

NEGROES ARE NOT MOVING TOO FAST

Denouncing claims that the black American expects special favors, a renowned civil-rights leader proposes a "grand alliance" between the races.

By Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

America is fortunate that the strength and militancy of Negro 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 special advantages from the government.

It is true that many white Americans struggled to attain security. It is also a hard fact that none had the experience of Negroes. No one else endured chattel slavery on American soil. No one else suffered discrimination so intensely or so long as the Negroes. In one or two generations the conditions of life for white Americans altered radically. For Negroes, after three centuries, wretchedness and misery still afflict the majority.

Anatole France once said, "The law, in its majestic equality, forbids all men to sleep under bridges—the rich as well as the poor." There could scarcely be a better statement of the dilemma of the Negro today. After a decade of bitter struggle, multiple laws have been enacted proclaiming his equality. He should feel exhilaration as his goal comes into sight. But the ordinary black man knows that Anatole France's sardonic jest expresses

a very bitter truth. Despite new laws, little has changed in his life in the ghettos. The Negro is still the poorest American—walled in by color and poverty. The law pronounces him equal, abstractly, but his conditions of life are still far from equal to those of other Americans.

More important than all of these facts is that the gap between Negroes and whites is not narrowing as so many believe. It is growing wider. The technological revolution expressed in automation and cybernetics is edging the Negro and certain poor whites into a socially superfluous role, into permanent uselessness and hopeless impoverishment.

In 1964, the nation's production has hit historic heights. Yet U.S. Government statistics reveal that the unemployment rate of Negro youth averages 33 percent. In some of the northern ghettos the rate of unemployment of youth is 50 percent. These figures of unemployment dwarf even those of the depression of the 1930's, and they shed some light on why there was such a high proportion of young people in last summer's riots. Despair made them active participants.

Charges that Negroes are going "too fast" are both cruel and dangerous. The Negro is not going nearly fast enough, and claims to the contrary only play into the hands of those who believe that violence is the only means by which the Negro will get anywhere.

Another, more enduring myth is that the Negro has waited so long that any improvement will satisfy him. A beginning sincerely made is one thing, but a token beginning that is an end in itself is quite another thing, and Negroes will not be deluded into accepting one for the other. The tragedy of the present is that many newly prosperous Americans contemplate that the unemployable Negro shall live out his life in rural and urban slums, silently and apathetically. This thinking is wrong. Walter Lippmann has summed up the facts behind the folly in these words: "The Negro minority is too large

to be subdued. . . . Negro grievances are too real, their cause too just, 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 governments 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 overzealous government which is charged with so 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.

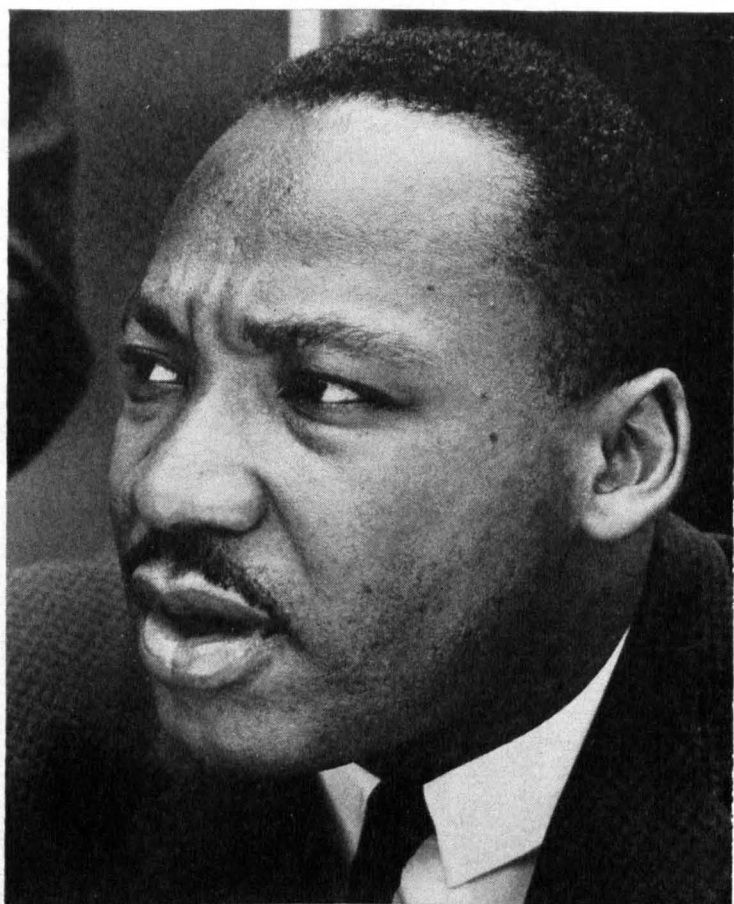
Whites must bear the heaviest guilt for the present situation, but it would be both unwise and unjust to gloss over

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 irresponsibles 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 cheap 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



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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 its forms determine its value.

In a period of turbulence, mistakes, which under other circumstances might have been contained, are frequently made worse by unexpected developments. This occurred when some 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. The headlines of a sensation-seeking press enlarged essentially small events to the level of catastrophes.

These exaggerations obscured the fact that crime lives in the heart of all large cities. The irritating deeds of certain irresponsible civil-rights forces, and the senseless violence in which the perpetrators were Negro, merged 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 streets and subways is closer to them than the abstract questions of justice for a minority, however appalling its grievances. Civil-rights leaders cannot control crime. They can control the demonstrations they initiate, however. They have a responsibility to maintain discipline and guidance so that no one is able to confuse constructive protest with criminal acts, which all condemn.

The ghetto has hidden many things from whites, and not the least of these is the rampant racketeering that has a sanctuary in the slums and corrupts the ghetto's already miserable life. 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 law-enforcement agencies.

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 the nation. One of the questions they evoked was doubt about the Negro's attachment to the doctrine of nonviolence.

Ironically, many important civic leaders began to lecture Negroes to adhere to nonviolence. It is important to recall that *Negroes* created the theory of nonviolence as it applies to American conditions. For years they fought within their own ranks to achieve its acceptance. They had to overcome the accusation that nonviolence counseled love for murderers. Only after dozens of Birminghams, large and small, was it acknowledged that it took more courage to employ nonviolent direct action than impetuous force.

Yet a distorted understanding of nonviolence began to emerge among white leaders. They failed to perceive that nonviolence can exist only in a context of justice. When the white power structure calls upon the Negro to reject violence but does not impose upon itself the task of creating necessary social change, it is in fact asking for submission to injustice. Nothing in the theory of nonviolence counsels this suicidal course.

The simple fact is that there cannot be nonviolence and tranquillity without significant reforms of the evils that endangered the peace in the first place. It is the effort of the power structure to benefit from nonviolence without yielding meaningful change that is responsible for

the rise of elements who would discredit it.

Is the dilemma impossible of resolution? The best course for the Negro happens to be the best course for whites as well and for the nation as a whole.

There must be a grand alliance of Negro and white. This alliance must consist of the vast majorities of each group. It must have the objective of eradicating social evils which oppress both white and Negro. The unemployment which afflicts one third of Negro youth also affects over 12½ percent of white youth. It is not only more moral for both races to work together but more logical.

One argument against a grand alliance holds that the shortage of jobs creates a natural climate of competition which tends to divide, not unify. If those who need jobs regard them as bones thrown to hungry animals, a destructive competition would seem inevitable. However, Negroes certainly do not want nor could they find the path to freedom by taking jobs from the white man. Instead, they want the white man to collaborate with them in making new jobs. This is the key point. Our economy, our resources are well able to provide full employment.

It has also been argued that while alliances for economic advancement can be achieved, several "subjective questions" such as housing and schools will be more stubborn. But these questions are based upon a myth, not reality. Just as Negroes would be foolish to seek to overcome 90 percent of the population by organizing their 10 percent in hostile combat, whites would be equally foolish to think that the Negroes' 10 percent is capable of crowding the schools and neighborhoods of 90 percent.

The majority of Negroes want an alliance with white Americans to tackle the social injustices that afflict *both* of them. If a few Negro extremists and white extremists manage to divide their people, the tragic result will be the ascendancy of extreme reaction which exploits all people. For some Americans deluded by myths, the candidacy of a Goldwater seemed a solution for their ills. Essentially he identified big government, radicalism and bureaucracy as the cause of all evils. Civil-rights legislation, in his view, is not a social necessity—it is merely oppressive big government. He ignored the towering presence of discrimination and segregation, but vividly exaggerated crime in the streets. The poverty of the Negroes, he implied, is due to want of ambition and industry. The picture that emerged to delight the racist was that of undeserving, shiftless, criminally dangerous radicals who have manipulated government for their selfish ends, but whose grievances are largely fanciful, and will wither away if left to the states.

Our nation has absorbed many minorities from all nations of the world. In the beginning of this century, in a single decade, almost nine million immigrants were drawn into our society. Many reforms were necessary—labor laws and social-welfare measures—to achieve this result. We accomplished these changes in the past because there was a will to do it, and because the nation became greater and stronger in the process. Our country has the need and capacity for further growth, and today there are enough Americans, Negro and white, with faith in the future, with compassion, and will to repeat the bright experience of our past.

