

RIFLE SQUADS or the BELOVED COMMUNITY



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EVERYONE WHO IS AT ALL informed about the civil-rights struggle seems agreed that the summer of 1964 will be critical and quite possibly tragic. The present situation is a product of forces which have been piling up for years and even centuries. The changes that will come about if integration is achieved will be profound in all spheres of American life—the political patterns, the economy, the culture, the ethos. The issues which are faced by individuals and organizations are highly complicated and emotion-laden. Yet all sorts of individuals and groups (including advocates and practitioners of “nonviolence”) have to act—do act and make decisions these days—without adequate information to guide them and for the most part able to calculate the consequences only tentatively and partially. It is clearly important that we try to discern such guidelines to action as may be available.

The Georgia Council on Human Relations, with headquarters in Atlanta, has just issued a pamphlet entitled “Albany, Georgia—Police State.” Readers of LIBERATION will recall that this city was the scene of bitter episodes in the civil-rights struggle in 1961 and 1962 and of an encounter between the Albany authorities and people, on the one hand, and the Quebec-Washington-Guánatánamo Peace Walk, on the other, early in 1964. The pamphlet begins as follows:

The white majority in Albany is living in a dream—a one hundred year old, segregated dream. In the dream, everybody dwells contentedly. Negroes are happy in their child-like singing and dancing. Whites are loving, understanding and paternal. Listen to some white people in Albany talk:

“We love our Nigras and they love us.”

“We’re making a lot of progress here. I can’t tell you how much we’ve done for our colored folks.”

“Many’s the Monday morning I’ve gone downtown to get our yardman, Joe, out of jail. I take care of my own.”

“My maid told me herself: ‘Oh, no ma’am, I don’t want to be integrated. I wouldn’t be happy in with all the white folks.’”

I can testify on the basis of my own recent visits to Albany and other Southern cities that attitudes and statements such as those listed here are to be found even among religious and other leaders. Moreover, the parochialism which sees the situation essentially in terms of annoyance with Negroes who suddenly don’t keep their place and become “aggressive” and with liberal dreamers or radical and “Communist” subverters who mislead Negroes, is not confined to the South. Many people have no realization of the fact that we live in a world upheaval which is “happening” to all of us, white and Negroe alike, much as a natural phenomenon like a hurricane or tidal wave asks no by-your-leave and makes no distinctions based on character, color or anything else. To change the metaphor, there is no awareness that on one level various people and groups are playing parts which they did not freely choose in a drama which they did not write and are not directing. The one thing we are powerless to do is to wish away the problem. Change and disturbance are as certain as “death and taxes.”

In this context it is pertinent to point out that in so far

as one can speak of "responsibility" in such historic developments, the white peoples of West Europe and North America have brought the present situation upon themselves and the rest of mankind. These people developed the technology which made large-scale industry possible and revolutionized agriculture. For several centuries, they spread their rule over the world by direct or indirect conquest, while preaching doctrines of freedom, equality and even love. They are now developing automation. The white nations are still militarily dominant and the nuclear powers. They made the mistake of engaging, mostly among themselves, in two colossal World Wars during the present century, as a result of which their hold over colonial peoples was broken.

The psychological aspect of white conquest should constantly be kept in mind these days. One of the great taboos in the world is that between the peoples who have known humiliation as peoples and those who have not, but instead have humiliated others. The white peoples are the ones who shoved other peoples, especially the colored, off the sidewalk in Western and in Asian and African countries alike, but no one could push the white master off the sidewalk anywhere.

The tide began to turn some time ago and is now flowing strongly in the other direction. The colored peoples are asserting themselves; the white people are having to make room and to abandon theories and practices of superiority. This is never easy, and seldom if ever has backing down from a position of superiority and domination to one of something near equality been done gracefully. But there come times when it has to be done.

We may here remind ourselves that it is a part of American tradition to hold that freedom cannot be handed to people on a silver platter, that real men and women stand up for their rights. "Don't tread on me" is thought of as a typical American slogan. To be ready to defend your own house and shoot the man who invades it and would perhaps insult or attack your women folk is commonly considered a laudable attitude, especially in the South. Are not Negroes following in this American tradition when they resent being patronized, when they do not have the "feeling" of being free until they have taken hold of freedom? One often hears men of standing say that it would be different if Negroes asked (begged?) for their rights, but that "we're not going to be bullied into granting them—don't push us." In much the same way, many Englishmen, of the time of George III, thought of the colonials as upstarts and insolent hoors for "demanding" rights and independence. There are many generations of humiliation and oppression behind the upsurge among Negroes and the belligerence now asserting itself. The results are not invariably pleasant. They are often bizarre and in some cases horrible, as revolutions always are. Perhaps we could at least not be so surprised that the familiar accompaniments of mass change manifest themselves in the United States today. We might

even take some satisfaction in the realization that once more people are "demanding" that beautiful thing, freedom, and their leaders saying: "Let my people go." Perhaps whites could derive a measure of intellectual objectivity and reduce the intensity of their anger by realizing that these things are "happening" to us (as similar surprises, mysteries and disturbances have happened to others in revolutionary periods) rather than being "inflicted" by some mad or evil persons who live in the Negro section or flood out of New York's Harlem to tie up highways to the New York World's Fair.

Who Is Obstructing Whom?

There are a couple of other cases that might be mentioned of a tendency on the part of whites to apply a double standard and find reprehensible among Negroes what they condone or even practice themselves. Take the resentment of Southern senators and a good many citizens in all sections of the country against what are stigmatized as illegal, undemocratic and obstructionist tactics on the part of Negroes and their allies in the civil-rights struggle. The senators are presently engaged in the obstructionist tactic of a filibuster. It is usually possible for men in positions of power with the machinery of government in their hands, working to maintain the *status quo*, to obstruct measures they oppose, in a respectable and outwardly legal fashion. Southern senators do not have to display themselves on the street in Washington or in the states where their civil-rights senatorial colleagues live. They do not have to commit "trespass," or distribute leaflets on the streets, or "disobey an officer's command." But the results in the Senate today and the shocking business of their being elected to Congress by a small minority of voters in direct violation of the Constitution—are no less obstructionist and undemocratic, and all the more effective. People who have not realized this and worked to change it are not in a position to press the issue of obstructionism against the civil-rights movement.

Another case in point is that of ordinances in Southern cities and towns, which limit civil liberties and are patently contrary to decisions laid down by the Supreme Court. The only recourse citizens (of whatever color) who want to exercise their democratic rights are supposed to have is to take each unconstitutional ordinance all the way to the Supreme Court, only—in many cases—to have a slightly altered but no less repressive ordinance adopted. In Mississippi a whole series of measures has been enacted for the avowed purpose of preventing or indefinitely delaying change in the racial pattern. Yet a good many people—and not all by any means poorly educated or simple-minded—have a more negative and intense reaction toward the proposed "stall-in" at the World's Fair (which I am not endorsing at this point) than to the colossal and enduring "stall-in" which is being staged in Mississippi.

A word needs to be said about the attitudes people take toward violence and nonviolence. Many act as if they thought Negroes have a peculiar obligation to be non-

violent, and especially in the civil-rights struggle, the struggle for emancipation, Freedom Now. Yet in the very sections of Georgia and other states where any but the most pacific, not to say submissive, conduct on the part of Negroes seems shocking and one frequently hears discourses on how readily Negroes resort to violence in their day-to-day life, one finds little espousal of pacifism or nonviolence. There is less concern than in some other sections of the country about the nuclear arms race and the danger of nuclear war. There is only a most embryonic peace movement. The Peace Churches are almost non-existent. The military virtues are extolled. And, of course, one encounters practically no opposition to the location of missile bases and various other military installations in this region.

Until one has faced these facts, one is in no position, either politically or morally, to speak to the Negro community or the civil-rights movement. This is pre-eminently true of those of us who advocate nonviolence.

Self-Defense

Turning now to the relevance of nonviolence in face of an undoubtedly growing tendency among Negroes to be suspicious of it and to feel that the movement has to become more militant and resort to more "realistic" tactics, it seems to me at the outset that there is a confusion around the use of the so-called "right to self-defense" and the call to exercise it, which ought to be cleared up. If one is talking in terms of legality and prevailing mores, then the right of an individual to defend himself, his home, his family, even to shoot a man who threatens to shoot or otherwise injure him and his family, undoubtedly exists in American and Western society. So long as that is the case, the Negro should have the right to self-defense as well as the white man. The pamphlet by the Georgia Council on Human Relations referred to at the beginning of this article states: "Everywhere in the streets of Albany you see white men carrying fire-arms. If you are white and can see to sign your name to the application, you are given a permit, no questions asked," a white businessman observed. Of course, no Negroes need apply."

But the problem now before American society and in particular before Negroes is not so simply or automatically disposed of. For one thing, it is not generally assumed that a good community or one where people can live peacefully is one where all or even many citizens go about with guns in their belts or in their homes. Quite the contrary. As a matter of fact, Malcolm X and other "leaders" who call on Negroes to exercise the right of "self-defense" are not talking about that "right" as commonly understood. I suspect that some of them at least are aware of this and use the term as a demagogic and manipulative device. If they are not aware that this is the case, then they are not qualified to be leaders. People who do not know what an explosive or a poison is should not handle explosives or poisons.

What is meant in the present context is only in a small

degree that an individual Negro should have a gun and under circumstances of great danger use it against another individual, white or Negro, who attacks him or his family. What is meant is that Negroes generally around the country should provide themselves with firearms and organize rifle clubs wherever there are conflict situations and the agencies which are supposed to provide safety for citizens and enable them to exercise elementary rights fail to do so for Negroes. This tactic is thought to hold good more particularly where whites are armed and have bullied and very likely actually injured or killed Negroes. It is this reasoning which has to be evaluated, not a simple case of "self-defense" or a spontaneous action of one individual toward another in a tense moment.

I have more than once heard it said by Negroes who are reluctantly turning to the idea that "nonviolence" may not be enough, that if in a couple or a few cases Negroes were to use force, or even threaten it seriously, this would cool down the Citizens Council people and white hoodlums. It would also convince the wielders of power in the South that it was no longer possible to keep Negroes down or to delay integration.

It seems to me conceivable that a shooting in some local situation might have what could be called a questioning or catalytic effect in that isolated local instance. But, putting pacifist considerations aside for a moment, one cannot realistically think of the problem raised by the tendency to become belligerent and violent in these isolated local terms. What is virtually certain to happen (and is indeed expected by people like Malcolm X and those who go along with him in greater or less degree) is a summer series of mass demonstrations and rioting in which Negroes will "fight back." Whitney Young, Jr., executive director of the National Urban League, commented on the restraint exercised up to now by Negroes as follows in recent testimony before a Congressional Committee:

I think Negro citizens in the face of the years of provocation, in the face of the historic abuse, have shown an amazing restraint and an amazing loyalty. This from a people who have so little reason to have this kind of faith, who have all the provocation, the abuse, the murders, the years of want, of poor housing, of rats biting their children.

I trust I have made it abundantly clear that in a sense things "happen" to people, even the things they themselves do in situations of social turmoil, and that it is absurd to expect that Negroes will be an exception. But this does not absolve individuals and especially leaders from the necessity of making choices as to tactics and not simply being the pawns of historic forces or social hysteria. On this level and in this context the current trend away from nonviolence is certainly subject to suspicion and criticism.

One basic question that exponents of this trend have not, in my opinion, seriously faced is whether Negroes basically and eventually want to be part of American

society. I do not necessarily mean society as it is now constituted and organized, though truth compels us to face the fact that this is probably just what large numbers of Negroes want. However, as I see it, a desegregated American society would be pretty radically different from the one we now have. Now I believe that whether in an America radically transformed or not, Negroes as a people want to live in the United States; they don't want to migrate and they don't seriously want to live in a Negro nation-state in some corner of American soil. Parenthetically, the desire of Negroes to control their own movement and not to have it run by whites is legitimate. In this as in other instances, demagogues use nationalist appeals or proclamations of Negro racial superiority to overcome social inertia and evoke a response from those who rightly want to be free from various forms of white domination or patronizing. At the same time, they run the risk of helping to precipitate tragedy.

If, for example, Negroes do want to be eventually a genuine part of the American community, then they will have to live in a community to which whites also belong. To create or think lightly of deepened rifts between the races, of psychological wounds which may take long to heal in numerous cities and towns, of polarized enmities, seems clearly dangerous and may be laying the groundwork for eventual elimination of that multi-racial or *truly* integrated society which is the object of the civil-rights movement and the goal of the Negro community. The race problem is psychological and social, not merely one of economic or political structure. It is necessary that the reality and shame, the deep roots, of the present rift be exposed and not sturred over. But this can only be for the purpose of obliterating the rift, not for deepening it or making it permanent and utterly rigid.

Federal Intervention

Even in a more narrowly political sense there is a problem here which has hitherto received too little attention. Important sections of the Negro movement look to Federal action, and specifically the intervention of Federal troops, to contribute at critical moments to the advance of the integration movement. Many seem to have espoused a strategy which will lead to the intervention of Federal troops on a mass scale in Mississippi this summer. The wisdom of this dependence on Federal agencies and especially Federal armed force can be questioned on various grounds. But in the present context it seems clear that the civil-rights movement cannot expect the support of the very Federal agency that is supposed to hold society together at a critical moment, to keep the situation from getting utterly out of hand and the society from falling apart—and this is precisely what the civil rights movement looks to in a desperate situation like Mississippi—and at the same time itself work for the (temporary?) breakdown of the society, or more accurately, accept it as inevitable.

To put it in another way, it is one thing for the Fed-

eral troops to intervene eventually in order to protect Negroes from police brutality and/or vigilante violence. A quite different situation will exist if it even appears that whites have to be protected from Negro violence born of frustration and intolerable emotional pressures.

To cite a case which to my mind illustrates the perils of dependence on Federal intervention, whether military or not, the Johnson administration is certainly going to try to have a civil-rights bill adopted and then avoid creating a bad image of the United States in the minds of other nations and colored peoples throughout the world. But I do not see how anyone can for a moment entertain the thought that the administration will welcome a call to send Federal troops to Mississippi or anywhere else during an election campaign; or that one can assume confidently that it will *decide to do so* at all.

What Kind of Revolution?

There is another aspect of strategy to which very little if any serious consideration has as yet been given. There is no doubt that those who have been denied freedom and equality have to desire them, and struggle for them in a way that will "disturb" society, or else things will remain as they are (or get worse). This involves "social dislocation." But when tactics are devised—and the proposed stall-in in connection with the opening of the World's Fair seems to me probably to fall in this category—with a view to creating inconvenience and disturbance in general, as an outlet for pent-up emotion, then a vast problem is opened up. The same problem is raised when people like Malcolm X ridicule "nonviolent revolution" as spurious and contend that in a real revolution blood has to flow.

A phase of traditional revolutions has been disintegration of an old order in various ways and by various means. One of the most important factors in the disintegration of Czarist society in 1917 was Lenin's counsel to the Russian soldiers to "vote with your feet" and go home. He told them that the defeat of "their own nation" in war was a lesser evil. Now there is sense of a kind in general dislocation in such a situation, *provided* that there is an element in the situation that wants to take power, and may perhaps be able to, and is ready to undertake building a new society and a new center of power. The Bolsheviks were in that position in 1917.

Assuming for the sake of argument that such an overturn were desirable, who are the elements that are to accomplish this in the United States today? Malcolm X and his followers? Even moderately informed people know that the civil-rights issue, the economic or job issue and the Cold War issue are linked together. They know that without labor and other elements joining in the struggle even integration as such cannot be achieved. But any such cooperation of various elements exists today only in the most embryonic sense. To base the tactics of the civil-rights movement on the assumption that a traditional revolution is imminent in the United

States is either mad or criminal. In the present state of things there has to be some fairly obvious connection between a demonstration and a specific not infinitely remote goal.

In general, there is no coherent or generally recognized theory as to how or whether a revolution like the historic ones can take place in a country like the United States in the nuclear age. For all thoughtful people, and certainly for those who espouse nonviolence, or at least conceive of its possible relevance, the question of what "revolution" means in our time is posed.

The traditional revolution centers around the transfer of power from one class or social element to another, and results in the setting up of a new power structure. It is well to remind ourselves at this moment when a good many seem to think that nothing "real" is taking place except where there is shooting, that in their early stages traditional revolutions were often remarkably free from violence. Essentially, the old order collapsed and the new element moved in to fill a vacuum. The large-scale violence was likely to come when counter-revolutionary efforts were staged.

It is also the case that revolutions were in their beginnings idealistic. They were to bring in a new order of "liberty, fraternity, equality" or "a class-less and warless world." In no sense did the masses realize in the early stages that a new power structure to dominate society was going to be set up. There would not have been sufficient emotional motivation for the great venture and arduous labors of revolution if people had not believed that liberation and not just another variety of bondage was in sight.

The Beloved Community

The believers in nonviolence (and at least some who do not think of themselves in those terms) do not see the task of our age as that of a seizure of power by a new social element and the setting up of a new power structure. They see the task of our age as that of building the beloved community. No one can have a fairly close contact with the civil-rights movement and the people in it, including the young people, without feeling that, in spite of all contrary appearances and even realities in the movement, deep near its center is this aspiration for a beloved community and the faith that this is what they are working for and already in a sense realizing now. "O, Freedom, Freedom over me." "Deep in my heart I do believe that we shall overcome some day"—not overcome the white man, but overcome that which stands in the way of man, each man.

In the meantime, regardless of whether or not one embraces nonviolence either as revolutionary strategy or as a way of life, all the available evidence points to the conclusion that nonviolence as basic strategy should not be abandoned by the civil-rights movement. Rather, mistakes should be corrected and new possibilities of developing nonviolent action should be dili-

gently explored and experimented with. It seems essential that the decision to adhere to nonviolence be a firm one and that it be clearly and openly proclaimed. The present situation, where there is considerable difference of opinion in various sections of the movement and a tendency for many of the adherents of nonviolence to weaken in their stand, while the advocates of "self-defense" and "true revolution" are (or seem to be) certain of their stand and aggressive in their attitude, is the worst possible. If the latter are right, their strategy should be generally accepted. Some of them might be shocked if it were accepted. If their policy is not adopted, those who reject it should not be intimidated by its advocates.

There is no space here to make detailed suggestions as to tactics. Moreover, the civil-rights movement has in the leaders of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, CORE, and in one of our editors, Bayard Rustin, persons who are brilliant and masterful in this field. Three general suggestions do seem to me worth recording.

In the first place, the opponents of nonviolence tend to gain a following among the more depressed and poverty-stricken elements in the Negro ghettos. There are a number of reasons for this, but one of the main ones is that the "nationalists" and others pay attention to these elements and at least appear to offer programs they think can improve their condition. I think more attention to them, as against what might be called Negro white-collar elements, might produce results. Rent strikes and unemployed actions would presumably appeal to them more than actions related to education or electing Negroes to Congress or even voter registration.

Secondly, there are indications that training for non-violent action is being taken more seriously than it has been, but much more needs to be done immediately in this field.

Thirdly, while there is a tendency in parts of the white community to polarize into a hostile or disillusioned position because of alleged "extremist" action by Negroes, there are also many who become increasingly troubled and eager to help. Very large sections of the nation are capable of experiencing deep moral revulsion against racism and segregation, especially when Negro nonviolent demonstrators are brutally treated, as was shown in relation, e.g., to the Birmingham struggle. In my view, that moral revulsion may have been the main factor in at last impelling Kennedy to submit a civil-rights bill and the House actually to adopt a stronger one than Kennedy's. It is my impression that the nonviolent movement may have been distracted from paying sufficient attention to the involvement of whites on this moral ground.

In closing as in beginning an analysis of this kind, attention must be focused on the white community. I referred earlier to the chasm between the peoples who have known humiliation as peoples and those who have not, but have humiliated others. The latter are

the West Europeans and the Americans. The chasm has for the most part kept the (colored and white) peoples separated from each other. It is so no longer. The chasm is going to be bridged somehow. From the side of white men a bridge of understanding, repentance, reconciliation and love might be thrown across the chasm. If this is not done, a bridge of pent-up frustration, vengeance, hate may be thrown across it by the majority of the human race. Those who over centuries dug the chasm would hardly be in a position to quarrel with the effect. But this would not be building the beloved community either. It would be opening another familiar cycle of domination and eventual corruption. This might prove suicidal for all in the nuclear age.

Therefore, Negroes of whom love cannot be "demanded" by whites—love is in any case not subject to demand—may nevertheless give it. Those who have so long known what it is to be shoved off the sidewalk by whites may possibly understand what it means to the latter to be shoved into the street. If by discrimination and hate Negroes are driven to discrimination and hate, what, after all have they done to themselves? There is no virtue or healing in following a bad example. There are Negroes who know this: whites are not needed to teach it to them. It was in Jackson,

Mississippi last year that the widow of Medgar W. Evers said to her fellow-Negroes at a Memorial service for her slain husband: "You mustn't hate; you must love."

The poet, Mark Van Doren was asked recently to read his poem entitled "Born Brother?" to a gathering of writers. He first exclaimed: "Ah, yes. Equality—the greatest of all doctrines and the hardest to understand." Then he read:

"Equality is absolute or no.
Nothing between us can stand
we are the sons
Of the same sire, or madness
breaks and runs
Through the rude world."

The venerable Jewish philosopher, Martin Buber, referring mainly to relations between nations, uttered an appeal some years ago, which is applicable in a peculiarly poignant way to the race situation. He spoke of those in whatever camp who "carry on the battle against the anti-human," and said: "Those who build the great unknown front shall make it known by speaking unreservedly with one another, not overlooking what divides them but determined to bear this division in common."

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