

PERSPECTIVE

Photo: Rufus Hinton

ON THE ATLANTA REBELLION





"Business is business. I work with white men every day and I get along. But when they start fooling around with my brothers, that's it. I don't care anymore. Long as his skin's the same as mine, he's my brother."

—Atlanta Journal, Sept. 7, 1966

Photo: Julius Lester

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Text by Julius Lester
Photos by Rufus Hinton
Julius Lester
Jimmy Lytle

I.

In seeking to determine the cause of the recent rebellions* in Atlanta, Georgia, the mayor, city officials and the press looked no further than to the presence in the city of the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee and then closed their investigation. By attacking SNCC they joined the increasing number of government officials and newspapers who claim that the rebellions of this past summer have not been acts against a system that offers a living death to black men, but have been only the result of agitation by Communists and/or black nationalist groups. No evidence has ever been put forward to substantiate these claims. Yet they are repeated over and over again in the face of much evidence to the contrary. The refusal to accept the meaning of the rebellions of this past summer will only result in more disturbances of the same nature.

*We use the word "rebellion" instead of riot, because it conveys a truer meaning of what has been occurring. In none of the incidents of the summer of '66 did black people go into white neighborhoods. Their first target was always the police. Their second has been white-owned businesses in the ghetto. These targets have been chosen deliberately, because they are the most visible signs of oppression in the ghetto. These rebellions have been conscious political acts, just as the sit-ins and picket lines were conscious political acts. Demonstrations in the ghetto do not tend to comply with the acceptable means of protest. To use the word riot gives rise to images of black men running amok, without cause or reason. This image does the black man no harm, because he knows why he's throwing bricks at policemen. It does do a disservice to whites, though, who are not given the opportunity to understand.

II.

Atlanta had many warnings of something to come. In June 1966 there were street demonstrations in Mechanicsville, a black ghetto that is adjacent to Summerhill, the rebellion area. These demonstrations were organized by local residents to protest inadequate facilities. The police managed to quiet the residents and some temporary measures were taken to provide adequate playground facilities. In August there were two consecutive nights of incidents outside the Palladium, a black club, in southwest Atlanta, when black people felt that the police were unjustly arresting patrons of the club. In both instances they tried to free the arrested parties and run the police from the area. In one instance they succeeded.

The most direct warning to the city of Atlanta came in a report presented to the mayor in February, 1966. This report was prepared by the Community Council of the Atlanta Area, Inc., under a Federal grant from the Urban Renewal Administration of the Department of Housing and Urban Redevelopment. It was called "Social Blight and its Causes (with special reference to the blighted areas surrounding Atlanta Stadium.)" This area, in part, is Summerhill—the area where the rebellion occurred, the rebellion for which the Mayor can find no other cause than Stokely Carmichael and SNCC.

**"No grievances
justify
mob action and
insurrection."**

—Congressman
Charles Weltner,
Sept. 7, 1966

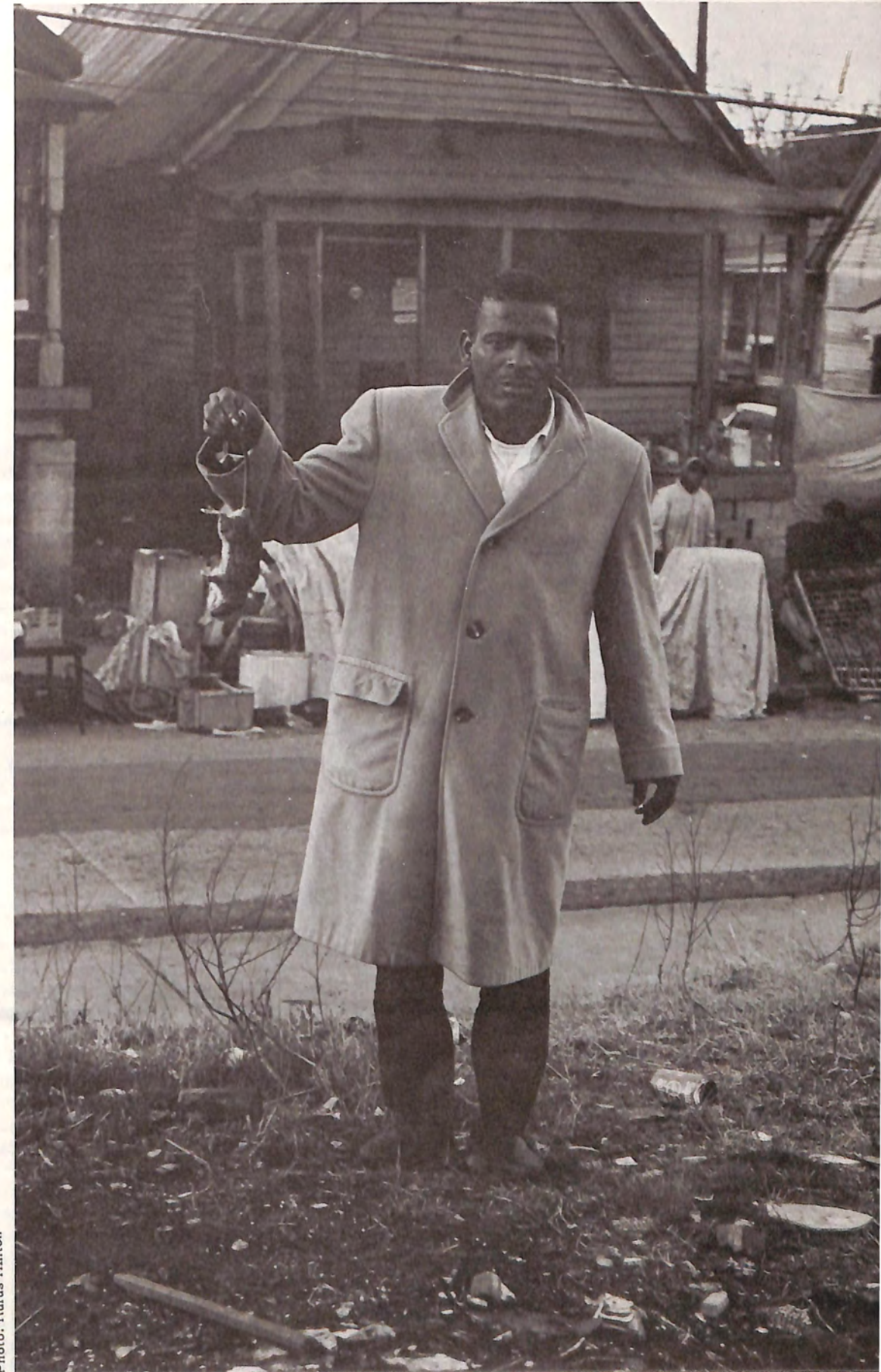


Photo: Rufus Hinton

III.

Atlanta, Georgia is hailed by many as the most progressive city in the South. The New York Times of September 7, 1966 says:

The city has been widely praised as a model for the South in its peaceful acceptance of school desegregation, and its two daily newspapers—*The Constitution* and *The Journal*—are among the most liberal in the region in racial matters.

Perhaps Atlanta is the most progressive city in the South because it, more than any other Southern city, resembles the cities of the North. It has its industry, its imposing skyline, an air of affluence, a symphony orchestra, an annual arts festival, a major league baseball team, a professional football team, and air pollution. If these credentials are not enough to qualify Atlanta as a metropolis of the sixties, it also has urban renewal.

As it has been exercised in most cities, including Atlanta, urban renewal is nothing more than evicting poor black people from their homes, razing the area and “renewing” it with high cost apartments, hotels, motels, and expressways. In Atlanta the Marriot Hotel, a deluxe accommodation for those who can afford to be deluxely accommodated, stands in the heart of what used to be a black slum area, Buttermilk Bottom.

Black slums are never anything to brag about...shacks, rats, roaches, garbage that spills out of the cans and into the streets because the Sanitation Department seems to collect more on a whim than a schedule. The shacks and apartments in the slums that black people dignify by calling home are usually rented from landlords who pocket the rent and refuse to make repairs. If he is ever carried to court for refusing to maintain his property according to the building and health codes, the resultant fine is so low as to encourage him to continue to do nothing. Eventually, these “homes” are condemned as unfit; the city pays the slumlord a healthy sum for the property (which he has intentionally allowed to deteriorate so it would be condemned and bought by the city) and the residents, poor, black powerless, are told they must move. The area is to be “renewed”.

This “renewal” is hailed almost as loudly as would be an announcement that Jesus was going to preach at First Baptist on the third Sunday. The newspapers proclaim the news far and wide. The Chamber of Commerce prepares a new publicity brochure. The mayor is interviewed on his way to the bank with his latest haul of graft from this “boon to the city.” The victims of this “boon”, black people, receive the heartfelt sympathy of city officials and are known throughout history as the “inevitable victims of progress.” (After all, didn't Jesus Himself lay the cornerstone for capitalism when he said, ‘And the poor ye shall always have with you.’?) But a few can't be allowed to hold back what is good for all, we are told, so they pack up their clothes and belongings and move into an already overcrowded part of the city. This is the urban renewal blueprint from city to city across America. Atlanta has followed it conscientiously.

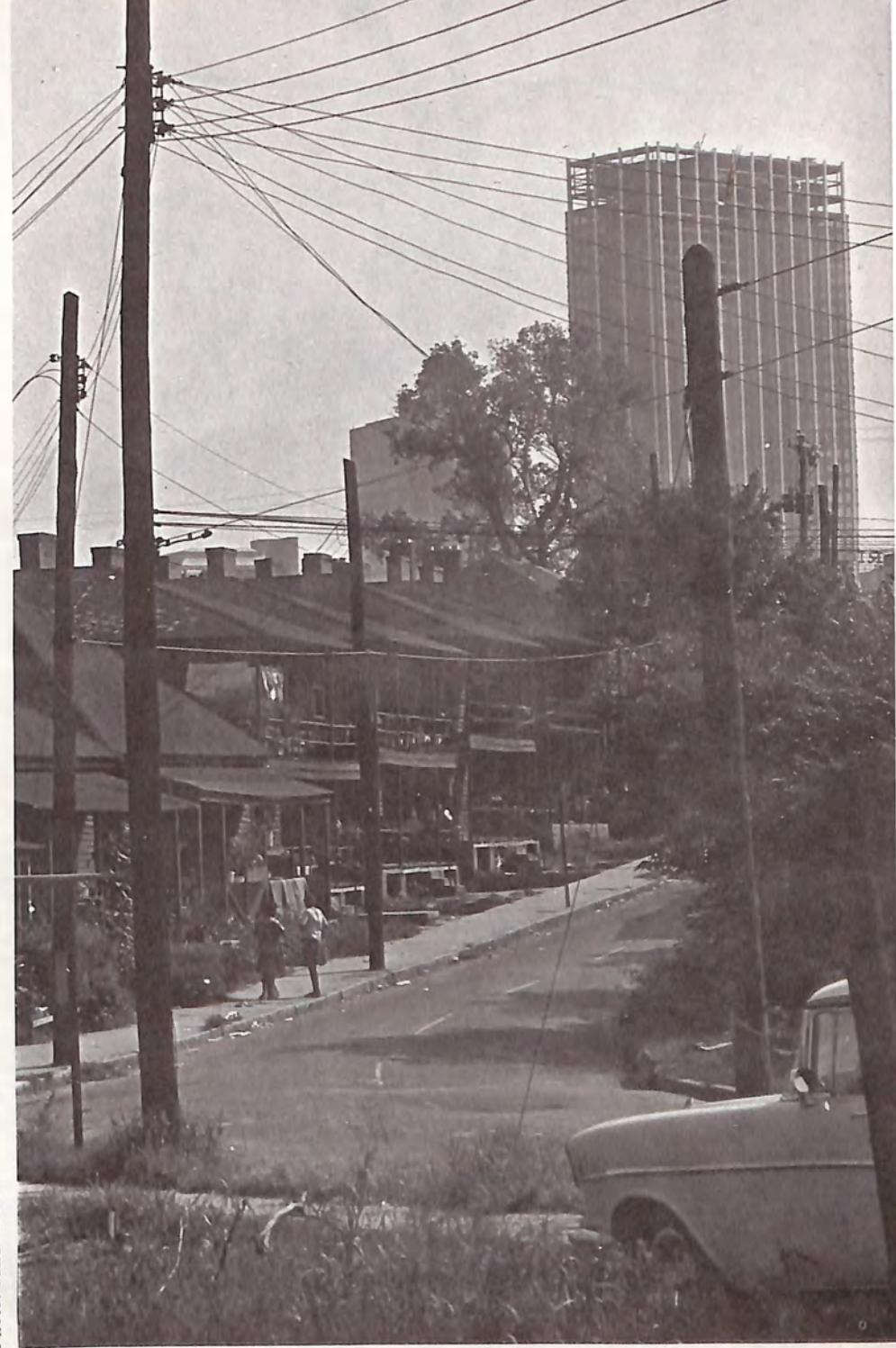


Photo: Julius Lester

**"I don't care
how many buildings
they put up.
They ain't for us."**

—Resident of street in photo to author.



Photo: Julius Lester

**"I'm running this city...
There're a lot of people in it who're not very good,
but I'm running it."**

—Mayor Ivan Allen, Atlanta Constitution, Sept. 7, 1966

IV.

There was much excitement in the halls of the Chamber of Commerce when talk began about the possibility of Atlanta acquiring a major league baseball team. You can't be a big league city without a ball team and Atlanta wanted to be "big league". An 18-million-dollar stadium was built so that Atlanta could be. The black victims of this step toward progress were forced to move without any housing being provided for that which was to be destroyed. Like refugees from the conflagration of a war they didn't understand, they moved into Summerhill and Mechanicsville.

Prior to the erection of this house of progress, Summerhill was not considered a slum, although the trend had begun due to the changing employment opportunities and the aging of the houses. According to the Community Council's report:

This deterioration has been accentuated through clearance by reducing the available low-income housing units. This increased demand for housing has resulted in a further division of old houses into several apartments and in a more widespread doubling up of families. One of the most common remarks to our interviewers by long-term residents concerned how rapidly the areas nearest the stadium have changed since the clearance. The doubling up and increased pressure for housing caused "a good many of the stable people to move away." During the four months that we have been talking with people in the area closest to the stadium, the interviewers have observed an extremely high turnover among renters and a loss of homeowners... Many of the areas surrounding clearance seem to become little more than temporary quarters for people who are constantly forced to move. Thus, clearance and relocation, without careful consideration of the effect on neighborhoods, has a snowballing effect in the destruction of the surrounding areas.

That is Summerhill, expendable, as black people have always been.

V.

To many, including Mayor Ivan Allen and Mr. Ralph McGill of the Atlanta Constitution, it is possible for someone to enter an area with a soundtruck, shout "Black Power!" several times and people will knock each other over getting out to the streets with bricks and bottles in their hands. If the Mayor and the press are to be believed, this is actually what happened. A rebellion, however, cannot be induced by some witch doctor named Stokely from the stone-age SNICK tribe. Rebellions happen because people know no other way in which to make themselves heard. Those who demonstrate with Molotov cocktails are not people who can go to city planning commission hearings and hear themselves discussed as an item in the budget. A rebellion is the language of those who must talk to the deaf.

The report by the Community Council was prepared in language that the Mayor could hear and understand.

In the area around the stadium 8 to 12% of the families have annual incomes of less than \$1,000. Another 15-25% have incomes between \$1,000 and \$2,000. Education shows a similar pattern: 5-10% of the adults have never been in school. Another 20-30% have had less than 5 years of education. About one-fourth to one-third of the children live with only one parent. The infant mortality rate is between 40 and 50 deaths per 1,000 live births, twice as high as middle class areas. Their streets are unpaved; the schools are much more crowded; the enforcement of sanitation, housing and other standards is much less stringent; in many neighborhoods street lights are virtually non-existent...Coupled with the absence of services have been many unfulfilled promises to improve conditions. Bond issues have been sold on the promises of improved schools or streets or parks, but these services have not materialized. Public officials have stated their desires to improve this or that situation, but conditions remain essentially unchanged. It should be no surprise that most people simply do not believe the benign expressions of good intent made by local officials.



**"... our summers of riots are caused
by America's winters of delays."**

—Martin Luther King, Jr. Atlanta Journal, Sept. 10, 1966



Photo: Rufus Hinton

"The Atlanta Community—Negro and white—will be making a sad mistake if it writes off Tuesday's disturbances in the South Side as a plot of outside agitators, to be dealt with by replenishing the police department's supply of tear gas."

—The Council on Human Relations of Greater Atlanta, Inc.
Atlanta Constitution, September 9, 1966

VI.

The summer was almost over and Atlanta was about to relax, because "niggers ain't never been known to riot in the winter." The day after Labor Day a white policeman shot a black man suspected of auto theft. (Given a chance he could have proven he had borrowed the car he was driving.) "The ambulance come to take him off and he lay down there," said Mrs. Marjorie Prather, mother of the victim. "My other son and this other police was about to get into it out there. He was saying, 'I know you didn't have to shoot him. You didn't have to cause this. You could have caught him cause he wasn't running that fast.' And some of the people told me that when the policeman shot him once, he said, 'Lord, let me make it back to the house. Let me make it back to the house.' I told the policeman 'You didn't have to do anything except take a long step to catch him, but you didn't even try. You were too busy shooting at him.'"

Thus, it began. How many other times had white policemen shot black men? How many other times had white policemen beaten black men and taken them off to jail? How many other times? But this time was the one time too many. In Cleveland it was not being able to get a glass of water in a bar run by a white man. In Watts it was the simple arrest of two men on a traffic violation. It's always something that has happened an infinite number of times before, but on one occasion it becomes the proverbial straw breaking the camel's back.

**"You go home and eat a big steak with mushrooms,
while we has to go home and eat sardines.
Let us go home with you."**

—Atlanta Constitution, Sept. 12, 1966



Photo: Julius Lester

VII.

No matter how many times the city of Atlanta and the press scream that SNCC was responsible for the rebellion, the black people of Atlanta know that SNCC did not destroy homes for hotels, motels, expressways and a ball stadium. They know that SNCC did not force these people to move into Summerhill, Mechanicsville and other already crowded areas of the city. They know that SNCC does not set the exorbitant prices black people are forced to pay for groceries in the ghetto stores owned by whites. Yet, Ivan Allen says SNCC is responsible for the rebellions. Those black men he has bought off with tea and cookies can say, as did the Rev. Otis Smith, "Our main concern is Stokely Carmichael. Whether or not we have a riot is up to him." The Rev. William Holmes Borders can say, "We've got to stop him before he stops us." Dr. O. W. Davis can say, "Mr. Carmichael is an albatross around our necks."

Like Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, Ivan Allen and the city of Atlanta are in a fiery furnace, but they do not feel the heat. It is not, however, the grace of God that keeps them from feeling the flames. It is their own inability or unwillingness to respond to desperation and despair. Rather than recognize this, which would be no shame, they launch a vendetta against SNCC.

Whether SNCC lives or dies is not important, because the black community will continue to fight until a society is created in which the black man will be able to fulfill himself. In that society there will be no place for the Ivan Allens, who think a city's image and progress can be separated from the people of that city.

Photo: Jimmy Lytle





Photo: Julius Lester