

THE WHITE PROBLEM

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BUS BURNING in Anniston, cowardly brutality in Birmingham, cynical injustice in Jackson—during recent months many people in this country and throughout the world have been appalled by news of the incidents involving Freedom Riders and segregationists, which began in Alabama on Mother's Day ("Mother's Day the Southern Way"). The very officials who are supposed to uphold law and order have connived at, and even abetted, lawlessness and disorder.

Perhaps you regard such incidents as the exception. If so, I suggest that you become a Freedom Rider and take a look at Dixie from the inside. The shameful happenings of recent months are only the symptoms of a sickness that is chronic, deep-seated, and deadly. Here are some facts about this sickness as it exists in the South.

Voting. The right to vote is an essential ingredient of democracy. In the eleven states that comprised the Confederacy only a quarter of the Negroes of voting age dare to register at the polls. In the states of the Deep South—Alabama, Florida, Louisiana, Mississippi, and South Carolina—less than fifteen per cent are registered. Not long ago, one Negro in Louisiana who had the temerity to register was shot dead on the grounds of the State Capitol in Baton Rouge. Naturally, no one has been prosecuted for his murder.

Education. In 1954, the Supreme Court ruled that segregation of schools violates the law of the land; it urged "all deliberate speed" in integrating the existing "separate but equal" school facilities. But seven years later, the states of the Confederacy have achieved less than two per cent integration. In four of them there are no integrated schools whatsoever. In Louisiana there are only four integrated Negro pupils, in North Carolina only fifty, and in Virginia only a hundred and seventy.

At the time of the Court's ruling, some of the other Southern states, as well as the District of Columbia, had completely segregated schools. By now, the District of Columbia's school system is almost fully integrated; West Virginia and Delaware are about half way, Kentucky and Missouri about a third, Maryland and Oklahoma about a quarter. Progress has been made, and none of the dire prophecies uttered by white Southerners has been fulfilled.

Employment. The pay scale for the Negro in the South is about half that of the white; the rate of Negro unemployment is about double that of the white. Few good jobs are open to Negroes. If you have trouble

making ends meet, reflect on the conditions of your Negro fellow citizens in the South.

A Negro "girl" (who may be sixty years old) comes to work for her white "lady" (who may be half her age) in Sumter, South Carolina, at eight in the morning. She scrubs clothes and floors, cooks and serves the main meal of the day at noon, nurses, irons, dusts, vacuums and sweeps. At four she goes home to care for her own family. She does this five days a week, eight hours a day. Her pay is ten dollars *a week*. She can be fired without cause and without notice. At least ten "girls" are waiting to take her job.

Tulane University, in New Orleans, is a renowned institution of higher learning. The cafeteria employees there are Negroes, whose work is hard, hot, and dirty. They work eight hours a day, six days a week. For this they are paid *eighteen dollars a week*.

The millions of decent white people in the South are silent, except to say that they understand the "nigra" and can solve the problem, if they are left alone. In the hundred years that have elapsed since the Civil War, they have obviously not managed to solve the problem. Perhaps they should ask themselves the penetrating question: "Who benefits?" And perhaps the rest of us, all over the nation, should ask ourselves whether that bedsheet, that coke, that plastic pencil are not bargains because of the suffering, segregation, and slave labor that have gone into their manufacture.

Justice. Discrimination at once degrades the oppressed and dehumanizes the oppressor. We have seen in Nazi Germany, Communist Russia, and other tyrannies, the rapid degeneration and limitless depravity that this dehumanization can bring about. Make no mistake of it, the same terror exists to a degree in our own country. And to the extent that each of us tolerates it, it exists in ourselves, does it not?

What happens to the Southern Negro who refuses to accept the debased position of the "good nigger"? And to the white who befriends him? They will suffer constant police harassment, economic reprisals, threats, beatings, and other kinds of persecution. A friend of mine has been jailed twenty-eight times in the last year (and often held incommunicado) because he encourages certain American citizens to vote in the state of South Carolina. This extraordinary man says that he will just have to "suffer out" his persecutions. And of his persecutors, he says that "you can't really hate them."

A woman Freedom Rider was, with myself, among the last three persons to leave the burning bus at Aniston, Alabama. It was a near thing, but we had one break: the mob of hoodlums had been driven back by the smoke and flames and the arrival, tardy though it was, of the Alabama police. Some of the passengers who preceded us were not so lucky. As they crawled through the windows or stumbled out the door, half-blinded and choked by the smoke, they were indiscriminately clubbed by the murderous mob. For my companion, this would not have been a new experience. Taking part in a sit-in last December, she was mercilessly beaten by police and hospitalized for eleven days. Segregation, you see, does not admit of such luxuries as pity, compassion, or respect for womanhood.

Peaceable, nonviolent demonstrators have been struck with fists, chains, clubs, and pipes. In Jackson, Mississippi, the police set ferocious dogs on pickets who were, in an orderly fashion, exercising their right of protest under the First Amendment.

Huntsville, Alabama is in the "Bible Belt". It is also the scene of frantic activity in rocketry. These rockets are supposed to defend democracy from the threat of godless Communism. A Negro in Huntsville was recently shot dead by a white man. The white man said that he thought the Negro was insulting his wife. Nothing has been done about this murder.

Lynching has been outlawed by the Federal government. But it has not been eliminated in Dixie; it has merely gone underground. Now Negroes simply disappear. Where, for example, are the witnesses in the infamous Emmett Till murder case? Soon after the trial, all the witnesses had vanished from Mississippi—and apparently from the face of the earth.

How does one deal with corruption and degeneracy of this magnitude? The millions of decent white Southerners are, with rare exceptions, more intimidated than the Negroes. Most of them withdraw to a state of fantasy, a conspiracy of silence.

It is the despised and downtrodden Negroes who are exhibiting dignity, decency, and courage. I hope that some of you who read this will be able to attend their mass meetings and share the inspiration, faith and hope that is generated there. When you join in the singing of the "Freedom Song", such phrases as "We are not afraid," and "Love conquers all," will take on a new meaning, because you will realize that they are not just phrases that have been incorporated into the lyrics of a song, but refer to principles that have been put into practice. *Not one blow* has been struck by a Negro in a Southern demonstration since the beginning of the Montgomery bus protest five years ago. The Negroes have literally turned the other cheek and returned good for evil. Truly, the last are now first.

This process is part of the unfinished business of the American revolution. It constitutes a revolution in itself, a revolution that is nonviolent, Gandhian and deeply religious, basing itself as it does on the realization that since God sits in all men, to injure any man is to injure God Himself. The goal is not victory *over* men, but justice and respect *among* human beings, the establishment of trust and brotherhood. Its means are non-violent ones, and its only weapon is Love.

Among these new American revolutionaries are such people as Martin Luther King, Jr., James Farmer, Fred Shuttlesworth, James Lawson, Julie Aaron, John Lewis, Charles Person, Diane Nash, Jerome Smith, Ralph Abernathy, Henry Thomas, Max Francis Moultrie, Charles Jones, Jimi McDonald. Their heads ain't bendin' low, and you don't call them "Joe". They are convinced that it is just as sinful to consider yourself lower than another man as to consider yourself higher than another man. They feel you cannot call yourself a man and accept treatment as something less than human.

They are convinced that democracy is meaningless if one is born in a segregated hospital, goes to a segregated school, lives out one's days in a segregated neighborhood, stays in segregated hotels, eats in segregated restaurants, patronizes segregated theaters, worships in segregated churches, swims in segregated waters, drinks at segregated fountains, and is finally buried by a segregated mortician in a segregated cemetery, with the promise of eternal life in an integrated Heaven. They are saying, rather, that the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand.

Is it not time that we rose up as a nation and insisted that the Congress of the United States be freed from domination by a perverse minority of Southern segregationists? Should not the President of the United States put principles ahead of politics and disdain electoral votes that have been contaminated with the tribute money of segregation?

This hideous problem is the product of compound ignorance and acts of immorality, stretching back for generations. But it will have to be solved in our lifetime. It will be solved only through the good will, the revolutionary fervor and the genuine patriotism displayed by our courageous Negro brothers, qualities that inspired some of us whites to join the Freedom Rides.

What is commonly designated as the Negro problem is really a white problem. Will we whites continue to pass by on the other side and deny or evade the problem? How about the house next door, the worker alongside you, the Kingdom of Heaven within you? Can we any longer afford our cowardly and convenient ignorance? Are we not now forced to choose between complicity and fraternity? Choose which you like: integration or—disintegration. You cannot have both.