VIII: Days to Come

One hundred and fifty years ago, when the Negro was a thing, a chattel whose body belonged to his white master, there were certain slaveowners who worked out arrangements whereby a slave could purchase himself, and become a "freedman." An enterprising young man who became enamored of a slave sweetheart worked desperately—in what time he could find away from his labors—and, over a period of years, amassed sufficient capital to earn his own liberation and that of his betrothed. Many a Negro mother, after toiling from dawn until sundown, would spend the remainder of the night washing clothes and putting away the pennies and nickels so earned until, with the passage of years, a few hundred dollars had been accumulated. Often she struggled and sacrificed to purchase not her own freedom but that of a son or daughter. The hard-earned dollars were paid to the slaveowner in exchange for a legal instrument of manumission which declared its holder relieved of the bondage of physical slavery.

As this movement grew, some Negroes devoted their lives to the purchase and liberation of others. A servant of Thomas Jefferson worked for some forty years and earned ten thousand dollars, with which she was able to obtain the liberation of nineteen fellow humans. Still later, a few dedicated and humanitarian white men took a crusade to the public for funds to ransom black people from the degradation which their abductors had imposed upon them. Even James Russell Lowell, who was opposed to compensated emancipation, wrote to a friend: "If a man comes and asks us to help him buy his wife or his child, what are we to do?"

"Help me buy my mother," or "Help me buy my child," was a poignant appeal. It brought the deep torture of black people's souls into stark and shocking focus for many whites to whom the horror of slavery had been emotionally remote.

As one approaches the emancipation of today’s Negro from all those traumatic ties that still bind him to slaveries other than the physical, this shadowed footnote, this half-forgotten history of a system that bartered dignity for dollars, stands as a painful reminder of the capacity of society to remain complacent in the midst of injustice. Today's average American may well shudder to think that such tawdry transactions were acceptable to his grandparents' parents. Yet that same American may not realize that callous indifference to human suffering exists to this day, when people who consider themselves men of good will are still asking: "What is the Negro willing to pay if we give him his freedom?"

This is not to say that today's society wants dollars and cents in order to grant the Negro his rights. But there is a terrible parallel between the outstretched and greedy hand of a slave trafficker who sold a Negro his own person, and the uplifted and admonishing finger of people who say today: "What more will the Negro expect if he gains such rights as integrated schools, public facilities, voting rights and progress in housing? Will he, like Oliver Twist, demand more?"

What is implied here is the amazing assumption that society has the right to bargain with the Negro for the freedom which inherently belongs to him. Some of the most vocal liberals believe they have a valid basis for demanding that, in order to gain certain rights, the Negro ought to pay for them out of the funds of patience and passivity which he has stored up for so many years. What these people do not realize is that gradualism and moderation are not the answer to the great moral indictment which, in the Revolution of 1963, finally came to stand in the center of our national stage. What they do not realize is that it is no more possible to be half free than it is to be half alive.

In a sense, the well-meaning or the ill-meaning American who asks: "What more will the Negro want?" or "When will he be satisfied?" or "What will it take to make these demonstrations cease?" is asking the Negro to purchase something that already belongs to him by every concept of law, justice and our Judeo Christian heritage. Moreover, he is asking the Negro to accept half the loaf and to pay for that half by waiting willingly for the other half to be distributed in crumbs over a hard and protracted winter of injustice. I would like to ask those people who seek to apportion to us the rights they have always enjoyed whether they believe that the framers of the Declaration of Independence intended that liberty should be divided into installments, doled out on a deferred-payment plan. Did not nature create birth as a single process? Is not freedom the negation of servitude? Does not one have to end totally for the other to begin?

It is because the Negro knows that no person—as well as no nation—can truly exist half slave and half free that he has embroidered upon his banners the significant word NOW The Negro is saying that the time has come for our nation to take that firm stride into freedom—not simply toward freedom —which will pay a long-overdue debt to its citizens of color. Centuries ago, civilization acquired the certain knowledge that man had emerged from barbarity only to the degree that he recognized his relatedness to his fellow man. Civilization, particularly in the United States, has long possessed the material wealth and resources to feed, clothe and shelter all of its citizens. Civilization has endowed man with the capacity to organize change, to conceive and implement plans. It is ironic that, for so many years, the armed forces of this nation, even in time of war, were prisoners of the southern system of segregation. The military establishment could tear a man away from his wife and child, and reorient, within weeks, his entire mode of life and conduct. But not until World War Il did the Army begin to conceive that it had the right, the obligation and the ability to say that a white man in uniform must respect the dignity of a black man in uniform.

We need a powerful sense of determination to banish the ugly blemish of racism scarring the image of America. We can, of course, try to temporize, negotiate small, inadequate changes and prolong the timetable of freedom in the hope that the narcotics of delay will dull the pain of progress. We can try, but we shall certainly fail. The shape of the world will not permit us the luxury of gradualism and procrastination. Not only is it immoral, it will not work It will not work because Negroes know they have the right to be free. It will not work because Negroes have discovered, in nonviolent direct action, an irresistible force to propel what has been for so long an immovable object. It will not work because it retards the progress not only of the Negro, but of the nation as a whole.

As certain as it is that a planned gradualism will not work, neither will unplanned spontaneity. When the locomotive of history roared through the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth, it left the nation's black masses standing forlornly at dismal terminals. They were unschooled, untrained, ill-housed, and ill-fed. The scientific achievements of today, particularly the explosive advance of automation, maybe blessings to our economy, but for the Negro they are a curse. Years back, the Negro could boast that 350,000 of his race were employed by the railroads. Today, less than 50,000 work in this area of transportation. This is but a symbol of what has happened in the coal mines, the steel mills, the packing houses, in all industries that once employed large numbers of Negroes. The livelihood of millions has dwindled down to a frightening fraction because the unskilled and semiskilled jobs they filled have disappeared under the magic of automation. In that separate culture of poverty in which the half-educated Negro lives, an economic depression rages today. To deal with this disaster by opening some doors to all, and all doors to some, amounts merely to organizing chaos.

What is true in the field of employment also applies to housing. We cannot tap the ghettos in order to screen out a few representative individuals, leaving others to wait in grim shacks and tenements. Nor can the vast ghettos of many cities be turned inside out in one convulsive gesture, spilling people of all varieties into one torrent to flow wherever the social gravity pulls. Either of these courses—gradualism or directionless spontaneity—would generate social turmoil both for the deprived and for the privileged.

Solutions to the complex plight of the Negro will not be easy. This does not signify that they are impossible. Recognizing these complexities as challenges rather than as obstacles, we will make progress if we freely admit that we have no magic. We will make progress if we accept the fact that four hundred years of sinning cannot be canceled out in four minutes of atonement. Neither can we allow the guilty to tailor their atonement in such a manner as to visit another four seconds of deliberate hurt upon the victim.

Recently, Roy Wilkins and I appeared on the television program Meet the Press. There were the usual questions about how much more the Negro wants, but there seemed to be a new undercurrent of implications related to the sturdy new strength of our movement. Without the courtly complexities, we were, in effect, being asked if we could be trusted to hold back the surging tides of discontent so that those on the shore would not be made too uncomfortable by the buffeting and onrushing waves. Some of the questions implied that our leadership would be judged in accordance with our capacity to "keep the Negro from going too far." The quotes are mine, but I think the phrase mirrors the thinking of the panelists as well as of many other white Americans.

The show did not permit time for an adequate answer to the implications behind the question: "What more does the Negro want?" When we say that the Negro wants absolute and immediate freedom and equality, not in Africa or in some imaginary state, but right here in this land today, the answer is disturbingly terse to people who are not certain they wish to believe it. Yet this is the fact. Negroes no longer are tolerant of or interested in compromise. American history is replete with compromise. As splendid as are the words of the Declaration of Independence, there are disquieting implications in the fact that the original phrasing was altered to delete a condemnation of the British monarch for his espousal of slavery. American history chronicles the Missouri Compromise, which permitted the spread of slavery to new states; the Hayes-Tilden Compromise, which withdrew the federal troops from the South and signaled the end of Reconstruction; the Supreme Court' compromise in Plessy v. Ferguson, which enunciated the infamous "separate but equal" philosophy. These measures compromised not only the liberty of the Negro but the integrity of America. In the bursting mood that has overtaken the Negro in 1963, the word "compromise" is profane and pernicious. The majority of Negro leadership is innately opposed to compromise. Even were this not true, no Negro leader today could divert the direction of the movement or its compelling and inspired forward motion.

Many of our white brothers misunderstand this fact because many of them fail to interpret correctly the nature of the Negro Revolution. Some believe that it is the work of skilled agitators who have the power to raise or lower the floodgates at will. Such a movement, maneuverable by a talented few, would not be a genuine revolution. This Revolution is genuine because it was born from the same womb that always gives birth to massive social upheavals —the womb of intolerable conditions and unendurable situations. In this time and circumstance, no leader or set of leaders could have acted as ringmasters, whipping a whole race out of purring contentment into leonine courage and action. If such credit is to be given to any single group, it might well go to the segregationists, who, with their callous and cynical code, helped to arouse and ignite the righteous wrath of the Negro. In this connection, I am reminded of something President Kennedy said to me at the White House following the signing of the Birmingham agreement.

"Our judgment of Bull Connor should not be too harsh," he commented. "After all, in his way, he has done a good deal for civil-rights legislation this year."

It was the people who moved their leaders, not the leaders who moved the people. Of course, there were generals, as there must be in every army. But the command post was in the bursting hearts of millions of Negroes. When such a people begin to move, they create their own theories, shape their own destinies, and choose the leaders who share their own philosophy. A leader who understands this kind of mandate knows that he must be sensitive to the anger, the impatience, the frustration, the resolution that have been loosed in his people. Any leader who tries to bottle up these emotions is sure to be blown asunder in the ensuing explosion.

A number of commentators have implied that a band of militants has seized the offensive and that the "sound and sensible" leaders are being drawn into action unwillingly in order to keep control from being wrested out of their hands. Certainly there are, and will continue to be, differences of opinion among Negro leaders, differences relating to certain specific, tactical moves; but to describe the meaning of recent events as the seizure of control by few who have driven out the rest exaggerates the importance of the differences. The enemies of racial progress—and even some of its "friends," who are "for it, but not so fast"—would delight in believing that there is chaos up front in the civil-rights ranks.

The hard truth is that the unity of the movement is a remarkable feature of major importance. The fact that different organizations place varying degrees of emphasis on certain tactical approaches is not indicative of disunity. Unity has never meant uniformity. If it had, it would not have been possible for such dedicated democrats as Thomas Jefferson and George Washington, a radical such as Thomas Paine and an autocrat such as Alexander Hamilton to lead a unified American Revolution. Jefferson, Washington, Paine and Hamilton could collaborate because the urge of the colonials to be free had matured into a powerful mandate. This is what has happened to the determination of the Negro to liberate himself. When the cry for justice has hardened into a palpable force, it becomes irresistible. This is a truth which wise leadership and a sensible society ultimately come to realize.

In the current struggle, there is one positive course of action. There is no alternative, for the alternative would connote a rear march, and the Negro, far from being willing to retrogress, is not even willing to mark time. In this Revolution no plans have been written for retreat. Those who will not get into step will find that the parade has passed them by.

Someone once wrote: "When you are right, you cannot be too radical; when you are wrong, you cannot be too conservative." The Negro knows he is right. He has not organized for conquest or to gain spoils or to enslave those who have injured him. His goal is not to capture that which belongs to someone else. He merely wants and will have what is honorably his. When these long-withheld rights and privileges are looked upon as prizes he seeks from impertinent greed, only one answer can come from the depths of a Negro' being. That answer can be summarized in the hallowed American words: "If this be treason, make the most of it."

The sooner our society admits that the Negro Revolution is no momentary outburst soon to subside into placid passivity, the easier the future will be for us all.  
  
Among the many vital jobs to be done, the nation must not only radically readjust its attitude toward the Negro in the compelling present, but must incorporate in its planning some compensatory consideration for the handicaps he has inherited from the past. It is impossible to create a formula for the future which does not take into account that our society has been doing something special against the Negro for hundreds of years. How then can he be absorbed into the mainstream of American life if we do not do something special for him now, in order to balance the equation and equip him to compete on a just and equal basis?

Whenever this issue of compensatory or preferential treatment for the Negro is raised, some of our friends recoil in horror. The Negro should be granted equality, they agree; but he should ask nothing more. On the surface, this appears reasonable, but it is not realistic. For it is obvious that if a man is entered at the starting line in a race three hundred years after another man, the first would have to perform some impossible feat in order to catch up with his fellow runner.

Several years ago, Prime Minister Nehru was telling me how his nation is handling the difficult problem of the untouchables, a problem not unrelated to the American Negro dilemma. The prime minister admitted that many Indians still harbor a prejudice against these long-oppressed people, but that it has become unpopular to exhibit this prejudice in any form. In part, this change in climate was created through the moral leadership of the late Mahatma Gandhi, who set an example for the nation by adopting an untouchable as his daughter. In part, it is the result of the Indian Constitution, which specifies that discrimination against the untouchables is a crime, punishable by imprisonment.

The Indian government spends millions of rupees annually developing housing and job opportunities in villages heavily inhabited by untouchables. Moreover, the prime minister said, if two applicants compete for entrance into a college or university, one of the applicants being an untouchable and the other of high caste, the school is required to accept the untouchable.

Professor Lawrence Reddick, who was with me during the interview, asked: "But isn't that discrimination?"

"Well, it may be," the prime minister answered. "But this is our way of atoning for the centuries of injustices we have inflicted upon these people."

America must seek its own ways of atoning for the injustices she has inflicted upon her Negro citizens. I do not suggest atonement for atonement's sake or because there is need for self-punishment. I suggest atonement as the moral and practical way to bring the Negro's standards up to a realistic level.

In facing the new American dilemma, the relevant question is not: "What more does the Negro want?" but rather: "How can we make freedom real and substantial for our colored citizens? What just course will ensure the greatest speed and completeness? And how do we combat opposition and overcome obstacles arising from the defaults of the past?"

New ways are needed to handle the issue because we have come to a new stage in the development of our nation and of one in ten of its people. The surging power of the Negro revolt and the genuineness of good will that has come from many white Americans indicate that the time is ripe for broader thinking and action.

The Negro today is not struggling for some abstract, vague rights, but for concrete and prompt improvement in his way of life. What will it profit him to be able to send his children to an integrated school if the family income is insufficient to buy them school clothes? What will he gain by being permitted to move to an integrated neighborhood if he cannot afford to do so because he is unemployed or has a low-paying job with no future? During the lunch counter sit-ins in Greensboro, North Carolina, a nightclub comic observed that, had the demonstrators been served, some of them could not have paid for the meal. Of what advantage is it to the Negro to establish that he can be served in integrated restaurants, or accommodated in integrated hotels, if he is bound to the kind of financial servitude which will not allow him to take a vacation or even to take his wife out to dine? Negroes must not only have the right to go into any establishment open to the public, but they must also be absorbed into our economic system in such a manner that they can afford to exercise that right.

The struggle for rights is, at bottom, a struggle for opportunities. In asking for something special, the Negro is not seeking charity. He does not want to languish on welfare rolls any more than the next man. He does not want to be given a job he cannot handle. Neither, however, does he want to be told that there is no place where he can be trained to handle it. So with equal opportunity must come the practical, realistic aid which will equip him to seize it. Giving a pair of shoes to a man who has not learned to walk is a cruel jest.

Special measures for the deprived have always been accepted in principle by the United States. The National Urban League, in an excellent statement, has underlined the fact that we find nothing strange about the Marshall Plan and technical assistance to handicapped peoples around the world, and suggested that we can do no less for our own handicapped multitudes. Throughout history we have adhered to this principle. It was the principle behind land grants to farmers who fought in the Revolutionary Army. It was inherent in the establishment of child labor laws, social security, unemployment compensation, manpower retraining programs and countless other measures that the nation accepted as logical and moral.

During World War Il, our fighting men were deprived of certain advantages and opportunities. To make up for this, they were given a package of veterans rights, significantly called a "Bill of Rights." The major features of this GI Bill of Rights included subsidies for trade school or college education, with living expenses provided during the period of study. Veterans were given special concessions enabling them to buy homes without cash, with lower interest rates and easier repayment terms. They could negotiate loans from banks to launch businesses, using the government as an endorser of any losses. They received special points to place them ahead in competition for civil-service jobs. They were provided with medical care and long-term financial grants if their physical condition had been impaired by their military service. In addition to these legally granted rights, a strong social climate for many years favored the preferential employment of veterans in all walks of life.

In this way, the nation was compensating the veteran for his time lost, in school or in his career or in business. Such compensatory treatment was approved by the majority of Americans. Certainly, the Negro has been deprived. Few people consider the fact that, in addition to being enslaved for two centuries, the Negro was, during all those years, robbed of the wages of his toil. No amount of gold could provide an adequate compensation for the exploitation and humiliation of the Negro in America down through the centuries. Not all the wealth of this affluent society could meet the bill. Yet a price can be placed on unpaid wages. The ancient common law has always provided a remedy for the appropriation of the labor of one human being by another. This law should be made to apply for American Negroes. The payment should be in the form of a massive program by the government of special, compensatory measures which could be regarded as a settlement in accordance with the accepted practice of common law Such measures would certainly be less expensive than any computation based on two centuries of unpaid wages and accumulated interest.

I am proposing, therefore, that, just as we granted a GI Bill of Rights to war veterans, America launch a broad-based and gigantic Bill of Rights for the Disadvantaged, our veterans of the long siege of denial.

Such a bill could adapt almost every concession given to the returning soldier without imposing an undue burden on our economy. A Bill of Rights for the Disadvantaged would immediately transform the conditions of Negro life. The most profound alteration would not reside so much in the specific grants as in the basic psychological and motivational transformation of the Negro. I would challenge skeptics to give such a bold new approach a test for the next decade. I contend that the decline in school dropouts, family breakups, crime rates, illegitimacy, swollen relief rolls and other social evils would stagger the imagination. Change in human psychology is normally a slow process, but it is safe to predict that, when a people is ready for change as the Negro has shown himself ready today, the response is bound to be rapid and constructive.

While Negroes form the vast majority of Americans disadvantaged, there are millions of white poor who would also benefit from such a bill. The moral justification for special measures for Negroes is rooted in the robberies inherent in the institution of slavery. Many poor whites, however, were the derivative victims of slavery. As long as labor was cheapened by the involuntary servitude of the black man, the freedom of white labor, especially in the South, was little more than a myth. It was free only to bargain from the depressed base imposed by slavery upon the whole labor market. Nor did this derivative bondage end when formal slavery gave way to the de facto slavery of discrimination. To this day the white poor also suffer deprivation and the humiliation of poverty if not of color. They are chained by the weight of discrimination, though its badge of degradation does not mark them. It corrupts their lives, frustrates their opportunities and withers their education. In one sense it is more evil for them, because it has confused so many by prejudice that they have supported their own oppressors.

It is a simple matter of justice that America, in dealing creatively with the task of raising the Negro from backwardness, should also be rescuing a large stratum of the forgotten white poor. A Bill of Rights for the Disadvantaged could mark the rise of a new era, in which the full resources of the society would be used to attack the tenacious poverty which so paradoxically exists in the midst of plenty.

The nation will also have to find the answer to full employment, including a more imaginative approach than has yet been conceived for neutralizing the perils of automation. Today, as the unskilled and semiskilled Negro attempts to mount the ladder of economic security, he finds himself in competition with the white working man at the very time when automation is scrapping forty thousand jobs a week. Though this is perhaps the inevitable product of social and economic upheaval, it is an intolerable situation, and Negroes will not long permit themselves to be pitted against white workers for an ever decreasing supply of jobs. "The energetic and creative expansion of work opportunities, in both the public and private sectors of our economy, is an imperative worthy of the richest nation on earth, whose abundance is an embarrassment as long as millions of poor are imprisoned and constantly self-renewed within an expanding population.

In addition to such an economic program, a social-work apparatus on a large scale is required. Whole generations have been left behind as the majority of the population advanced. These lost generations have never learned basic social skills on a functional level—the skills of reading, writing, arithmetic; of applying for jobs; of exercising the rights of citizenship, including the right to vote. Moreover, rural and urban poverty has not only stultified lives; it has created emotional disturbances, many of which find expression in anti-social acts. The most tragic victims are children, whose impoverished parents, frantically struggling day by day for food and a place to live, have been unable to create the stable home necessary for the wholesome growth of young minds.

Opportunities and the means to exploit them are, however, still inadequate to assure equality, justice and decency in our national life. There is an imperative need for legislation to outlaw our present grotesque legal mores. We find ourselves in a society where the supreme law of the land, the Constitution, is rendered inoperative in vast areas ofthe nation. State, municipal and county laws and practices negate constitutional mandates as blatantly as if each community were an independent medieval duchy. In the event that strong civil-rights legislation is written into the books in the session of Congress now sitting, and that a Bill of Rights for the Disadvantaged might follow, enforcement will still meet with massive resistance in many parts of the country.

In the thirties, the country was faced with a parallel challenge. Powerful and antagonistic elements all over the land were strongly resisting the efforts of workers to organize to secure a living wage and decent conditions of work. It is interesting to note that some of the states that today are opposing progress in civil rights were the same that defied the unions' efforts during the thirties. Then, as now, the task of penetrating to thousands of communities in order to ensure the rights of their citizens over the opposition of hostile interests posed a substantial and complex challenge to federal power.

The national government found a method of solving this problem. The Wagner Act was written, establishing the rights of labor to organize. Regional labor boards were appointed, armed with the power to ascertain facts, conduct elections, issue binding orders and, through the utilization of these powers, to compel compliance. Of course, the strength of a newly aroused labor movement, with a well-sharpened strike weapon, stimulated cooperation. The twofold effect of a comprehensive law, backed by a zealous government and the power of organized labor, within a few short years transformed thousands of strife-torn, antilabor citadels into orderly, unionized communities.

A law designed to operate in the fashion of the Wagner Act may well be the answer to some of the problems of civil-rights enforcement during the next decade. Recently, Senator Harrison Williams of New Jersey presented a bill to the Senate incorporating many similar proposals. Other senators searching for legislative solutions should be encouraged to consider measures along these lines.

The pattern of future action must be examined not only from the standpoint of the strengths inherent in the civil-rights movement, but simultaneously from a study of the resistance we have yet to face. While we can celebrate that the civil-rights movement has come of age, we must also recognize that the basic recalcitrance of the South has not yet been broken. True, substantial progress has been made: It is deeply significant that a powerful financial and industrial force has emerged in some southern regions, which is prepared to tolerate change in order to avoid costly chaos. This group in turn permits the surfacing of middle-class elements who are further splitting the monolithic front of segregation. Southern church, labor and human-relations groups today articulate sentiments that only yesterday would have been pronounced treasonable in the region. Nevertheless, a deeply entrenched social force, convinced that it need yield nothing of substantial importance, continues to dominate southern life. And even in the North, the will to preserve the status quo maintains a rocklike hardness underneath the cosmetic surface.

In order to assure that the work of democracy so well begun in the summer of 1963 will move forward steadily in the seasons to come, the Negro freedom movement will need to secure and extend its alliances with like-minded groups in the larger community. Already, in the complex dilemma of fast-paced progress and persistent poverty, the Negro has emerged as a dissatisfied, vibrant and powerful element, armed with a method for articulating and acting out his protest. His example has not gone unobserved by others, of all races, who live in equally desperate circumstances. Inevitably, before long, a broad-based legion of the deprived, white and Negro, will coalesce and restructure an old order based too long on injustice.

In the case of organized labor, an alliance with the Negro civil-rights movement is not a matter of choice but a necessity. If Negroes have almost no rights in the South, labor has few more; if Negroes have inadequate political influence in Congress, labor is barely better off; if automation is a threat to Negroes, it is equally a menace to organized labor.

The withholding of support from the March on Washington by the National Council of the AFL-CIO was a blunder, and served to strengthen the prevalent feeling that organized labor, not only on the national level but frequently on the local level as well, is lacking today in statesmanship, vigor and modernity. This default is all the more noticeable because labor's history contains a rich record of understanding toward racial issues. When labor fought for recognition during the thirties and forties, and thus became the principal "civil-rights" issue of the time, disadvantaged Negroes joined in its bitter struggles and shared every sacrifice. Negroes battling for their own recognition today have a right to expect more from their old allies. Nothing would hold back the forces of progress in American life more effectively than a schism between the Negro and organized labor.

Another necessary alliance is with the federal government. It is the obligation of government to move resolutely to the side of the freedom movement. There is a right and a wrong side in this conflict and the government does not belong in the middle.

Without the resources of the federal government, the task of achieving practical civil rights must overwhelm voluntary organization. It is not generally realized that the burden of court decision, such as the Supreme Court decision on school desegregation, places the responsibility on the individual Negro who is compelled to bring a suit in order to obtain his rights. In effect, the most impoverished Americans, facing powerfully equipped adversaries, are required to finance and conduct complex litigation that may involve tens of thousands of dollars. To have shaped remedies in this form for existing inequities in our national life was in itself a concession to segregationists. The unsound consequences of this procedure are hampering progress to this day. A solution can only be achieved if the government assumes the responsibility for all legal proceedings, facing the reality that the poor and the unemployed already fight an unequal daily struggle to stay alive. To be forced to accumulate resources for legal actions imposes intolerable hardships on the already overburdened.

Perhaps the most determining factor in the role of the federal government is the tone set by the chief executive in his words and his actions. In the past few years, I have met and talked with three presidents, and have grown increasingly aware of the play of their temperaments on their approach to civil rights, a cause that all three have espoused in principle.

No one could discuss racial justice with President Eisenhower without coming away with mixed emotions. His personal sincerity on the issue was pronounced, and he had a magnificent capacity to communicate it to individuals. However, he had no ability to translate it to the public. or to define the problem as a supreme domestic issue. I have always felt that he failed because he knew that his colleagues and advisers did not share his views, and he had no disposition to fight even for cherished beliefs. Moreover, President Eisenhower could not be committed to anything which involved a structural change in the architecture of American society. His conservatism was fixed and rigid, and any evil defacing the nation had to be extracted bit by bit with a tweezer because the surgeon' knife was an instrument too radical to touch this best of all possible societies.

President Kennedy was a strongly contrasted personality. There were, in fact, two John Kennedys. One presided in the first two years under pressure of the uncertainty caused by his razor-thin margin of victory. He vacillated, trying to sense the direction his leadership could travel while retaining and building support for his administration. However, in 1963, a new Kennedy had emerged. He had found that public opinion was not in a rigid mold. American political thought was not committed to conservatism, nor radicalism, nor moderation. It was above all fluid. As such it contained trends rather than hard lines, and affirmative leadership could guide it into constructive channels.

President Kennedy was not given to sentimental expressions of feeling. He had, however, a deep grasp of the dynamics of and the necessity for social change. His work for international amity was a bold effort on a world scale. His last speech on race relations was the most earnest, human and profound appeal for understanding and justice that any president has uttered since the first days of the Republic. Uniting his flair for leadership with a program of social progress, he was at his death undergoing a transformation from a hesitant leader with unsure goals to a strong figure with deeply appealing objectives.

The assassination of President Kennedy killed not only a man but a complex of illusions. It demolished the myth that hate and violence can be confined in an airtight chamber to be employed against but a few Suddenly the truth was revealed that hate is a contagion; that it grows and spreads as a disease; that no society is so healthy that it can automatically maintain its immunity. If a smallpox epidemic had been raging in the South, President Kennedy would have been urged to avoid the area. There was a plague afflicting the South, but its perils were not perceived.

Negroes tragically know political assassination well. In the life of Negro civil-rights leaders, the whine of the bullet from ambush, the roar of the bomb have all too often broken the night's silence. They have replaced lynching as a political weapon. More than a decade ago, sudden death came to Mr. and Mrs. Harry T. Moore, N.A.A.C.P. leaders in Florida. The Reverend George Lee of Belzoni, Mississippi, was shot to death on the steps of a rural courthouse. The bombings multiplied. Nineteen sixty-three was a year of assassinations. Medgar Evers in Jackson, Mississippi; William Moore in Alabama; six Negro children in Birmingham—and who could doubt that these too were political assassinations?

The unforgivable default of our society has been its failure to apprehend the assassins. It is a harsh judgment, but undeniably true, that the cause of the indifference was the identity of the victims. Nearly all were Negroes. And so the plague spread until it claimed the most eminent American, a warmly loved and respected president. The words of Jesus "Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me" were more than a figurative expression; they were a literal prophecy.

We were all involved in the death of John Kennedy. We tolerated hate; we tolerated the sick stimulation of violence in all walks of life; and we tolerated the differential application of law, which said that a man’s life was sacred only if we agreed with his views. This may explain the cascading grief that flooded the country in late November. We mourned a man who had become the pride of the nation, but we grieved as well for ourselves because we knew we were sick.

In sadness and remorse the American people have searched for a monument big enough to honor John Kennedy. Airports, bridges, space centers and highways now bear his name. Yet the foundations for the most majestic tribute of all were laid in the days immediately following his death. Louis Harris, polling a cross section of the country for its reaction to the assassination, wrote that 'the death of President Kennedy produced a profound change in the thinking of the American people; a massive rejection of extremism from either right or left, accompanied by an individual sense of guilt for not working more for tolerance toward others." If the tragically premature end of John Kennedy will prove to have so enlarged the sense of humanity of a whole people, that in itself will be a monument of enduring strength.

I had been fortunate enough to meet Lyndon Johnson during his tenure as vice president. He was not then a presidential aspirant, and was searching for his role under a man who not only had a four-year term to complete but was confidently expected to serve out yet another term as chief executive. Therefore, the essential issues were easier to reach, and were unclouded by political considerations.

His approach to the problem of civil rights was not identical with mine—nor had I expected it to be. Yet his careful practicality was nonetheless clearly no mask to conceal indifference. His emotional and intellectual involvement were genuine and devoid of adornment. It was conspicuous that he was searching for a solution to a problem he knew to be a major shortcoming in American life. I came away strengthened in my conviction that an undifferentiated approach to white southerners could be a grave error, all too easy for Negro leaders in the heat of bitterness. Later, it was Vice President Johnson I had in mind when I wrote in The Nation that the white South was splitting, and that progress could be furthered by driving a wedge between the rigid segregationists and the new white elements whose love of their land was stronger than the grip of old habits and customs.

Today, the dimensions of Johnson's leadership have spread from a region to a nation. His recent expressions, public and private, indicate that he has a comprehensive grasp of contemporary problems. He has seen that poverty and unemployment are grave and growing catastrophes, and he is aware that those caught most fiercely in the grip of this economic holocaust are Negroes. Therefore, he has set the twin goal of a battle against discrimination within the war against poverty.

I have no doubt that we may continue to differ concerning the tempo and the tactical design required to combat the impending crisis. But I do not doubt that the president is approaching the solution with sincerity, with realism and, thus far, with wisdom. I hope his course will be straight and true. I will do everything in my power to make it so by outspoken agreement whenever proper, and determined opposition whenever necessary.

For many months during the election campaign of 1960, my close friends urged me to declare my support for John Kennedy. I spent many troubled hours searching for the responsible and fair decision. I was impressed by his qualities, by many elements of his record, and by his program. I had learned to enjoy and respect his charm and his incisive mind. Beyond that I was personally obligated to him and to his brother, Robert Kennedy, for their intervention during my 1960 imprisonment in Georgia.

However, I felt that the weight of history was against a formal endorsement. No president except perhaps Lincoln had ever sufficiently given that degree of support to our struggle for freedom to justify our confidence. I had to conclude that the then known facts about Kennedy were not adequate to make an unqualified judgment in his favor. Today, I still deeply believe that the civil-rights movement must retain its independence. And yet, had President Kennedy lived, I would probably have endorsed him in the forthcoming election.

I did not arrive at this conclusion only because I learned to repose more confidence in President Kennedy. Perhaps more basic is the fact that a new stage in civil rights has been reached, which calls for a new policy. What has changed is our strength. The upsurge of power in the civil-rights movement has given it greater maneuverability, and substantial security. It is now strong enough to form alliances, to make commitments in exchange for pledges, and if the pledges are unredeemed, it remains powerful enough to walk out without being shattered or weakened.

Negroes have traditionally positioned themselves too far from the inner arena of political decision. Few other minority groups have maintained a political aloofness and a nonpartisan posture as rigidly and as long as Negroes. The Germans, Irish, Italians, and Jews, after a period of acclimatization, moved inside political formations and exercised influence. Negroes, partly by choice but substantially by exclusion, have operated outside of the political structures, functioning instead essentially as a pressure group with limited effect.

For some time, this reticence protected the Negro from corruption and manipulation by political bosses. The cynical district leader directing his ignorant flock to vote blindly at his dictation is a relatively rare phenomenon in Negro life. The very few Negro political bosses have no gullible following. Those who give them support do so because they are persuaded that these men are their only available forthright spokesmen. By and large, Negroes remain essentially skeptical, issue-oriented, and independent-minded. Their lack of formal learning is no barrier when it comes to making intelligent choices among alternatives.

The Negroes' real problem has been that they have seldom had adequate choices. Political life, as a rule, did not attract the best elements of the Negro community, and white candidates who represented their views were few and far between. However, in avoiding the trap of domination by unworthy leaders, Negroes fell into the bog of political inactivity. They avoided victimization by any political group by withholding a significant commitment to any organization or individual.

The price they paid was reflected in the meager influence they could exercise for a positive program. But in the more recent years, as a result of their direct-action programs, their political potentiality has become manifest both to themselves and to the political leadership. An active rethinking is taking place in all Negro circles concerning their role in political life. The conclusion is already certain: It is time for Negroes to abandon abstract political neutrality and become less timid about voting alliances. If we bear in mind that alliance does not mean reliance, our independence will remain inviolate. We can and should selectively back candidates whose record justifies confidence. We can, because of our strength; we should, because those who work with us must feel we can help them concretely. Conversely, those who deny us their support should not feel that no one will get our help, but instead they must understand that when they spurn us it is likely not only that they will lose, but that their opponent will gain.

The Negro potential for political power is now substantial. Negroes are strategically situated in large cities, especially in the North but also in the South, and these cities in turn are decisive in state elections. These same states are the key in a presidential race, and frequently determine the nomination. This unique factor gives Negroes enormous leverage in the balance of power. The effects of this leverage are already evident. In South Carolina, for example, the 10,000-vote margin that gave President Kennedy his victory in 1960 was the Negro vote. Since then, some half a million new Negro voters have been added to southern registration rolls. Today a shift in the Negro vote could upset the outcome of several state contests, and affect the result of a presidential election.

Moreover, the subjective elements of political power—persistence, aggressiveness and discipline—are also attributes of the new movement. Political leaders are infinitely respectful toward any group that has an abundance of energy to ring doorbells, man the street corners and escort voters to the polls. Negroes in their demonstrations and voter-registration campaigns have been acquiring excellent training in just these tasks. They also have discipline perhaps beyond that of any other group, because it has become a condition of survival. Consider the political power that would be generated if the million Americans who marched in 1963 also put their energy directly into the electoral process.

Already, in some states and cities in the South, a de facto alliance of Negro and sympathetic white voters has elected a new type of local official— non-integrationist, but non-segregationist too. As Negroes extend their energetic voting and registration campaigns, and attain bloc-voting importance, such officials will move from dead center and slowly find the courage to stand unequivocally for integration.

On the national scene, the Congress today is dominated by southern reactionaries whose control of the key committees enables them to determine legislation. Disenfranchisement of the Negro and the non-exercise of the vote by poor whites have permitted the southern congressman to wrest his election from a tiny group, which he manipulates easily to return him again and again to office. United with northern reactionaries, these unrepresentative legislators have crippled the country by blocking urgently needed action. Only with the growth of an enlightened electorate, white and Negro together, can we put a quick end to this century-old stranglehold of a minority on the nation' legislative processes.

There are those who shudder at the idea of a political bloc, particularly a Negro bloc, which conjures up visions of racial exclusiveness. This concern is, however, unfounded. Not exclusiveness but effectiveness is the aim of bloc voting; by forming a bloc a minority makes its voice heard. The Negro minority will unite for political action for the same reason that it will seek to function in alliance with other groups—because in this way it can compel the majority to listen.

It is well to remember that blocs are not unique in American life, nor are they inherently evil. Their purposes determine their moral quality. In past years, labor, farmers, businessmen, veterans, and various national minorities have voted as blocs on various issues, and many still do. If the objectives are good, and each issue is decided on its own merits, a bloc is a wholesome force on the political scene. Negroes are, in fact, already voting spontaneously as a bloc. They voted overwhelmingly for President Kennedy and before that for President Roosevelt. Development as a conscious bloc would give them more flexibility, more bargaining power, more clarity and more responsibility in assessing candidates and programs. Moreover a deeper involvement as a group in political life will bring them more independence. Consciously and creatively developed, political power may well, in the days to come, be the most effective new tool of the Negro's liberation.

Because Negroes can quite readily become a compact, conscious and vigorous force in politics, they can do more than achieve their own racial goals. American politics needs nothing so much as an injection of the idealism, self-sacrifice and sense of public service which is the hallmark of our movement. Until now, comparatively few major Negro leaders of talent and unimpeachable character have involved themselves actively in partisan politics. Such men as Judge William Hastie, Ralph Bunche, Benjamin Mays, A. Philip Randolph, to name but a few, have remained aloof from the political scene. In the coming period, they and many others must move out into political life as candidates and infuse it with their humanity, their honesty and their vision.

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For whatever demands the Negro justly makes on his fellow citizens are not an effort to lift responsibility from himself. His tasks are still fundamental, involving risks and sacrifices which he has already proved himself prepared to make. In addition, he will have to learn new skills, new duties, and creatively and constructively to embrace a new way of life. Ask a prisoner released after years of confinement in jail what efforts he faces in taking on the privileges and responsibilities of freedom, and the enormity of the Negroes' task in the years ahead becomes clear.

One aspect of the civil-rights struggle that receives little attention is the contribution it makes to the whole society. The Negro in winning rights for himself produces substantial benefits for the nation. Just as a doctor will occasionally reopen a wound, because a dangerous infection hovers beneath the half-healed surface, the revolution for human rights is opening up unhealthy areas in American life and permitting a new and wholesome healing to take place. Eventually the civil-rights movement will have contributed infinitely more to the nation than the eradication of racial injustice. It will have enlarged the concept of brotherhood to a vision of total interrelatedness. On that day, Canon John Donne' doctrine, "no man is an island," will find its truest application in the United States.

In measuring the full implications of the civil-rights revolution, the greatest contribution maybe in the area of world peace. The concept of nonviolence has spread on a mass scale in the United States as an instrument of change in the field of race relations. To date, only a relatively few practitioners of nonviolent direct action have been committed to its philosophy. The great mass have used it pragmatically as a tactical weapon, without being ready to live it.

More and more people, however, have begun to conceive of this powerful ethic as a necessary way of life in a world where the wildly accelerated development of nuclear power has brought into being weapons that can annihilate all humanity. Political agreements are no longer secure enough to safeguard life against a peril of such devastating finality. There must also be a philosophy, acceptable to the people, and stronger than resignation toward sudden death.

It is no longer merely the idealist or the doom-ridden who seeks for some controlling force capable of challenging the instrumentalities of destruction. Many are searching. Sooner or later all the peoples of the world, without regard to the political systems under which they live, will have to discover a way to live together in peace.

Man was born into barbarism when killing his fellow man was a normal condition of existence. He became endowed with a conscience. And he has now reached the day when violence toward another human being must become as abhorrent as eating another's flesh.

Nonviolence, the answer to the Negroes' need, may become the answer to the most desperate need of all humanity.

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