

## THOUGHTS AFTER A RIOT

# So We Are a City of Law and Order?

By REESE CLEGHORN

ON TUESDAY, trouble came to Summerhill, near the Atlanta Stadium. Police shot a man in an arrest. The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee then seized the opportunity to whip tempers and frustrations to an explosive point. In the danger-filled hours that followed, hundreds of Negroes gathered and many attacked the police with stones, sticks and bottles.

Our riot, even so, was limited. The next day, property damage was seen to be light. As dangerous as the situation had been, only a small number of about 30,000 people who live in slum conditions close to the stadium had been involved.

No one who had bothered to look into Atlanta slum conditions was surprised much by the event or the location. Summerhill and the adjacent neighborhood of Mechanicsville long since had been pinpointed as among our worst slums.

The Community Council of the Atlanta Area told us last February how bad conditions are there. (And how much has been done since then?)



"MUCH of the housing . . . around the stadium is beyond repair, and the interviewers could find very few cases of even minimal maintenance," the report said. "As if in deliberate harmony with housing conditions, the streets commonly have broken pavement and holes; many are not paved at all. Sidewalks are broken and uneven and, with occasional exceptions, grass is nonexistent. At night, the absence of street lights makes the area very dark and dangerous. . . ."

"This deterioration has been accentuated through clearance by reducing the available low-income housing units. . . ."

Why does Summerhill exist, then?

MOST OF THE area has passed the point of rehabilitation. So Summerhill has been designated for a future urban renewal site. Certainly that will not solve all or even the main problems of those who live there, but done properly and accompanied by the right moves for the people now there, it would relieve many of the conditions.

Why hasn't urban renewal begun? Summerhill is one of eight areas proposed for urban renewal — eight in which Atlanta has not moved because it would not raise the money for the task.

Most of the cost of these renewal operations would be paid by the federal government; but Atlanta has not been willing to spend the money. The city government has not had it; and

no one has insisted that it be done. When we have bond issues for urban renewal, the amounts proposed and approved are pittance in comparison with the need.

What happens in the meantime in such an area—Summerhill, Mechanicsville, Vine City or Plunkettown? What happens is that the city simply does not do its job. Why is the housing code not fully enforced? How can it be done, some officials ask in reply, when houses already are too dilapidated to be rehabilitated, or why should it be done when an area already has been proposed for urban renewal and perhaps already has been zoned for future industrial use? So it goes.

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WE ARE HEARING a lot about the law. After a riot, everybody talks about law and order. Those believed to have provoked crowds into violent action are hustled off to jail, charged with inciting to riot, put under bonds totaling thousands of dollars each.

The prosecution of anyone really guilty of inciting already-wretched people into eating tear gas and otherwise increasing their wretchedness, knowing that this kind of demagoguery puts murder in the air, is absolutely right.

Yet it is interesting to compare what is happening on that front with what happens regularly to the white-collar landlords who fatten themselves on the misery of the slum dwellers.

How many major slum landlords of the kind who make a habit of defying the law and refusing to abide by the city housing code, adding to the bitterness that comes to violence—how many of them currently are in jail serving time or awaiting trial under \$10,000 bond?

None.

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EVEN WHEN THE city takes them to court, what does the Housing Court of Atlanta do? Here is what it can do: It can fine a violator \$500 and send him to jail for six months, and if there are 20 cases against him it can repeat that penalty in each. And here is what, by contrast, the Housing Court commonly does do: It fines a mass violator \$22 or \$27, or \$50 and a suspended sentence. It is a bargain.

Even this is only after tenacious evasion of the law; no one is brought into Housing Court except as a last resort.

In Atlanta, as in most big cities, we do not seem to be able to enforce laws against those who illegally profit from the misery of the slums, and who create the conditions that give us violence.

But we surely can be effective in enforcing the law against the trouble-makers. We are a city of law and order.