

Report L-47
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Southern Regional Council
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THE QUESTION FROM JACKSONVILLE

: The Easter Week outbreak in Jacksonville of racial violence, predominantly from Negro sources, raises this question: was it something peculiar to Jacksonville, scene of one of the few and worst instances of raw rioting during the 1960 sit-ins; or was it a portent of terrible things to come, symptomatic of a mood and emotional climate to be expected over the South this Spring and Summer, as the great turning point of federal civil rights legislation is reached?

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The immediate build-up to Jacksonville's rioting began the week of March 16. Negro demonstrations seeking desegregation of restaurants and hotels were stepped up. Instead of placid picketing which had, with a new impetus from participation of Negro ministers, become since February a regular thing on downtown city sidewalks, there began sit-ins. At some, a hit and run tactic was used; at others, demonstrators remained to be arrested. By Thursday and Friday of that week, roving Negro teenagers were moving through the downtown and its fringes, some demonstrating, some, according to most accounts, merely making their presence felt -- walking slowly in front of traffic, acting boisterously. Part of this seemed to be in reaction against arrests, and against Negroes being barred from a hearing on the arrests. At one point on Friday, March 20, 100 or so of these youngsters gathered at Hemming Park in the center of the downtown, the center of the 1960 rioting.

Various observers said the activity Friday afternoon had led them to expect a confrontation with white racists at the park that night or Saturday, and possibly a riot. This did not materialize either time. But Mayor Haydon Burns had communicated to newspapermen

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before 1:00 a. m. Saturday his plans for a television speech Saturday night on the racial situation, based on a warning that a riot was imminent.

The mayor's statement Saturday night was later reproduced by him as a full page advertisement in the city's newspapers.

The Mayor asserted he had full responsibility for the city, and declared "I refuse to delegate or to relegate this responsibility to anyone or any biracial committee or any other groups, it is my responsibility and I will face it." (A week before, he had been approached by representatives of the Jacksonville Council on Human Relations and urged to form a biracial committee with official sanction, or to do something positive in the face of growing Negro restiveness. This same recommendation had been made by others previously.)

The mayor's statement also pointed out that publicly owned facilities were desegregated, and maintained that Negroes had no "civil rights" to seek service at private hotels and restaurants and other businesses. "...If such were not the law, then why is the Congress considering the Public Accommodations law at this time?"

The statement then went on to say that, under twelve city laws, "demonstrations like last week" (presumably sit-ins) and "gatherings other than by permit" (the collecting at Hemming Park) would be prohibited. The laws cited included one "against conspiracy." To supplement "508 colored and white police officers," including "45 specially trained members of the Emergency Corps that are capable of meeting any situation," the mayor said he was "right now going to give the oath and swear in as Special Police Officers 496 Firemen who at this moment are assembled at their respective stations under the direction of their senior officers."

Observers said that they stood back and waited for the lid to blow. It did not Sunday. But on Monday morning, March 23, a crowd of demonstrating Negro youths gathered at Hemming Park. They were dispersed, some arrested, some chased by police who had circled their gathering in motorcycles with sirens and motors roaring. After the rout, Jacksonville entered its two nights and two days of violence and vandalism.

Negroes threw rocks, bricks, and bottles at cars and store windows in the pie-wedge Negro section that

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points into the heart of downtown, and tossed fire bombs at white and Negro stores and businesses, perhaps half a dozen, including Mayor Burns's Negro gubernatorial campaign headquarters. Negroes were arrested in possession of fire bombs and other weapons. False alarms, as many as 17 in 25 minutes, kept up during the period. Something like 76 police cases of vandalism were reported between Monday night and Wednesday morning.

A Negro woman was shot to death along a road from a passing car, in a Negro area. Police at the time and since said they had no clues and no way to know whether the shooting was connected with racial strife. A car containing one white and two Negro sailors was fired into, apparently by Negroes. The white sailor and one of the Negroes were slightly injured. A tourist car was fired at, its occupant cut by glass. A man who claimed to have been tied up and cut with razor blades by Negroes turned out to be the same man who claimed the same thing happened to him during the 1960 rioting at the hands of the Ku Klux Klan. Police said his story was false.

At one point, police kicked in the door of the NAACP headquarters and arrested students there. The police said they were throwing bottles out the window. An NAACP spokesman denied it. He also charged that desk drawers in the office were rifled.

Virtually all of the vandalism was confined to the Negro section. It was sporadic and involved individuals or small groups. Something more nearly approaching mob violence occurred Tuesday at New Stanton High School, a Negro school which includes students from the "best" Negro homes. The school was emptied by a bomb threat. (Previously, bomb threats had provided school yards full of youngsters from which the hit and run demonstrators sought recruits.) Students vandalized (details are not clear) a bread truck driven by a white man. Police were called, and a small contingent arrived. A Negro officer arrested one youth. While one group of students engaged the police, razzing them, others freed the arrested youth. A Negro officer fired a pistol into the air. A help call went out, and re-enforcements arrived, including, according to the sheriff's office, about 15 cars of state troopers, 30 men, of a group which happened to be in a training session in Jacksonville. The pistol shot, and the sight of the troopers and their weapons, angered the already dangerous crowd of 1,500 students. Rocks and bottles were thrown at police and newspapermen, and at Negro teachers and other Negro

adult on-lookers. The police pulled out. (They later said they thought it the best way to calm the crowd.) The crowd turned on the newsmen, overturning their car and setting it on fire, chasing three (while adult Negro on-lookers sat on their porches laughing.) They caught one, pummeled him, and, according to one of the three chased, robbed him. The man was rescued by Negro teachers who took him into the school for safety and treatment. Another reporter, arriving on the scene, was quickly pulled into a grocery store whose door was then guarded by Negro adults until he could get out of the area safely.

Similar -- though less violent -- mob scenes occurred at two other Negro schools emptied by bomb threats. At Matthew W. Gilbert Junior High School, police and fire vehicle windows were broken, and at Northwest High School rocks were thrown at two grocery stores.

In the midst of this, on Wednesday, Mayor Burns called for an "unofficial" bi-racial committee to regain "peace and harmony and understanding." (At a press conference, he said this was not inconsistent with his previous stand. The committee was "community action"; he was still responsible for law enforcement.) Friday afternoon pickets were walking peacefully downtown, and by Easter Morning, with sunshine bathing the Confederate monument in Hemming Park, the riot tension seemed over.

The bi-racial committee, headed by important members of the city's business elite, was understood to be ready and equipped to act; it could conceivably be the instrument for Jacksonville's peaceful acceptance of a fair deal in race relations. Backsliding, however, could mean more trouble.

Continued picketing and a boycott to keep pressure on the new committee was the policy the NAACP announced that Easter Sunday afternoon.

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Which was it? A legacy of violence cropping up again in Jacksonville or a new phase in the South's struggle to be rid of segregation?

A comparison with the similar Negro vandalism that occurred in 1960 shows extreme differences in the degree

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of provocation. Then it had come from whites swinging axe handles at sit-in demonstrators.

This time, the Ku Klux Klan was quiescent, and a speech by a visiting U. S. Nazi Party nabob drew an audience of ten, six of whom were police. The provocation seemed to center around impatience with the lack of desegregation progress, resentment of a gradually getting-tougher handling of demonstrators in Municipal Court, and an immediate flare-up of resentment over the mayor's speech. (Some said the speech was political; the mayor is one of six candidates for governor. He claimed the stepped-up Negro activity was inspired by his political enemies. He might be right, to the extent that Negro leaders may have wanted to show the state that they were not happy with what his 15 year old administration had produced for them.)

A factor common to both riot situations was gangs of juvenile and older Negroes who, under such colorful names as the "High Hats," "Boomerangs," and "Untouchables," are in normal times "involved in other matters that keep the Negro crime rate high" (in the words of Chief Deputy Sheriff William F. Whitehead). He, city police sources, and the NAACP attributed most of this year's Negro violence -- as in 1960 -- to such elements in the Negro community taking advantage of the civil rights tension to let go some of their own broader gauge hostility. As

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an indication of this kind of anger in operation, some of the rocks and some of the fire bombs were thrown at Negroes and Negro businesses.

At the schools, another element entered. George Harmon, Jacksonville Journal assistant city editor, was one of those chased, and he said that the majority of the crowd was in a mood of excited, almost gleeful excitement, while there was violence in the mood of a hard core group at the center of the crowd. It was panty-raid, spring feverishness degenerated into mob violence, he said.

Furthermore, no physical provocation to compare with the Birmingham police dog and fire hose treatments of Spring, 1963, ever occurred.

To say all of this is still not to get at a real understanding of a situation such as Jacksonville's, or of the roots of violence in such a southern Negro community. To understand is to begin with the stench and dilapidation of the Negro slums, and to try to comprehend the hopelessness that is compounded out of the thudding impact upon the human consciousness of being poor, and being blocked by the very conditions of this poverty and by the weights of discrimination from any possible escape. This is hopelessness deepened by the new knowledge that the old dream of escape to the North is false -- that up there it's just more of the dreary old same. "Our young," say Negroes in Jacksonville and elsewhere over the South in 1964, "don't care any

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To know this is to know the extreme: the already defeated, desperate young -- fatherless or sons of men who have no jobs -- who have no model except within themselves, and who find their meaning in life in gangs, with their medieval and prehistoric overtones, their war councils, and their internecine battling. These gangs were there in 1960 as they have been at other southern racial crises, watching from the sidelines. They saw the non-violent demonstrators beat, and believed that the police failed to protect them, arresting them, and not their aggressors. This rankles, and is a part of what had been festering in the black ghettos of Jacksonville.

So, too, is the memory of what happened when the gangs ran violent after seeing the treatment of the non-violent in 1960, their own violence turned outward instead of upon self and one another. They recount to each other and to new initiates still the old war stories, of how for a few hours there they took over, controlled the expressways into town, and faced down cops, Negro and white. "And we came upon this white policeman, and man, he was so scared of us, that he gave us his gun, without our asking for it..."

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Also, to understand is to know that a Negro community in a city like Jacksonville is not monolithic -- that while it is united in a drive to end segregation, it is fragmented in dispute over how best this might be achieved, whether by violence, or non-violent direct action, or peaceful, dignified negotiation. Such a community, just like its white counterpart, is torn, too, by the plain old human rivalries of class and age and personality: the scorn of the leader, who lives amid his people in the slums, for the "black bourgeoisie," moved like the white man to a suburb that hides them from the harshness of the life of their people. The contempt of the professional man, who has fought his way up to a fine home with a swimming pool, for the upstart young militants who won't listen to the experience and skill and wisdom that got him where he is and was used in the long painful past of racial advancement that helped lead to the recent breakthroughs.

These are among the dynamic elements that are operating in such a situation as Jacksonville's, influencing actions, setting terms, in a context far more complex than the surface appearance of black against white, good against evil.

There had been some progress in the city. Now, there is a bi-racial committee, and more ground for hope.

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"Yes," says the middle-class Negro leader, "there is hope -- because the white men know they've had two strikes. The third strike, and Jacksonville is out." In the background lurks the gang member, with a ring in his ear, a half articulated murmur in his brain. "Why not? There is no hope for me. Why should there be hope for anybody else? Boy this next one is going to be a BIG rumble..."

Rutledge Pearson, 34, Negro schoolteacher, is head of the Jacksonville and Florida NAACP branches, and the leader of the city's civil rights drive. He and other NAACP leaders worked all night Monday and Tuesday (including a television appeal) urging against the violence, telling the people that the effective thing to do was follow non-violent leadership. Mr. Pearson cites efforts by various groups to persuade the mayor to give official status to a bi-racial committee. He and others describe the long record of the previous bi-racial committee, established by the Chamber of Commerce after the 1960 riots. (Even in name, it tended not to admit being bi-racial; it was called the Community Advisory Committee and its Negro Counterpart.) It was hampered by lack of official recognition, and such things as a failure to keep minutes, according to Dr. W. W. Schell, who patiently and persistently worked as chairman of the "Negro counterpart." It was considered generally ineffective in

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the crucial, last-ditch efforts to desegregate public accommodations and jobs.

Like most southern cities, Jacksonville has desegregated most publicly owned facilities, including theoretically its beach. It closed its swimming pool. Thirteen Negro first graders entered five previously all-white schools in the Fall of 1963. A half dozen restaurants have desegregated; hotels accept Negro conventioners; theatres limit Negro customers to eight a night.

Thus, the wellsprings of Jacksonville Negro civil rights discontent seemed to be general dissatisfaction with tokenism -- a profound frustration growing out of a feeling that the city's civic leaders were not joining in good faith with those Negroes who were trying to find accommodation by peaceful means. The violence, which may have been diminished but could not be stopped by responsible Negro leaders, would seem to have sprung from youthful hysteria and mob spirit at the schools, and otherwise from criminal elements and others in the Negro community who sensed a ripe opportunity for expression of dangerous fury, out of a lifetime of deprivations.

And violence-proneness is not one-sided in the city. White racists may have been quiescent during the crisis, but they have in beatings and bombings (a recent case resulting in arrests) made their presence felt since 1960.

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"...They were after anybody white," said a Negro mother sadly of the school rioters..Prince McIntosh, Jr., 21, public relations director of the Jacksonville NAACP (who was arrested while taking pictures of the demonstrations) said the local NAACP Youth Council does not at all condone violence, but -- "at the same time we feel just calling for the cease of violence will get nowhere... We need to try not so much to stop violence as to root out the evil that is the cause of the violence -- segregation."

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Whether Jacksonville is a special case ultimately rests with the South, as new opportunities for good-faith dealing between white and Negro people loom ahead for each community in this year of national decision making. In 1960, in a special publication, Racial Violence and Law Enforcement, the Southern Regional Council stated:

The South is not an anarchy. It is not a region where government is weak. It is not a region where the lines of political and economic power are loosely held. The breakdowns in law and order in the South are an outcome of public policy -- no less because it is sometimes oral and traditional rather than written in statutes and police manuals.

The words still apply, as each community in the South faces the decision of whether to obey the prospective federal law on public accommodations and other civil rights.

In the years following 1954, the South chose to violate the American tradition of obeying the Supreme Court's reading of the Constitution.

The question for 1964 is whether the spirit of lawfulness has returned to the Southern political leadership, to that leadership which drummed up the orgy of massive resistance and which had always, as it has now even throughout the Deep South, power to maintain order.

In great areas of the South today, that leadership has been overthrown and replaced.

In those states and cities where it still exists, it acts still as the real agent provocatuer of turbulence and violence.

But the lesson of Jacksonville is also that wherever the white civic leadership -- religious, business, and political -- allows a racial crisis to develop and spill into the streets (whether by indifference or inattentiveness to the justified impatience of Negroes with tokenism or less, or by rebuff of Negro efforts to effect change through discussion and joint planning, or by other failures), then it invites violence in.

Beyond prudent doubt, the next six months will be packed with crisis and decision for the South and for the nation. Every indication points to protest activity of an extent and an intensity without precedent, not only in the South but in the North as well. The Senate filibuster

wears on. When it is finally over and defeated, and a law is passed, the issue in the South will be compliance. In both Summer and early Fall, some of the most recalcitrant school districts of the Deep South will be under court order to desegregate. And in the background of all this, there will be the excitement of the Presidential campaign and many state races.

With the lesson of Jacksonville in mind, the expectations for this Spring and Summer for every community of the South seem to hinge around such questions as the following:

- What guarantees are there that a racial crisis might not set off the energies of mobs, whether of white or Negro students full of spring feverishness, or of white or Negro victims of impoverishment, sullen in their slums?
- What policies and tools (such as an honorable biracial committee) give responsible Negro leaders any hope that their just demands will be met, short of the creation of a race crisis?
- And finally, what is the unspoken communication of community leadership toward violence? In Jacksonville, it seemed to be the

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message that violence works. The two days of rioting accomplished the creation of an apparently effective biracial committee, something that weeks of urging had not accomplished. They seemed on their way to accomplishing in the field of public accommodations desegregation and the meeting of civic responsibility what three years of patient negotiation had not been able to achieve. Is this the message that will come from other communities, to shape the emotional climate and mood during the crucial, turning-point Spring and Summer coming upon the South?