

# The Successful Sit-Ins in a Border City: A Study in Social Causation

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AMONG THE EARLIEST successes of the student sit-in movement during the spring of 1960 was the opening up of the Baltimore department store restaurants to Negro customers.<sup>1</sup> In this city, moreover, it was notable that the demonstrations were unmarked by the violence that attended demonstrations in cities farther south, and the students attracted an unusual amount of support among white citizens.

In this article I shall explore the reasons for the character and success of the student sit-in movement in Baltimore during the spring of 1960, by placing the movement and its achievements in the context of social change that has been going on in Baltimore over the past decade, and tracing in some detail the sequence of events initiated by the student demonstrations that began in the middle of March, 1960. The analysis will involve an examination of the activities of the students, of store managements,

and of intergroup relations agencies.<sup>2</sup>

## THE SETTING

Baltimore is a border-state city of almost a million people, of whom over one-third were Negroes in 1960. In race relations its practices had been largely southern until well after the Second World War. Segregation was complete in education (with the exception of the University of Maryland Law School) and in publicly owned recreational facilities. Negroes were barred from theaters, restaurants and other places of public accommodation, and they faced extreme discrimination in employment.

From the point of view of subsequent change, however, Baltimore was fortunate in several respects. Negroes were not disfranchised and there was no segregation on trains and buses. Moreover, the city possessed unusually vigorous units of both the NAACP and Urban League, a crusading Negro newspaper whose publisher played an important role in civic affairs, several

1. Probably the only earlier instance that spring of a change in store policies due to student sit-in activity was at Galveston on April 5. There were of course earlier instances of successful sit-ins by school youth, as in the case of the activities of the Oklahoma City NAACP youth councils in 1959.

2. The following account is based chiefly on information obtained as a result of being a participant-observer in the student sit-in movement in Baltimore, and from interviews with store officials and leaders in intergroup relations agencies.

active interracial civic groups such as the United Church Women, Americans for Democratic Action and the Congress of Racial Equality, and beginning late in 1951 an effective Governor's Commission on Interracial Problems and Relations. All of these agencies, acting sometimes in concert, more often autonomously, and at times at cross-purposes, helped to make significant dents in the system of segregation and discrimination during the post-war years.

Progress in the immediate post-war period seemed minimal, but 1951-1952 proved to be a turning point. In those two years there was a significant breakthrough in employment when taxi and bus companies began hiring Negro drivers, the University of Maryland began admitting Negroes to all its graduate and professional schools, and the city's only legitimate theater abolished segregated seating.

From then on the pace of social change quickened. In 1954 the Board of Education voluntarily decided to desegregate its schools promptly after the Supreme Court's decision of May 17. Also in the wake of this decision the Housing Authority of Baltimore decided the time was ripe to desegregate its public housing operations. The predominantly Negro residential sections of the city had been growing rapidly in extent following the Supreme Court decision against restrictive covenants in 1947, and except for one incident (which was promptly quashed by the police) neighborhood transitions had been peaceful. Moreover, since 1956 there has been some prog-

ress in efforts to promote integrated neighborhoods. In 1956 also a legal battle of several years finally resulted in the complete integration of the city's recreational facilities.

In the economic area the Urban League reported modest successes in widening employment opportunities; in 1957 the city council created an Equal Employment Opportunities Commission (without enforcement powers, however); and the local physicians' and lawyers' associations began admitting Negroes.

Meanwhile there had also been significant political development. In 1954 three Baltimore Negroes were elected to the state legislature, marking the first time any Negroes had served in that body; and the following year the first Negro councilman since the city had been redistricted in the early 1930's was elected. In the middle fifties, also, Governor McKeldin appointed several Baltimore Negroes to judicial and other positions in the city and state.

#### SOME EARLIER GAINS

In the area most pertinent to this paper—that of public accommodations—there was also some improvement. In 1954 and 1955, chiefly as a result of CORE sit-ins, downtown variety-store lunch counters opened to Negroes, and in the latter year a sit-in demonstration by Morgan State College students at the Northwood shopping center opened the Read drug-store chain lunch counters. Between 1956 and 1958 the downtown movie houses opened their doors to Negroes;

in 1958 and 1959 several of the major downtown hotels ended their discriminatory policies; and as the fifties drew to a close a tiny handful of restaurants also changed their policies.<sup>3</sup>

Curiously department stores had been more discriminatory in Baltimore than probably anywhere else in the country. Beginning in the 1920's they effectively discouraged Negro trade by refusing Negroes charge accounts and refusing to permit them to try on or return articles. Certain firms, it appears, in effect rejected Negro patronage entirely. It was only during and after the Second World War that, under the pressure of various interested groups and agencies, the department stores gradually—and in piecemeal fashion—modified their discriminatory policies.

By 1960 beauty shops, eating facilities and the more intimate women's garment departments were the chief pockets of discrimination left in the department stores. Meanwhile, on their own, the stores had been gradually moving toward elimination of segregated rest-room and dining facilities for their employees, had ventured modestly into the area of hiring Negroes for white-collar jobs, and in at

least two instances had begun the employment of Negro salesclerks.

#### THE NORTHWOOD DEMONSTRATIONS

In this movement toward opening up places of public accommodation, Morgan State College students had played a significant role by their sit-in demonstrations at the Northwood shopping center, located less than a mile from the college. These, beginning in 1955, had as their chief targets lunch counters, which they successfully desegregated, and the movie theater, whose owner stubbornly refused to alter his policy.

Typically the demonstrations were organized under the leadership of the student council, began sometime during the spring of each school year, and usually ended with at least one success, but with the theater owner and some other proprietor proving obdurate.

In order to disassociate themselves from the college, and to emphasize their status as citizens asking for the rights of citizens, the students carried on their work as the Civic Interest Group. In 1958 and 1959 the students had unsuccessfully attempted to open the Rooftop Dining Room at the Hecht-May Company's Northwood branch department store.

It was in this atmosphere of social change in Baltimore, and in the context of past successes (and failures) at Northwood that during the school year 1959-1960 the student leadership at Morgan was, as usual, thinking of again starting the annual demonstrations. Eventually, about six weeks after the southern student sit-in dem-

3. Many of the business firms involved were reluctant to change their policies, and economic interest was often an important factor in their shift of policy. Thus the downtown movie houses and one of the restaurants were compelled to alter their practices by the changing character of the neighborhoods in which they did their business, while the major hotels were influenced by the growing number of groups who would hold conventions only at integrated hotels.

For an excellent summary of most of the changes discussed in the preceding paragraphs see *Toward Equality: Baltimore's Progress Report* (Baltimore: The Sidney Hollander Foundation, 1960). Also helpful were the annual reports of the Governor's Commission and a number of interviews.

onstrations had begun on February 1 at Greensboro, N.C., the Morgan students renewed their efforts at Northwood—this time aiming at the movie theater and more particularly at the department store restaurant.

For several days their mass sit-ins thoroughly disrupted service at the restaurant; subsequently the management barred their entrance, and the students then confined their activity to picketing at the two outside entrances to the restaurant. Five students were arrested during the ten days or so of demonstrations at the Northwood department store restaurant — one charged with assault in a pushing incident, and the other four charged with trespass when they temporarily seemed to be blocking an entrance walkway. These were the only arrests made during the entire period of department store demonstrations, and the charges were later dropped in all cases (though there have since been a number of arrests in connection with demonstrations against other restaurants during the summer and fall of 1960). And in contrast to the early years of the student demonstrations at Northwood, the police acted fairly, and in fact almost seemed to be apologizing for arresting the "trespassing" students at the request of the restaurant manager.<sup>4</sup>

4. In general the higher police officials have acted fairly throughout the year and a half during which the demonstrations have been going on, though there have been instances of discriminatory actions by individual policemen. For the most part also the city magistrates proved impartial, and in some cases were in obvious sympathy with the student demonstrators. During the summer of 1960 one magistrate actually expressed disappointment that he did not get the opportunity to dismiss charges against one student, because, before he could even hear the case, the students' lawyer had requested that the case be transferred to a state court.

Shortly after the demonstrations began the executive secretary of the local Urban League, a skilled tactician highly regarded by many of the city's businessmen, came out to the campus to speak with the student leaders. He felt that the students would be unable to attain their objectives without putting pressure on the Hecht-May Company's competitors, and he therefore urged that the students demonstrate downtown at all of the four major department stores. (In the course of my research it later developed that this was precisely the course of action desired by the Hecht-May Company itself, and that in fact the Urban League secretary and the firm's executives had discussed the idea together before it was broached to the students.)

To the surprise of this experienced and outstanding community leader, the students' response to his suggestion was negative. As the student council president expressed it, it was manifestly impossible for the students at Morgan, in an outlying section of the city, to arrange effective demonstrations downtown, several miles from the college.

The students picketed at Northwood as much as twelve hours daily, though participation declined from two or three hundred students to a few dozen by the end of a week. In contrast to the strong hostility exhibited toward the student demonstrators in the middle fifties, few passersby made nasty remarks. Some bottles tossed off the roof of the store one evening was the sum total of

violence from teenage roughs, who were usually shooed away by the police before they could cause any trouble.

At the behest of the Governor's Commission negotiations between the students and the department store were instituted, but ended in failure. A request by the company for temporary suspension of the demonstrations while negotiating continued was rejected by the students, because of negative results when they had agreed to a similar proposal the year before.

Finally, in desperation, about ten days after the demonstrations had started, the department store obtained relief in the courts, in the form of a temporary injunction limiting the students to two pickets at each entrance to the restaurant. In their complaint the store management charged that the demonstrations had cost them forty-nine per cent of their restaurant business, and thirty-three per cent of their retail store trade, as compared with the same period a year before.<sup>5</sup>

#### BROADENING THE ATTACK

Ironically the granting of this injunction was probably the best thing that could have happened to the Civic Interest Group at that time. This was so for two reasons. First, it served to perk up flagging student interest (in fact it had become difficult to obtain pickets during the daytime). Secondly, it led the students to take up the suggestions of the Urban League Secre-

tary which they had earlier rejected, and to adopt the tactic which—unknown to the students—the department store management wished they would take. In short the students did what had previously appeared to them to be impossible: they went downtown—to the “seat of the trouble” as they said.

What made possible this belated fulfillment of the Urban League secretary's suggestion was a few hundred dollars put up by the NAACP for chartered bus transportation. And so it was that on a tense Saturday morning, late in March, a couple of hundred students and a handful of their instructors staged sit-in demonstrations at Baltimore's four major department stores.

The Hecht-May Company was prepared, for guards stationed at the restaurant entrance turned the students away. A second store simply closed its dining room. At Hutzler's, considered Baltimore's leading department store, the students were permitted to sit in the restaurant and at the basement lunch counter until closing time, but the facilities themselves ceased serving for the day. The fourth store, apparently out of a mixture of what it deemed to be the ethical thing and what it judged to be sound business practice at this juncture in the city's history (though admittedly it was taking a definite risk), had earlier decided to serve the students if they should appear. Consequently, to the surprise of the demonstrators, they were courteously received as customers. So unprepared were the stu-

5. While much of the drop in trade in the store was due to the loss of Negro customers, the drop in restaurant business was probably due to whites staying away in order to avoid what seemed to them to be possible unpleasant incidents.

dents for this unexpected turn of events that they had scarcely enough money to buy anything.

Sitting-in and picketing downtown gave the students something they had lacked before—adequate coverage in the city's media of mass communication. And Hochschild-Kohn's courageous decision to change its policy was crucial to the success of the movement, for it facilitated the mobilization of public opinion against the other stores. Indeed, practically at once there was a dramatic rallying of public opinion to the support of the students.

Quite spontaneously and without any prompting from the students a number of Negro and interracial—even predominantly white and relatively conservative—organizations got busy. Some, like the YWCA, passed resolutions commending the store that had opened and urging that the others do so. Money seemed to be flowing in as others, especially the churches and voluntary associations in the Negro community, as well as numerous individuals of both races, sent in contributions, though the students had not made a general appeal for funds. Many organizations urged their members to write letters and cancel charge accounts, and many individuals did this spontaneously.

#### PUBLIC SUPPORT

Unlike other cities this was not a centralized, coordinated movement, but came about partly as the result of the spontaneous actions of many individuals, and partly as the result of the unsolicited efforts of leaders in a

number of organizations. Especially striking was the fact that economic action was taken not only by Negroes but by many whites as well.<sup>6</sup> The fact that the demonstrators were students seemed to be particularly effective in eliciting the support of many white people. Indicative of the response of the white community were the communications received by the store that had changed its policy. Overwhelmingly they favored the change, and many of the letters came from the finest residential sections of the city.<sup>7</sup>

The heaviest pressure was exerted against the city's leading department store, for the other stores had indicated that they would change their policy if Hutzler's did—that, as one executive said, they were hitching their wagon to Hutzler's star. Furthermore, it was alleged by other department store executives and by leading figures active in intergroup relations that Hutzler's had all along been the most intransigent on the matter, for its management had never so much as agreed to sit down and discuss the situation. Though Hutzler's has denied these charges, it was clear that this store's policy was the key to the solution of the situation.

Prodded by one of the chief figures among the city's intergroup relations

6. It would be hard to say how much business the discriminating stores actually lost, especially as the period covered by the downtown demonstrations was relatively short. The *Baltimore Afro-American* on April 16 (the day before the department stores all gave in), citing Federal Reserve figures, stated that there was an 8% decline in department store business as compared with the same period in 1959. The downtown department stores all denied that there had been any significant change in their trade, however.

7. This store, however, did suffer a temporary drop in its restaurant patronage.

leaders, some of the most prominent white people in the city individually visited the officials of the various stores, and informed Hutzler's that inasmuch as the other two were willing to alter their policy, and they personally favored the change, they really thought that Hutzler's ought to do so.

Meanwhile the demonstrations continued two or three days a week (on Saturdays and on evenings when the stores were open late). The demonstrations were always orderly, the policemen and others commending the students on their excellent behavior. The crowds out for Easter shopping did not jostle with the students, there was no violence, and there were no arrests. In an effort to avoid any incidents, Hutzler's president, upon leaving town for a few weeks shortly after the demonstrations began, had left word that the dining rooms were to close down whenever the students appeared. In fact, on one occasion, shortly before the stores gave in, eight demonstrators closed all four dining places at Hutzler's. All in all there was something downright genteel about this phase of the Civic Interest Group's operations in Baltimore.

Further efforts at negotiation with the department stores had borne no fruit. The students refused to go along with a two-week cooling off period because they reasoned that their demonstrations would be less effective once the pre-Easter buying season was over. Nevertheless student interest was again flagging, and it was

well that Hutzler's president returned from his cruise and arranged a conference.

#### VICTORY

This meeting was attended by four student leaders, two Urban League officials and the NAACP lawyer who was the students' legal counsel. Though the students were thus armed with adult aid adequate for difficult negotiations, the presence of the latter proved unnecessary, for the firm's president announced his change of policy at once and complimented the students upon their behavior during the demonstrations. Though this decision was a surprise to the other two stores they both followed suit immediately.

Thus within three weeks from the time the students had started demonstrating downtown, victory was won. Victory had been achieved relatively easily because of the support of both the Negro community and much of the white community. Baltimore was perhaps unique in the degree to which the economic pressure was not only a Negro "withdrawal" but an interracial one. Victory was also achieved because of the support the students received from community organizations professionally interested in race relations, as well as from churches and other voluntary associations whose chief concern was not race relations as such.<sup>8</sup> To a considerable degree this support came to the students un-

8. The Baltimore *Afro-American* on two or three occasions stressed—in very general terms—the contribution of white ministers, though I did not happen to find out about this in the course of my own research.

solicited. Much of the work—especially of the Urban League and the United Church Women—was unknown to the students.

The spontaneity of this support accorded the students not only among adult Negroes—which was typical throughout the South—but also among sympathetic whites, was notable indeed. Just as Hochschild-Kohn's unexpected reversal of policy on the occasion of the students' first downtown demonstration seems to have been essential for the students' ultimate victory, so also it is hard to see how the students—whose efforts were waning when victory came—could have succeeded without this dramatic demonstration of public support.

It is true that then, as later in the history of the Civic Interest Group, the students have tended to act autonomously of the established leadership in the community, even when, as in this instance, its assistance was so important in their victory. This has tended to exasperate adult leaders, especially in the Baltimore NAACP and Urban League, who felt that the

students have lacked appreciation for their help and guidance.

Yet fundamentally it was, after all, the students' victory. This was so in their eyes, and it was so in the eyes of the public. They were the heroes, for they were the ones who had picketed for hours, they were the ones who had run the risk of being arrested, and they were the ones who had pointed the way to the community. Hutzler's in a statement to the public gave credit to the students for calling attention to the situation and for accomplishing what the stores themselves had not been able to do. As the students' lawyer said, "They were way ahead of me. If they had followed me, we would still be in court arguing the case on a demurrer."

In short, by dramatizing the issue, the student demonstrations had harnessed both the Negro community's desire for change and the white public's readiness for it. Certainly in Baltimore, as elsewhere, the students' action speeded up spectacularly the whole process of change in the pattern of race relations.