against this grunting of ancient solutions it is all the more impressive that some major publications demanded deep reforms and accepted a heavy measure of responsibility for the white community.

To return to the search for tactics, we must reject both armed insurrection either for shock value or conquest along with obsequious pleas to insensitive government.

Taking into account that rage is a powerful fact of life in the ghetto, the mechanical application of tactics of non-violent marches and meetings which could work among southern Negroes becomes unsound. Non-violent action in the South was effective because any form of social movement by Negroes upset the status quo. When Negroes merely marched in Southern streets it was close to rebellion. In the urban communities marches are less disquieting because they are not considered rebellions and secondly, because the normal turbulence of cities absorbs them as merely transitory drama which is ordinary in city life.

To raise protest to an appropriate level for cities and to invest it with aggressive but non-violent qualities, it is necessary to adopt civil disobedience. To dislocate the functioning of a city without destroying it can be more effective than a riot because it can be longer-lasting, costly to the society but not wantonly destructive. Moreover, it is more difficult for government to quell it by superior force. Mass civil disobedience can use rage as a constructive and creative force. It is purposeless to tell Negroes they should not be enraged when they should be. Indeed, they will be mentally healthier if they do not suppress rage but vent it constructively and use its energy peacefully but forcefully to cripple the operations of an oppressive society. Civil disobedience can utilize the militancy wasted in riots to seize clothes or groceries many did not even want.

Civil disobedience has never been used on a mass scale in the North. It has rarely been seriously organized and resolutely pursued. Too often in the past it was employed incorrectly. It was resorted to only when there was an absence of mass support and its purpose was headline-hunting. The exceptions were the massive school boycotts by Northern Negroes. They shook educational systems to their roots but they lasted only single days and were never repeated.

If they are developed as weekly events at the same time that mass sit-ins are developed inside and at the gates of factories for jobs, and if simultaneously thousands of unemployed youth camp in Washington, as the Bonus Marchers did in the thirties, with these and other practices, without burning a match or firing a gun, the impact of the movement will have earthquake proportions. (In the Bonus Marches, it was the Government that burned down the marchers' shelters when it became confounded by peaceful civil disobedience.)

This is not an easy program to implement. Riots are easier just because they need no organization. To have effect we will have to develop mass disciplined forces that can remain excited and determined without dramatic conflagrations.

The existence of riots, while primarily a responsibility of the white majority, is also in part our own. Our slum brothers are not organized by any of us for real action. Our internal quibbling, compromising and capitulating for cheap gains leaves them essentially leaderless. We may not do all this in a day but if we set to the task, I am convinced civil disobedience can curtail riots. This should not be its primary objective is social change, not to put an iron lid on slums. It will not be welcome to the power structure even though it solves rioting because it supplants it with more effective action.

We should also realize that in civil disobedience we will have significant white allies directly involved in our action as well as others sympathetic to it. The reason there have been some sane white voices in this period is that the urban crisis intersects the Negro crisis in the city. Many white decision-makers may care little about saving Negroes but they must care about saving their cities. The vast majority of production is created in the cities; most white Americans live in them; the suburbs, to which they flee, cannot exist detached from the central cities. Hence powerful white elements objectively have goals that merge with ours.

Civil disobedience does not eliminate coalition politics. It supplements it. To take the opposite position that coalition politics is the exclusive method is as futile as it is disastrous. Negroes are not in a mood to wait for change by the slower, tedious, often frustrating road of political action. While inducing them to see this as the long term task, they need the social adrenalin of quick changes that would be provided by civil disobedience. However difficult it may be to combine political action with civil disobedience, it must be done because both are necessary in today's urban condition.

The white society failed to move when the conservative McCone Commission warned two years ago after Watts, "The existing breach, if allowed to persist, could in time split our society irretrievably. So serious and so explosive is the situation that unless it is checked, the August riots may seem by comparison to be only a curtain-raiser for what could blow up one day in the future." The white society did not move and Newark came after Watts and was followed by Detroit. We will have to make them move.

We will have to remind them that in the 18th Century, Thomas Jefferson said, "I tremble for my country when I reflect that God is just." In the second half of the 20th Century his warning can no longer remain unheeded.

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