

GOLDWATER

AND THE

WHITE BACKLASH

BY TOM KAHN

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The "White backlash" from which Barry Goldwater is expected to benefit can be blamed on the civil rights movement in only one sense: that the militance of the movement have not actually altered the institutional conditions which foster racism.

In other words, the rhetoric, ideology, and pressurized militance of the Negro movement have convinced some whites that the Negro is pushing too hard, by which they think he is progressing too fast. They think he is getting more and more of what he wants yet growing in appetite, and unreasonableness, and selfishness. Thus the white worker who feels that the Negro is not content with equal rights but interprets equal rights to mean displacing the white worker from his job.

The tragedy, of course, is that the conditions of Negro life have not significantly improved since 1954, which some would see as the beginning of the Negro revolution. Indeed, a deterioration of the Negro's position with regard to housing, schools, and jobs can be demonstrated. (See my pamphlet, The Economics of Equality, published by the League for Industrial Democracy.)

For many white Americans, an objective examination of the socio-economic fact of Negro life is more difficult than an emotional oversimplified response based on "personal experience." But such an examination is crucial for liberals and radicals who have insisted upon the institutional sources of racism and demanded that institutional changes proceed not gradually but rapidly and not wait upon changes in attitudes, which may well evolve only gradually.

What follows is therefore intended to buttress the argument that while strategic changes of emphasis may be necessary for the civil rights movement, in view of the experiences of this political year, more not less radical social and

economic demands must be pressed. The Harlem riots, which should have surprised no one, are not an indictment of Negroes for ingratitude toward the civil rights bill but an indictment of the view that Negro aspirations and social justice could be satisfied through an extension of legal or merely civil rights, without reference to the social and economic inequalities historically interwoven with the denial of those rights.

The "white backlash" then is part and parcel of an American tradition which holds that once the legal disabilities are cleared from an individual's path, full opportunity to succeed has been guaranteed, subsequent success or failure is the individual's responsibility. That rugged individualism has been rendered an obsolete philosophy by the technology of modern society is a proposition Americans presumably recognized during the New Deal and in coping, though inadequately and piecemeal, with several social evils since.

Nonetheless, a peculiar burden has been placed on the Negro because his anger and militance are the only conspicuous manifestations of the revolt of the poor to emerge thus far.

Thus, the tactics and language of protest which the affluent respectable society finds objectionable in any case, it views in racial terms because it has not yet seen comparable expressions from dispossessed whites. In this sense the white backlash is partly a class reaction cast for the present in "racial mold" because the Negro is almost exclusively the visible portion of the submerged iceberg which is the "other America." For strategic considerations alone, the full emergence of that iceberg — the entry of the American poor (75% of whom are white) onto the stage of political action — is an essential next step for two reasons:

First, significant sections of the affluent population would be likely — on moral, religious, humanitarian, or other grounds — to support or identify more sympathetically with the protest of poor whites, which conjure up familiar

chapters of American history, including the New Deal era, than they can with the black poor from whose culture they are more alienated.

Second, those who fought against the social and economic demands of the white poor would have to do so along more overtly class lines than are tenable in an officially democratic society. Their exposure and isolation would be as clear-cut as the present "white backlash" is confused. Certainly the redrawn battle lines would be more advantageous to the cause of racial equality. Whatever the ultimate outcome, there would at least have emerged an interracial mass movement struggling for fundamental reforms in American society and projecting a national program toward that end. The Negro revolution would then have been rescued (for lack of a better word) from isolation and the "white backlash" would be confronted with a qualitatively different phenomenon.

Samuel Lubell's recent survey of the Southern political mood supports this thesis. The survey indicates that the strategy of Dixie's Goldwaterites is to wed racism and economic conservatism. They recognize that without the dynamic and mass appeal of racism, Goldwater's dusty 19th century economics can have no motor power, no life of its own. More importantly, Lubell finds that the hesitant caution that many Southern whites evince toward Goldwater is due precisely to his position on social security, medical care, and other bread-and-butter issues. Johnson's ability to carry the South hinges on whether he can ward off the marriage of Eastland and Adam Smith by a program for economic reform that captures the popular imagination.

It is doubtful whether he can do this without going far beyond the present "war on poverty". While present legislation is a step in the right direction, its quantitative inadequacy makes it vulnerable to Goldwater charges of election-year gimmickry. That the Goldwater critique is hypocritical, given the Senator's own non-program, is besides the point. The point is that Johnson's campaign has to be built around a program which the poor perceive as promising concrete, palpable, and fundamental changes in their condition of life.

If such a program emerges, this year may well see an influx of masses of hitherto non-voting, apathetic, and presumably "apolitical" Americans into the electorate. This would be little short of a political revolution, comparable in many respects to the Jacksonian upheaval or to the massive electoral shift that took place in 1936. What is the social character of this new electorate? To avoid skirmishing over labels, I throw these into the hopper--working class, lower class, poor, dispossessed, racial and ethnic minorities, etc.. Most of these elements have refrained from voting not out of any inherent incapacity for "good citizenship" but out of a demoralization and a sense of impotence bred by the failure of the major parties clearly to pose meaningful social alternatives. The passivity of these elements has been induced by the conviction that it really doesn't make much difference who gets elected--politicians are politicians.

There was no little justification for this condition in the last two decades, when elections pitted Tweedledee against Tweedledum. Previously, the political scene is decisively different in 1964. The depth of the difference, as stated above, depends on the extent to which the Johnson campaign focuses on the real issues and offers real--what we would call radical--programs.

As freedom fighters have well learned in recent years, this matter cannot be left in the hands of Johnson or of the Democratic Party. The Negro community, the labor movement, liberals and radicals--allies in a political coalition--will have to inscribe the slogans on the Johnson banner. The campaign to elect Johnson (their being no other practical way to defeat Goldwater) must proceed hand-in-hand with a campaign by the liberal coalition to capture effective control of the Democratic Party. Control implies more than the power to dictate the party's platform and political style; it means the ability to implement the platform--on the executive and legislative level--once the electoral victory is achieved.

The obstacles to such control are well known: the accumulated seniority of the party's Southern wing gives the Dixiecrats a majority of important committee chairmanships in the House and Senate. Senate Rule XXII strengthens the Dixiecrat's minority veto power, which they exercise in a coalition with conservative Republicans

This coalition has succeeded in impeding the enactment of major social legislation for two decades.

The likelihood is the Johnson will be re-elected. The question is whether his re-election will proceed simultaneously with a shift in the balance of power within the Democratic Party. Only if the Negro-labor-liberal coalition in effect becomes the Democratic Party (that is the majority party) can serious, far-reaching government programs be undertaken whose ultimate consequences will be the abolition of the social base of Goldwaterism in the U.S.

I mean programs to vastly accelerate racial integration of all American institutions without delay. This will take us beyond civil rights. Because class and color have become increasingly intertwined in the last ten years, racial integration implies corresponding degrees of economic integration. Housing integration means more than the banning of restrictive covenants; it means the demolition of slums and the subsidization of ~~low-income~~ families in middle-income housing. Fair employment, as I have tried to show in The Economics of Equality, can only be achieved in the context of full employment; this means federal public works programs, economic planning, and major readjustments to the changes that cybernation is creating in the structure of the labor force and of the economy generally. And surely future generations will hold us in contempt for haggling over bussing for the purpose of integrating schools when we live in a society whose potential material abundance is so enormous as virtually to eliminate physical obstacles to moral action.

Utilized in a massive program of national reconstruction, our material resources are our main weapons against the "white backlash"—or rather against the frustration, despair, ignorance, and purposelessness that gives rise to it. Whether those resources will be thus utilized is, in the broadest sense of the word, a political question.

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