

Five long hot summers and how they grew

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ON THE racial scene, speeches and behavior that would have been unthinkable five years ago, at the time of Martin Luther King, Jr.'s Birmingham campaign have become commonplace. The climate of the American racial conflict has escalated and actually sustained an inversion of values. The early nonviolent bargaining mode which featured moral suasion and dramatic appeals to conscience has given way to equally dramatic coercive threats of riot and violence.

By analyzing, as a series of moves in a bargaining process, the step-by-step escalatory progression by which this transformation took place, one can gain insight into some hidden mechanisms that determine the result. For example, the Birmingham and Mississippi moral-confrontation phase had a framework of game-like calculation not generally appreciated. The crucial part that provoking or conspicuously withholding violence played in the early nonviolent campaigns provides a valuable precedent for the situation that prevails in 1968, after the Report of the President's Commission on Civil Disorders and the assassination of Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr. Perhaps if we re-examine—with some help from the insights of game theory—the stratagems, claims, bluffs, and threats that have gotten us where we are, we may better be able to negotiate (in both senses of the word) the present unacceptable state of affairs.

Tell it like it was: Birmingham, 1963

The organized militant phase of the civil rights struggle coincides in most persons' minds with the series of long hot summers which began in Birmingham in the spring of 1963. In fact, however, Martin Luther King's Birmingham campaign was preceded by a less well-known effort in Albany, Georgia, in the summer and fall of 1962. Significantly, by Dr. King's own admission the Albany operation was a failure.

When, in Albany, Georgia, in 1962, months of demonstrations and jailings failed to accomplish the goals of the movement, reports in the press and elsewhere pronounced nonviolent resistance a dead issue.

There were weaknesses in Albany, and a share of the responsibility belongs to each of us who participated. However, none of us was so immodest as to feel himself master of the new theory. Each of us expected that setbacks would be a part of the ongoing effort. There is no tactical theory so neat that a revolutionary struggle for a share of power can be won merely by pressing a row of buttons. Human beings with all their faults and strengths constitute the mechanism of a social movement. They must make mistakes and learn from them, make more mistakes and learn anew. They must taste defeat as well as success, and discover how to live with each. Time and action are the teachers.

When we planned our strategy for Birmingham months later, we spent hours assessing Albany and trying to learn from its errors.¹

The implication of the passage quoted is that Albany really was a failure, but that "weaknesses" and "errors" uncovered there helped perfect the theory that was applied successfully in Birmingham. King nowhere gives explicit details of how his Birmingham strategy benefited from the Albany experience, but the lesson learned from Albany can be inferred from the following passage, in which "Bull" Connor's initial tactics are compared with those of Pritchett.

Birmingham residents of both races were surprised at the restraint of Connor's men at the beginning of the campaign. True, police dogs and clubs made their debut on Palm Sunday, but their appearance that day was brief and they quickly disappeared. What observers probably did not realize was that *the Commissioner was trying to take a leaf from the book of Police Chief Laurie Pritchett of Albany. Chief Pritchett felt that by directing his police to be nonviolent, he had discovered a new way to defeat the demonstrations.* Mr. Connor, as it developed, was not to adhere to nonviolence long; the dogs were baying in kennels not far way; the hoses were primed. But that is another part of the story.²

¹ Martin Luther King, Jr., *Why We Can't Wait* (New York: Signet Books, 1963), p. 43.

² *Ibid.*, p. 69. Emphasis mine.

Evidently the reason King failed in Albany was that Chief Pritchett used force rather than violence in controlling the situation,³ that is, *he effectively reciprocated the demonstrator's tactics*. King's Birmingham innovation was pre-eminently strategic. Its essence was not merely more refined tactics, but the selection of a target city which had as its Commissioner of Public Safety "Bull" Connor, a notorious racist and hothead who could be depended on *not* to respond nonviolently.

When the demonstrations began, Connor was a lame duck, having been defeated by Albert Boutwell, a "moderate," in a run-off election April 2, 1963. Knowing that Connor's term would soon expire, eight Birmingham clergymen took newspaper space to ask, not unreasonably, that Dr. King desist until Boutwell had been given an opportunity. King's answer was his celebrated "Letter from a Birmingham Jail,"⁴ which, though admirable as rhetoric, comprised a somewhat hawkish response to the ministers' proposals. King declined their suggestion that he negotiate forthwith, saying that non-violent direct action must first "create such a crisis and foster such a tension" that meaningful negotiation would be assured. He also stated that "one has a moral responsibility to disobey unjust laws," citing as an example the local parade ordinance, a deliberate breach of which had resulted in his incarceration.⁵

After eight days, Dr. King emerged from jail to initiate on April 20, a new operational phase which enlisted school-age children in large numbers and sought to "fill the jails." This tactic was gradually intensified until, on May 2, more than a thousand young demonstrators were jailed.

Finally, on Friday, May 3, "Bull" Connor "abandoned his posture of nonviolence." King's account is unfortunately not clear as to whether "some few spectators" who "reacted to the brutality of the policemen by throwing rocks and bottles" precipitated the employment of dogs and hoses or vice versa. In any event, pictures of the resulting violent confrontation, which culminated in the brutal use of high pressure hoses on the demonstrators, shocked and outraged the United States and the rest of the world on Saturday morning. This episode is at least superficially familiar to anyone who took an interest in the matter at the time, and most persons' curiosity concerning it has long since ceased.

³ The riot control strategy that emerged during the riots which occurred in the wake of Dr. King's assassination essentially duplicates this technique. Troops in sufficient numbers dominate the situation without resort to firearms. Firearms are the equivalent in a riot environment of dogs, fire hoses, and cattle prods in the context of a nonviolent demonstration.

⁴ *Ibid.*, Chapter 5.

⁵ His conviction was appealed to and ultimately upheld by the Supreme Court, and Dr. King served a well-publicized five-day sentence in August 1967—reading William Styron's *Confessions of Nat Turner*.

However, the events of the next three days, Sunday, Monday, and Tuesday (May 5, 6, and 7) impart a curious off again/on again quality to the proceedings and, though quite significant, have seemingly gone unnoticed.

Dr. King tells in his book how, on Sunday afternoon, the Reverend Charles Billups led another massive march, proceeding down a Birmingham street across which Connor and his men had taken up positions, deployed their hoses, etc. When the marchers drew near, Reverend Billups "politely refused" Connors order to turn back, whereupon "Bull Connor whirled on his men and shouted: Dammit. Turn on the hoses."

Then, according to King, occurred "one of the most fantastic events of the Birmingham story." The marchers, many of whom had been on their knees, stood up and advanced. Connor's men fell back, "their hoses sagging uselessly in their hands," while several hundred Negroes marched past them without interference to hold a prayer meeting "as planned."

Now King's account differs in several important respects from *The New York Times* version. According to *The Times*, the demonstrators knelt to pray directly in front of Connor's "barricade," whereupon Reverend Phillips (*sic*) declaimed "Turn on your water, turn loose your dogs, we will stand here till we die." No such orders were forthcoming, however, and after an interval during which police made no attempt to disperse them, the demonstrators proceeded not toward the jail, their supposed goal, but to a nearby park where they held their prayer meeting.

Whichever version one accepts, the point is that Connor evidently apprehended the unwisdom of bowling over nonviolent demonstrators with high pressure hoses for a third straight day. The next day, Monday, one thousand more Negroes were jailed, 40 per cent of them juveniles. A Negro woman was photographed being held down by five white policemen. Dick Gregory was arrested. However, authorities announced their intention to use "no more force than necessary," and, as on Sunday, hoses were not employed. On Tuesday, "police and firemen drove hundreds of rioting Negroes off the streets with high pressure hoses . . . after 2,500 to 3,500 persons rampaged through the business district in two demonstrations." Thus provoked, Connor reverted to his original conspicuously oppressive and brutal fire-hose tactic, although a measure of restraint prevailed inasmuch as cattle prods and police dogs were not reintroduced. On Wednesday, a moratorium was declared on demonstrations, and negotiations began on Thursday.

Now there are several illuminating perspectives one can open up and many issues to examine in the light of the preceding accounts.

A moral and intellectual paradox is that the Albany campaign—where nonviolence was reciprocated—failed, whereas Birmingham

—where violence was nonviolently provoked—was interpreted as a great success. The good guys vs. bad guys explanation that proved so satisfactory at the time seems ingenuous when one realizes that, despite their nonviolent label, the demonstrations had to provoke a violent response in order to succeed. According to Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., “the Attorney General three times counseled the Birmingham leaders not to force issues while Bull Connor was still in charge.”⁶ But after the conspicuous brutality of dogs, fire hoses, and cattle prods, no one cared to examine the fine structure of the game-like tactics and strategy that brought it about.

An advocate of nonviolent techniques might simply regard Birmingham as a more skillful and therefore successful application of “moral jujitsu,” secure in the knowledge that the cause was ultimately just so that the rest was merely “tactics.” But for an objective observer, the interesting questions are: Why didn’t Connor inquire of Albany’s Chief Pritchett concerning his methods? Why didn’t Pritchett volunteer them? On the other hand, maybe he did and the answer is: “Bull” Connor didn’t get his nickname for nothing. How, after the example of Albany, could sheriffs consistently fail to cope with King’s tactic as most of them did?

The following three propositions are advanced as working hypotheses:

1. King’s skill consisted mainly in his ability to *contrive*—in the best Machiavellian tradition—a situation in which he was the injured party (an interpretation quite inconsistent with the popular verdict at the time). He did not anticipate beforehand everything that this would entail. His tactics emerged in a series of existential command decisions.

2. Such a strategy depends for its success on certain gaps and discontinuities in communication. (If Connor had understood King’s method earlier, he would have behaved differently—albeit hypocritically.)

3. Where public opinion arbitrates, sentiment rallies to the victim—which idea the victim may exploit, *as long as he does so discreetly*. To appreciate the last qualification is to appreciate some of the costs incurred by the Movement, now that riots sometimes appear instrumental and deliberate. To arrange to have violence visited upon oneself reflexively for the benefit of an influential audience is an exercise in public relations—but, to be effective, must not appear as such.

Birmingham left such a vivid sense of outrage hovering over the country that Negro leaders organized the March on Washington, which provided an outlet for the powerful resentment that was engendered during the latter part of the summer of 1963. The following spring witnessed the passage of the Civil Rights Bill of 1964. In

⁶ *A Thousand Days* (New York: Houghton, 1965), p. 988.

the interval after Birmingham, President Kennedy remarked to Dr. King: "Our judgment of Bull Connor should not be too harsh. After all, in his way, he has done a good deal for civil-rights legislation this year."⁷

1964—The COFO summer project

Nineteen sixty-four was the year of the COFO Summer Project in Mississippi and the year in which riots occurred for the first time in six Northern cities. As such, it was a year of transition, in which the earlier moral-confrontation phase overlapped the riots-as-a-weapon-or-threat phase that emerged after Watts.

The COFO project was a hybrid phenomenon, less of a moral confrontation than Birmingham, and more of a power play. COFO (Congress of Federated Organizations) was a loose *ad hoc* consortium for which established organizations such as the NAACP and the Urban League footed the bill, while SNCC provided organizing talent, energy, and a cutting edge. Having noticed that, in parts of Alabama and Mississippi, Negroes greatly outnumbered whites, SNCC theoreticians had in 1961 mounted a voter registration campaign which for three years had been frustrated by white intimidation, terror, and the threat of economic reprisal. The 1964 Summer Project, masterminded by a disillusioned SNCC staff, was presented as a massive effort to get voter registration off the ground with the aid of large numbers of vacationing white college students.

However, COFO's reasonable and liberal voter registration goal turned out to be a benign cover for a more ambitious and aggressive SNCC strategy. Let us focus first on this underlying strategy, and then on the circumstances surrounding the murder of the three civil rights workers, Schwerner, Chaney, and Goodman, on the assumption that the latter was the summer's key event.

Although the COFO Summer Project is in most respects adequately documented, reportage concerning it manifests a distinct split personality. On one level the COFO project consisted of three activities: voter registration, freedom schools, and community centers. The one thousand white student volunteers were hostages to assure federal supervision of this work.

However, according to Christopher Jencks, COFO was a "mere umbrella under which SNCC veterans run Mississippi's Summer Project."⁸ The grand strategy was to provoke a massive federal intervention amounting to an occupation and a "second effort at reconstruction."⁹

⁷ King, *op. cit.*, p. 132.

⁸ Christopher Jencks, *The New Republic*, August 22, 1964.

⁹ *Ibid.*; see also Joseph Alsop in *Newsweek*, July 13, 1964.

The not-so-covert goal appeared to be to provoke Klan vengeance upon the white participants to an extent that would necessitate federal intervention and, ultimately, martial law.¹⁰ However, since this possibility was the subject of semi-public speeches to the volunteers at their Oxford, Ohio, training sessions, and of newspaper editorials, it was inevitably communicated to the Klan—which in turn warned its membership *not* to resort to violence.

The communication and decision process in this case is revealing. On Saturday, June 20, the first two hundred of approximately one thousand volunteers boarded their buses in Ohio for the trip to Mississippi. Michael Schwerner and his companions, having arrived on Friday, were busy making arrangements. A light aircraft was reported to have dropped leaflets over Pascagoula, Mississippi, Sunday afternoon with the word from the Klan: to paraphrase, “Refrain from violence, that is what they want.” Nevertheless, as we now know, Schwerner, Goodman, and Chaney were brutally murdered that same evening. This presents the possibility of viewing the murders as a failure of communication among white racists, or a breakdown in Klan discipline. The parallel with “Bull” Connor’s lapses into character during the Birmingham fracas is clear. An exercise of more than academic interest is to speculate on the outcome of a summer during which the Klan primly refrained from rising to the bait (i.e., doing what comes naturally, violence-wise) while Project workers went freely about their registration-teaching duties with no *cause célèbre* forthcoming. Or, if some such horrific deed was essential to the Project’s goal—federal intervention—what if the conspirators had been convicted and executed? Either the first (the “preferred”) or the second (the “just” outcome) would probably have undercut incentives for the Voting Rights Bill of 1965.

In an article in the December 1964 *Activist*, Staughton Lynd recalled a COFO strategy meeting in which James Forman of SNCC

¹⁰ *The Washington Post*, editorial, June 25, 1964: “The young project workers cannot claim they do not foresee the response their presence may provoke. . . . And some of the adult organizers not only expect mayhem but also see as one purpose of the operation—perhaps the major purpose—the compelling of Federal intervention in force, by marshals or troops, to quench the expected violence. . . . We cannot feel that the Federal Government now shows itself so apathetic, stupid, hypocritical or cowardly that it must be constrained to act by the threat of piling martyr’s corpses on its doorstep. The President, the Department of Justice and its Civil Rights Division and even the Congress, on the eve of enacting America’s most encompassing civil rights law, have not demonstrated such feebleness of purpose and such pusillanimity that their course of action must now be mortgaged to the decisions of a thousand collegians and a handful of ruthlessly righteous organization leaders. . . . [Let] the young people subject to the trenchant study they apply to other matters the question of their own competence as political strategists. Let them ask themselves with some humility what action, however fastidiously legal, they are entitled to take that could inflame passions and explode sparks in the political tinderbox of this menacing summer.”

(Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee) modified the well-known Camus quotation—"neither victims nor executioners"—saying that (paraphrase) "until this is over there will be no pure victims, we will all be partly victims *and* executioners." This somber realization—particularly so for an apostle of nonviolence—apparently emerged after the fact.

In planning the 1965 Selma campaign, the sort of provocative ploy that had been undertaken as a reluctant last resort and only after a great deal of soul-searching in Birmingham was recognized to be a distasteful but necessary cost of doing business. At Selma, the permissible limits of several highly disciplined demonstrations were worked out in deals between the Selma Director of Public Safety, Wilson Baker, and Harry Boyt of the SCLC (Southern Christian Leadership Conference) staff. During one crucial prearranged confrontation, young demonstrators broke ranks and were chased by police, producing a melee superficially reminiscent of Birmingham for the television cameras. The SCLC had anticipated that they would lose "two or three" lives in the course of the Selma campaign, a prediction which proved sadly correct. Selma was the last of the classic Southern nonviolent campaigns, and was followed two months later by Watts.

From what has been said, the negotiating technique that characterized the civil rights movement in its classic militant period, 1962–1965, should be tolerably clear. The Birmingham drama was calculated to enlist the consciences of Northerners whose intervention could be mobilized the more easily as no immediate interest of theirs was involved. If a profoundly subjective, partly sentimental, partly manipulated, atmosphere had not prevailed at the time (which we are here seeking to penetrate), nonviolent techniques would not have worked, and much of the manifest progress would not have occurred. Where liberal opinion could not supervene to terminate a confrontation, it might go on and on, as with Fr. Groppi in Milwaukee.

In the COFO Mississippi operation, the moral capital that accrued to the movement after Birmingham was invested by SNCC in a maximizing scheme designed to produce an immediate political payoff by forcing a massive federal intervention that would overturn the existing order. When their audacious strategy failed to produce sufficiently radical change (recall the experience of the Mississippi Freedom Democrats of the 1964 convention), SNCC militants became bitter and retreated from their nonviolent ideal. (They were to re-emerge with the ambivalent slogan "Black Power" in 1966, which ambivalence was resolved in 1967 in favor of a violent ideology of urban guerrilla warfare.) By 1967, Mississippi Negro voter enrollment had begun to pay political dividends. This two-to-three-year lag between COFO's militant stimulus and the

response (significant Negro enfranchisement) in Mississippi finds a Northern parallel: an attack on the problems of urban Negroes seems to be lagging behind the recognition, circa 1966, of riots as a political instrument by about the same amount of time. Whether by the time visible progress occurs in the cities, the militants in their impatience will have gone on to more radical tactics, remains to be seen.

The foregoing suggests why the original nonviolent methods could not be successfully transplanted to the North, and indeed required increasing ingenuity to succeed in the South. The task of Southern demonstrators was to devise tactics that would cause the police, the Klan, etc. to act out conspicuously and in public their well-known role as oppressors of Negroes, even of Negroes whose behavior was impeccably nonviolent. This police stereotype was familiar to the audience beforehand—in fact, as in a traditional morality play, the whole story was known to them by heart. However, as time went on, the rules of the drama or game became clearer, and it became increasingly difficult to induce the police to “play the heavy,” particularly while on camera.

There was also the problem of ensuring that Negroes would remain nonviolent. There were continual *sotto voce* implications of violence in the earlier nonviolent technique. Several times in his book, King recalled with satisfaction that his followers maintained their nonviolent discipline in the face of one or another extreme provocation, then acknowledged with evident regret that, for example, “Some few spectators, who had not been trained in the discipline of nonviolence, reacted to the brutality of the policemen by throwing rocks and bottles.”¹¹ Without laboring the point, it ought to be obvious that this implicit threat-at-one-remove from undisciplined onlookers was not lost on the white power structure. (The 1968 Poor People’s Campaign is a current case in point.)

Because this threat was always formulated as “accede to our reasonable demands or risk the (implied) consequences, it is the only moral thing to do,” the threat was conveyed indirectly without any moral obloquy, this being shunted harmlessly off to some worthy surrogate, say, Malcolm X.

In the North, however, a strong religious orientation and tradition of submissive behavior were lacking, and the difficulty of keeping demonstrations within permissible bounds was keenly appreciated. Background violence was all too likely to spill over into the foreground, spoiling the effect.

Finally, there was the problem of the liberal “audience.” Consider the following quotation by Robert Penn Warren dating from the first riots and commenting on the nonviolent era.

¹¹ *Op. cit.*, p. 100.

Though Handlin approves of demonstrations and direct action in the South, where the Negro is deprived of the ballot, he sees that tactic as a mistake in the North, again "a misreading of the situation." But Wyatt T. Walker, lately of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, had already indicated the lack of realism in such a view: the Negro, he says, must "have a crisis to bargain with"—and he often has to create his crisis. This principle applies, North or South.¹²

The implication is that the same technique would work equally well in the North. However, along with altered roles for police and demonstrators, a third variable changed. In the South, Negro grievances were redressed by displacing onto a disinterested third party (public opinion, particularly Northern liberals) the indirect appeal of the Negro-as-victim. To similar events in the North the appropriate white response was, not a crusade fueled by righteous indignation, but personal guilt, so that this displacement mechanism was not available and there was no one to intercede. While these considerations do not invalidate the Negroes' need for "a crisis to bargain with," they do suggest why the crises began to assume a different form.

1964—Riots in six cities¹³

Nineteen sixty-four was an election year, and in view of the pressures generated in Mississippi and by the Goldwater candidacy, a disagreement developed among Negro leaders as to how best to negotiate the latter half of the summer. Rather than risk "cooling it" with an action program, as in the previous year's post-Birmingham March on Washington, the leadership opted for a moratorium on demonstrations—with militants Farmer (CORE) and Forman (SNCC) dissenting. Under the circumstances, the chain of riots which began in Harlem was not altogether unexpected. The new era arrived by what can only be termed the escalation route. On Saturday morning, July 12, there occurred the deliberate/panicky killing of an unarmed/knife-wielding Negro teenager by an off-duty police lieutenant. Next, there were protests and inflammatory leaflets. Monday evening, a street-corner speech by James Farmer culminated in a march on the local police station, which touched off disorders leading ultimately to full-fledged riots. Most of the riots in the overlapping chain that followed the Harlem riot grew out of a precipitating incident involving police. On the second day of the Harlem riot, Jesse Gray, erstwhile leader of the

¹² From a review of Oscar Handlin's *Fire-Bell in the Night*, October 22, 1964, *The New York Review of Books*.

¹³ Nominally, Harlem; the Bedford-Stuyvesant section of Brooklyn; Rochester, N. Y.; Paterson, N. J. (also Elizabeth and Jersey City); Chicago; Philadelphia.

Harlem rent strike, called for “100 skilled black revolutionaries” who were ready to die “participating in guerrilla warfare.” If such talk had any effect in prolonging the disturbance, or promoting arson, the results were too disorganized to leave any lasting impression. The consensus was then and still is that the 1964 riots were spontaneous outbursts of pent-up frustration, doubtless aggravated by the atrocities and outrages visited on Southern Negroes during the Birmingham and COFO campaigns. Recall that the fall 1964 FBI report on the summer’s rioting concluded that the six ghetto riots were “not racial” because they were not deliberately planned with a political end in view, and lumped them with a Labor Day teenage rampage at Hampton Beach, New Hampshire, and one in Oregon!

It is obviously inappropriate to discuss strategy in connection with actions having no discernible purpose. But the riots had all sorts of intrinsic political implications, and how these gradually asserted themselves is interesting. How quickly the latent instrumental-coercive interpretation suggested itself was revealed in the phraseology employed in leaflets distributed by Brooklyn NAACP members during the later teenage phase of the Harlem conflagration: “COOL IT, BABY, Your Message Has Been Received.” The riots-as-a-message attitude embodied in this quote was so rare as to be virtually imperceptible in accounts of the 1964 riots. Today it is inescapable.

The kind of behavior manifested in the spate of riots that followed Dr. King’s assassination in the spring of 1968 was practically indistinguishable from that typical of the 1964 riots. What has changed is the accompanying attitudes and interpretation. It is not hard to follow the process by which this transformation was accomplished, which amounts to a kind of strategic dialogue among militant Black Nationalists. On-the-spot accounts of the 1964 Harlem riots reveal that as the initial complex blend of exultation and rage passed, a mood of foreboding and anticipated reaction emerged. (Compare the tone of the first-hand reports in the August 1964 black radical monthly, *Liberator*, with subsequent numbers, for example the November 1964 article, “No Final Solution—Yet.”) It is obvious why the 1964 riots were for a while regarded even by many Negroes as an irretrievable disaster. The Goldwater-Johnson election was imminent and things were preternaturally quiet from September through November. There was talk among Negro leaders of a turn “from protest to politics,” implying that the era of demonstrations was over. However the riots were obviously “spontaneous and unrehearsed,” and whites still had the guilt and sympathy engendered by the outrages in Philadelphia, Mississippi, to expiate. Later, after Lyndon Johnson had inundated Barry Goldwater, it was noticed that large-scale Negro violence did not necessarily

cause the sky to fall. The stage was set for Watts and some further thoughts on the subject of riots as a "message."

1965—Watts

The Watts riot had noticeable instrumental overtones: "soul brother" signs, deliberate selective destruction by fire of white-owned businesses, widespread reports of sniper activity (despite which no one was hit—in retrospect, the reports are called into question in that most were received after the National Guard arrived and began firing).

Nevertheless there is no doubt that the McCone Commission report was correct in denying a political or revolutionary basis to the Watts disturbance. For further proof of this verdict, one can consult the post-riot lead article "Watts, L.A.: A First Hand Report, Rebellion Without Ideology," in the September 1965 *Liberator*, which explicitly states that the riots lacked purpose, ideology, and organization.

However, the pendulum of Negro opinion that had swung in the direction of excuses, apologies, and doubts after the 1964 riots was beginning to swing very rapidly in the other direction by the time of Watts—at least among the militants. In the August 1965 *Liberator*, a commentary on the organization of the Deacons for Defense in Bogalusa, Louisiana, ended with the exhortation that "we *must* follow their example." The September issue contained the aforementioned "nonideological" interpretive report on Watts by two members of the Watts Preparedness Committee, along with an article entitled "Self-Defense" and an editorial containing the statement "Watts, Los Angeles, is our manifesto." It also carried an appreciative review of a book on guerrilla warfare, *The War of the Flea* by Robert Tabor, in which the reviewer Carlos Russell chided the author for having shrunk from applying a guerrilla warfare prescription to the plight of the Negro in the United States. The tone of the review suggests that the book awakened an interest that was quite new. In the November "Letters" column appeared a detailed reply to the review by the author, Robert Tabor. He quoted "Ché" Guevara to the effect that a precondition to successful revolution was that "all peaceful legal constitutional remedies must first be exhausted," suggesting that this had not yet been done. He went on to point out the virtual impossibility for a highly visible, greatly outnumbered minority, segregated into ghettos, to follow the classic "fish in the sea" guerrilla tactic. But he went on to suggest what they might do instead, which, since it describes fairly accurately what has been happening subsequently, is worth quoting. Mr. Tabor stated that "More Watts are coming" and went on to say that

I do not think that the Black Minority can win these battles, any more than it can win a civil war in the U.S. But it may be that they will achieve something, after all. It may be that they will sow so much fear and confusion and hurt so many pocketbooks, and create so great an embarrassment for Uncle Sam on the International Scene, and, finally, so shake and shock the passive majority, that in the end, out of sheer desperation the bankers and businessmen and politicians will say all right damn it—give them what they want. . . .

It was inevitable that, having been told that Watts was unplanned, unorganized, nonconspiratorial, etc.—the McCone Commission said there was “no real correlation between alleged consumer exploitation and destruction”—many people would ask themselves; What if riots *were* organized?

In the December 20, 1965, *The Nation*, there appeared “The Language of Watts,” subtitled “Riots as a Weapon,” a very sensitive attempt to fashion a rationale for the Watts experience, which however was not very successful. “Rioting is for the Negro in Watts a form of expression.” Clearly though, this type of thinking had reached some sort of critical mass among militant blacks. Riots no longer seemed unthinkable. The question then became: Is there any way to convert them into political power?

Spring 1966—Riots as a weapon?

During the spring of 1966 the idea that riots were “weapons”¹⁴ and “rebellions”¹⁵ began to be publicized and to gain popular acceptance. Despite the authoritative ring of its title, “Violence Is Necessary,” an article in the March 1966 *Liberator*¹⁶ indicates that black militants were just beginning to think about the subject. The “weapon” and “rebellion” characterizations of Watts were ex post facto rationalizations.

However, beyond this point one should begin to think of the developing situation in terms of strategic interaction.

There is a sense in which the game-theoretical phrase, “rationality of irrationality,” can shed considerable light on the political effect of riots. Those not acquainted with this concept can get some sense of what it usually means (as distinguished from the way we are defining it here) from another paragraph in *The New York*

¹⁴ Dr. Frederick J. Hacker, quoted in *The New York Times*, May 22, 1966. “What must be understood by the rest of America is that, for the lower-class Negro, riots are not criminal, but are a legitimate weapon in a morally justified civil war. For the ghetto-Negro in the second half of the 20th Century, anything—even a new American revolution—is better than being invisible.”

¹⁵ Bayard Rustin, “The Watts Manifesto and the McCone Report,” *Commentary*, March 1966.

¹⁶ Donald W. Jackson, March 1966, p. 6.

Times article quoted in footnote 14. "One Negro businessman, certain that rioters in the past were hoodlums trying to keep from going to work, displayed a pistol and a quart bottle of whiskey—"I'll get as drunk and as crazy as they get to protect my store.'"

A case can be made for the proposition that the less instrumental and planned a riot appears, the less backlash there is. A convincingly irrational outburst does not inspire a deterrent white counter-threat, but something nearer sympathy. ("Forgive them O' Lord, for they know not what they do.") Nevertheless, rather than excusing riots on such sociologically justified grounds as youth, poverty, and class values, these factors were after due consideration subordinated to race and in favor of a rationale of riots as conscious political acts.¹⁷ The evidence for this was sparse indeed, but the logic expressed in the Walker quote (i.e., the need for a "crisis to bargain with") asserted itself irresistibly and the claims were made. In a sense, the advent of the riots was a less significant event than the promulgation of this doctrine, which amounted to a conscious strategic choice.

But converting the riot threat into political power proved just as slow and agonizing as the earlier nonviolent campaigns.

The justification for focusing on this aspect of an admittedly many-dimensional conflict is that, in retrospect, it has proved to be one of those waves of the future. By 1968 a survey of Negro attitudes¹⁸ would show a substantial positive response to the question, "Is Violence Necessary?," particularly among the prime riot population: young Negro males in Northern cities. Many Negroes were arriving at the conclusion militant intellectuals had advanced two years earlier. *It took a year and a half for militant black intellectuals to formulate the riot "message" themselves. It would take two years more for their self-fulfilling prophecies of 1966 to be ratified by the rank and file.*

In 1966 hopes raised by the Great Society programs had not yet been dashed by the Vietnam involvement, and recollections of Martin Luther King's nonviolent successes were still fresh; a residuum of good will lingered. While a nucleus of Black Nationalist desperados might have been found to conduct terrorist incidents along the lines of the Algerian revolt, given the prevailing climate of opinion they would merely have succeeded in isolating themselves. Indeed, an abortive foray might have inoculated their constituents against radicalization. This was the meaning of the Guevara precondition quoted by Tabor.

Under such circumstances, given a militant disposition, what could one do? Well, one could organize, proselytize, and advertise

¹⁷ See notes 15 and 16 and *Life*, July 10, 1966.

¹⁸ *Fortune*, January 1968.

one's wares, even if the product was by no means ready for the market.

According to Professor Thomas C. Schelling, it is the *threat* of violence, not violence itself, that gets one what one wants. With a vivid enough imagination, in areas where widespread ignorance prevails, one may be able to erect a creditably threatening façade of potential guerrilla warfare, even though carrying out the threat might be self-defeating and therefore irrational. Strictly speaking, this would seem to be a bluff. But none of this is sufficiently calculable or controllable to be so calmly dismissed. Besides, if someone has a reputation for being pretty mad already, who is to say how rational he will be? Furthermore, sufficiently bellicose talk creates a crisis atmosphere which increases the likelihood that incidents will escalate—a form of “brinkmanship” that increases the risk of a shared disaster that no one would deliberately initiate.

As with thermonuclear war, no one would deliberately initiate a clash they know would lead to mutual disaster. But one may maneuver in a way that increases the risk that suspected irrational factors will get out of hand. This is another example of “the rationality of irrationality.” Does it not seem passing strange that while riots were believed to be pointless and irrational, people were relatively complacent about them, but that when they began to appear deliberate everyone feared they might get out of control?

Summer 1966—Long, but not so hot

In one respect, 1966 was the most interesting summer of all. As we have seen, in terms of what was being written and said, it promised to be the longest, hottest, most destructive summer to date. But in terms of actual riots, it was anomalously less violent than one would have been led to expect by extrapolating the trend of the three preceding years.¹⁹ An early straw in the wind had been a reshuffle in the SNCC high command which occurred in the early spring. John Lewis, who had been identified since the beginning of SNCC with nonviolence as a “philosophy” and a “way of life,” was voted out in favor of Stokely Carmichael who was on record as favoring nonviolence “as a tactic,” that is, only for as long as it worked, being prepared to renounce it pragmatically if an alternative approach looked more promising. Under Carmichael, SNCC

¹⁹ In terms of disturbances that left a lasting national impression. This interpretation seems to correspond with the average person's recollected impressions, which apparently retain only memorable, i.e., major, riots. That about twice as many small-to-medium disturbances occurred in 1966 as in either 1964 or 1965 seems to have gone unperceived except by specialists and police. As the Report of the President's Commission of Civil Disorders said of the 1967 riots, most of the disorders would have received little or no national attention as “riots” had the nation not been sensitized by the more serious outbreaks.

formally and deliberately disassociated itself from the civil rights movement's traditional commitment to nonviolence, taking up a position on the leftward militant fringe. (A virtually identical leftward shift was repeated in 1967, Rap Brown taking over from Carmichael with the latter on his way to Havana and Hanoi.) CORE, when it elected Floyd McKissick, also moved some distance leftward by refusing to denounce categorically the previous year's Watts riots. The racial situation picked up an ominous head of steam through the month of May. The July 10, 1966 issue of *Life* magazine provided a forum for what is still one of the more detailed and concrete and therefore menacing threats of organized urban guerrilla warfare in the black ghettos of Northern cities.

However, on June 6 James Meredith, who had started on a lone trek from Memphis to Natchez—guarded by local police who were in turn supervised by the FBI—was shot. He was first reported dead, then critically wounded. The outraged reaction was instantaneous and acute. Galvanized by the Meredith incident, the conservative Negro leadership quickly organized an extended march along the route Meredith was to have taken. The march lasted almost a month, pursuing a leisurely pace and taking time for detours off the original itinerary. Meredith's injuries proved not to be serious, so that he was able to rejoin the march after two weeks, well before it terminated. The interesting facet to the affair was not that the conservative Negro leadership chose to make it the occasion of an elaborate protest march—the incident could hardly have been better designed if it had been custom made—but the alacrity with which Stokely Carmichael and Floyd McKissick, after having gone to some pains to achieve militant, even intransigent, postures for themselves and their organizations, rejoined the responsible old-line leaders in making much of Meredith's largely symbolic trauma. If Meredith had been killed, such a full-blown response would have been quite appropriate; as it happened though, how much one wanted to make of it was to a considerable extent optional. If one construes the march as something of an escape valve or diversion—not unlike the 1963 March on Washington in this regard—then a truly radical Carmichael would have exploited it in the Northern urban ghettos where he could doubtless have stirred up an unprecedented furor. That Carmichael, King, McKissick, and A. Philip Randolph were shown, arms linked, collaborating on a chorus of "We Shall Overcome" was a critical index of the degree of seriousness in Carmichael's earlier declaration of war. (Noticing this, one prominent black militant accepted—as had Carmichael—an invitation to a "Civil Rights Conference" at Hudson Institute with the remark: "I've got to talk to Stokely, he's rocking the boat the wrong way.")

Although there were five fairly serious racial disturbances during

the summer of 1966, one had the distinct impression of coasting through the summer poised on the brink of disaster. The amount of communication involved—or lack of it—was striking. Until late June, the Johnson Administration failed utterly to acknowledge the various threatening portents. (The black radical quoted above also said, regarding the same Hudson Institute Conference, “I don’t know if my message has been received,” apparently believing that some participants would relay his lurid warnings to the Establishment.)

The emotional aftermath of the Meredith affair seemed to linger until about the end of July. Late in July, Vice President Humphrey gave a speech²⁰ in which he allowed as how he didn’t much blame young ghetto-dwelling Negroes for rioting, saying he would probably “lead a mighty good revolt” himself if he had their problems. (This sentiment was followed at the distance of a few weeks with a more severe, relatively reactionary speech, “No matter how bad things are, breaking the law is never a solution.”) In August, several interesting developments occurred. One was an extraordinary series of columns by Joseph Alsop, which he began by quoting from the General Confession, “We have left undone those things which we ought to have done, and we have done those things which we ought not to have done,” proceeding then to detail how Judgment Day was at hand in the Negro urban ghettos. Another was a series of hearings begun by Senators Ribicoff and Robert Kennedy which effectively, and at some length, took cognizance of the Negro grievance—if not in behalf of the Administration then at least in behalf of the legislative branch.

As it happened, August came and went without the expected large-scale disasters. In September, when the summer was technically at an end, Stokely Carmichael aggravated a small but well-publicized conflict in Atlanta during which, among other things, the mayor was obliged to leap from an automobile atop which he had been trying to speak.

One can conceive of the Meredith incident at the beginning of June and the Carmichael episode in September as parentheses delimiting the bounds of an otherwise curiously uneventful summer.

If this is so, then—although it can’t be proved—it seems probable that the considerable apprehension evident during the summer of 1966 was more a result of what the militants *said* (the various manifestos) than what they *did* (which was relatively mild). From this experience must have emerged an appreciation that it is not so much violence but the threat of violence that influences an adversary and obtains political ends, which would account for the hyperviolent verbal display put on by Carmichael and Brown in 1967.

²⁰ *The New York Times*, July 19, 1966.

1967—Rhetoric and riots

It was suggested above that 1966 demonstrated that an eloquent threat can be comparable in its effect to actual violence. Whatever the inspiration for it, the strategic innovation of 1967 was the extravagant behavior of Stokely Carmichael and Rap Brown, who, starting where the spring 1966 "just war" proclamations left off, escalated the riot threat beyond the limits of credibility. While Brown kept the home fires burning verbally, Carmichael traveled to Havana, Hanoi, and Moscow, incorporating the dogmas of Frantz Fanon, Castroite anti-American elements, and the Viet Cong (the enemy of my enemy is my friend) guerilla precepts into a "Third World *Uber Alles*" mélange. A surrealistic aura has surrounded this episode in retrospect because of the Department of Justice's willingness to let bygones be bygones, rather than to martyr Carmichael and his correspondingly equable demeanor.

Although there is no way of determining objectively the effect of these threatening gestures, the intent behind them is reasonably clear: leave no stone unturned in creating the most threatening posture imaginable.

Two assumptions underly the following account: The extravagant speeches and behavior of Carmichael and Brown amplified the psychological effect of the 1967 riots, while the riots—and especially the reports of organized guerrilla warfare—lent credibility to their rhetoric in a sort of regenerative symbiosis. The heightened sense of urgency that emerged in 1967 was therefore inspired as much by nihilist rhetoric and threats of urban guerrilla warfare as by actual riots.

August 1967's unprecedented level of concern was stimulated by the joint action of several factors. Not just by the quantity of riot violence, for example, but more importantly by the pattern of its occurrence. The summer's racial heat began early with a succession of incidents through June and the first half of July, at which point Newark exploded. Newark had hardly cooled down when Detroit erupted. So, at the beginning of August, with the summer only half over, one perceived a nascent trend which if extrapolated was reason for serious concern. But, with the exception of New Haven, the rioting eased precipitately after Detroit, as if everyone sensed that the point had gotten across.²¹

Press reports suggest that the Newark disturbance was partly a reaction to police harshness, but that Detroit's enlightened hands-off

²¹ Dick Gregory said that other cities should "thank Detroit," because comparable violence would have had to occur elsewhere, if not there. This sounds as if a sort of cumulative quota had to be met one way or another to achieve a necessary effect.

policy permitted things to get out of hand there by default. A police shift change in Detroit, shortly after the precipitating incident, permitted looting to spread, after which police were increasingly outnumbered by looters who knew there were orders not to fire. A disconcerting aspect of Detroit was that it contrasted so markedly with poorer communities such as Newark, and it was rumored that affluent middle-class Negroes participated for ideological reasons. This implied a race-oriented political basis for the riots that the usual economic solutions (jobs, housing, education) might not dissipate. The riot in New Haven tended to support this surmise. After Detroit the wild extremist rhetoric of H. Rap Brown and Stokely Carmichael began to assume a certain ominous plausibility.

Nevertheless, the *prima facie* case for organized terrorism was sufficiently weak in Detroit for J. Anthony Lukas in an early article²² to discount it almost entirely. Later, participants came forward to enhance the signal-to-noise ratio as it were, and make sure that "Whitey" would "get the message."

Probably the message (patterns of systematic burning and sniping) embodied in the Detroit riot would have emerged almost as clearly from the Watts riot, given this kind of assistance and sufficiently sensitized investigators. In any event, considering the nature of the medium, it is certainly more efficient to call attention to the latent message in this way than to escalate terrorist activity to an unambiguous level.

Actually, in objective terms of physical damage and fatalities, the two standard indices, Detroit was only marginally worse than Watts. Evidently, the specter of urban guerrilla warfare (made credible by a combination of immoderate words and conservative deeds) evoked a level of establishment concern that would have required any number of old-style "inadvertent" Harlem-Watts-type riots to achieve. In this sense, 1967 marked somewhat more of a qualitative escalation than a quantitative one, which in strictly economic terms constitutes a victory of sorts for the rioters. That is, augmenting one's acts with threats amounts to an economy of means.

Malcolm X once told a middle-of-the-road Negro leader that without pressure from the extremists the moderates would get nowhere. Carrying this insight to its logical conclusion, one arrives at the far-out strategy that has recommended itself to Carmichael and Brown. The more extreme, the better.

But if the impression Detroit made was due in large part to the effects of the extreme rhetoric and behavior of Rap Brown and Stokely Carmichael, then other long-run implications need to be considered.

²² *The New York Times*, magazine, August 27, 1967.

That the militant aggregate threat posture would come to employ a high ratio of violent words to violent deeds is understandable, first because that is the path of least resistance. Talk is cheap, especially compared to riots. Ghetto Negroes who have experienced one serious riot are seldom enthusiasts for another. Also, deeds are irrevocable in a way that words are not. For example, when the Vietnam war ends, a cloud of rhetoric can be dissipated relatively easily; not so the effects of urban terror and assassination. This supports the idea that, in 1967, verbal hyperbole not only magnified, but to a significant extent compensated for the relative restraint of riot violence. Leaving aside the possible negative effects and future costs, one reaches the paradoxical conclusion that to the extent hyperbolic threats augment an action strategy, they are conservative. Other things being equal, alternative approaches would tend to require more overt violence to force federal acknowledgment²³ of the connection between riots and the Negro predicament.

Riots, bargaining, politics

In 1968 the pressure—the political influence—generated by the riot threat is developed through two interdependent mechanisms which are worth distinguishing analytically (in the public mind they run inextricably together).

One mechanism is riots as defined by the President's Riot Commission: "racial" but not "interracial," that is, Negroes rioting against such "symbols of white authority" as property and the police, but not against white people per se. On the evidence of attitude surveys and of what happened after the death of Martin Luther King, it is apparent that the Negro mood has reached a pitch of dissatisfaction that meets the Tabor precondition for widespread acquiescence in such violence. But the special "property, not people" character of the riots, and their tendency to be confined to Negro neighborhoods, has meant that the white majority could afford to be relatively tolerant of them. It is an open question as to whether these restrained riots, even if they occurred frequently and in large numbers, would cause the bankers and businessmen to say "all right, dammit—give them what they want," as Mr. Tabor suggested. The riots work a terrible hardship on the older (nonrioting) solid citizens of the ghetto, and there simply might not be enough ignitable ghettos to do the job.

Which points to the second mechanism: the more-or-less credible threat of urban guerrilla warfare. This is the "civil war" which Mr. Tabor declared the Negro could not "win." It was suggested above

²³ Signified by the appointment of the Commission on Civil Disorders to decode the riot message.

that such a threat was therefore irrational, but one which was nevertheless made credible in 1967. It was this threat that accounted for the high level of concern among influential whites, and indeed for the appointment of the Riot Commission. (This exercise in brinkmanship parallels the United States-Soviet threats of thermonuclear war over Berlin and Cuba, which though they may be irrational are taken very seriously.)

It is interesting to see how the Riot Commission's conclusions in this area dovetailed with the militants' tactics (tact?) to preserve the political advantages and eliminate the mutual disadvantages that such undeniably dangerous expedients entail. The Commission was directed by the President to investigate the extent to which the riots were planned or organized. They reported that they "found no evidence that all or any of the disorders or the incidents that led to them were planned or directed by any organization or group." This formulation does not speak directly to the question of whether some of the activity in the later stages of, say, the Detroit riot showed signs of organization. It was never alleged that entire riots were planned and deliberately initiated, only that patterns of organized activity were sometimes discernible once one had started. Since there were only faint objective traces of such activity, pointed up retroactively by shadowy militant claims, the Commission was surely wise to ignore them. To have acknowledged evidence of deliberate intent would have defined a conscious challenge which would have ensured bitter opposition to its main recommendations (police restraint, massive economic programs).

The discretion with which the militants asserted their threat, and the fact that the Commission failed to acknowledge it while acting (in the urgency of its recommendations) as though it had received the "message," saves face all around. It supplies an admittedly illogical "have your cake and eat it too" element which may be necessary if we are to break out of the "we can't reward riots" vicious circle.

The strategic implications of the Commission's recommendation that alternatives be found to the use of deadly force in controlling riots are quite profound. In one sense, it only corrects an asymmetry in the bargaining position of the rioters, who have showed remarkably little disposition to injure white persons as compared to white property. What it really does, though, is transform the conflict from a matter of life and death to one of dollars and cents. You don't shoot at us, we won't shoot at you. It minimizes the likelihood that a degenerate, downward spiral of violent reprisals could occur, which is the really mortal danger that has hovered over the conflict. The price in economic terms could of course become quite high if the authorities could not muster sufficient force to control the situation nonviolently, so that looters were in effect given a free ride and were able to exploit this fact massively. If the rule that says police

are to fire only in reply to snipers (or perhaps arsonists, too), is observed, then the overwhelming majority of rioters would not be threatened.

The increased costs ("reparations" in the form of loot, the expense of the manpower necessary to police riots without resorting to deadly force, the enormous social costs in terms of disrespect for law and order) of this tacit agreement to bargain nonviolently might make the funding of Great Society programs look more attractive to the white majority. If looters take too great advantage, pressure to rescind the prohibition on deadly force would obviously rise. The situation is still one of mutual deterrence, "brinkmanship" or "chicken," but one with a presumption in favor of an economic rather than a violent bargaining mode. How this will work itself out is unpredictable; in any bargain the outcome is indeterminate. But given the amazing ingenuity and restraint demonstrated during the preceding five years, the prospect for a businesslike negotiated settlement appears good.

Perhaps the greatest hidden cost of our strained racial situation is the generation of young Negroes who have come to associate power with violence. The lesson of the summer of 1968, at home as in Vietnam, must be that there are stringent limits on what one can accomplish politically with violence. (Actually, this was the original lesson of "Bull" Connor and Birmingham.) Having discovered by experience the limits of their commitment to nonviolence, it is highly desirable that militants—black and white—confront pragmatically the political consequences of their romantic infatuation with violence.