

THE CHICAGO RIOTS

VIOLENCE WITHOUT A PLOT

D. J. R. BRUCKNER

*Then, not that man do more, or stop pity; but that he
be wider in living; that all his cities fly a clean flag . . .*

Poet Kenneth Patchen



CHICAGO

The worst aspect of a riot is that it causes an over-reaction in the community; the people panic. Revolutionaries have understood this since the ancient world and have sometimes used it to their own advantage.

There are signs of serious over-reaction in Chicago to the riots that ripped up the West Side from July 12 to July 15.

Part of the panic is purely self-protective, of course. Political, economic and religious leaders of the community discovered in the midst of violence that they have less control than they would like, or indeed than they should have; and they found

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they have less information than they need, to act.

Civil rights leaders on the whole discovered much the same thing.

However, if a riot has any benefit, it lies in this, that it brilliantly illuminates, for a moment, the logic of events: extreme violence tends to force the hands of people, and suddenly theoretical positions and legal principles all look quite different.

What happened in Chicago is not very mysterious if one looks simply at it.

Search for a Plot

A number of city officials and police officers, however, are responding to the demands of the white majority in the city, and are looking for a plot or conspiracy, whether it be one concocted by youth gangs or Communist-inspired groups, or by political hotheads.

A lot of investigators are scurrying around looking for this alleged plot, and, God help us, they may even find one. Any little old mangy plot, however crazy or ineffectual, will serve very well to salve the conscience of the city.

The fact is that the riot was aimless. There is an instructive comparison available to this city. Last month there was a considerable riot in the city's Puerto Rican community. Compared with the violence on the Negro West Side, the Puerto Ricans' riot was a model of order and purpose.

Theirs was a violent demonstration against a breakdown of communication. There was a certain happiness about it at times, as when the crowds lifted a man who had been bitten by a police dog to their shoulders and paraded him through the streets as a hero.

The Puerto Ricans are at least a community among themselves. After their riot their leaders attended public hearings and aired their grievances, and these were the same grievances one could hear any Puerto Rican on the streets talking about.

Total Unhappiness

What struck one about the riot among the Negroes was the total dissolution of a neighborhood of perhaps 350,000 people; the hatred not only against the white power structure, but against one another; the factions that battled against one another; the total unhappiness of it. This was not a happy riot, and even some of the boasting leaders of the teenage gangs admitted they were afraid. Afterwards, no one could fully define the grievances of the community.

The riot was started by an altercation over the turning off of a fire hydrant. One's white neighbors who live out on the lakefront do not accept this explanation at all, but it is true. In the West Side ghetto a major riot can be caused by the turning of a wrench; no plot is needed and no reign of terror by gangs.

Field workers from two city commissions working in the slums, others working for the YMCA, crusad-

ing pastors and some police all know that riots have almost broken out several times in recent weeks over mere rumors, the transfer of a favorite priest from his parish, or an arrest.

This is not to minimize the organized aspect of the riot. There are gangs and they are a serious problem, and there are some revolutionary groups in the ghetto. But life in the ghetto is normally violent and brutal; it does not take much to set off a riot. The white man outside the ghetto can scarcely realize the power of a rumor on the West Side, for instance; his mind cannot take it in. He really does not know the life of the poor, Negro or white, or how suspicious that life is.

At 3 a.m. July 14, in the midst of the riot, a reporter was attacked by a large rat on a West Side street corner. Two teen-age Negro boys, returning, they said, from a riot foray, beat off this beast with a baseball bat and a board, explaining they were happy enough to fight rats which are, on the whole, worse than white newsmen.

Filled With Rats

The slums are filled with rats; rats are the manifest evidence of the inhumanity out there. They are everywhere, along with the debris of demolished buildings, the dirt in the streets, the cheap bars. People grow up among the rats and live with them.

The West Side is mostly the home of the Negro poor. In this it differs vastly from the South Side where perhaps 450,000 Negroes live; many of them live well, some live magnificently. On the West Side even childhood has degenerated into gang warfare, extortion, intimidation, physical punishment and even occasional murder. Adult life is merely an extension of this violence. In such conditions one does not have to explain riots by plots.

Mayor Richard J. Daley, during the riot, said there were "outsiders" promoting the riot. Perhaps there were. But all those arrested lived on the West Side and police did not find the outsiders. Angry with Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., the mayor demanded to know from him "whether other cities have no problems." Perhaps they have, and Dr. King is indeed an outsider. But last summer the mayor was faced with the problem of nuns staging a sit-in on the world's busiest intersection to protest the slums, and they were not outsiders.

The mayor's pouting is not dignified; it is childish. But it reflects the attitude of the white majority which still elects him and which resents being jostled.

In race relations in this city, the bulk of the white people treats the mayor like a servant who is hired to bribe the minorities into civic order. Thus a riot produces a sudden munificence from city hall, of hydrant sprinklers and swimming pools and housing projects.

Pervasive Conception

This conception of the mayor's office is so pervasive that even many Negroes have come to believe it, and the leading Negro politicians, who are part of Daley's Democratic Party machine, actually enforce it.

But the gifts of city hall hide the basic problem about the Negro ghetto. The problem is that most of the people in the ghetto simply do not share in any way in the life of the city. Their alienation is an enormous spiritual wall built up of uncountable

and ancient indignities; it is the wall of the city.

The problem is to break down the wall. Dr. King, when he opened his civil rights drive here two days before hell broke loose, thought he had at least part of the machinery to break down the wall.

But the riot, which illuminated society's flaws, also illuminated some serious weaknesses in Dr. King and his approach. The first thing that became evident was that in Chicago Dr. King, the patron saint of non-violence, was leading a collection of local civil rights groups whose leaders include a few pretty violent people.

This problem results from a structural weakness in the King method. Dr. King's Southern Christian Leadership Conference suffers from a lack of troops and thus it is plagued by indiscriminate recruitment when it enters a city. In a big city like Chicago, where there are 900,000 Negroes and only a percentage of these favor Dr. King, the flaw can be fatal.

Little Influence

Dr. King very quickly discovered he had little influence in the West Side community. When he walked the streets on the first night of riot pleading for non-violence some young Negroes laughed at him. When his aides showed films this past spring of the Watts riots to illustrate the danger of violence, some youths applauded. Youth gang leaders who met with Dr. King as the riots subsided on the night of July 15 said they might turn to non-violence and again they might not.

Some of these gang leaders told a reporter they had met several times with SCLC officials long before the riots, but Dr. King had no program for them, so the youths gave up on him. One of them called him a "hit-and-run messiah."

His prestige suffered enormously in the Chicago riots. The Sunday before the uproar started, he had stood in Soldier Field and debated non-violence as against "black power" with none other than Floyd McKissick of the Congress of Racial Equality, the preacher of black power.

The riot cooled that philosophical argument permanently, one gathers. For the riot has turned not only the whites against Dr. King, but the Negro power structure as well; and his civil rights movement here is in immediate danger of passing into the hands of the old-time politicians. Dr. King finds himself in the position of either becoming the high priest of all the poor and only the poor, or getting out, quickly.

In either case, he has been pushed—violently if you will—in the direction of the McKissick position, that Negro rights must involve Negro political power. Further, no matter how much Dr. King protests that his Chicago drive is not partisan and not violent, the riot exposed clearly that many of the people around him are very partisan and a few are violent.

Violent and Non-Violent

One of his top aides, the Rev. James Bevel, told almost 50,000 people at the July 10 rally that "we want the violent and the non-violent to join with us." That seems pretty straightforward.

Among the persons attending a conference with the mayor the day before the riots started was Chester Robinson of the West Side Organization, a local civil rights group.

Robinson is not personally a violent man, but his headquarters has become a convenient gathering

voices by financing community action programs seeking to involve the poor in the solution of their own difficulties, was shouted down in April when he attempted to address a conference called by the Citizens Crusade Against Poverty. At the time, he said a handful of "professional demonstrators" were trying to make trouble. His attitude now, at least for publication, is that such confrontations are a positive thing. "It's time," he says, "that the poor speak up for their needs."

Joe P. Maldonado, executive director of the county's antipoverty vehicle, the Economic and Youth Opportunities Agency, who also has been subjected to insulting personal abuse, shares this opinion in essence.

Governmental Confusion

Infuriated by governmental confusion and political machinations which seem to dull the promise of anti-poverty programs, the poor strike out at anybody who represents the "power structure." Their more vocal members appear determined to take over and make changes themselves.

Speaking of certain manifestations of the so-called revolt of the poor, James E. Ludlam, president of the Welfare Planning Council, a traditional agency, told anti poverty board members that a vocal minority "grounded in militancy and conflict" was trying to capture control of antipoverty programs. He said these militant elements are given to threats of violence, disruption of meetings and "infiltration and subversion of staff decisions."

But the Rev. William Hervey, director of the Department of Metropolitan Mission for the Los Angeles Presbytery, responds that militancy is necessary in the fight against "man's most dehumanizing enemy—poverty."

Old weapons cannot be used to fight a new war, argues Mr. Hervey, referring to the traditional welfare agencies. He agrees that many of those castigated by Ludlam are "grounded in militancy and involved in conflict," but he could not agree that their actions were totally negative.

One of the intriguing prospects in all this is that some of today's revolutionists, like others of history, will become part of the "power structure" themselves once they gain control. Then, presumably, they will regard themselves as "responsible" and will find themselves facing the fury of new revolutionaries.

One man who believes the often-irresponsible accusations by the poor are a necessary part of progress is Dr. J. Alfred Cannon, a UCLA neuropsychiatrist who works with a group called People in Community Action.

Dr. Cannon, a Negro, says, "Anytime you have a group of people who are relative strangers, one way they have of testing each other might be through initial demands or angry confrontations. It's a way of finding out how genuine the other person is.

"Often this kind of confrontation . . . paves the way for more constructive, gentle exchanges.

"Shouting at a public official . . . is a demonstration that the poor and minorities have the strength and power to be able to challenge the 'big chief.' This is very important, because they can see their effectiveness in some kind of action. It leads to a sense of worthwhileness and adequacy . . . and a potency which the poor generally don't have."

'Feeling of Participation'

This is the beginning, says Dr. Cannon, "of the poor man's feeling of participation in his own destiny, a very important strut in his health."

Bitterness over the failure of the war on poverty to deliver immediate results, and disillusionment over the administration of welfare programs have triggered a statewide—even a nationwide—effort by the poor to organize.

With the backing of the University of California Extension, the Sears Foundation, and two privately organized advisory agencies—the California Foundation for Economic Opportunity and the California Center for Community Development—a first California Convention of the Poor was held in Oakland in February.

This led to the June convention in Fontana, attended by representatives of slum tenant councils, welfare recipient groups and community action movements around the state.

Out of the Fontana convention, Dr. Jacobus TenBroeck, a UC political science professor and former chairman of the State Social Welfare Board, emerged with the task of giving some organizational sophistication to the more than 20 Welfare Rights Organizations which are loosely joined in this movement. A convention is planned this fall to develop a legislative program, clearly aimed at mounting a lobby for changes in welfare and other laws affecting the poor.

Welfare Recipients

Remarkably, in view of widespread conviction among the general public that most welfare recipients wouldn't work if they could, some of the loudest protests in recent Welfare Rights Organization demonstrations were that the present system "makes it impossible for us to work our way off welfare."

"If you don't have poor people in on the solutions," says Dr. TenBroeck, "you misgauge what the problems and their attitudes are.

"They flail, they shout, they are quite unreasonable," concedes Dr. TenBroeck. "This is therapy and steam-valving. Unless you provide some way to let off their futility, we're sitting on a lid we ought not to sit on—as you see in Watts.

"It's not a matter of whether we enjoy it—but whether we're going to make it possible for those who are deprived to cease to be deprived.

"They want the rest of us to slide into the background as they get on their feet and get organized. And that's the way it should be."