

# JUST A MATTER OF TIMING?

Tom Hayden

THE FIGHT TO REGISTER and vote is clearly the new pivot of the Southern civil-rights movement. It is new because Negro protest has not previously selected political channels. It is significant because it challenges the segregationist one-party system which historically has prevented the Negro from politically expressing his grievances. It is potent because it is linked to persistent legal and nonviolent direct action.

There are five million Negroes of voting age in the South. Generally, about twenty-five per cent of the registered Negroes vote, compared to sixty per cent of the registered whites. In well over a hundred counties, whites practice discriminatory techniques against Negroes who want to exercise their franchise. If considerably more Negroes voted, they would by no means constitute a Southwide majority, but they would be a bloc, to which state and national political representatives would be somewhat more responsible.

The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, the Congress of Racial Equality, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People and the Urban League are now engaged in efforts at voter registration in various areas of the South. Their Voter Education Project, officially begun this summer, is being administered by the Southern Regional Council and will service local Negro groups as well as affiliates of national organizations. Taconic, Field and other foundations are



contributing nearly half a million dollars to the campaign, and the Justice Department is stepping up investigations of discriminatory practices in over seventy Southern counties.

Though barely underway, the voter drives are already having an impact on the South. In McComb, Mississippi, and Albany, Georgia, the Deep South has been penetrated by unyielding Negro campaigns. The Mississippi drive led to the emergence of two Negro Congressional candidates, the first in that state since Reconstruction. In Alabama, ten Negroes ran for Democratic Party executive committee seats. In Atlanta, a rabid racist candidate was defeated in the mayoralty election by a Good-for-Business Integrationist, on the strength of the Negro vote. In Memphis, a Congressman changed his voting habits because of the threat of constituent Negroes.

Lest it be thought that the Negro revolt is on the verge of success, it should be remembered that the forces of reaction and authoritarianism remain strong across the South. The lily-white Democratic Party is basically intact, business successfully prevents union organization, militarism and fervent anti-Communism flourish, and the public generally maintains its narrow, irrational identifications with the myths and traditions of the region. One of the few changes is the slight but apparent surge of racist Republicans centering on the philosophy of Barry Goldwater, which is beginning to

tarnish the popularity of the Democrats among white people. The civil-rights movement is a minority movement, albeit a relentless one.

This newest phase of the civil-rights struggle is chronicled in Louis Lomax's inside story in a recent *Harper's*. "The Kennedys Move in on Dixie." The article, which is substantially the same as the conclusion of Lomax's new book, "The Negro Revolt," is described as the narrative of "how the two brothers are planning to change the whole political climate of the South, by opening the ballot boxes to hundreds of Negroes."

Now civil-rights news is easily gathered; but when it is the work of Lomax, an author and "inside dopester" of the civil-rights community, it should be carefully studied. In this instance the article is particularly important, because, first, it touches an unpublicized but crucial new departure into politics by Southern Negroes and, second, because it contains a rosy view of the master politician, John F. Kennedy, one that is widely held by liberals but is open to fundamental criticism.

The essence of Lomax's article is a defense of the Kennedy administration, demonstrating how the "complex and burdened man from Boston" is quietly trying to enfranchise the Southern Negro, win him to the Democratic Party, put constituent pressure on the Dixiecrats—and, as Lomax at least implicitly acknowledges, counter the first traces of Republican organization. In a key paragraph, the author writes: "So the stage is set for President Kennedy to fight the civil rights battle of his preference on grounds of his own choosing. Although the Justice Department has appeared as a friend of the court in behalf of the freedom fighters and sit-in demonstrators, the administration does not feel these things are of basic importance."

Apparently agreeing with the President's judgment, Lomax sketches his ideal of a "significant civil rights drama": five hundred Negroes led by famous civil-rights activists, marching to the courthouse in Jackson, Mississippi, demanding to vote. Young Robert Kennedy rushes by airplane and cab to exhort Mississippi officialdom to permit the Negroes to vote. Soon after, Southern Senators are using the term "colored citizens" instead of "niggers" as a result of the pressure from their new constituents.

Having presented this vignette, and aware of its remoteness from reality, Lomax acknowledges the existence of "mounting liberal criticism" of the President, especially focusing on discrimination in federally-supported housing, Jim Crow government contracts to private industry, and the lack of civil-rights legislation. "Much of the liberal criticism of the President can be reduced to a matter of *timing*." In conclusion, then, Lomax is convinced that the President's delay "is a necessary concomitant of political mechanics: the awesome task of moving Congress (a Congress where he has no real majority backing), of rallying private support, of changing, legally, the political and economic situation of the Negroes in the South and wherever they are discriminated against. He got into the Presidency by

political maneuvering—the only way he could have got there—and he cannot afford an absolutely moralistic attitude on any single issue, particularly one so explosive as civil rights." On this humble note, Lomax ends.

Surely this general thesis will be accepted by nearly every liberal, white or Negro. On its basis the liberal community will assess the President and the civil-rights community will explore its future moves. But is Lomax's estimate of Kennedy at all accurate? Considerable evidence exists to suggest that it is not—and to the extent that it is not, the civil-rights movement will be misdirected and frustrated.

It has become commonplace to say that Kennedy has done more for civil rights in two years than Eisenhower did in eight. Of this there can be no doubt—only it is like comparing whispers to silence when morality (not to mention world conditions) demands stentorian declarations. Again, numerous writers have documented the number of judges and other federal officials Kennedy has appointed with his civil-rights philosophy of "enforcement, not enactment of laws"—and the number of gestures he still could make before the executive bag of tricks is emptied. These are not litanies to recite here—*what should be criticized is not the quantitative failures but the fundamental approach of the administration to the problem of the Negro.*

Perhaps the key to the Kennedy approach lies in the President's own conception of his role as a balancer of extremely divergent, if not irreconcilable, interests. His own political party is a coalition of integrationists and racists. As keeper of the coalition, Kennedy not only appoints Mennen Williams Undersecretary of State to Africa but chooses the greatest of political chameleons, Lyndon Johnson, as his vice-president. The Kennedy who personally takes Martin Luther King on a White House tour is the same Kennedy who made political deals over the breakfast table with John Patterson, the Alabama governor who tacitly permitted mob violence against the Freedom Riders. Apparently in return for Patterson's support, Kennedy nominated Alabaman Charles Meriwether, political ally of the Ku Klux Klan, to be head of the Export-Import Bank, which distributes funds to underdeveloped (non-white) countries. Kennedy has also appointed three segregationists as federal judges in states where voter registration drives badly need administration leverage—Cox and Mize in Mississippi and West in Louisiana.

In Kennedy's extremely "balanced" cabinet, the only real Southerner is Secretary of Commerce Luther Hodges, former governor of North Carolina and high official of the Southern Textile Manufacturing Association, the South's most crucial industry, with eight hundred thousand operatives. Hodges shows no measurable interest in the growth of racially-integrated labor unions in the Southern states, the only means by which the Negro will obtain the economic security that is prerequisite to active citizenship and social mobility. But even the moderate federal Civil Rights Commission,

in its recent report on *Voting*, noted that the achievement of economic independence from white bosses was the desperate need of the Southern Negro, and that voting would not really be significant until the problem of economic exploitation was solved.

In this context it is not at all incomprehensible that the administration's "hire a Negro" program in federally-supported industries has touched so far only such fields as garments and aircraft, which are peripheral to the South, rather than textiles. Nor is it surprising that there have been no investigations by the Justice Department into the charges made in June 1960 by the Textile Workers Union that the labor movement is denied its legitimate rights in the South.

Until the Kennedy administration demonstrates in an unequivocal way that it is on the side of labor organization in the South, until it chooses to conflict with Luther Hodges' interests, until the "balance" itself is reshuffled to the economic benefit of the Negro, the much-acclaimed vote will be a truncated weapon against the *status quo* and the "commitment" of the administration to human needs will be suspect. Until Kennedy is willing to risk the political unity of the Democratic Party in behalf of equal rights, the Negro will face, to borrow a Kennedy inaugural phrase, a "long twilight struggle" of indefinite duration.

The administration is prepared to make no such fundamental commitments. It seeks what liberalization of the Dixiecrats and advancement of the Negro is possible within the one-party and unionless *status quo*—with full knowledge, presumably, that the Southern politicians cannot be liberalized enough to initiate the political, economic and social reforms required for fully equal rights and opportunities. Robert Kennedy's infamous "cool off," uttered to the Freedom Riders while his brother was travelling overseas, is indicative of the dominant attitude toward nonviolent direct action—and of the Kennedy distaste for intra-party provocation.

But author Lomax—the archetypal liberal—confuses the issues by rationalizing the Kennedy civil-rights moves as a matter of "timing," when an entire orientation is at issue. To be sure, "timing" is involved—perhaps we can wait fifty years for the Dixiecrats to reform themselves, unions to spring up magically, and a Republican Party to grow as well. Will the Southern Negro wait as long in optimistic nonviolence? And what about the nine million Negroes in Northern ghettos who live beyond the rehabilitating effects of the "welfare state" because the Southern Democrats will not support social security extensions, unemployment compensation, low-cost public housing, a proliferation of new jobs, massive retraining programs? Even if they were willing to wait, the crucial point is that there is no guarantee that the administration will change their inferior station, except in so far as the total well-being of the public is improved: if standards of living continue to improve slowly, the Negro (who receives about one-half the white man's wage) will creep toward affluent inferiority.

The best guarantee of this fate is Lomax's own apparent desire that the Kennedys have a *commanding* role in the civil-rights movement, "moving in" on "their own grounds." To give the master political balancer a leadership role in a basic social struggle would be implicitly to forsake the catalytic effects and revolutionary possibilities of nonviolent action and, equally important, to destroy *the independent character of the movement*. Stated another way, this would mean that determination of the future civil-rights movement would be in the power of the President who would compromise its course by bartering with the Negro's chief enemies, the Dixiecrats.

Seen this way, the picture is bleak indeed. There is no hope that the "complex and burdened man from Boston" will take steps which would shatter his Democratic Party coalition, as in 1948. The Kennedy-worshipping liberal community can be expected to endorse the "move on Dixie" (after all, Negroes ought to vote; then equality will surely prevail). It is even suspected that the President will sign a second Emancipation Proclamation on the White House lawn this fall, in commemoration of the document of 1862—after all, civil-rights progress is just a matter of timing.

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## LABOR AND THE ADMINISTRATION

Because of limitations of space, the following concluding paragraph had to be cut from Sumner S. Rosen's article "Labor and the Politics of Peace" in the Summer issue. We are happy to print it now since for those who missed the Summer issue, it is an excellent restatement of points made in the article and at the same time parallels Haydon's analysis of the pitfalls of working for Negro rights within the framework of the administration.

The time for choice—and it will be a painful choice—is very close at hand. We have had our chance to look the so-called affluent society of the Eisenhower period in the face, and have found that it leaves out a good deal of what gives life meaning and purpose. We have had our chance to look at the meaning of the Kennedy consensus, of which the labor movement is officially a part, and have discovered that there are disquieting and perhaps dangerous things in store for those who relax their guard and forget their moral origins and moral commitments. No one can say that labor was not given an opportunity to work inside the apparatus. But now the time has come to start looking for the exit, and to come out into the free air. The future, if there is to be one, lies with those who have undertaken to build a really free society at home and a really disarmed world community. For the labor movement, it seems to me that now is the time to join them, or else to begin writing its own epitaph.