LIBERAL ANALYSIS
AND
FEDERAL POWER

by TOM HAYDEN

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STUDENTS FOR A DEMOCRATIC SOCIETY

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At an increasing rate Americans are "informed" of bloody conflicts going on in the South. But tragically, facts are not weighted with passion, and reason tends to shy when its thrust points towards the need for drastic change. We seem blinded by the very way in which we analyze the given facts; intellectuals are placed at vantage points which, described as seats of reason, actually function to immunize the senses and turn incoming truths into trickling, instead of tidal, currents.

From such vantage points David Riesman and the editors of The New Republic recently reviewed the course of events in the South. Their observations and frail conclusions are reflections of the liberal conscience in a state of sincere worry, not the product of the cold war of imagination which frets about the adverse effect of our racism on the American image. However, much as the spirit of Riesman and The New Republic demand sympathetic respect, it is sometimes foolish to judge the open mind, the questioning spirit, as ipso facto good. From this liberal posture can come an ideology of inaction and irresponsibility, pronounced from heights of shelter and sophistication. This, unfortunately, seems true in this case.

Both Riesman and The New Republic editors are responding, in particular, to Howard Zinn's proposal for greater federal action in the South and, in general, to the broad question of what speed of social change is appropriate in segregated areas. Zinn has argued, in the October 26 New Republic and in the November-December Correspondent, that the federal government often refuses to implement its legal mandate to protect the constitutional rights of all citizens; that the government is denying the Constitution and the law when it claims to be legally helpless to act; that it is imperative to make the government enforce the law through the use of a special force of federal agents "to stand guard throughout the Deep South in the protection of the constitutional rights of the people in that region!"

Riesman and The New Republic restrict themselves only briefly to narrow aspects of the Zinn proposal. Riesman criticizes Zinn for "taking for granted" the possibility of Congress voting money for this federal force "when in fact they are hesitant to vote money for a domestic peace corps to do far less revolutionary things!" But surely Zinn would agree, and has done so in Nation articles - this, to him, is all the more reason for building intense pressure on Congress through demonstrations which make executive or congressional action imperative. The editorial in The New Republic skips this issue but points out that "obvious drawbacks" include the shift of responsibility for law enforcement from local to national levels - which, in case this concept seems radical, is only the implementation of the Constitution and the subordination of state rights to federalism.

From there, however, the liberals plunge into the deeper issues suggested by Zinn. Listing me as an ally of Zinn's, Riesman says that our remedy for the South is "in effect to elect Goldwater and then see what happens!" The "radicals" according to Riesman, argue for a policy "which would in effect expel the conservative and racist southerners from the Democratic Party, force them into the Republican Party, and have a real showdown between left Democrats and right Republicans!" This reminds Riesman of the radicals who criticized the Social-Democrats and the Weimar Republic, allegedly taking the risk of bringing Hitler to power "with the thought that things would have to get worse before they could get any better!" Riesman thinks a Goldwater election would be a "high price to pay for the ideological purity of our parties!"
The New Republic questions those "who believe that if the segregationists were subdued by force, they would of necessity change! Perhaps so, they go on in a historical vein, with which Riesman sympathizes, but on the other hand "force was tried once before, during Reconstruction, and the results were not exactly encouraging.... The long term objective of the civil rights movement should not be to subdue the white supremacist in the South, but to change him!"

The liberals are careful to point out that theirs are questions, not convinced judgments. They even muse. Riesman: "If I were a Mississippi or Alabama Negro at the end of a sheriff's prod, I might well feel (a Goldwater election) was a chance worth taking, although even then I might underestimate the degree to which my situation would become worse and the chance for escape from it even more attenuated!" The New Republic: "Still, unless the white southerners show a little more flexibility, Mr. Zinn's approach may be the only alternative to anarchy. That this would be a catastrophe for the nation and would probably eliminate hope for civilizing the South in the foreseeable future, does not make it impossible!"

These arguments are important not simply because of the serious regard in which the authors are held, but because they may signify a wave of liberal concern akin to the revulsion against extremism expressed by Theodore H. White in his very influential Life magazine article of Nov. 22. Therefore a critique must deal in detail with each point of the new skepticism.

First, the use of historical references establishes a deceptive wisdom. Even if one accepts the foggy argument that historical events can be translated into clear lessons for governing current behavior, the liberal interpretation of Weimar Germany and of southern Reconstruction are questionable. Riesman and The New Republic are irresponsible for neglecting the complexity and conflicting interpretation of both series of events to which they refer. It would be cruel, but deservingly reciprocal, were they themselves attacked as typical representatives of the timid liberals who were blind and rapidly optimistic while counter-revolutions in Germany and the American South were allowed to consolidate.

(If Riesman is arguing that Hitler could have been staved off if the German radical left had given greater support to the Weimar government, then I believe we are in polar disagreement. The only deterrent to Hitler at that time would have required the radicalization of the German liberals and social-democrats, and a socialist program with a viable movement of millions backing it. The real parallel, therefore, is between the liberals of both times who were unwilling to try to organize a strong left-wing. For two different but interesting chronicles of these times, see Joseph Buttinger's The Twilight of Socialism and Serge Chakotin's The Rape of the Masse. As for the parallel with Reconstruction, again: the facts can be arranged against Riesman and The New Republic editors. It is true that immediately after the Civil War, during Reconstruction, there was considerable violence between Negroes and whites. It is also true that Reconstruction was a key factor in establishing cohesion among white classes - big planters and small farmers - in the Democratic Party, where once there had been class antagonisms and growing left-populism. But it is also true that official segregation was not entrenched until the restraining liberal northern forces withdrew from the South, leaving southern aristocrats free to use vicious means to suppress the Negroes and the populists in the nineties. Two crucial instances of compromise were in the political events of 1877 and 1896. In the first, the "liberal" Radical Republicans won the presidency (Hayes over Tilden) through a compromise in which they pledged to withdraw troops and massively invest in the racist southern economy. In 1896, the Democratic Party nominated Bryan and adopted a radical populist rhetoric without expelling the reactionary southern wing of the party. This trapped the decent southern populists whose only remaining alternatives were equally dismal: to remain Democrats and be subordinate in the South to the controlling privileged class, or to join the Republicans who now were dominated by northern businesspeople and financiers. See V.O. Key's Southern Politics, C. Vann
A second essentially false issue is developed by the criticism of Zinn's "radicalism." This tends to place Zinn in the category of extremism, when in fact his proposal is bold but not revolutionary. There are many civil rights leaders who believe that violence or every disruption short of violence is now necessary to make this nation choose between paralysis and progress. Zinn's proposal is not for the nonviolent blockage of Montgomery; not for radical disruption of our cities North and South—though both of these ideas are discussed by reasonable men who are aware of the boiling level of the crisis. Zinn's suggestion is primarily legalistic. But the issue, say the liberals, is deeper than this. To them the questions are first, whether federal coercion will create a near-permanent resentment and alienation among whites and, second, whether this resentment will be expressed in irrational deeds of violence and a political swing, supported by anxious northern whites, to Goldwater Republicanism as a desperate "way out."

This fear is based on a theory of "too much," after which negative effects result from good actions. But after a century of southern anti-Yankee sentiment, after the troops in Little Rock and Oxford, would this new single act really erase the possibilities for a future reconciliation? I think not. It is this well-meant, but paranoid, reasoning which time and again leaves initiative to the worst among us. The racist still knows there is almost no limit to liberal toleration; when will the liberal know there is almost no limit to racist inflexibility? Even in the late November days when political warriors everywhere put down their swords and meditated together on the death of their president, the Dixiecrat bloc stayed intransigent and organized in the face of growing sentiment in favor of a civil rights bill. Perhaps the most shameful instance of this intractable realpolitik was their refusal to applaud at all during President Johnson's moving comments on civil rights before the assembled Congress just days after the assassination.

The southern segregationist Democrats are able to act in this spectacularly evil manner because they have learned that liberalism is defused, lacking a point of moral explosion. Liberal laxness and federal policies of laissez-faire in times of violence in the South, whether for decent or opportunistic or whatever reasons, help to breed the conditions in which segregationist horses have the incentive to rampage, "respectable" segregationist politicians and bosses permit the hatred of the horses to go unchecked, and white southerners of good heart keep regretfully silent in the absence of national protection.

Even if this be denied, it is far from established that the use of federal power itself contributes to the degeneration of white attitudes. In fact some research, for instance about the impact of the 1954 school segregation decision, supports the hypothesis that federal enforcement of law prepares the very conditions in which gradual social change can occur with minimal strain.

(See Carmichael and James, The Louisville Story (1957), for a study of the constructive impact of the Supreme Court's 1954 decision. For a sample of social science literature see David N. Herr, "The Sentiment of White Supremacy: An Ecological Study," American Journal of Sociology, Vol. 64 (May, 1959), pp. 592-98: "The will to preserve segregation among white southerners is held to be a direct function of the social and economic gain resulting therefrom and an inverse function of the guilt engendered by critical contact with the value system outside the South." For a more eloquent analysis see Martin Luther King's "Letter from a Birmingham Jail" to religious moderates, available from the Southern Christian Leadership Conference.)

Overlooked in the liberal analysis also are the counter-processes which make for structural integration of North and South and which are more powerful than the forces which divide. Chief among these at present are, first, the immigration of
entrepreneurs and the aged from North to South; second, the development of bureaus in southern industrial cities with greater national than regional ties. These trends and others hollow out the sick regional mystique and create a southern basis for opposition to the continuous violent white resistance to change which Riesman fears.

But what would happen at the polls? Would the Democrats lose? First of all, it is a myth that the South provided the decisive edge in the 1960 elections; if Kennedy had lost all the South and kept only his Northern victories, he still would have been elected. (See Thomas Hayden, "The Power of the Dixiecrats," New University Thought, December-January, 1963-64, pp. 6-16. "...Kennedy scored huge majorities in Negro areas of the North: 64 percent of the city vote in Baltimore, 75 percent in Boston, 64 in Chicago, 71 in Cleveland, 66 in Detroit, 54 in Los Angeles, 63 in New York, 68 in Philadelphia, 67 in Pittsburgh. Both Republican leader Thurston Morton and Robert Kennedy attributed Nixon's narrow defeat to a failure to hold the Negro voting percentages which Eisenhower secured in 1956 (Ike was supported by 36 percent, Nixon by less than 25 percent).

...Thanks to the South's pro-Democratic instincts, disclosed and undisclosed bargains, and the active work of Lyndon Johnson and Robert Kennedy, the President carried seven of the traditional ten southern states—but only five of them solidly. Excluding the Texas vote which Johnson personally captured, Kennedy's electoral advantage in the South was 70-43, with 14 Mississippi and six Alabama electors defecting from the New Frontier to vote independently. Kennedy reversed Ike's 1956 success in the South, when the GOP had swept to a 77-50 advantage in the same states. But it should be noted that JFK's surplus 27 votes from the South were still a "cushion" and not a decisive edge. The President finished 81 votes ahead of Nixon and 31 votes over the necessary 269 needed for an electoral college victory.") The new President, however, is likely to hold even more of the South than Kennedy could in 1964. This is true no matter how committed Johnson is to civil rights legislation, because he is a southerner and a long-time crony of many Dixiecrat oligarchs. Even if this interpretation, which points to a Democratic presidential victory in 1964, regardless of what action the government takes in the South, were inaccurate, today Riesman's earlier fear of a Goldwater triumph should be eased by polls which show the Arizonan slipping in popularity since November 22.

All the previous has been too abstractly sociological and political. It is a version of "strategic thinking" to be indulged in, but too fragile to count as the central basis for judgment in these matters. That it seems the basis for liberal judgment in this case is tragic. The primary basis, where such speculation about consequences is necessarily inconclusive, should be that of personal solidarity, of taking sides with the southern Negro in his immediate plight where he is facing organized violence and terror. If they thought in this fashion, the New Republic editors would have to go to the Deep South themselves to work on civil rights, or they would have to advocate an effective immediate support for the Negroes in their war for the vote. If the Negro is not supported in the immediate Black Belt crisis, he is either subdued or tortured.

The problem is that the institutions of gradualism are perverted in too many places of the nation, and missing altogether in the Black Belt. The courts at local and state levels are segregationist, and at federal levels they are too slow to prevent murder and suffering. The schools are barely "mixed" and remain vehicles for conformity to racist ideology. The unions hardly exist, and where they do, it is under extreme victimization by business and state power. The police, state and local, are executioners. The politicians are venal men locally and, nationally, as Riesman himself says, are unwilling to legislate the needed remedies. As a result of these circumstances, in Mississippi, people are starved out by Leflore County officials; in Georgia, Negro churches are burned in Dougherty County; in Alabama, little girls are bombed in their pews; in South Carolina, students are