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Vernon M. Briggs Jr.
vmb2@cornell.edu

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Keywords

Reform, order, society, institutions, urban, change, commission, level

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Volume 1 - Paper #4

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June 1968

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The False Dichotomy: The Widening Gap

Between Reform and Order

by Vernon M. Briggs, Jr.

On March First of this year, the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders released its report on the urban violence of the previous summer. It concluded that a wedge is continuing to divide our nation into "separate and unequal" societies. The divisive force is white racism. The indictment--which has been widely misunderstood--was not directed against white people as individuals but against the resilient institutions that they dominate. The prerequisite for a stable society, it was argued, will be the reform of these societal institutions. Without fundamental changes in our educational policies; welfare concepts; health programs; police relationships; employment practices; and housing patterns, there will be no order.

Since the issuance of the document, the nation has witnessed the tragic assassinations of two of its leading spokesmen for reform: Dr. King and Senator Kennedy. Little has been done at the federal level to endorse the findings of the Commission or to implement the needed reforms; less at the state and local levels.

The defenders of the status quo have brushed aside the wise counsel of the Commission. The cry of "order" at all costs has received the spotlight; while the plea for institutional changes

has been brusquely shunted off-stage. Bayard Rustin has aptly diagnosed the trend and he recently warned a white audience that:

"The term 'crime in the streets' is rapidly becoming a slogan for keeping the 'nigger' in his place. But it will not work."

The fact that reform and order are indivisible seems to be overlooked by many. The Commission saw the cogitation. It dismissed lawlessness--- as a positive force by categorically asserting that:

"Violence cannot build a better society. Disruption and disorder nourish repression, not justice. They strike at the freedom of every citizen. The community cannot--it will not--tolerate coercion and mob rule."

The Commission believed that "the deepening racial division is not inevitable"; "the movement apart can be reversed." To turn the tide, however, it will be necessary to launch a "compassionate, massive, and sustained" attack upon the urban ghettos and the societal institutions that have created, maintained, and condoned their existence.

The ambivalent reception given the Report serves once more to reinforce the old adage that "after all is said and done, more is said than done." The inaction at the national level has been diminished even more by the shocking indifference at the community level. In the recent Texas primary campaign, for example, the conservative candidates spoke for solutions in terms of the suppression of agitators, stiffer penalties for lawbreakers, and a build up of the garrison state. The liberal candidate ignored the issue in favor of discussions of the need for lower automobile insurance rates, improved consumer

safegaurds for housewives, and the desirability of the sale of hard liquor in restaurants and nightspots. Where are the voices for change within our government and among those who seek high office? How long can promises of paralysis in the face of national need continue to be the springboard to elected positions?

Politics in America lost its honor in the last part of the nineteenth century; it is losing its respect in the last part of this century. The mantle of responsibility for change is shifting from government to university campuses and to the streets. The youthful uprising across the world--from Red China, Japan, Poland, Yugoslavia, West Germany, and France to Berkeley and Morningside Heights--portend an alteration in the focal point of leadership in our Society. The quest for equal opportunity for all men has been swept into the maelstrom of opposition to war and to the "soulless materialism" of technological advancement. Universities--where the enthusiasm of youth and the idealism of elders are combined--are emerging(if only at a grudgingly slow pace) as the moving forces for the reform of society's institutions. Even such a pervasive social critic as Herbert Marcuse has acknowledged the trend and--to the surprise of many of his nihilistic following--has exempted American universities from his devastating forays against the established order. Marcuse told a New York gathering in May 1968 that:

"I believe American universities, at least quite a few of them, today are still enclaves of relatively free thought. So we do not have to think of replacing them by new institutions."

The fact that "quite a few" universities are "relatively free" means that they afford some opportunity to say what must be said and, occasionally, to do what must be done. Such actions are, it would seem, impossible today in the sterile environment of the political and governmental arena. Too many politicians have forsaken leadership as a characteristic of elected position. Typically they adhere to the practice of telling the public what it wants to hear as opposed to what it should be told. Reform means change. Reliance upon the electorate for guidance would be highly desirable if the public at large were adequately informed as to the dimensions of our national crises and knowledgeable as to the consequences of alternative policy proposals. But in a society in which people have complicated business and personal lives that preclude opportunities to be adequately informed and in which many other citizens ask simply of their government the right to be left alone, a leaderless vacuum has been created. So it is, that by default other groups in society are becoming more visible in the major confrontations of the times. To date, these groups have not attained a commanding vantage point; but to deny the trend is to acknowledge an unawareness of current affairs.

But the relevant question for the future of this Nation is not who will lead; rather it is will the institutional changes that are sought be forthcoming soon enough? Urgency is becoming as significant as substance. Whitney Young, Executive Director of the most traditional of all civil rights groups--the Urban League--told an April 1968 press conference that:

"There are no moderates today. Everybody is militant.
The difference is there are builders and there are burners."

Thus, with the candle burning from both ends, there is no time to debate the false dichotomy as to whether order or reform should be the immediate goal. Reform is the means by which order as an end can be accomplished. The only real issue is the level of disorder that our society will experience before it will initiate the needed reforms.

In a prophetic address to the graduating class of Cornell University in June, 1968, John W. Gardiner (formerly Secretary of the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare and presently Chairman of the Urban Coalition) spoke to this precise point. His speech was entitled "How 20th Century Civilization Collapsed." Through the voice of a fictitious scholar of the 23rd Century, Gardiner explained how it came to pass that during the last third of the 20th Century civilization was destroyed. After three subsequent centuries of chaos, authoritarian reconstruction, and gradual liberation, an examination of the demise was initiated. The cause was diagnosed as a "failure to design institutions capable of continuous renewal." Mr. Gardiner observed that:

"...20th Century institutions were caught in a savage cross-fire between uncritical lovers and unloving critics. On the one side, those who loved their institutions tended to smother them in an embrace of death, loving their rigidities more than their promise, shielding them from life-giving criticism. On the other side, there arose a breed of critics without love, skilled in demolition but untutored in the arts by which human institutions are nurtured and strengthened and made to flourish.

Between the two, the institutions perished.

The 23rd Century scholars understood that where human institutions were concerned, love without criticism brings stagnation, and criticism without love brings destruction.

For the specifics of what must be done if Mr. Gardiner's apocalyptic words are not to become epithetical, one should read the aforementioned Report of the Commission on Civil Disorders. The details are all there. But one should not deceive himself. There are no finite answers. Those who seek to be Don Quixotes in the search of permanent solutions are foredoomed to a life of similar frustration. For today's tonics will likely be tomorrow's toxics. The immediate goal can only be the creation of a climate by which institutional refurbishment--in the light of changing societal conditions--will be welcomed as commonplace and not equated with the advocacy of revolution. In such an atmosphere, there exists at least the prospect of a society of order without the creation of a police state.