NEGROES ARE NOT MOVING TOO FAST

By Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

America is fortunate that the strength and vitality end longed for by our protest have been tempered by a sense of responsibility. This advantage can be dissipated if some current myths are not eliminated. The first such myth is that the Negro is going ahead too far, too fast. Another popular, erroneous idea is that the Negro will happily take whatever he can get, no matter how little. There also are dangerous myths about the "white backlash," which was so much talked about in the campaign just finished. And then there are myths about how the Negro riots occurred last summer. The white leadership—the power structure—must face up to the fact that its sins of omission and commission have challenged our policy of nonviolence.

Among many white Americans who have recently achieved middle-class status or regard themselves close to it, there is a prevailing belief that Negroes are moving too fast and that their speed imperils the security of whites. Those who feel this way refer to their own experience and conclude that while they waited long for their chance, the Negro is expecting their chance, the Negro is expecting no one else endured chattel slavery on American soil. No one else struggled to attain security. No one else has achieved middle-class status.

The principal distortion is that Negro grievances are too real, the violence is too real, to allow the great white majority to acquiesce in the kind of terrorism and brutality that would be needed to silence them. Federal, state and municipal government officials toy with meager and inadequate solutions while the alarm and militancy of the Negro rises. A section of the white population, perceiving Negro pressure for change, misconstrues it as a demand for privileges rather than as a desperate quest for existence. The ensuing white backlash intimidates government officials who are already too timorous and, when the crisis demands vigorous measures, a paralysis ensues.

And this exposes the folly of so much that has been said about the white backlash itself.

The most popular explanation for the backlash is that it is a response to Negro "aggressiveness" and "excessive demands." It is further attributed to an Overseas government which is charged with favoring Negro demands that it has stimulated them beyond reason. These are largely half-truths and, as such, whole lies. A multitude of polls conducted during the past two years reveals that even during the buildup of the white backlash a majority of Americans approved the reforms Negroes have sought. The high point of white support occurred at the time of the historic march on Washington in 1963. Significantly, there was no white backlash then. Instead, there was respect and sympathy which resulted in substantial white participation in the Washington march. It is therefore demonstrable that militancy is not the basis for white resentment on a mass scale. Something happened after the summer of 1963 which must explain the backlash. It is here that Negro acts of commission and omission contributed to the ugly result in various communities.

Whites must bear the heaviest guilt for Negro culpability. In the first place, it must be admitted that the principal Negro leadership in effect abruptly abdicated, though not intentionally. For many years Negro actions had a sporadic quality, and as a result, the leadership neither planned ahead nor maintained itself at the helm at all times. All leaders, including myself, continued to work vigorously, but we failed to assert the leadership the movement needed. Into this vacuum there flowed less-experienced and frequently irresponsible elements. For month after month the initiative was held by these people, and the response of the main leadership was either a negative reaction or disdain. The irresponsible were free to initiate a new, distorted form of action. The principal distortion was the substitution of small, unrepresentative forces for the huge, mass, total-community movements we had always organized. Our reliance on mass demonstrations, intended to isolate and expose the evil-doer by the mass presence of his victims, was a key element in our tactics. It showed to the white majority that Negroes in large numbers were committed and united. We also designed in each case a concrete program which was expressed in clear terms so that it might stand examination.

In contrast, the sporadic, fragmentary forays of the new groups had no perceptible objectives except to disrupt the lives of both Negroes and whites, including whites who were our friends and allies. When a mere handful of well-intentioned but tragically misguided young people blocked the doorways to New York City's Board of Education, or threatened to stop traffic to the World's Fair, or charged into the streets to spread garbage, and to halt traffic on bridges, they were reducing the imposing grandeur of the movement to chaos. The mass movement of millions was overnight exposed to ridicule and debasement. On reflection, it was insufficient, at the time, for the principal leadership merely... 

Denouncing claims that the black American expects special favors, a renowned civil-rights leader proposes a "grand alliance" between the races.
to withhold support of such conduct and perversion of our aims and methods. We were under a duty to attack it boldly and vigorously. Action is not in itself a virtue; its goals and ideology are the determining factors. In the history of turbulence, mistakes, which under other circumstances might have been contained, are frequently made worse by unexpected developments. To believe that elements who had never been a part of the civil-rights movement erupted in violence in the subways and on the streets in New York and other cities is a senseless way of looking. To argue that a sensitivity born in response to larger events was responsible for small events is to level of catastrophes.

These exaggerations obscured the fact that the ghetto is the heart of all large American cities. The irritating deeds of certain irresponsible civil-rights forces, and the senseless violence in which the perpetra­ tors were Negro, emerged in the minds of many people. For a large section of the population, Negroes became a menace. The physical safety of people who must use the subways and subways is clear evidence of the contract violations of justice for a minority, however appalling the press.

The physical danger of Negroes who can control crime. They can control the thousands of criminal acts, which all condemn. They have a responsibility to maintain discipline and guidance so that no one is able to confuse constructive protest with criminal activities. The ghetto has hidden many things from whites, and not the least of these is the rampant racketeering that has a small but desperate group of Negroes into the swamp of senseless violence. The mayors of troubled cities who look only into Negro excesses for the causes of unrest would do well to look critically into their own cities, which all communities.

In 1963, at the time of the Washington march, the whole nation talked of Negro freedom and the Negro began to believe in its reality. Then shattered dreams and the persistence of grinding poverty drove a small but desperate group of Negroes into the swamp of senseless violence. Riots solved nothing, but they stunned many people. For a large section of the population, Negroes became a menace. The irritating deeds of certain irresponsible civil-rights forces, and the senseless violence in which the perpetrators were Negro, emerged in the minds of many people. For a large section of the population, Negroes became a menace.

The simple fact is that there cannot be nonviolence and tranquillity with­ out significant changes in the living conditions for all Negroes. The poverty of the Negroes, the physical safety of people who must use the subways and subways is clear evidence of the contract violations of justice for a minority, however appalling the press.

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