VIl: The Summer of Our Discontent

More than twenty-five years ago, one of the southern states adopted a new method of capital punishment. Poison gas supplanted the gallows. In its earliest stages, a microphone was placed inside the sealed death chamber so that scientific observers might hear the words of the dying prisoner to judge how the human reacted in this novel situation.

The first victim was a young Negro. As the pellet dropped into the container, and the gas curled upward, through the microphone came these words: "Save me, Joe Louis. Save me, Joe Louis. Save me, Joe Louis. . .

It is heartbreaking enough to ponder the last words of any person dying by force. It is even more poignant to contemplate the words of this boy because they reveal the helplessness, the loneliness and the profound despair of Negroes in that period. The condemned young Negro, groping for someone who might care for him, and had power enough to rescue him, found only the heavyweight boxing champion of the world. Joe Louis would care because he was a Negro. Joe Louis could do something because he was a fighter. In a few words, the dying man had written a social commentary. Not God, not government, not charitably minded white men, but a Negro who was the world's most expert fighter, in this last extremity, was the last hope.

Less than three decades later, Negroes have discovered the fighting spirit, and the power, each within himself. Voluntarily facing death in many places, they have relied upon their own united ranks for strength and protection. In the summer of 1963, the bizarre and naive cry to Joe Louis was replaced by a mighty shout of challenge. Helplessness was replaced by confidence as hundreds of thousands of Negroes discovered that organization, together with nonviolent direct action, was explosively, powerfully and socially transforming.

As if to dramatize the change, that summer in Birmingham another Negro world heavyweight champion appeared on the turbulent scene. Floyd Patterson came to Birmingham not as a savior, but because he felt he belonged with his people. At no moment in his pugilistic career was Patterson more of a champion than the day he appeared, far from his comfortable home, to give heart to the plain people who were engaged in another kind of bruising combat.

To measure the gains of the summer by doing some social bookkeeping—to add up the thousands of integrated restaurants, hotels, parks and swimming pools; to total the new job openings; to list the towns and cities where the victory banners now float—would be to tell less than the whole story. The full dimensions of victory can be found only by comprehending the change within the minds of millions of Negroes. From the depths in which the spirit of freedom was imprisoned, an impulse for liberty burst through. The Negro became, in his own estimation, the equal of any man. In the summer of 1963, the Negroes of America wrote an emancipation proclamation to themselves. They shook off three hundred years of psychological slavery and said: "We can make ourselves free."

The old order ends, no matter what Bastilles remain, when the enslaved, within themselves, bury the psychology of servitude. This is what happened last year in the unseen chambers of millions of minds. This was the invisible but vast field of victory.

"Am I just imagining it," asked a white business executive, "or are the Negroes I see around town, walking a little straighter these days?" "It makes you feel this way," said a Negro organizational leader. "At last, by God, at last!"

For hundreds of years the quiet sobbing of an oppressed people had been unheard by millions of white Americans—the bitterness of the Negroes' lives remote and unfelt except by a sensitive few Suddenly last summer the silence was broken. The lament became a shout and then a roar and for months no American, white or Negro, was insulated or unaware. The stride toward freedom lengthened and accelerated into a gallop, while the whole nation looked on. White America was forced to face the ugly facts of life as the Negro thrust himself into the consciousness of the country, and dramatized his grievances on a thousand brightly lighted stages. No period in American history save the Civil War and the Reconstruction, records such breadth and depth to the Negro's drive to alter his life. No period records so many thaws in the frozen patterns of segregation.

It would have been pleasant to relate that Birmingham settled down after the storm, and moved constructively to justify the hopes of the many who wished it well. It would have been pleasant, but it would not be true. After partial and grudging compliance with some of the settlement terms, the

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twentieth-century night riders had yet another bloodthirsty turn on the stage. On one horror-filled September morning they blasted the lives from four innocent girls studying in their Sunday-school class. Police killed another child in the streets, and hate-filled white youths climaxed the day with a wanton murder of a Negro boy harmlessly riding his bicycle.

These were terrible deeds but they are strangely less terrible than the response of the dominant white community. If humane people expected the local leadership to express remorse, they were to be disappointed. If they hoped that a sense of atonement would quicken the pace of constructive change, the hope was destined to die a cold death. Instead the small beginnings of good will seemed to wither. The City Council adamantly refused to appoint Negro policemen. The merchants took a few steps forward within the limited terms of the settlement, but construed it as narrowly as possible. The city did desegregate the library, the golf course and later the schools and public buildings, all of which were beyond the scope of the agreement. Yet a bleakness of spirit militated against wholehearted progress. Perhaps the poverty of conscience of the white majority was most clearly illustrated at the funeral of the child martyrs. No white official attended. No white faces could be seen save for a pathetically few courageous ministers. More than children were buried that day; honor and decency were also interred.

A few white voices spoke out boldly, but few people listened with sympathy. The speech of Charles Morgan, delivered in the aftermath of the Sunday school bombing, was a brave indictment of collective guilt. As a result of his forthrightness, Morgan, a prominent lawyer, was forced to abandon his practice and, with his wife and family, to leave the state.

Looking away from the political leaders, Birmingham's Negroes sought from industry a sign that it would encourage meaningful action in the spirit of the May agreement. The industry leaders were not only independent and capable, but their ownership was largely located in the North. U.S. Steel does not have to fear southern hatemongers. It is an economic oligarchy of giant power not only in Birmingham, but in the nation and the world. After months, its chairman, Roger Blough, declared from New York that despite U.S. Steel' preeminence in Birmingham, it would be improper for the corporation to seek to influence community policies in race relations. "We have fulfilled our responsibility in the Birmingham area," he said. If the community had enacted unreasonable taxes, or ordinances adversely affecting production, there is no doubt that the power of U.S. Steel would have been swiftly unleashed to determine a different result. Profits were not affected by racial injustice; indeed, they were benefited. Only people were hurt, and the greatest single power in Birmingham turned its back

At this point many observers began to charge that Birmingham had become the Waterloo of nonviolent direct action. The question had to be faced whether white resistance was so recalcitrant that all the heroism, daring and sacrifice of Negroes had ended, in Eliot words: "Not with a bang but a whimper."

One hundred and seventy-five years ago, ordinary New England farmers tried to hold a hill against brilliantly trained English troops. The American farmers were outgunned and outnumbered; they had no military training, and no military discipline. But they broke two British charges on sheer nerve and spirit. Finally, running out of gun powder, they were routed. The army of King George held the hill. But Bunker Hill became a shrine of the American Revolution, and in the years of the Revolution that followed, wherever the embattled colonists marched, the Battle of Bunker Hill was an inspiration for victory. The climaxing victory at Yorktown is less well remembered than the valiant stand on the heights over Boston.

At Bunker Hill the "rabble" became an army. The British won the hill, but the colonists won their self-respect and the profound respect of their enemy. In the succeeding years of the war, the British would never again attempt to take a fortified position from the Americans. The vanquished won the war on that hill—the victors lost it.

Birmingham was different only in the sense that the Negroes did not retreat, and they won some significant gains. The desegregation of lunch counters, libraries, schools on a token basis may seem a small breach in the enormous fortress of injustice, but considering the strength of the fortress, it was a towering achievement. And Birmingham did more than this. It was a fuse—it detonated a revolution that went on to win scores of other victories.

There is a lull in Birmingham at this writing. My preference would have been to resume demonstrations in the wake of the September bombings, and I strongly urged militant action without delay. But some of those in our movement held other views. Against the formidable adversaries we faced, the

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fullest unity was indispensable, and I yielded. The Birmingham power structure still has an opportunity to fulfill its promises voluntarily. Whether it will act willingly, or only after renewed demonstrations, is for white Birmingham to determine. That it will finally have to act is as certain as the fact that Bunker Hill is today part of the United States of America.

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There had been no general staff of the Revolution, and no national plan of operations. There could be no reliable records to compute the gains. Yet no one could doubt that as the Negro left 1963 behind he had taken the longest and fastest leap forward in a century.

No revolution is executed like a ballet. Its steps and gestures are not neatly designed and precisely performed. In our movement, the spontaneity of its pattern was particularly in evidence. Injustice, discrimination and humiliation stood on every street corner, in every town, North and South. The selection of target cities was random. Wherever there was creative Negro leadership, wherever the white power structure responded clumsily and arrogantly, there a new storm center whirled into being.

Some cities embroiled in the conflict were by no means the worst offenders. Savannah, Atlanta, Nashville were well in advance of other southern communities, but they were not spared. The experienced Negro leadership simply determined to take a longer step forward in these localities. In a host of other communities the protests represented only the beginning, and by the time the demonstrations had ended, only a partial victory had been won. Yet for these cities the beginning was a long and satisfactory distance from nothing.

But in some places the white power structure had frozen into position. Injustice was not an evil to be corrected even partially—it was an institution to be defended. Against the nonviolent army the segregationists marshaled their legions of hatred. America' shame acquired new place names: Oxford, Mississippi—mobs shrieking for blood attack federal marshals and before order is restored two men are dead. Jackson, Mississippi—Medgar Evers, courageous N.A.A.C.P. secretary, is assassinated from ambush. Gadsden, Alabama—a new and barbarous weapon is introduced for use against Negroes, the electric cattle prod. Danville, Virginia—upright white citizens, concerned that police brutality is insufficient to intimidate Negroes, begin wearing guns in their belts.

Cambridge, Maryland, and Rome, Georgia, differed from one another in degrees of bitterness and brutality, but not in attitudes of resistance. From one perspective these engagements were all defeats for the movement. Yet from another viewpoint there were intangible elements of victory. Despite the worst these communities could inflict, they could not drive the Negroes apart. Their blows only served to unite our ranks, stiffen our resistance and tap our deepest resources of courage.

Seen in perspective, the summer of 1963 was historic partly because it witnessed the first offensive in history launched by Negroes along a broad front. The heroic but spasmodic and isolated slave revolts of the antebellum South had fused, more than a century later, into a simultaneous, massive assault against segregation. And the virtues so long regarded as the exclusive property of the white South—gallantry, loyalty and pride—had passed to the Negro demonstrators in the heat of the summer's battles.

In assessing the summer's events, some observers have tended to diminish the achievement by treating the demonstrations as an end in themselves. The heroism of the marching, the drama of the confrontation, became in their minds the total accomplishment. It is true that these elements have meaning, but to ignore the concrete and specific gains in dismantling the structure of segregation is like noticing the beauty of the rain, but failing to see that it has enriched the soil. A social movement that only moves people is merely a revolt. A movement that changes both people and institutions is a revolution.

The summer of 1963 was a revolution because it changed the face of America. Freedom was contagious. Its fever boiled in nearly one thousand cities, and by the time it had passed its peak, many thousands oflunch counters, hotels, parks and other places of public accommodation had become integrated.

Slowly and unevenly, job opportunities opened up for Negroes, though these were still more impressive in their promise than in their immediate numbers. In the larger northern cities, a more significant change in employment patterns took shape. Many firms found themselves under fire, not because they employed Negroes, but because they did not. Accustomed to ignoring the question, they were forced by its sudden overwhelming presence

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into a hasty search for absolving tokens. A well-trained Negro found himself sought out by industry for the first time. Many Negroes were understandably cynical as the door to opportunity was flung open to them as if they were but recent arrivals on the planet. Nevertheless, though the motives were mixed, the Negro could celebrate the slow retreat of discrimination on yet another front.

The sound of the explosion in Birmingham reached all the way to Washington, where the administration, which had firmly declared that civil-rights legislation would have to be shelved for 1963, hastily reorganized its priorities and placed a strong civil-rights bill at the top of the Congressional calendar. The task of turning the bill into law still lies ahead as I write, and the task of conforming custom to law must follow. But the surest guarantee that both will be achieved in the end is found in the massive alliance for civil rights that was formed in the summer of 1963.

With initial success, every social revolution simultaneously does two things: It attracts to itself fresh forces and strength, and at the same time it crystallizes the opposition. This Revolution conformed to the pattern. The positive growth of the movement was spectacular. Sympathy and support from white and Negro sources accelerated in geometric proportions. The number of S.C. L.C. affiliates jumped from 85 to 110. Conservatively estimated, more than one million Americans attended solidarity demonstrations in Washington, D.C., New York, Los Angeles, San Francisco, Cleveland, Chicago and Detroit, to mention but a few Equally significant, though less direct in expression, hundreds of national civic, religious, labor and professional organizations speaking for tens of millions went on record in resolutions of sympathy with the unfolding movement. Because such resolutions had for so long been merely lofty expressions of empty eloquence, embattled Negroes might justifiably have deprecated their value. However, a new quality enriched these recent declarations and gave them dynamic meaning. Recognizing that the movement was now dominantly one of direct nonviolent action, for the first time they specifically called upon their supporters to join the demonstrators on the line of active struggle. This was commitment, not comment.

Sheriffs and police officers found themselves grappling with an utterly novel situation. Nationally renowned religious leaders were taking their place in jail cells along with the ordinary Negro. Sitting in the patrol wagon between the Negro domestic and the truck driver was the erect figure of the national head of the Presbyterian Church. Catholic priests and rabbis of Jewish congregations took their place on the front lines as the Old and New Testament ethic of social justice flamed with the fire that once before had transformed a world.

The crystallized opposition of the segregationists was not unexpected; but we had only dimly foreseen the resistance that came from another quarter. Victor Hugo has spoken of the "madmen of moderation" who are "un-paving hell." The descendants of Hugo's moderates appeared in the fall of 1963, bearing banners inscribed with the message: Order Before Justice.

For the most part, these moderates counted themselves as friends of the civil-rights movement; certainly they were in no sense moral bedfellows of the forces of segregation and violence. But they were now wrestling with a logic that an earlier, more passive, movement had never forced them to question. They had long settled on a simple compromise, one easy to accept and to live with. They could countenance token changes, and they had always believed these would make the Negro content. They were not asking him to stay in his old ghetto. They were ready to build a brand-new ghetto for him with a small exit door for a few. But the breath of the new movement chilled them. The Negro was insisting upon the mass application of equality to jobs, housing, education and social mobility: He sought a full life for a whole people. These moderates had come some distance in step with the thundering drums, but at the point of mass application they wanted the bugle to sound a retreat.

Resentment, impatience with militancy, and aloofness began to overcome the earlier enthusiasm. It would be easy merely to denounce this mood or ignore it, but it would be the greater wisdom to understand it. These men and women, despite their hesitations, are not our main enemies. They are our temporary obstacles and potential allies.

They are evidence that the Revolution is now ripping into roots. For too long the depth of racism in American life has been underestimated. The surgery to extract it is necessarily complex and detailed. As a beginning it is important to X-ray our history and reveal the full extent of the disease. The strands of prejudice toward Negroes are tightly wound around the American character. The prejudice has been nourished by the doctrine of race inferiority. Yet to focus upon the Negro alone as the "inferior race" of American myth is to miss the broader dimensions of the evil.

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Our nation was born in genocide when it embraced the doctrine that the original American, the Indian, was an inferior race. Even before there were large numbers of Negroes on our shores, the scar of racial hatred had already disfigured colonial society. From the sixteenth century forward, blood flowed in battles over racial supremacy. We are perhaps the only nation which tried as a matter of national policy to wipe out its indigenous population. Moreover, we elevated that tragic experience into a noble crusade. Indeed, even today we have not permitted ourselves to reject or to feel remorse for this shameful episode. Our literature, our films, our drama, our folklore all exalt it.

Our children are still taught to respect the violence which reduced a red-skinned people of an earlier culture into a few fragmented groups herded into impoverished reservations. This is in sharp contrast to many nations south of the border, which assimilated their Indians, respected their culture, and elevated many of them to high position.

It was upon this massive base of racism that the prejudice toward the nonwhite was readily built, and found rapid growth. This long-standing racist ideology has corrupted and diminished our democratic ideals. It is this tangled web of prejudice from which many Americans now seek to liberate themselves, without realizing how deeply it has been woven into their consciousness.

The roots are deep, and this condition in turn influences the character of the Negro Revolution. Our history teaches us that wielding the sword against racial superiority is not effective. The bravery of the Indian, employing spears and arrows against the Winchester and the Colt, had ultimately to eventuate in defeat. On the other hand, history also teaches that submission produces no acceptable result. Nonresistance merely reinforces the myth that one race is inherently inferior to another. Negroes today are neither exercising violence nor accepting domination. They are disturbing the tranquillity of the nation until the existence of injustice is recognized as a virulent disease menacing the whole society, and is cured. The Negro's method of nonviolent direct action is not only suitable as a remedy for injustice; its very nature is such that it challenges the myth of inferiority. Even the most reluctant are forced to recognize that no inferior people could choose and successfully pursue a course involving such extensive sacrifice, bravery and skill.

We Americans have long aspired to the glories of freedom while we compromised with prejudice and servitude. Today the Negro is fighting for a finer America, and he will inevitably win the majority of the nation to his side because our hard-won heritage of freedom is ultimately more powerful than our traditions of cruelty and injustice.

To those who argue that Negroes are becoming too aggressive, and that their methods are alienating the dominant white population, there is a convincing answer. It was revealed in the survey conducted by Newsweek during the latter part of the summer of 1963. The surveyors interviewed a cross section of whites in depth. The striking result disclosed that overwhelming majorities favored laws to guarantee Negroes voting rights, job opportunities, good housing and integrated travel facilities. These majorities were found in the South as well as the North. Moreover, on the questions of integrated schools and restaurants, the same heavy majorities appeared in the North and the vote fell only barely short of a majority in the South.

The significant conclusion emerges that those whites without a vested interest in segregation have found acceptable exactly the changes that the nonviolent demonstrations present as their central demands. Those objectives Negroes have dramatized, fought for and defined have clearly become fair and reasonable demands to the white population, both North and South. The summer of our discontent, far from alienating America' white citizens, brought them closer into harmony with its Negro citizens than ever before.

The thundering events of the summer required an appropriate climax. The dean of Negro leaders, A. Philip Randolph, whose gifts of imagination and tireless militancy had for decades dramatized the civil-rights struggle, once again provided the uniquely suitable answer. He proposed a March on Washington to unite in one luminous action all of the forces along the far-flung front.

It took daring and boldness to embrace the idea. The Negro community was firmly united in demanding a redress of grievances, but it was divided on tactics. It had demonstrated its ability to organize skillfully in single communities, but there was no precedent for a convocation of national scope and gargantuan size. Complicating the situation were innumerable prophets of doom who feared that the slightest incidence of violence would alienate Congress and destroy all hope of legislation. Even without disturbances, they were afraid that inadequate support by Negroes would reveal weaknesses that were better concealed.

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The debate on the proposal neatly polarized positions. Those with faith in the Negro's abilities, endurance and discipline welcomed the challenge. On the other side were the timid, confused and uncertain friends, along with those who had never believed in the Negro capacity to organize anything of significance. The conclusion was never really in doubt, because the powerful momentum of the revolutionary summer had swept aside all opposition.

Washington is a city of spectacles. Every four years, imposing presidential inaugurations attract the great and the mighty. Kings, prime ministers, heroes and celebrities of every description have been feted there for more than 150 years. But in its entire glittering history, Washington had never seen a spectacle of the size and grandeur that assembled there on August 28, 1963. Among the nearly 250,000 people who journeyed that day to the capital, there were many dignitaries and many celebrities, but the stirring emotion came from the mass of ordinary people who stood in majestic dignity as witnesses to their single-minded determination to achieve democracy in their time.

They came from almost every state in the union; they came in every form of transportation; they gave up from one to three days' pay plus the cost of transportation, which for many was a heavy financial sacrifice. They were good-humored and relaxed, yet disciplined and thoughtful. They applauded their leaders generously, but the leaders, in their own hearts, applauded their audience. Many a Negro speaker that day had his respect for his own people deepened as he felt the strength of their dedication. The enormous multitude was the living, beating heart of an infinitely noble movement. It was an army without guns, but not without strength. It was an army into which no one had to be drafted. It was white and Negro, and of all ages. It had adherents of every faith, members of every class, every profession, every political party, united by a single ideal. It was a fighting army, but no one could mistake that its most powerful weapon was love.

One significant element of the March was the participation of the white churches. Never before had they been so fully, so enthusiastically, so directly involved. One writer observed that the March "brought the country’s three major religious faiths closer than any other issue in the nation' peacetime history." It was officially endorsed by the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the U.S.A., the American Baptist Convention, the Brethren Church, the United Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A., and by thousands of congregations and ministers of the Lutheran and Methodist Churches. In the Archdiocese of New York, letters were read in 402 parishes quoting Cardinal Spellman's call for accelerated activity on racial justice, with an additional appeal from the Auxiliary Bishop and Vicar General of the Archdiocese, the Most Reverend John J. Maguire. In Boston, Cardinal Gushing named eleven priests as representatives to the occasion. In addition to the American Jewish Congress, whose president, Dr. Joachim Prinz, was one of the day' chairmen, virtually every major Jewish organization, religious and secular, endorsed the March and was heavily represented at the gathering.

In unhappy contrast, the National Council of the AFL-CIO declined to support the March and adopted a position of neutrality. A number of international unions, however, independently declared their support, and were present in substantial numbers. In addition, hundreds of local unions threw their full weight into the effort.

If anyone had questioned how deeply the summer's activities had penetrated the consciousness of white America, the answer was evident in the treatment accorded the March on Washington by all the media of communication. Normally Negro activities are the object of attention in the press only when they are likely to lead to some dramatic outbreak, or possess some bizarre quality. The March was the first organized Negro operation which was accorded respect and coverage commensurate with its importance. The millions who viewed it on television were seeing an event historic not only because of the subject, but because it was being brought into their homes.

Millions of white Americans, for the first time, had a clear, long look at Negroes engaged in a serious occupation. For the first time millions listened to the informed and thoughtful words of Negro spokesmen, from all walks of life. The stereotype of the Negro suffered a heavy blow. This was evident in some of the comment, which reflected surprise at the dignity, the organization and even the wearing apparel and friendly spirit of the participants. If the press had expected something akin to a minstrel show, or a brawl, or a comic display of odd clothes and bad manners, they were disappointed. A great deal has been said about a dialogue between Negro and white. Genuinely to achieve it requires that all the media of communication open their channels wide as they did on that radiant August day.

As television beamed the image of this extraordinary gathering across the border oceans, everyone who believed in man's capacity to better himself had a moment of inspiration and confidence in the future of the human race. And every dedicated American could be proud that a dynamic experience of democracy in his nation's capital had been made visible to the world.

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