

The Negro revolution

As President John F. Kennedy presses his bold and controversial civil-rights program on Congress, more than 50 American cities are experiencing racial strife and mass demonstrations. The drumbeat of a new Negro militancy gives urgency to the President's warning of a "rising tide of discontent." It is time to take heed of this warning. In truth, Mr. Kennedy has given voice to our national conscience, which demands that Negroes be allowed to pass beyond the written and unwritten WHITE ONLY signs in the nation's stores, restaurants, hotels and hiring halls. Beyond this, our nation is challenged to accept a new image of the American Negro, to accept the fact that the Negro community is aroused and will resort to as much force as is necessary to win the full privileges of citizenship. "Revolution" is a harsh word. It means upheaval and bloodshed. And it means a confession of failure. It means that the rule of law has failed, that the voices of reason have not been heard. And yet revolution is the word that is beginning to apply to the Negro demonstrations, not only in Birmingham and Jackson but also in New York City, Chicago, Detroit and the other ghettos of the North. Black forces are drawn up in a battle line that confronts the white man wherever he stands on the principles and practices of segregation. It is the responsibility of the nation to accommodate the legitimate aims of this Negro revolution with as little violence and damage to our society as possible.

The seat of initiative for dealing with the most critical domestic problem of the century should be our nation's capital. Bill Davidson's report on the mess in Washington on page 17 is a study in irony. The "government" of Washington remains willfully blind to the points that the President made in laying out his civil-rights program. Mr. Kennedy damned "inaction," yet the capital remains a showcase of inaction in a time of domestic crisis. The attitudes that obstruct progress in Washington are typical of the forces that have disfranchised and frustrated the Negro throughout our society.

President Kennedy has attempted to respond to the increasingly grave dilemma by putting before Congress the most comprehensive civil-rights bill in the past century. It would guarantee Negroes equal

rights in all major commercial institutions, such as hotels, restaurants, theaters and department stores. It would speed the desegregation of public education by allowing the Attorney General to file suits against any segregated schools. And since much of the Negro problem involves the chronic unemployment of unskilled Negro workers, the President's bill would allocate \$400 million to retrain and educate Negro laborers.

This program will not placate the militant Negro and it will not please the white segregationists, but it seems a moderate and minimal program to the reasonable observer. After all, it has been almost a century since the Constitution guaranteed equal voting rights, but only one quarter of qualified southern Negroes are allowed to vote. It has been almost 10 years since the Supreme Court ordered schools desegregated "with all deliberate speed," but less than 8 percent of southern schools are desegregated. In the states of Alabama and Mississippi not one public-school district has been integrated. Yet the southern senators plan to kill or at least modify President Kennedy's civil-rights bill by the most senseless of strategies, the filibuster. And from the Negroes there are threats that a southern filibuster will be met by massive protest demonstrations in Washington. The President has challenged both sides "to do their utmost to lessen tensions and to exercise self-restraint. The Congress should have an opportunity to freely work its will."

The indications are that a compromise will finally pass Congress—but it is likely that neither side will heed the President's appeal for moderation. The ardent segregationists will stage their futile filibuster; the zealous integrationists will stage their dangerous and equally futile demonstrations. And America will be the worse for it.

The Negro revolution will not be put down by a compromise bill; it has gone beyond this point. As a nation we must use all of our resourcefulness and courage to answer the yearnings of 20 million Negroes. If honorable demands for equality and justice are not met, leadership will pass into the hands of irresponsible men. The question is not how much time is left. There is very little time. The question is: What do we do with these few remaining hours?