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TRUMAN ADMINISTRATION, 1946-1948.

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GRADUATE COLLEGE

URBAN ASPECTS OF CIVIL RIGHTS AND THE EARLY
TRUMAN ADMINISTRATION, 1946-1948

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URBAN ASPECTS OF CIVIL RIGHTS AND THE EARLY
TRUMAN ADMINISTRATION, 1946-1948

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INTRODUCTION

AN URBAN PERSUASION

This work attempts to prove that the most significant aspect of the civil rights issue as it arose in the immediate post-World War II period lay in a response to the Negro's urban condition--a response that appeared most spectacularly in the actions of white liberals from late 1946 to 1948, but which emerged initially in the main body of Negro literature during the early part of the decade. Together, these forces posed a compulsive and progressive influence on the Truman Administration's efforts in behalf of civil rights. The years of neglect spawned an ugly inheritance for Harry S. Truman and every president who followed him. Problems that lay partially hidden for years surged into the open, raising questions that are still being asked: Will the Negro continue to be isolated in the central city and have his opportunities, hopes, and aspirations stifled, or will he be fully assimilated into the mainstream of urban life? Will buildings continue to be torn down in the name of social progress while ignoring an opportunity to rebuild young lives

exposed to overcrowding, lack of food, and inferior educational facilities? Will Americans continue to react to riots only out of fear or will they seek ways to avoid them with constructive community programs? Finally, and most seriously, will the central cities continue to become urban islands in an ever-expanding sea of all-white suburban satellites?

And while on the surface these problems appear to be exclusively symptomatic of the turbulent 1960's, it is painfully clear from this study that they had reached alarming proportions more than two decades ago. At the same time, there was a growing awareness of the situation. Those who supported the Negro's hope for a better day were focusing their attention on the urban phase of the problem, albeit for different reasons. Some reacted out of insight and understanding, others out of fear and self-interest, and still others for political or hidden reasons. Collectively, their reaction was vital because it involved a response to urbanization which at its best pointed toward a definitive action program, and at its worst toward a gradual approach that perpetuated the problem and hastened the forces of violence. Furthermore, it marked an admission--though perhaps not a conscious one on the part of the principals involved--that the decisive issues were urban, and the nation's fate lay in coming to terms with them. Nevertheless, the response was a reality--whether

it appeared in the bitter thoughts of Negro intellectuals such as William Attaway, Saunders Redding, W. E. B. Du Bois, Richard Wright, and others, in the columns of a Negro newspaper, the pronouncements of an urban expert, the findings of a mayor's commission, the projects of the Americans for Democratic Action (ADA), or in the final report of President Truman's Committee on Civil Rights.

A partial explanation of this growing awareness of the inequities of Negro urban life is provided by observing the tremendous surge of colored people to northern cities during the decade 1940 to 1950. The population trends of that period supported the conclusion of Truman's Committee on Civil Rights that discrimination was not just a southern problem, but a problem confronting the whole nation. Table 1 shows the increase in black population outside the South.

This growth was not a sudden phenomenon of the 1940's, but a continuation of an out-migration of Negroes from the South that had increased in every decade (except the depression period, 1930-1940) since 1910. Still, the most notable increase came from 1940 to 1950 when 1,597,000 Negroes left the South. It reached a point during these years when natural increase--rather than migration--provided the greater part of Negro population gains in the North.¹ Such a flow of black humanity to a concentrated

¹Report of the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders (New York: Bantam Books, Inc., 1968), pp. 240-41.

TABLE 1

INCREASE IN NEGRO POPULATION
OUTSIDE THE SOUTH

<u>State</u>	<u>1940^a</u>	<u>1950^b</u>
California	124,306	462,172
District of Columbia	187,266	280,803
Illinois	387,446	645,980
Michigan	208,345	442,296
Missouri	244,386	297,088
New Jersey	226,973	318,565
New York	571,221	918,191
Ohio	339,461	513,072
Pennsylvania	470,172	638,485

^aU.S., Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, Population: 1940, Vol. II: Characteristics of the Population (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office), p. 52.

^bU.S., Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, Population: 1950, Vol. II: Characteristics of the Population (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office), p. 106.

area was of great significance politically, economically, and socially. And that most of this increase was to urban areas is revealed in Table 2.

By 1950, 93.5 per cent of the Negro population in the North and West lived in urban areas as compared to 70.1 per cent of the whites in these regions.² Overall, the percentage of Negro population in northern areas increased from 27 per cent of the nation's total in 1910 to 62 per cent in 1950.³

²The Negro Almanac, 1967, p. 225.

³Ibid., p. 239.

TABLE 2

INCREASE IN NONWHITE POPULATION
TO MAJOR URBAN AREAS

<u>City</u>	<u>1940</u>	<u>1947</u>
New York	458,444	819,450
Chicago	277,731	447,370
Philadelphia	250,880	439,410
Detroit	149,119	348,245
Washington	187,266	285,988

SOURCE: The Negro Handbook, 1949, p. 8.
The Negro constitutes approximately 95.6 per cent of the nonwhite population.

An examination of this problem quite obviously raises the question as to why Negroes moved north in an endless flow throughout the century. And although not central to this study, some answers to that question give further insight into the city's persistent lure for southern blacks. In an important recent work on the city's meaning throughout history, urbanologist Jacques Ellul focuses on its universal attraction to all men. In bold terms he characterized this attraction as a force of immense proportions:

There is something magical about her attractiveness, and it is impossible to explain men's passion for the city, her influence on their activity, the irresistible current flowing in long unconscious waves to pull men toward her dead asphalt, without giving a thought for her force, her seductive power. Around the city there rises a wall of mirages, and on the map may be traced the zone of indecision where man can be part of the city's basic orientation without actually living within her boundaries.

He assumes her manners, her language, her scorn, her simplistic attitudes. He has her rhythm and bears everywhere, on his clothes and in his face, in the way he treats his wife and in the way he treats his children, in his work and in the air he breathes, in everything he is, the mark of the city. Even when he does not yet live there, even when he is close to the oldest country houses of the surrounding farmland, he is nonetheless in a locked cage. The city is not far away, and it is not hard to learn to live as they do there. And so the mores of the city are acquired, without its life. An invasion of the soul, hand in hand with the material invasion, the first wave preparing the mass arrival of the tractors, bulldozers, cement mixers, and air compressors, announcing the heavy clouds of factory smoke, a job, getting up joylessly to a sunless sky and dirty air, air that is a mixture of gasoline fumes, coal smoke, and the immense breath of a million neighbors.⁴

Considerable attention has been given to this subject; however, few works have gone beyond an earlier classic on migration, Louise Venable Kennedy's, The Negro Peasant Turns Cityward. Kennedy saw the Negro migration as a "continuous phenomenon," increasing as the processes of communication and travel reached out to rural areas, and as knowledge of various opportunities became more widespread.⁵ While emphasizing economic opportunity of the North and discrimination in the South as chief reasons for recent migrations (particularly during World War II), she also gave attention to socio-psychological causes. For instance, as the Negro's knowledge of the

⁴Jacques Ellul, The Meaning of the City (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1970), p. 152.

⁵Louise Venable Kennedy, The Negro Peasant Turns Cityward (New York: Columbia University Press, 1930), p. 36.

possibilities of migration increased (through return of those who had gone before, letters back home, and the general state of public opinion in the South) it exerted real pressure on potential migrants.⁶ And again returning to Ellul's emphasis on the lure of urban areas, Kennedy posed this question:

Who can say how great a part the "lure of Harlem" has played in the migration of southern Negroes? Modern improvements in means of communication and travel have served to bring the mass of rural Negroes in close touch with the attractions and opportunities of other places and have made migration not only a conscious possibility but an easy performance.⁷

Gunnar Myrdal gave considerable attention to this subject in his monumental study of the Negro, An American Dilemma. Myrdal said this migration is partly explained by the agricultural decline and the corresponding decrease in job opportunities in the Black Belt of the Southeast. He suggested that the North offered the Negro much more security as a citizen, and greater freedom as a human being.⁸ But to say emphatically that one factor or another determined this movement is far too simple an explanation. Myrdal concluded that it was quite complicated and probably different for each Negro who decided to leave the land. It could even have been touched off

⁶Ibid., pp. 52-54.

⁷Ibid., p. 56.

⁸Gunnar Myrdal, An American Dilemma (New York: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1944), pp. 189-91.

by chance factors--such as a young man losing his sweetheart.⁹

A more recent sociological study stresses, as Kennedy did, the importance of channels of communication that were established over the years between northern and southern Negroes. This constant flow of information maintained a knowledge of opportunities and circumstances available to Negroes still in the South, and although the authors concur that racial conflicts helped to maintain this migration, they believe it would have occurred without such conflict as long as this line of communication continued to operate.¹⁰

Even more significant because it examines a particular area and presents an outstanding case study is Oscar Handlin's, The Newcomers, Negroes and Puerto Ricans in a Changing Metropolis. Handlin discounts--for lack of evidence--the argument that Negroes came to the North in order to live off relief. He asserts that people are reluctant to leave "known miseries" for "unknown dangers."¹¹ Handlin further says that when a mass of people are set in motion, the individual migrants are likely to maintain a

⁹Ibid., pp. 193-94.

¹⁰Karl and Alma Taeuber, Negroes in Cities (Chicago: Aldine Publishing Co., 1965), p. 13.

¹¹Oscar Handlin, The Newcomers, Negroes and Puerto Ricans in a Changing Metropolis (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1959), p. 48.

high degree of mobility and to seek jobs wherever they may be found.¹²

Though the reasons for leaving the land add another dimension to an understanding of the social dynamics of increased black urbanization, the prime concern of this study is not the northward migration itself, but the Negro's actual presence and lack of mobility once in the urban centers. As Handlin again pointed out, the shock of migration deprived the Negro of control and discipline, disrupting family authority (a theme to be more fully developed later in this work). Unlike the earlier European immigrant who accepted a complete break with his past which necessitated the creation of new institutions, the Negro maintained a continual line of communication between the North and South, so that the sense of connectedness was never broken. Consequently, he did not feel compelled to create any new institutions to meet his needs. Furthermore, Handlin said that since the Negro faced so much discrimination in every phase of city life including accommodations, schools, and hospitals, he was therefore reluctant to take any action on his own that would tend to further set him off in an isolated group.¹³

As the migration reached its peak in the 1940's, more Americans than ever before were becoming aware of

¹²Ibid., p. 54.

¹³Ibid., pp. 98, 108-15.

just what it meant to be a black city dweller. An oppressive inner world was speaking out in a language all its own, and what it conveyed was an overwhelming spiritlessness that supplanted every thing valuable to human existence. In Gilbert Osofsky's book, Harlem: The Making of a Ghetto, he examines (in one particular Negro locale) the new migrants in their squalid conditions--"packed together to the point of indecency"--a true slum environment, one that reflected the Negro's situation throughout most of the urban North. Poverty, congestion, disease, and death fastened a kind of fateful grip on those Negroes who settled there. And to make matters even worse, there was a "deep strain of peasant ignorance and superstition embedded in the minds of thousands of migrants. . . ." ¹⁴

An unwanted legacy! A problem of its own making! It was suddenly thrust in America's face. The invisible became horribly visible--the classic slums with their shabby, unlighted streets; their filthy flophouses and rented rooms that cost too much; and their dilapidated tenements with fat rats, rotten stairs, and urine pools in unlit hallways. The black and white liberal response to these conditions rose gradually over the decade to an apparent fulfillment of purpose by early 1948, a fulfillment

¹⁴ Gilbert Osofsky, Harlem: The Making of a Ghetto (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1963), p. 143.

in terms of at least providing some progressive directions for the future--a fulfillment brought about in great part by what might be called an urban persuasion.

URBAN ASPECTS OF CIVIL RIGHTS AND THE EARLY
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CHAPTER I

THE ASPHALT GARDEN.

And there in that great iron city, that impersonal, mechanical city, amid the steam, the smoke, the snowy winds, the blistering suns; there in that self-conscious city, that city so deadly dramatic and stimulating, we caught whispers of the meanings that life could have, and we were pushed and pounded by facts much too big for us. Many migrants like us were driven and pursued, in the manner of characters in a Greek play, down the paths of defeat; but luck must have been with us, for we somehow survived.
. . .¹

The changes embodied in the above passage reveals the changes in the life of a people who moved from a structured, authoritarian, rural existence to an industrialized, urban frontier. It is significant that the man who wrote it was both a part of the northward-trek itself (coming out of rural Mississippi), as well as its most prominent observer. To Richard Wright then, credit must go for producing--through his prose works--the most powerful plea in behalf of a struggling race. He pricked

¹St. Clair Drake and Horace R. Cayton, Black Metropolis (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Co., 1945), p. xvii.

the conscience of white Americans as no previous writer had done before, asking over and over again if the stultifying confines of the ghetto would be the only world for millions of unborn Negroes. Although he was the most important Negro writer in the forties, other little-known black writers also contributed a substantial body of writing. All in all, the central thrust of this literary genre pointed toward--and moreover, helped bring about--a much broader Negro response to racial discrimination in general, and urban deprivation in particular. Furthermore, it was the nucleus of a militant urban protest that followed more than two decades later.

Wright's introduction to Black Metropolis--an important sociological examination of black life in Chicago--represented the essence of all the later demands for equal rights. It was truly a frustrated response that would swell into an overall urban explosion. Alienation was revealed as a law of life in the ghetto, and it seemed to heighten the struggle between black and white, rich and poor. As Wright further noted, it was a deep tragedy that plagued and perplexed white America:

Today the problem of the world's dispossessed exists with great urgency, and the problem of the Negro in America is a phase of this general problem, containing and telescoping the longings in the lives of a billion colored subject colonial people into a symbol. Yes, when the Negro problem is raised, white men, for a reason which as yet they do not fully understand, feel guilt, panic, anxiety, tension; they feel the essential loneliness of their position which is built

upon greed, exploitation, and a general denial of humanity; they feel the naked untenability of this split consciousness, their two-faced moral theories spun to justify their right to dominate.²

Wright thus sounded the theme of black nationalism more than two decades before it would permeate the northern ghettos and forge a new identity for Negroes. In so doing, he posed the questions that would grow more numerous and urgent in the years ahead, all of which exemplified the black man's emerging awareness of himself and his own degradation. Wright asked:

What peculiar personality formations result when millions of people are forced to live lives of outward submissiveness while trying to keep intact in their hearts a sense of the worth of their humanity? What are the personality mechanisms that sublimate racial resentments which, if expressed openly, would carry penalties varying from mild censure to death? Does the Negro's tremendous fund of repression affect his speech, his walk, his dress, his music, his health?³

This outward resentment became an even stronger psychic force in the years ahead as the Negro increasingly blamed his suppressed position on all white men. Once this idea grew in intensity (though difficult to tell when --or if--it became a dominating factor in Negro thought), it tended to serve as a great influence toward enabling the Negro to acquire a sense of dignity and self-esteem. In other words, it served as a psychological redemption for black people--whether in the urban North or the rural South. The Negro was looking in the mirror and scrutinizing

²Ibid., p. xxv.

³Ibid., p. xxx.

himself; and the longer he looked the more convinced he became that the dominant white culture was responsible for all his problems. Therefore, these first signs of real concern about his subjugated condition, particularly in the cities, constituted a powerful body of thought; it would reach far into the future as an influence on Negro protest.

Despite such signs of an inner black consciousness, its literary manifestations were not a unique response by Negro writers. It was instead a vital part of an American literary tradition stretching back to colonial times, though emerging as a distinct trend during the mid-nineteenth century. It is commonly referred to as "pastoralism," a continual reliance on the "Virgilian" mode--providing the basis for a tradition of withdrawal from "the world" in favor of a retreat to a fresh green landscape. As Leo Marx inferred, America (the virgin continent) aroused the European mind with the prospect of "an unspoiled hemisphere."⁴ The American expressions of this pastoralism since the early nineteenth century indicate why the Negro version is such a vital part of the tradition. As Marx stated:

It is widely diffused in our culture, insinuating itself into many kinds of behavior. An obvious

⁴Leo Marx, The Machine in the Garden, Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America (New York: Oxford University Press, 1967), p. 3.

example is the current "flight from the city." An inchoate longing for a more "natural" environment enters into the contemptuous attitude that many Americans adopt toward urban life (with the result that we neglect our cities and desert them for the suburbs). Wherever people turn away from the hard social and technological realities this obscure sentiment is likely to be at work. We see it in our politics, in the "localism" invoked to oppose an adequate national system of education, in the power of the farm bloc in Congress, in the special economic favor shown to "farming" through government subsidies, and in state electoral systems that allow rural population to retain a share of political power grossly out of proportion to its size. It manifests itself in our leisure-time activities, in the piety toward the out-of-doors expressed in the wilderness cult, and in our devotion to camping, hunting, fishing, picnicking, gardening, and so on. . . .⁵

Marx further pointed out that this tendency to "idealize rural ways" has been an obstacle to social progress. As he again stated:

The soft veil of nostalgia that hangs over our urbanized landscape is largely a vestige of that once dominant image of an undefiled, green republic, a quiet land of forests, villages, and farms dedicated to the pursuit of happiness.⁶

The tradition of pastoralism has a pervasive hold on the present. Examples in the literature are legion and it is sufficient for the purpose of this dissertation to select a few writers in order to illustrate its continuity. One can point for example to Emerson and Whitman as writers who gave early expression to the ideal. Emerson's version --though reflecting Jeffersonian bias in its anti-urban tone--gave optimistic vent to the processes of industrialism

⁵Ibid., p. 5.

⁶Ibid., p. 6.

by viewing it as a redeeming feature for the coming pastoral utopia. Marx said in this regard that Emerson thought of the industrial revolution as a "railway journey in the direction of nature." To Emerson, moving west meant "casting off European attitudes and rigid social forms and urban ways."⁷ Thus in his own accommodating way, Emerson came to terms with industrialism and at the same time maintained his vision of pastoralism. Pastoralism, he believed, was too "pure" and "virtuous" to be effected by the "machine"; in fact, the machine, the symbol of industrialism, would even serve to maintain the simple, pastoral life.

Larry Eugene Taylor has further elaborated on Emerson's role in his excellent book, Pastoral and Anti-Pastoral Patterns in John Updike's Fiction. Taylor says that in rejecting the church and espousing the woods, Emerson rejected original sin and embraced a doctrine of original innocence (men are less fallen sinners than "unrealized potential Adams").⁸ Walt Whitman further elevated this "return to nature" by assigning it a symbolic cyclical benevolence--a nature worship.⁹ His poems

⁷Ibid., p. 238.

⁸Larry Eugene Taylor, Pastoral and Anti-Pastoral Patterns in John Updike's Fiction (Carbondale & Edwardsville, Illinois: Southern Illinois University Press, 1971), p. 33.

⁹Ibid., p. 34.

exalt nature's seasonal regularity as opposed to "clock" time--a recurring theme in nearly all pastoral literature.

As the nation made the transition from a predominantly agrarian nation to an industrial one after the Civil War, the pastoral yearning gained renewed vigor. The progression from Emerson and Whitman to Mark Twain represents the strains accompanying this industrial transformation. According to Taylor, Tom Sawyer was "representative of a lost youth and a lost time, in which simple childhood values had a kind of primitive grace and humor which could never again be regained in a corrupt world."¹⁰ And in regard to this point, both Marx and Taylor see the "raft symbol" in Huckleberry Finn as the key to understanding the pastoral ideal in modern literature--Taylor calling it the "pastoral touchstone."¹¹ The full meaning of this is manifested in Twain's use of the "shore" as representing turmoil and trouble in industrial life, while the raft symbolized a simple, pure bucolic way although Twain realized the deception involved here. In commenting on this, Marx said:

Floating quietly downstream, Huck and Jim attune themselves to the serene rhythm of the great river. . . . The image of the quietly drifting raft is a realization of freedom born of sensuous delight and a liberation of instinct. . . . This rudimentary society of two, one black and one white, is an American Arcadia, an egalitarian wish-image. . . . The river partly insulates Huck and Jim from the hostile world of the

¹⁰Ibid., p. 39.

¹¹Ibid., p. 41.

shore. Yet Clemens is realistic enough, and faithful enough to the logic of his ruling metaphor to admit the limitations of the raft. It lacks power and maneuverability. It can only move easily with the current, that is, southward into slave territory.¹²

Leaving Mark Twain and passing into the twentieth century, one finds the "ideal" ever present in the literature. It is present in bold form in the work of Sinclair Lewis, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Ernest Hemingway, John Steinbeck, William Faulkner, and such contemporaries as John Updike, Saul Bellow, and William Styron to mention only a few. Significantly, these writers extend the "ideal" to a new level--the anti-pastoral (their heroes and anti-heroes make gestures toward returning to nature that in the end fail), but despite the failures and a realization of such by the authors, the power of the Agrarian Myth and the Pastoral Dream has increased since the "closing of the American frontier and the pollution of Walden Pond."¹³ Taylor explained why this is true:

The more sophisticated and complex the Alexandrian Court, the stronger the longing for the simplicity of the Sicilian hills. The more prevalent concrete and steel, the greater the desire for grass and trees. In twentieth century fiction and life, the farm boy has become the successful real-estate salesman, the nihilistic expatriate, the legendary business mogul, the university professor, the columnist for the New Yorker, and the President of the United States. And he has inherited a boxed set of green-bound pastoral and agrarian values which he occasionally turns to for solutions. And the most

¹²Marx, The Machine in the Garden, pp. 327-28.

¹³Taylor, Pastoral and Anti-Pastoral Patterns, p. 41.

amazing part, he is surprised when these pastoral, agrarian, transcendental values don't work. . . .¹⁴

More specifically, the "Dream" is present in Babbitt's escape from city burdens to the Maine woods. The theme is maintained in the Joad family's flight to a mythical garden, in the omnipresence of the woods as some pervasive reincarnation of a lost Eden throughout Faulkner's stories, and in the mock-pastoral suburbs of John Updike's novels. Updike, more than any modern writer, refined the myth to its ultimate subtlety and sophistication in numerous instances, but nowhere better than in two passages from his novel, Of The Farm (1965). In the first, the hero, Joey Robinson is carefully observing a pastoral painting on a wall of his mother's farm house; and in the second he is equating the lost simplicity of the bucolic image to his voluptuous wide-hipped wife (an anti-pastoral tone underlies the first passage):

I went to examine the print closely. The pentagonal side of a barn was diagonally bisected by a purple shadow cast by nothing visible, and a leafless tree of uncertain species stood rooted in lush grass impossibly green. Beyond, I revisited, bending deeper into the picture, a marvellous sky of lateral stripes, of pastel colors where as a child I had imagined myself treading, upside down, a terrain of crayons. The tiny black V of one flying bird was planted in this sky, between two furrows of color, so that I had imagined that if my fingers could get through the glass they could pluck it up, like a carrot sprout.

.
My wife is wide, wide-hipped and long-waisted, and surveyed from above, gives an impression of terrain,

¹⁴Ibid., pp. 41-42.

of a wealth whose ownership imposes upon my own body a sweet strain of extension; entered, she yields a variety of landscapes, seeming now a snowy rolling perspective of bursting cotton bowls seen through the Negro arabesques of a fancywork wrought-iron balcony; now a taut vista of mesas dreaming in the midst of sere and painterly ochre; now a gray French castle complexly fitted to a steep green hill whose terraces imitate turrets; now something like Antarctica; and then a receding valleyland of blacks and purples where an unrippled river flows unseen between shadowy banks of grapes that are never eaten. Over all, like a sky, withdrawn and cool, hangs--hovers, stands, is--is the sense of her consciousness, of her composure, of a non-committal witnessing that preserves me from claustrophobia through any descent however deep.¹⁵

Certainly any number of other selections would serve to establish the power of the myth, but there is no need here to belabor that point. The real purpose of these comments on pastoralism is to place the Negro literary efforts of the 1940's in a proper perspective as a vital part of this pastoral and anti-pastoral genre. And to an even greater extent (since the force of the past--of a bygone day when simple rural virtues prevailed--is central to this mode), the Negro version possesses the vitality and realism of an actual experience, one in which every black man has participated in some deeply-meaningful way--if not in the actual flight to the cities, then by a "shared suffering" that all suppressed people feel to some extent. In this sense, every black man is

¹⁵John Updike, Of The Farm (New York: Fawcett World Library, 1967, original edition, Alfred Knopf, Inc., 1965), pp. 19, 39.

part of a significant historical experience; therefore, his own personal account produces a realism all its own.

Looking at this Negro prose from a purely critical standpoint, it must be placed in the main body of a long tradition of pastoral and anti-pastoral literature proceeding from Emerson, Thoreau, and Melville, through Twain, Lewis, Steinbeck, Faulkner, and ultimately to Updike and Styron. The addition of an intense anti-urban dimension makes it unique and worthy of special treatment. Negro literature from the early forties to the present extends the traditional forms of agrarianism (with its emphasis on a return to nature) to an "urban antipathy." The earlier paen to the qualities of the simple country landscape suddenly became an angry repudiation of the city as destructive to human values. The focus then shifted from delicate scenes of lavish woods, succulent orchards, and flocks of sheep (an idealization of nature from a distance as the moral symbol of the good life), to a stress on the horrible fact that man had already been swallowed up by the city and thus beyond redemption. This transition from bucolic nostalgia to urban rejection, and ultimately to complete alienation represented a final literary consummation, but at the same time and most tragically, an individual human act on the part of urban blacks; it is therefore important to understand both developments.

As a starting point toward understanding this evaluation of Negro thought and its relationship to actual racial processes in the cities, a little-known black author, William Attaway (himself a part of the migration northward from Mississippi), embodies all three stages in the transition mentioned above, but with a predominant emphasis toward the first. Though his chief novel, Blood on the Forge (1941) is no major literary masterpiece in terms of style, character development, or plot, it is a representative work in the pastoral tradition. It can be compared to Steinbeck's The Grapes of Wrath in the sense of developing the attraction of the long-lost agrarian ideal. Furthermore, Attaway's novel probes the individual trauma of a family leaving the land for the city, and then futilely trying to make the simple, old-time values work in a grim and imposing urban setting. Attaway's Joads are Negroes, three brothers headed by the elder Big Mat, who go north to find a promised land of milk and honey. Instead, they soon become overwhelmed by an impersonal atmosphere--one that brutalizes and degrades them. The "shock" of their immediate departure is graphically stated early in the novel.

Squatted on the straw-spread floor of a boxcar, bunched up like hogs headed for market, riding in the dark for what might have been years, knowing time only as dippers of warm water gulped whenever they were awake, helpless and drooping because they were headed into the unknown and there was no sun, they forgot even that they had eyes in their heads

and crawled around in the boxcar, as though it were a solid thing of blackness. . . . The air, fetid with man smell and nervous sweat, the pounding of the wheels shaking the car and its prisoners like a gourd full of peas, the piercing scream of the wheels fighting the rails on a curve, the uniform dark--those things were common to all. The misery that stemmed from them was a mass experience. Big Mat could not defend his identity against the pack.¹⁶

Critic Edward Margolies sees the boxcar taking them north as a "kind of womb preparing to disgorge them into a new life."¹⁷ But what kind of "new life"? Attaway hinted of a life that was a radical departure from "green" living, thus rendering the older values useless. While the train roared north, Big Mat cried:

What's the good in strainin' our eyes out these windows? We can't see where nothin grows around here but rusty iron towers and brick stacks, walled up like somebody's liable to try and steal them. Where are the trees? They so far away on the tops of the low mountains that they look like the fringe on a black wear-me-to-a wake dress held upside down against the sky.¹⁸

Attaway's dread of what the urban frontier meant for Negroes appears frequently in the novel and must be understood as part of the pastoral nostalgia. Big Mat longed for the "good ground and somethin' growing." As he saw it, the land belonged to him and all his black

¹⁶William Attaway, Blood on the Forge (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, Doran & Co., Inc., 1941), pp. 45-46.

¹⁷Edward Margolies, Native Sons, A Critical Study of Twentieth-Century Negro American Authors (Philadelphia & New York: J. B. Lippincott Co., 1969), p. 55.

¹⁸Attaway, Blood on the Forge, p. 53.

brothers. One passage in particular expresses this attachment.

Well, I go look at all the farmer. They all black. Their ain't no white man in the land. Nobody gets crop-aliened. There aint no ridin' boss. The muck ground cover all the farmer so they grow potatoes under their armpits. They grow field corn between their toes. One man jest let a big tree grow on his back for shade. All he do is walk in the shade and drink corn whiskey. . . . He took to walking in the hills. Like his brother, symbolically he was going home. In his trouble his spirit was near home. So the song of the mills was muted, and all that he saw had another air. The sky sometimes took on the colors of planting time. He did not see the smoke and slag of the mills. There was that coming-summer smell that the hot gases could not kill. This time of the year did something to Big Mat, and he found himself away in the hills, digging in the ground now and then with a pointed stick. He walked, and his nostrils tested the wind for the smells. There had been an old mule pressed against a rail fence on a sloping red hillside. Its nose had felt the breeze for good smells.¹⁹

Toward the close of the novel, it seems that Attaway made the shift from this nostalgia to an urban repudiation. Following Big Mat's death during a violent strike at the steel mill, his younger brother Melody (the name is symbolic of seasonal regularity) realized there would be no return to the greenery of the garden. It had only been a figment of Big Mat's imagination. Melody accepted his fate and that of his brother Chinatown in the following passage:

Someday, Melody thought, he and Chinatown would go home to Kentucky. But he did not think about that very hard. He was beginning to feel the truth: they would never go home. Now they would go to Pittsburgh. Many Negroes had gone to Pittsburgh

¹⁹Ibid., pp. 196, 200.

before them; many were castoffs of the mills. They had settled in the bottom of that city, making a running sore at those lowest points.²⁰

Although Attaway wrote no other novels after Blood on the Forge, this one work reenforces the theme that the emerging response to the Negro's urban condition was a reality. It could be found in the work of other Negro writers beside Attaway. In fact, Jay Saunders Redding, though not a novelist, captured the force of the land's attraction to those who left it, while at the same time revealing a somewhat hidden understanding (in an anti-pastoral sense) that it was not the same purified landscape as in the past. While travelling in the Natchez, Mississippi area during the year 1940, he saw nature in an alienated way. In his autobiography, he said:

I got in a network of clay roads that plow deep into the earth through the red hills. Tangled, ropey growth hung from the walls of the roads, and cattle and foot paths burrowed through the walls to hilly clearings, where staggered blackened shacks and outhouses were propped with rotting logs. The clearings were seldom clear. Tough grass and leathery bushes, slash pine and scrub oak grew everywhere over them. The land was not fecund, yet even the stones grew weeds.²¹

Another part of his autobiography perhaps best represents his realization that the land was not the same as it was in the past. The cotton, as he said,

²⁰Ibid., p. 276.

²¹Jay Saunders Redding, No Day of Triumph (New York: Harpers, 1942), p. 308.

"lay like a burden on the land," and each day the fields had an endless quota of pickers--"hungry, trusting folk who came out from the towns and villages before dawn, singing perhaps as the truck which bore them lurched through the chill darkness, unbelieving that the wage would drop from fifty to forty cents a hundred pounds by noon and to thirty by quitting time. . . ."22

It is evident that initial contact with the urban milieu aroused at first the kind of nostalgia expressed in Attaway's novel, the pronounced sensuous reaction of Big Mat although Mat is the first sign in the literature of a true urban Negro, one who subconsciously knows he is in his new environment to stay. However, in Richard Wright's autobiography, Black Boy, a work compiled during the early 1940's, the author achieved what may well be the pastoral myth's highest level of expression--an imagery laden word painting that resembles a French Impressionist's landscape. The passage reflects the rhythmic flow of the seasons and bears repeating in its entirety.

There was the wonder I felt when I first saw a brace of mountainlike, spotted, black-and-white horses clopping down a dusty road through clouds of powdered clay. There was the delight I caught in seeing long straight rows of red and green vegetables stretching away in the sun to the bright horizon. There was the faint, cool kiss of sensuality when dew came on to my cheeks and shins as I ran down the wet green garden paths in the early morning. There was the vague sense of the infinite as I

²²Ibid., pp. 279-80.

looked down upon the yellow, dreaming waters of the Mississippi River from the verdant bluffs of Natchez. There were the echoes of nostalgia I heard in the crying strings of wild geese winging south against a bleak autumn sky. There was the tantalizing melancholy in the tingling scent of burning hickory wood. There was the teasing and impossible desire to imitate the petty pride of sparrows wallowing and flouncing in the red dust of country roads. There was the yearning for identification loosed in me by the sight of a solitary ant carrying a burden upon a mysterious journey. There was the disdain that filled me as I tortured a delicate, blue-pink crawfish that huddled fearfully in the mudsill of a rusty tin can. There was the aching glory in masses of clouds burning gold and purple from an invisible sun. There was the liquid alarm I saw in the blood-red glare of the sun's afterglow mirrored in the squared panes of whitewashed frame houses. There was the languor I felt when I heard green leaves rustling with a rainlike sound. There was the incomprehensible secret embodied in a whitish toadstool hiding in the dark shade of a rotting log. There was the experience of feeling death without dying that came from watching a chicken leap about blindly after its neck had been snapped by a quick twist of my father's wrist. There was the great joke that I felt God had played on cats and dogs by making them lap their milk and water with their tongues. There was the thirst I had when I watched clear, sweet juice trickle from sugar cane being crushed. There was the hot panic that welled up in my throat and swept through my blood when I first saw the lazy, limp coils of a blue-skinned snake sleeping in the sun. There was the speechless astonishment of seeing a hog stabbed through the heart, dipped into boiling water, scraped, split open, gutted, and strung up gaping and bloody. There was the love I had for the mute regality of tall, moss-clad oaks. There was the hint of cosmic cruelty that I felt when I saw the curved timbers of a wooden shack that had been warped in the summer sun. There was the saliva that formed in my mouth whenever I smelt clay dust potted with fresh rain. There was the cloudy notion of hunger when I breathed the odor of new-cut, bleeding grass. And there was the quiet terror that suffused my senses when vast hazes of gold washed earthward from star-heavy skies on silent nights. . . .²³

²³Richard Wright, Black Boy, A Record of Childhood and Youth (New York: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1945), pp. 7-8.

When this was written, Wright had already been exposed to the urban environment that would be his home for the rest of his life. Without attempting to read anything into the above passage, it could well be that there was a deeper meaning beyond the obvious stress of the selection. He may have been saying that such a tranquil setting can never be like this--if indeed it ever was--again. His use of the words "vague," "dreaming," "nostalgia," "melancholy," and "yearning," to describe the lush pastoral setting that was so much a part of his consciousness seems to confirm this assertion. As he concluded these lines, the imagery of death suffused the entire vision ("a rotting log," "death without dying," "a hog stabbed through the heart, . . . split open, gutted, and strung up gaping and bloody," all unmistakable admissions on the author's part that the bucolic myth was dead and gone). Wright seemed to be implying that the city was the Negro's permanent home whether he wanted it or not. In other words, he must now deal with his new situation, and in a way other than by the application of his pastoral heritage. An "asphalt garden" had now replaced his former verdant one (if indeed the latter ever even slightly approached the ideal), and every black man who lived there must learn to deal with it realistically, for there was no turning back!

In Wright's work, this evolution of Negro thought is definitely traceable. He was saying essentially that

the city loomed large and seemingly beyond any real understanding to its black inhabitants. In order to comprehend it at all, Wright believed, a man must approach it on a different level of thought--a level that is clearly manifested in a large portion of his best work. And in that work, a great deal is revealed about the compelling force of the urban response.

In 1941, Richard Wright published 12 Million Black Voices, a written and picture account of the black migration to the northern cities; it best represents the transitional stage of development in his thinking. Beginning with the Negro's pastoral yearning, the book quickly assumed an anti-urban tone that would be developed more fully in the novels and short stories. He also used the first person plural in this book to give it a more personal and realistic character. As one critic pointed out, Wright succeeded in portraying the "persistent existence of feudal-like attitudes and relationships in rural areas and the introduction of modern machinery and industrial productive methods in those same areas," a development which added to the northward migration of blacks.²⁴ This same critic further added that the book showed the poor black farmers of the South moving from control by the "Lords of the Land" to the "Bosses of the Building."²⁵

²⁴Russell Carl Brignano, Richard Wright, An Introduction to the Man and His Work (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1970), p. 66.

²⁵Ibid., pp. 69-70.

Early in the book and in much the same fashion as Black Boy, Wright summoned forth the myth in very poetic strains. "Apple buds laugh into blossom. Honeysuckles creep up the sides of houses. . . . Bright green leaves jut from a million branches to form an awning that tries to shield and shade the earth."²⁶ And to give additional strength to this "green purity," he talked about the seasonal regularity of pastoral existence as opposed to the machine-like control of urban living. In so doing, he linked himself to the concept of the daily and seasonal life cycle expressed earlier by Thoreau and Whitman. From this point on, his narrative shifts. He talks about his black brothers as a people who knew only "relationships to people" and not "relationships to things." They had no institutional connections other than the Black Protestant Church, and they were moving into a world that would test them as they had never been tested before. Moreover, as Wright put it, how could they know that once they set their "awkward feet upon the pavements of the city, life would begin to exact . . . a heavy toll in death"?²⁷ By posing this question, Wright reached the level of "urban rejection," from which there was no return for the author or his people. In the following passage,

²⁶ Richard Wright, 12 Million Black Voices, A Folk History of the Negro in the United States (New York: The Viking Press, 1941), p. 32.

²⁷ Ibid., p. 93.

he lamented the transference of rural values to the city:

It seems as though we are now living inside of a machine; days and events move with a hard reasoning of their own. We live amid swarms of people, yet there is a vast distance that words cannot bridge. No longer do our lives depend upon the soil, the sun, the rain, or the wind; we live by the grace of jobs and the brutal logic of jobs. We do not know this world, or what makes it move. In the South life was different; men spoke to you, cursed you, yelled at you, or killed you. The world moved by signs we knew. But here in the North cold forces hit you and push you. It is a world of things.²⁸

Not only did Wright sound the cry of urban rejection in these lines, but he also hinted at a sense of complete alienation--the Existentialist theme later developed so powerfully by most contemporary Negro authors, especially James Baldwin and Ralph Ellison. In a similar vein, Negro Marxist and economist W. E. B. DuBois reached the same conclusions. He wrote of the contradictions in urban existence for Negroes when measured against their conditions in the South. While seeing the future advantages the city offered with its increased opportunities and "unrivalled facilities" for thought and culture, it was also true that Negroes were not welcome in most of the city's public and private accommodations.²⁹

The remainder of 12 Million Black Voices reflects the full impact of urban living on black people. There

²⁸Ibid., p. 100.

²⁹W. E. B. DuBois, Dusk of Dawn, An Essay Toward An Autobiography of a Race Concept (New York: Shocken Books, 1968, original edition, Harcourt, Brace & World, 1940), p. 317.

is the undeniable record of urban poverty in these pages; the reader can see it, smell it, feel it. The pictures add their own grim horror to the tragedy, much in the same manner as Erskine Caldwell's accounts of rural poverty during the thirties. Wright's record of the crowded rooms in rotting buildings carries a sense of finality with it that seems even more pathetic in the 1970's because the conditions still remain. As he portrayed this urban sore, Wright gave a graphic description of the Negro's city home.

The kitchenette is our prison, our death sentence without a trial, the new form of mob violence that assaults not only the lone individual, but all of us, in its ceaseless attacks. The kitchenette, with its filth and foul air, with its one toilet for thirty or more tenants, kills our black babies so fast that in many cities twice as many of them die as white babies. The kitchenette is the seed bed for scarlet fever, dysentery, typhoid, tuberculosis, gonorrhea, syphilis, pneumonia, and malnutrition. . . . The kitchenette, with its crowded rooms and incessant bedlam, provides an enticing place for crimes of all sort--crimes against women and children or any stranger who happens to stray into its dark hallways. . . . The kitchenette injects pressure and tension into our individual personalities, making many of us give up the struggle, walk off and leave wives, husbands, and even children behind to shift as best they can. . . . The kitchenette blights the personalities of our growing children, disorganizes them, blinds them to hope, creates problems whose effects can be traced in the characters of its child victims for years afterward. . . . The kitchenette is the funnel through which our pulverized lives flow to ruin and death on the city pavements at a profit. . . .³⁰

³⁰Wright, 12 Million Black Voices, pp. 106-8, 110-11.

Following this description, Wright focused on the streets that housed such dwelling places--unlighted, garbage filled, and mostly in disrepair. He said it looked as though many had been subjected to sustained aerial bombardment such as those in Europe during the war. A picture accompanied this description of the streets and made Wright's words appear to be almost an understatement. It showed a two-story building with garbage and debris piled up to the first window sills on the lower floor. These filthy pavements seemed to provide only one consolation for its Negro inhabitants--the many churches that enabled the people to maintain their personalities in relation to the "total world," and preserve a "quiet and constant communion with all that is deepest in us. . . ." ³¹

12 Million Black Voices therefore invites the reader into the city and allows him to glimpse the crowded, filthy tenements. Although Wright fit this into the context of advanced capitalism believing it to be white exploitation of blacks within a class, these Marxist overtones are less important than his repudiation of urbanization, a feeling that would grow to intense proportions during the rest of the decade. The response would spill over into a more popular medium of Negro expression by late 1946--that of newspapers and other periodicals. The Negro's plight would also bring forth an effort by white liberals to solve what

³¹Ibid., p. 131.

was shaping up as an acute urban crisis (whether it came in the form of a housing expert's reports, a mayor's race relations commission, or any number of civil rights committees). An invasion of the human consciousness had occurred and though not always displayed in the straight forward manner of a statistical report, it was still present in the actions of men of good will. Perhaps in her autobiography, anthropologist and novelist Zora Neale Hurston came close to grasping the reality and power of this emerging consciousness. She said:

I had seen myself homeless and uncared for. There was a chill about that picture which used to wake me up shivering. I had always thought I would be in some lone, arctic wasteland with no one under the sound of my voice. I found the cold, the desolate solitude, and earless silences, but I discovered that all that geography was within me. It only needed time to reveal it. My vagrancy had begun in reality. I knew that. . . .³²

It was this "desolate solitude" Miss Hurston spoke about that emerged in some of Wright's major prose writing, thus giving further evidence of his ability as a writer, but more importantly, representing the maturation of an urban response. This work also provides a vital link with the existential authors of the fifties and sixties. Therefore, by examining three works--Black Boy, the novel, Native Son, and the short story, "The Man Who Lived Underground," one gains an appreciation of Wright

³²Zora Neale Hurston, Dust Tracks on a Road, An Autobiography (Philadelphia, New York & London: J. B. Lippincott, 1942), p. 123.

as an author, and a greater understanding of the urban repudiation he personified.

As indicated earlier, Black Boy offered (in the first part of the book) a beautiful and compelling example of the pastoral myth--a conscious reflection on the greenery of the southern landscape. But the author quickly shifted perspective by presenting the future home of Negroes as a very different and distinctively forbidding landscape, one with "stone buildings" and "concrete pavements," with a noticeable and disheartening "absence of green growing things" that made it look dead. And though he fled--as many Negroes did--without qualms from a "hostile and forbidding" South to a northern promised land ("so that the numbness of my defensive living might thaw out and let me feel the pain--years later and far away--of what living in the South meant"), the shock of urban depravity soon destroyed such hopes.³³ His parting farewell to that pastoral world signaled a total acceptance of this new asphalt garden.

So in leaving, I was taking a part of the South to transplant in alien soil, to see if it could grow differently, if it could drink new and cool rains, bend in strange winds; respond to the warmth of other sun and perhaps to bloom. . . . And if that miracle ever happened, then I would know that there was yet hope in that southern swamp of despair and violence, that light could emerge even out of the blackest of the southern night. I would know that the South too could overcome its fear, its hate,

³³Wright, Black Boy, pp. 9, 226, 228.

its cowardice, its heritage of guilt and blood,
its burden of anxiety and compulsive cruelty.³⁴

Russell Carl Brignano, a leading expert on Wright, suggested that he sought the same thing in a "conscious" way that all Negroes who came north sought in an unconscious way. He would "seek a home," says Brignano, in what appeared to be a more amicable environment. Yet, underlying these hopes was a cautious brooding that stemmed from a failure to "find satisfaction and fulfillment in racial togetherness and familial intimacy in the South."³⁵ In Native Son, this is reflected in his "fusion of the particular with the general," so that the story of "a single Negro and his family becomes a saga of all southern Negroes." His own search for a father becomes a search for "dignity, economic opportunity, and social acceptance. . . ." Unable to find it in the South, he can hopefully make his experience work for him in a new environment.³⁶ However, a close look at this novel proves beyond much doubt that such abiding hope gave way to a deep and enduring pessimism.

The undue attention given to Wright's most popular work has unfortunately drawn attention away from the full evolution of his thought, as well as placing him in a

³⁴Ibid., p. 228.

³⁵Brignano, Richard Wright, p. 5.

³⁶Ibid., p. 6.

Marxist category (because of the communist dialectic that runs through most of the book). But it really matters little what Wright himself, or the book's hero, Bigger Thomas believed ideologically. The real importance of Native Son lies in Wright's assertion that the Negro's environment is apparently a permanent condition, "unrelentingly bleak and vacuous" (and with white men seemingly oblivious to changing it). As Edward Margolies pointed out in his recent study of Wright, when the novel "transcends its Marxist and proletarian limitations the reading becomes magnificent."³⁷ To try and arouse these white people, Wright employed a "shock tactic" in the novel's opening scene. It remains one of the most powerful passages in American literature.

A huge black rat squealed and leaped at Bigger's trousers-leg and snagged it in his teeth, hanging on. "Goddamn!" Bigger whispered fiercely, whirling and kicking out his leg with all the strength of his body. The force of his movement shook the rat loose and it sailed through the air and struck a wall. Instantly, it rolled over and leaped again. Bigger dodged and the rat landed against a table leg. With clenched teeth, Bigger held the skillet; he was afraid to hurl it, fearing that he might miss. The rat squeaked and turned and ran in a narrow circle, looking for a place to hide; it leaped again past Bigger and scurried on dry rasping feet to one side of the box and then to the other, searching for the hole. Then it turned and reared upon its hind legs. "Hit 'im, Bigger!" Buddy shouted. "Kill 'im!" the woman screamed. . . . Bigger swung the skillet; it skidded over

³⁷ Edward Margolies, The Art of Richard Wright (Carbondale & Edwardsville, Illinois: Southern Illinois University Press, 1969), p. 105.

the floor, missing the rat, and clattered to a stop against a wall. "Goddamn!" The rat scuttled across the floor and stopped again at the box and searched quickly for the hole; then it reared once more and bared long yellow fangs, piping shrilly, belly quivering. Bigger aimed and let the skillet fly with a heavy grunt. . . . "I got 'im," he muttered, his clenched teeth bared in a smile. "By God, I got 'im." He kicked the splintered box out of the way and the flat black body of the rat lay exposed, its two long yellow tusks showing distinctly. Bigger took a shoe and pounded the rat's head, crushing it, cursing hysterically: "You sonofabitch!"³⁸

One does not need to read further to understand his message. Clearly, there was no way to prevent such horrors from entering fully into the consciousness of anyone encountering them. The rat was only one of the more destructive symbols of this existence, and once such exposure became commonplace, society must be prepared to accept the consequences; thus, the rat incident further extended Wright's exposure of the Negro's urban burden in 12 Million Black Voices. In Native Son, however, the foremost symbol of the ghetto--the crowded kitchenette--is far more suggestive of total black deprivation. As one writer inferred, the kitchenette choked a man's very existence, particularly when he might awaken to "find giant rats attacking his women. . . ." This horror explains Wright's use of the fire throughout the novel; for such an existence, a "ghetto

³⁸ Richard Wright, Native Son (New York: The Modern Library, Harper & Row, 1940), pp. 5-6.

of endless burning," is the image that "embodies the Negro's place of residence in America. . . ."39

It is from such an atmosphere that the novel's hero--and indeed that of the northern city--emerges. Bigger Thomas was not only Richard Wright's most successful attempt at characterization, one which future Negro novelists would draw on, but also an effort to dramatize every urban Negro's deprived state through the personal experiences of one individual. Bigger's plight was the entire black race's writ large. He epitomized the meaningless existence of a whole black nation, and once this fact became a part of his consciousness he would probably destroy himself or somebody. Though Bigger may well be an exaggerated version of the average urban Negro's trauma, Wright is implying that they are all potential murderers if they remain in such an atmosphere. As Bigger himself said, "I reckon we the only things in this city that can't go where we want to, go and do what we want to do."40 That Bigger serves as the black urban prototype signifies, moreover, a future calamity which contradicts Wright's earlier hopes that the asphalt garden would become the Negro's Eden. His two acts of murder (one a white girl who

³⁹Dan McCall, The Example of Richard Wright (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1969), pp. 96-97, 177.

⁴⁰Wright, Native Son, p. 19.

befriended him, and the other his own girl friend) symbolized, as Margolies suggested, the only free exercise of will open to him in light of his refusal to make the sort of adjustment to the Negro's condition that his mother (her religiosity) and sister (her YWCA affiliation) made.⁴¹ At the same time, Bigger's murders foreshadowed what Brignano referred to as the "horrendous vision of the potential black uprising that . . . awaits in every Negro heart . . . against the centuries of white injustices and maltreatment."⁴² In the following passage (one in which Bigger was fleeing from the police), the stark reality of his situation runs through his mind:

He looked for a building with a "For Rent" sign. He walked two blocks and saw none. He knew that empty flats were scarce in the Black Belt; whenever his mother wanted to move she had to put in requests long months in advance. He remembered that his mother had once made him tramp the streets for two whole months looking for a place to live. The rental agencies had told him that there were not enough houses for Negroes to live in, that the city was condemning houses in which Negroes lived as being too old and too dangerous for habitation. And he remembered the time when the police had come and driven him and his mother and his brother and his sister out of a flat in a building which had collapsed two days after they had moved. And he had heard it said that black people, even though they could not get good jobs, paid twice as much rent as whites for the same kind of flats. He walked five more blocks, and saw no "For Rent" sign. Goddam! Would he freeze trying to find a place in which to get warm? How easy it would be for him to hide if he had the whole city in which to move about!

⁴¹Margolies, The Art of Richard Wright, p. 107.

⁴²Brignano, Richard Wright, p. 35.

They keep us bottled up here like wild animals, he thought. He knew that black people could not go outside of the Black Belt to rent a flat; they had to live on their side of the "line." No white real estate man would rent a flat to a black man other than in the sections where it had been decided that black people might live.⁴³

On an even deeper level, Bigger was an urban Joe Christmas, forever in search of an identity that always eluded him. He had dim hopes of achieving the good life ("that there should be a way in which gnawing hunger and restless aspiration could be fused; that there should be a manner of acting that caught the mind and body in certainty and faith"), but they are always overcome by the reality of his powerlessness.⁴⁴ Yet, this abiding hope never completely vanished. It was that same kind of hope and courageous endurance that sustained him under the South's color-caste system.

One of Wright's lesser known works reveals what is perhaps his intellectual settlement with this conflict of hope versus pessimism, and strongly suggests that the latter mood prevailed in the end. His short story, "The Man Who Lived Underground," originally part of an unpublished chapter of Black Boy, pursues the "urban rejection" theme to its conclusion, thus providing a vital link with the novels of alienation that appear in the 1950's. The story is an allegory of complete and final urban degradation. Fred Daniels, the leading character in the story,

⁴³Wright, Native Son, p. 231.

⁴⁴Ibid., p. 107.

lived beneath the city (having escaped there through a man hole after being beaten senselessly and chased by the police), wallowing in the sewage and slime like some modern day "Hairy Ape." From his vantage point, he was able to observe the actions of whites and make a comparison with those of his own people. The more he saw the more meaningless it seemed, and the more depressed he became. On one occasion after seeing a dead Negro baby caught in the sewer stream, he expressed the very depths of black despair.

Water blossomed about the tiny legs, the tiny arms, the tiny head, and rushed onward. The eyes were closed as though in sleep; the fists were clinched, as though in protest; and the mouth gaped black in a soundless cry.⁴⁵

Viewing the city from this subterranean seclusion gave Daniels a sharper sense of the Negro's hopelessness, and he soon approached the totally alienated attitude of his future black urban brothers. While looking in on a Negro church-service, he saw for the first time the futility of being black.

After a long time he grew numb and dropped to the dirt. Pain throbbed in his legs and a deeper pain, induced by the sight of those black people groveling and begging for something they could never get, churned in him. A vague conviction made him feel that those people should stand unrepentant and yield no quarter in singing and praying, yet he had run away from the police, had pleaded with

⁴⁵Richard Wright, Eight Men (New York: Pyramid Publications, 1969, original edition, The World Publishing Co., 1961), p. 27.

them to believe in his innocence. He shook his head, bewildered.⁴⁶

It is as if Daniels saw his whole life pass before his eyes during these wanderings, although much too fast to do anything about it. At night, his dreams were dominated by either confrontations with white authority or death visions; and when death finally prevails, it was almost a welcome release from a world that--even while a man was dying--maintained its grip on his fading consciousness.

From overhead came the muffled roar of a powerful motor and the swish of a speeding car. He felt the strong tide pushing him slowly into the middle of the sewer, turning him about. For a split second there hovered before his eyes the glittering cave, the shouting walls, and the laughing floor. . . . Then his mouth was full of thick, bitter water. The current spun him around. He sighed and closed his eyes, a whirling object rushing alone in the darkness, veering, tossing, lost in the heart of the earth.⁴⁷

Therefore, in both Native Son and "The Man Who Lived Underground," death served as the only release from the Negro's urban degradation (testifying as to how deep the force of "urban rejection" had penetrated the Negro mind). Its force would be maintained throughout the decade, projecting itself beyond the genius of a Richard Wright into a more popular medium of Negro expression. It grew because an ever increasing number of blacks came to realize that instead of winning some "redemption" for a long

⁴⁶Ibid., p. 26.

⁴⁷Ibid., p. 74.

struggle, their reward was going to be similar to the one Fred Daniels received--"a hole with walls of damp earth leading into blackness."⁴⁸

From his earlier vision of upward mobility in the cities, Richard Wright made the complete intellectual leap in the other direction with "The Man Who Lived Underground." The message was clear! Fred Daniel's fate could become the fate of all Negroes one day, if not in that highly dramatic way, then by the even more painful process of living a long life of urban submission. If slavery was a curse on the South, as Faulkner maintained, then the Negro's urban inheritance was a curse on the entire nation. The latter was further compounded by the fact that the Negro fled one kind of subjugation for another. As McCall put it, the "dream" turned to a "nightmare," symbolized by murder, fires, white persecutions, and frantic flight.⁴⁹

The tragedy of Bigger Thomas and Fred Daniels--and all urban blacks--is further magnified because they dream the American Dream, but are unable to make the Dream a reality. Even if they do not resort to murder, their sense of isolation and alienation builds to an intensity conducive to rebellion against the society at large. And since the real potential of rebellion increases when this situation is allowed to deteriorate, the issues raised by Wright

⁴⁸Ibid., p. 24.

⁴⁹McCall, The Example of Richard Wright, p. 181.

go beyond the Negro's urban plight to those of man's existence in a world "devoid of meaning and purpose."⁵⁰ For if the lives of Negroes mean nothing in an epistemological sense, it is just such "nothingness" that enlarges the problem to one of existential proportions. In fact, Brignano makes a definite connection between "The Man Who Lived Underground" and the work of the modern Existentialists. As he stated, man has "escaped into the underground of the world, symbolically the underground of the mind" (and seeks to see if what has happened to him in the world), "is part of a larger truth of merely an unpleasant exception."⁵¹

This existential dimension gives further support to the argument advanced in this study that the black response to urbanization was deep and far-reaching in its impact on the attitudes of Negroes and whites alike. Therefore, the existential predicament--all mankind's predicament--is that man in mass society finds himself isolated and forced to rely on his own resources; however, when he does this, he discovers that he cannot find security even in himself. As an attempt to define man's twentieth century condition (with its emphasis on the individual's constant effort toward "becoming"),

⁵⁰ Margolies, The Art of Richard Wright, pp. 106, 120.

⁵¹ Brignano, Richard Wright, pp. 150-51.

Existentialism assumes special significance when applied to a race that is denied access to the proper channels of advancement. Certainly some Negroes did rely on alternatives to offset this obstacle (occult religious sects, membership in socialist and communist groups, or individual acts of rebellion), but most of them endured their condition of "non-becoming" with a passive, Job-like stoicism; and because of their collective suffering, the problem grew worse and could scarcely be ignored.

Existentialism--as a philosophy pertinent to the race question--also stresses the belief that only one who is fully aware of the meaning of absolute despair and estrangement (because he has experienced it at first hand) can understand and appreciate the real freedom to hope for a better life. From this viewpoint, the Negro response to despair is uniquely powerful because it is "shared" by every one whose skin is black. Thus the Negro novels of the early 1940's (or any time for that matter) were vital works of art in that they revealed deep social wounds that adversely affected the whole nation--black, because it was happening to them; white, because they were allowing it to happen. And since there is an identity--despite religious, social, political, and individual differences--among all men, it was a logical development that the black intellectual's response to his own condition would spread throughout the society.

The early 1940's marked the earliest stages of what became a "world consciousness" with regard to the race question. As one close observer of existential expression in America, Sidney Finkelstein pointed out, the "more profoundly true the expression a nation gives to its own problems, struggles and historical experiences, the more it finds not incomprehensibility but kinship and understanding elsewhere."⁵² Herein lay the strength of these Negro authors of the early Forties! They took their place in the procession of a great humanist tradition, probably realizing it to an even greater degree than any of their predecessors because of the implications of racial submission. As Finkelstein further suggested, all of these artists assumed their own function was to break down the isolation of people by "giving them a consciousness of the world they were collectively shaping, creating a kinship between the writer and his readers through an illumination of the forces affecting all of them."⁵³

This existential position further reenforces the conclusions of the most significant study of race up to the present time--Winthrop D. Jordan's White over Black. Jordan made an exhaustive study of racial attitudes in

⁵²Sidney Finkelstein, Existentialism and Alienation in American Literature (New York: International Publishers, 1965), p. 286.

⁵³Ibid., p. 295.

America from the Elizabethan period through the early 1800's, and discovered two totally opposing forces operating with regard to the race question. First, as white Americans measured through time their whiteness against the Negro's blackness (fortified by a whole body of English observations about the Negro's different color), they tended more and more to associate the latter with a lower order, committing themselves to winning and maintaining the continent in the name of white, Anglo-Saxon institutions--proving in other words, their identity as "the fruit of England's and Europe's loins and as the good seed of civilization planted in the wilderness.

. . . " Second, since the nation served as a paragon of the Enlightenment, the white man strained under the necessity of "remaining faithful to his own image as the world's exemplar of liberty and equalitarianism, as the best hope of the civilization which he cherished."⁵⁴ Jordan contends that the former, more powerful force won out during most of America's formative years, at least up until the civil war (and feels it will continue to do so); however, the second force operated as a constant reminder to white Americans that they were not living up to their ideals, thus creating the deep tensions that have characterized the racial issue. For while each

⁵⁴Winthrop D. Jordan, White over Black (Chapel Hill, North Carolina: University of North Carolina Press, 1968), p. 581.

American confronted the problem, he most often found it impossible to make a clear-cut decision, or if he did, to live at ease with that decision. As Jordan said:

Within every white American who stood confronted by the Negro, there had arisen a perpetual duel between his higher and lower natures. His cultural conscience--his Christianity, his humanitarianism, his ideology of liberty and equality--demanded that he regard and treat the Negro as his brother and his countryman, as his equal. At the same moment; however, many of his most profound urges, especially his yearning to maintain the identity of his folk, his passion for domination, his sheer avarice, and his sexual desire, impelled him toward conceiving and treating the Negro as inferior to himself, as an American leper.⁵⁵

If this more humanitarian urge was coming to the forefront by the late 1940's, certainly the black intellectual response had served to hasten the action by making the dilemma a permanent part of the human consciousness. A black plea had arisen from the nation's inner cities, a challenge for white America to provide what had been denied the Negro people from the beginning--unimpeded access to the opportunities and privileges of a democracy. The Negro was simply asking for the right to achieve dignity as a human being and a full citizen.

⁵⁵Ibid., pp. 581-82.

CHAPTER II

ESSENCE OF BLACK PROTEST

These are poorly lighted streets, wide as boulevards, that nevertheless glitter with heat lightning as they slash through Harlem. Most notable are Seventh and Lenox Avenue. By day, the swift flow of the 500,000 Negroes who live on this three-square-mile "rug" pour through the wide streets that have seen better days. By night they are merely lurid, but by day the run-down, once-pretentious houses along these main arteries show up for what they are. Derelicts, trussed up. Leftovers from the days when whites occupied them in family groups. . . . These unhappy houses that manage to conceal most of their scrofula behind their facades are literally gorged with human life. Negroes who have had a long and shameful apprenticeship in foul housing conditions occupy them two, three, four, six and ten to a room. . . . The cross section of many of these buildings would further reveal underprivileged children. Crowded into dirty rooms which are packed to capacity with the exploited rent-payers of Harlem. It would reveal an insane conglomerate of trunks, cots, furtive tenants prepared to fly by night, three-shift sleepers who occupy beds that have a new occupant every eight hours. It would further reveal prostitutes, pimps, hallway bathrooms, light house-keeping in rooms of minimum privacy, and the high social hazards that go with lack of privacy.¹

Within about a year following the end of World War II, a large portion of the Negro press and some periodicals led by The Crisis and Opportunity, monthly magazines of the NAACP and the National Urban League respectively, picked up

¹Fannie Hurst, "The Two Sides of Harlem," Negro Digest, V (November, 1946), 11-14.

the themes of William Attaway and Richard Wright and carried them to a larger urban audience; thus reflecting the resentment that was building in the northern ghettos. And even though--as sociologist Kenneth B. Clark intimated--much of the Negro press did smack of absolutism in supporting the "sensational" viewpoints, as well as the black leaders who espoused these views (adopting an anti-white position simply because it irritated whites);² nevertheless, the focus on vital urban questions by 1946 was clearly noticeable. In the short run, this trend both influenced and reaffirmed the emerging white opinion that the Negro's urban condition did pose a threat to the welfare of whites and blacks alike--indeed, a threat to capitalism itself. In the long run, this popular response (taken together with the continuing resistance to flagrant violations of Negro rights in the South) represented the nucleus of an emerging black unity--the essence of a Negro protest that would reach a climax in the 1963 march on Washington.

While these developments--as manifested in the Negro press--are highly significant, there were signs earlier in the decade that this course of events was impending. For example, a more limited protest occurred in 1941 and may have influenced succeeding events. The March

²Kenneth B. Clark, Dark Ghetto (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1965), p. 169.

on Washington Movement for the establishment of a permanent Fair Employment Practices Committee (FEPC) was led by A. Phillip Randolph, head of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters. In an excellent book on this movement, Herbert Garfinkel viewed it as the beginning of a radical departure from any previous Negro protest activities (" . . . a dramatic gesture to force the white majority to take notice of the dire distress of its Negro brothers.").³ Picking up momentum as the issue for defense jobs became crucial, and posing a political threat to the Roosevelt Administration, Randolph dramatized the movement's strength by marching through Harlem during the summer of 1941.⁴ But as Garfinkel pointed out, enthusiasm for carrying out the proposed march dwindled when patriotic support for the war sank in on the home front during the course of the year.⁵ Nevertheless, the movement pointed toward a rising level of urban discontent, foreshadowing as it did a pouring forth of pent-up anger and disgust that was most clearly expressed in Negro newspapers and periodicals. Not that these publications had suddenly discovered the race issue at this time; to the contrary, they had always been "race" oriented (nearly all of them thrived on the subjugation of their race), but the post-war period brought with it a

³Herbert Garfinkel, When Negroes March, The March on Washington Movement in the Organizational Politics for FEPC (Glencoe, Illinois: The Free Press, 1959), p. 42.

⁴Ibid., p. 59.

⁵Ibid., p. 108.

distinctly urban hue to their diatribes. Whether it was Chicago, Kansas City, Detroit, Philadelphia, Pittsburgh, or New York, the urban manifestation of the race problem was attaining increased importance. There was then a distinct possibility right in the North's inner cities for a mutual assimilation of divergent means toward the final goal of racial equality. In fact, it was more than a possibility, for it maintained a steady momentum through the 1960's--finally receiving the full and active participation of low-income urban Negroes.

A further sign of this coming urban resentment appeared in a study made by the National Urban League in August, 1945 (later used by the Truman Civil Rights Committee in its investigation of urban housing). Although it was a direct offshoot of the FEPC drive and placed most of its stress on this issue, the study also showed an awareness of the Negro's urban burden. Pointing to housing as the number one urban problem, the study reported that since housing conditions had been worsened by the war ("Negroes have been chronically subjected to substandard housing in urban and rural areas."), it was necessary to take immediate action along the following lines: (1) continuation of low-rent housing construction under the United States Housing Act, (2) removal of all racial restrictions from land acquired under eminent domain, (3) acquisition of adequate parcels of land to make possible large-scale "coordinated" housing programs by public and private developers,

(4) provision of adequate housing for those displaced by slum clearance, and (5) addition of non-discriminatory clauses ("with assurance of administrative machinery to enforce it") in all existing national housing legislation, as well as any subsequent federal or urban redevelopment legislation. The memorandum also called attention to the pervasive connection between ghetto living and poor health (a connection that would become more obvious in the years ahead). To remedy this problem, the report supported a public health service to "assist in the development of a generalized health program. . . ." ⁶

In reading the Negro newspapers and periodicals from late 1946 until early 1948 when Truman urged Congress to adopt his civil rights program, it almost seems as though the literary response of Attaway, Wright, and others had been taken up in unison by these various publications. The same question posed by Wright was asked again and again in many different ways: Would the Negro overcome humiliation and convert his slums and sweatshops into something meaningful, or would he continue to say "Job-like to the society that crushes him: Though it slays me, yet will I trust in it"? ⁷

⁶Memorandum from the National Urban League to the President of the United States, "Racial Aspects of Reconstruction," August 27, 1945, Papers of Philleo Nash, Truman Papers, Harry S. Truman Library.

⁷St. Clair Drake and Horace R. Cayton, Black Metropolis, p. xxxi.

A large amount of the black opinion on this problem (for the purpose of clarity) can be placed under two categories: (1) the bleakness of slum life in general, and (2) the conditions of urban housing facilities. For the most part, popular opinion reacted most often to these two aspects of urban living. Concerning the first category, much of the opinion in the Negro press at first reflected an escapist tone, adopting a version of the pastoralism expressed by Negro intellectuals. Some writers urged the Negro to leave the city and return to the farms lest they add to an already insoluble problem of the crowded cities. An editorial in the Pittsburgh Courier (similar ones appeared in various issues of Negro papers throughout the period) captured the tone of this sentiment.

Rural life never offered more opportunities for all-around happiness than today, what with improved tools, all sorts of Government assistance, quick transportation, consolidated schools, and the same movies available in both city and village. America is becoming top-heavy with urban dwellers. As for our people, what we need more than anything else is an organization whose objective will be to aid the farmers in the city to get back on the land, somewhere, and to become independent.⁸

The same pastoral yearning appeared in the autobiographical-type columns of Courier writer Benjamin E. Mays. Mays spoke from first-hand experience of his youthful days around the southern city of Tampa, Florida. The switch from country life to one that

⁸Pittsburgh Courier, January 25, 1947.

involved slum housing, juvenile and adult delinquency, police harassment, and the lack of adequate educational, recreational, and hospital facilities forced him to look back to the farm with an intense longing. He described his own personal feelings in a column dealing with the black man's urban inheritance. He stated:

I left the farm at the age of twenty. I must admit though that it is not easy to choose the lesser of two evils--insecurity, peonage and semi-peonage on a farm and the uninviting slum conditions of the great cities, with its vice and other attending evils. It is only the fortunate soul who can rise up out of either. And yet the farm still fascinates me. I love to see the cotton bloom and the bolls crack open. I enjoy seeing the ripened grain tossed about by the wind. It is thrilling to see the dew glittering in the sun on the blades of corn. I like to pick a little cotton when I visit my sister in August.⁹

The "escape" solution was also reflected in a study of the Rocky Mountain states that appeared in the Negro Digest. Era Bell Thompson, an interviewer with the U.S. Employment Service and author of American Daughter (her account of personal experiences as the only black student in an all-white Midwestern college), urged Negroes to leave the crowded northern city and go to Wyoming, Montana, and the Dakotas. She pointed out that there were more people in two square miles of New York City than in all of the Mid-central states.¹⁰

⁹Ibid., February 15, 1947.

¹⁰Era Bell Thompson, "Lots of Room for Negroes," Negro Digest, V (March, 1947), 23.

The Negro press reacted strongly to this confinement (characterizing it as everybody's problem, not just the Negro's) and increasingly accepted it as a permanent situation--one which the Negro had to come to terms with in a realistic way. The Chicago Defender called it a "battle for living space" brought about by the massing of a large Negro population in one area.¹¹ The droves of displaced colored people formed a bewildered and demoralized lot. Negro columnist Joseph D. Bibb graphically described their plight.

Multitudes of displaced colored people have ventured forth downtown, in the garbs and trappings of the canebrakes of Louisiana and the deltas of Mississippi. Their simple mother hubbards and home sliced shoes bring back to memory the days when the immigrant hordes from Europe swept this country a few generations back.¹²

Bibb found that in one community on the west side of Chicago there were more than 43,000 arrivals from Mississippi alone, and less than 2 per cent had gone beyond the fourth grade. They were unaccustomed to the ways of the big city.¹³ In a later column, he called attention to the absence of political representation for the Negro. The city of Chicago had no Negroes on the superior court or circuit court benches, and only one on the municipal court. Furthermore, there were no masters

¹¹Chicago Defender, July 12, 1947.

¹²Pittsburgh Courier, August 23, 1947.

¹³Ibid.

in chancery, no receivers in bankruptcy, no assistant probate court judges, no federal judges, and no appellate or supreme court jurists. He thus compared the position of the 350,000 colored citizens of Illinois to the colored peoples of South Africa.¹⁴

Indeed, the Negro papers recorded all aspects of this urban poverty week by week ("run-down houses, inadequate police protection, poor garbage and street cleaning service, or any of the other disabilities which go to make up black Ghetto life. . . .").¹⁵ They supported their articles and editorials with an inexhaustible supply of photographs in a manner reminiscent of Wright's 12 Million Black Voices. There were pictures for example of garbage piles in the street, ramshackled dwellings, and ragged little children. One front-page picture in the Amsterdam News showed Harlem Negroes looking through a market window at an army of rats nibbling on the meat that would go on sale the next morning.¹⁶ Columnist Earl Brown best capsuled this resentment in a sharp rebuke.

A basic reason for all of Harlem's problems, including the one of filth and stench and dilapidation, is that Harlem is an overcrowded, Jim Crow community. If Negroes were not discriminated against and could move freely whenever they were able to buy a house or pay rent, many fewer people

¹⁴Ibid., September 20, 1947.

¹⁵New York Amsterdam News, October 12, 1946.

¹⁶Ibid., September 14, 1946.

would live in Harlem. This would not only in itself cause it to be cleaner but it would also force the landlords to keep up the tenements for human habitation, since the landlords would have to bid for tenants.¹⁷

Both The Crisis and Opportunity, predominantly middle class in outlook, stressed the legalistic aspects of the employment and housing issues. Nevertheless, they too responded to some of the multitude of problems in the cities. The Crisis, for instance, was particularly concerned with the quality of the urban Negro's health. In an article exposing the extent of inferior health care for Negroes, W. Montague Cobb, leading member of the NAACP's Medical Committee, stated that most Negro communities in the large cities were infested with vermin. The article was accompanied by pictures of a dark ghetto cellar breeding vermin and bacteria, as well as a filthy toilet (common in the Negro's central city housing) in incredibly cramped washroom quarters. To counter this, Cobb urged the passage of the National Health Bill, a measure that would have provided appropriations to care for the indigent. He was of the opinion that such a measure would compensate in part for discriminatory practices in both urban and southern rural areas.¹⁸ A subsequent article by Cobb reported that only ten hospitals in the North were impartial

¹⁷Ibid., April 5, 1947.

¹⁸W. Montague Cobb, "Removing Our Health Burden," The Crisis, LIII (September, 1946), 268-70.

in their treatment of Negroes. In response to such an intolerable situation, he called for a new policy of equal medical treatment for all people, thus bringing an end to the nation's "medical ghetto."¹⁹

In October, 1947, the NAACP made perhaps its most significant gesture toward publicizing Negro maltreatment by placing the civil rights issue before the United Nations. Led by W. E. B. Du Bois, an organization staff drew up a 155-page report which traced the long, sordid history of the denial of human rights to Negroes. One portion of the document (Chapter Five) pertained to the Negro's confinement in urban slums, placing the blame on the dominant white community and calling for an end to such criminal practice.²⁰ Although an eloquent appeal, there is no evidence that the NAACP followed this up with any concerted action.

The Urban League emphasized almost exclusively the employment side of the Negro dilemma in the cities. The League and its local chapters, operating in fifty-seven urban communities, placed their primary efforts on acquiring jobs for qualified Negroes, hopeful that by encouraging the cooperative efforts of white people it would lead toward

¹⁹W. Montague Cobb, "Medical Care and the Plight of the Negro," The Crisis, LIV (July, 1947), 201-11.

²⁰W. E. B. Du Bois, "Three Centuries of Discrimination," The Crisis, LIV (December, 1947), 362-64, 379-80. This article is a condensed version of the original report.

absorption of black people into broader community life. But such efforts were often stymied by the multifarious problems associated with modern city life. The League's efforts were also beset by internal strife and a lack of financial assistance from the Negro communities.²¹

Of all the urban limitations that faced the Negro, none drew more popular response than the housing issue. In fact, it remained at the center of this mass urban antipathy and easily overshadowed all other aspects of discontent put together. The resentment was climaxed politically by the white supported drive to abolish restrictive covenants. Housing expert Charles Abrams eloquently grasped the significance of the housing situation in the following statement:

The diseases of housing rival those in pathology. They include irritations over spatial, physical, and financial limitations. They are involved with neighborhood tensions, the shortcomings of neighborhood schools, transportation, and police protection; lack of proper playgrounds, parks, and open spaces; noise, smoke, smells, smog, drafts, dirt, insects, and vermin. The personal vexations of the housing problem are not only multiple and complex but they defy categorization.²²

Due to the recent research of a number of housing sociologists, Abram's opinion has become even more pertinent (mainly as a result of the persistence of this

²¹Arvarh E. Strickland, History of the Chicago Urban League (Urbana & London: University of Illinois Press, 1966), pp. 136-84.

²²Charles Abrams, The City is the Frontier (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1965), p. 40.

seemingly insoluble problem in the sixties and seventies). They point out that housing difficulties are both symptomatic of, and contributory to, many other problems of social adjustment. As Oscar Handlin concluded in his study of New York, the degree of success in coming to a quick solution of the housing question had far-reaching effects on many other areas such as employment, education, child delinquency, and the general health of the whole community. In a significant study of the ghetto, Kenneth Clark summed it up best:

Housing is no abstract social and political problem, but an extension of a man's personality. If the Negro has to identify with a rat infested tenement, his sense of personal inadequacy and inferiority, already aggravated by job discrimination and other forms of humiliation, is reinforced by the physical reality around him. If his home is clean and decent and even in some way beautiful, his sense of self is stronger. A house is a concrete symbol of what the person is worth.²³

Perhaps these sociological disclosures go a long way in explaining why popular outrage among Negroes during the forties increasingly asserted itself on the housing issue to the neglect of all others. The issue provided the Negro press and many other periodicals with a constant source of irritation. "Negro youth, hemmed in . . . and often denied adequate facilities," editorialized the Amsterdam News, "have been severely exposed to conditions

²³Kenneth B. Clark, Dark Ghetto (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1965), pp. 32-33.

which breed delinquency."²⁴ And these conditions existed not just in New York, but wherever a ghetto was found. The Baltimore Afro-American for example gave special attention to the effect of evictions on children. In one case, the paper focused on four children who were forced to sleep on the floor of their tenement apartment because their father, a refinery worker, was a month behind on the rent.²⁵

The Amsterdam News, overall the best of the Negro papers during this period, provided the most complete coverage of Negro housing in a crusading effort to make needed improvements. In October, 1946, the paper featured the deplorable living quarters of Negro veterans in Harlem, many of whom had taken up residence in condemned buildings (those having no lights, water, heat, or toilet facilities). In one tenement on Lenox Avenue for instance, two veterans and their mothers lived in two rooms on the second floor, utilizing a kerosene stove and lamps. They had tap water, but when it was turned on it ran down on the floor and walls of the apartment below. Another family in the same building rented a few unheated rooms for \$55.00 per month, and carried their water up the stairs in a pail. In addition to this, the entire building was dark, and plaster fell in piles from the slamming of doors.²⁶ Later in the

²⁴New York Amsterdam News, September 7, 1946.

²⁵Baltimore Afro-American, February 1, 1947.

²⁶New York Amsterdam News, October 19, 1946.

year, the paper discovered that a family of twelve--living in a tiny three-room apartment on West 134th Street--was to be evicted by the landlord because of violating the multiple dwelling law. Another large family in the area was living amidst the damage of a recent fire, and was subject to the same law.²⁷

An article in Opportunity gave further testimony to the deep human misery involved here. Dorothy B. Hamilton wrote of the violations (1,407) in some fifty-six buildings during 1946, which included broken plumbing, broken plaster, filth due to lack of painting, rusted fire escapes, low water pressure, rats and vermin, and many other adverse conditions.²⁸ Earl Brown commented on one such building in the predominantly Puerto Rican section of Harlem.

The city of New York must stand condemned for permitting any human being to live in this house. Certainly the city should condemn the house, demolish it and sow salt in the ground on which it stood. That would be the only way the plot of land could be purified. For huge rats as big as cats, vermin of every description infest the place. The dumbwaiter is filled with garbage from basement to roof; there is hardly a pane of glass in any windows in the house; no toilets flush; filth and germs and helpless humans have joined as one . . . and formed some kind of horrible death pact. . . .²⁹

²⁷Ibid., December 21, 1946.

²⁸Dorothy B. Hamilton, "The Problem of Substandard Housing," Opportunity, XXIV (October-December, 1946), 184-87.

²⁹New York Amsterdam News, August 16, 1947.

This fully exposed the absence of any effective controls against the slum lords in New York, but the pattern was pretty much the same in all urban areas. In Chicago, Joseph Bibb wrote an angry column about a judge viewing a run-down apartment building where garbage fermented under elevator shafts. The judge witnessed the horrible spectacle of dozens of people using a toilet that seldom flushed, rat-bitten babies, and vermin-infested kitchenettes. After seeing it, he placed a heavy fine upon the owners and operators, but as Bibb sadly pointed out, the people were still there.³⁰ Another example of such human neglect occurred a little later in Harlem, involving the trial of two landlords on charges of rent gouging and inferior housing conditions. Investigation revealed huge holes in the walls and ceilings, trash and garbage littered hallways, water leaking from pipes, rotten stairs, a poor sprinkle system, and fire escapes inaccessible to most tenants. Although the two were fined \$16,000 and sentenced to six months' imprisonment, many more like them escaped any prosecution.³¹

The Amsterdam News further revealed the seriousness of the housing shortage--while at the same time continuing its almost singleminded attention to the problem--by printing a field report from an Urban League official. The

³⁰Pittsburgh Courier, January 11, 1947.

³¹New York Amsterdam News, March 29, 1947.

report called attention to the small percentage of temporary housing accommodations earmarked for Negroes in 1946. For veterans alone, only 5,000 (less than 2 per cent) of 254,000 units were specified for blacks, and as late as October, 1946, only 1,600 were available for actual use. In addition to this shortcoming, the report revealed that only a small amount of private money had ever gone into construction of Negro housing. As an example, from 1939 through 1946 only 23,000 FHA insured units had been constructed for Negroes in the entire country, and while construction was carried out for Negroes in twenty cities, private builders gave priority to the higher income families.³² Furthermore, a city inspection of Harlem in early January 1947, revealed some incredible findings. Five houses on one block had no hall lighting, no maintenance workers, no clean lavatories or bathrooms, no central heating, no hot water; and worst of all, these places were infested with rats.³³ A News editorial on this situation foreshadowed a theme that recent sociologists have explored in depth.

The deplorable housing conditions in Harlem, as elsewhere, are a menace to public safety, a menace to public and private morals. These conditions act as incubators of crime, disease and immorality; they breed juvenile delinquency and keep up the high cost of hospital, court and prison budgets.

³²Ibid., February 8, 1947.

³³Baltimore Afro-American, January 18, 1947.

Low pressure areas drag down the higher economic conditions of other areas and other people; they sap the vitality of individuals, who, under better social conditions, could and would produce and consume more of the commodities of life. Jim Crow housing in New York City and State should and must go; the slum areas must be eradicated. Not even our relief families should be made to deteriorate further under their demoralizing influences.³⁴

Under such conditions, the tenants--even if they survived all these obstacles--lived in constant danger of death by fire. An editorial relating to this problem appeared in the Chicago Defender on January 18, 1947. Concerning three fires on the south side that killed eleven people, the paper decried the fact that Negro children and women were "dying like rats in fires in dilapidated homes unfit for human habitation. . . ." ³⁵ And again in New York, a devastating tenement fire on West 129th Street resulted in seven deaths, prompting an editorial cartoon in the News showing Negroes roasting over open fires. The accompanying story placed the blame on "overcrowding" and the "prejudice that fences in Negroes. . . ." ³⁶ In February, the Courier discussed the need for adequate housing in the cities, pointing out that 43.5 per cent of the total housing facilities in Pittsburgh were substandard and potential firetraps. This was true despite the fact that the

³⁴New York Amsterdam News, May 31, 1947.

³⁵Chicago Defender, January 18, 1947.

³⁶New York Amsterdam News, January 11, 1947.

low-rent housing program rehoused 12.3 per cent of Pittsburgh's Negro population by 1944.³⁷

Though the press concentrated on this dehumanizing aspect of housing, they also joined in the moderate drive spearheaded by the NAACP and Urban League to remove restrictive covenants. The press, however, looked upon this more as being helpful in the long run than as an immediate solution. Most of the other Negro papers seconded the position of the Amsterdam News, which looked upon their removal as "a tremendous step forward in making a real dent in the human problem of race relations," but not a solution to "all problems created by the already established ghettos. . . ."³⁸ The News did give its full support to the efforts of Robert Wagner, Jr., Commissioner of the New York Department of Housing and Buildings, in pushing low-cost public housing for low-income groups in the City. Wagner called for opening up and renovating many boarded-up houses, as well as rehousing persons displaced by renewal programs.³⁹

That the continuation of this practice further aggravated Negro resentment (as expressed in the press) was reflected in a column by Charles H. Houston on the

³⁷Pittsburgh Courier, January 15, 1947.

³⁸New York Amsterdam News, February 15, 1947.

³⁹Ibid., May 10, 1947.

District of Columbia Court of Appeals case upholding the covenants. He said:

The result is that in every city and every area where the colored population has any significance, it is surrounded by an invisible wall which crowds it into a ghetto, just as tight as the walled ghetto of Warsaw. And the fact that cases are popping up all over the country shows we face not simply the conspiratous efforts of a few prejudiced individuals, but a national policy. This policy of the courts upholding private restrictive covenants is really worse than legislation because a private covenant has no limits and can cover anything and everything to the end of time. . . .⁴⁰

Earl Brown extended this argument in an attack on the combination of mortgage companies, banks, and real estate firms which discriminated against Negroes. Brown angrily pointed out that these institutions made more money from "dilapidated flats in Harlem than from swank apartments on Park Avenue." They not only barred Negroes from residential sections beyond the central city areas, but also denied them low interest loans to make improvements on their own homes.⁴¹ The Courier argued that unless this practice was overcome, the Negro would find it extremely difficult to do much about other forms of segregation based upon the enforced ghetto.⁴² And further reaction to this situation came from Negro sociologist Horace

⁴⁰ Baltimore Afro-American, June 21, 1947.

⁴¹ New York Amsterdam News, July 12, 1947.

⁴² Pittsburgh Courier, June 7, 1947.

Cayton. He denounced a country that could build a bomb to destroy thousands but would not pass a housing bill.⁴³

Both The Crisis and Opportunity reflected their respective organizations' hopes that removal of the restrictive covenants would be a final solution to the Negro's housing shortage. Although this seemed to be a conservative approach, it did serve to keep the housing issue alive and pave the way toward a broader political solution to the Negro's total urban crisis. Actually, the NAACP simply intensified its long-fought battle against the covenants which had been going on since the thirties.⁴⁴ In an article for The Crisis, Robert C. Weaver captured the chief significance of the anti-covenant movement. Commenting on the depressed "economic islands" in the cities, he denounced policies that designed and developed communities for "specific income groups. . . ." Lamenting the fact that living space for Negroes was becoming increasingly confined, he called for immediate action in order to lessen the pressures of a growing Negro population. As he stated:

It is imperative that we establish some--in fact, as many as possible--areas of successful interracial living in Northern cities in the years immediately ahead, when racial patterns lasting a generation will be established. Widespread use

⁴³Ibid., June 21, 1947.

⁴⁴Clement E. Vose, Caucasion's Only (Berkeley & Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1969).

of occupancy standards is one of the ways to give permanency to these areas.⁴⁵

The Crisis kept up a steady vigil against the covenants and the mortgage-real-estate-financial combination; for example, a case in New York City involved charges by the federal government against just such a combination for willfully restricting minority groups to certain sections of the city by agreement and concerted action. This combination also made a number of surveys which showed the blocks in New York where Negroes and Spanish speaking persons resided, and then urged property owners in borderline sections not to allow these minority groups to move into their areas.⁴⁶

The Crisis also enthusiastically endorsed the work of the organization's local branches in their grass roots fight against the covenants. In Detroit, the magazine reported that 90 to 95 per cent of the homes were sub-standard, yet the occupants paid 30 to 50 per cent more than whites did for better housing. The Detroit branch found ten to twelve children often sleeping in one room, as well as whole families making one-half of a room serve as a home.⁴⁷

⁴⁵Robert C. Weaver, "A Tool for Democratic Housing," The Crisis, LIV (February, 1947), 47-48.

⁴⁶The Crisis, September, 1946, p. 265.

⁴⁷Ibid., October, 1947, pp. 308-9.

The most highly publicized incident involving the utilization of the covenant principle was the redevelopment project for New York City, Stuyvesant Town, a project of the Metropolitan Life Insurance Company. Negroes were barred from its housing, a development which The Crisis characterized as incredible in light of an already critical housing shortage. The project was made possible by the condemnation of land through eminent domain proceedings, the ceding of streets to the company by the city, and by a tax waiver for a period of twenty-five years in gross amount of some \$53,000,000. As a result of this use of public moneys and public powers, the magazine referred to it as a "major tragedy" if, "with what we have learned about the inherent evils of segregation, the housing pattern of the next three decades should be on such a basis. . . ." Furthermore, its extension to other cities would be "socially dismal," not only for Negroes but for communities as a whole.⁴⁸ As a later editorial inferred,

The restrictive covenant is not the only obstacle faced by Negroes who have the desire and the money to purchase homes away from warehouses and railroad tracks and undesirable small manufacturing areas in our urban centers, but if the Supreme Court should rule against the covenants, the colored people then could address themselves to the powerful combinations of real-estate-boards-bank-loan associations which constitute the Goliath in their path away from the ghetto evils of overcrowding, exploitation, crime, disease, and death.⁴⁹

⁴⁸Ibid., September, 1947, p. 265.

⁴⁹Ibid., November, 1947, p. 329.

Opportunity--though giving less attention to housing than the employment problem--for the most part endorsed the position of many white liberals, who spoke in terms of reducing racial tensions and promoting harmony through integrated housing projects. Taking its cue from a popular liberal attitude which called for ending the old segregated patterns in favor of a "higher objective" ("absorbing the minorities into all projects and all sections. . . ."), Opportunity endorsed some of the most enlightened white opinion on the housing issue.⁵⁰ This feeling was further highlighted in the following editorial comment--repeating an earlier position taken by the magazine:

The homes they get are most often those abandoned by the whites and so long as there is nothing better in sight no one, however strong his antipathy to contact with Negroes as neighbors, actual or potential, is likely to abandon what he has. Speculations, thus, concerning relief from the Negro population are conditioned upon the actual state of housing among the whole population. . . . Whatever plans might be devised for the betterment of American housing, to achieve lasting good they must comprehend the removal of artificial racial barriers, for if these persist, the problem of Negro housing will not be solved but merely transferred to another agency. And as long as there is a problem of Negro housing, the problem of American housing will remain unsolved.⁵¹

In reading this Negro opinion on the mortgage-real-estate-financial combination, it does seem to have overstressed the conspiratorial angle, but as Vose's book on

⁵⁰Charles Abrams, "Living In Harmony," Opportunity, XXIV (July-September, 1946), 116-18, 166-67.

⁵¹Opportunity, July-September, 1946, p. 115.

the covenants makes clear, this combination did, in reality, exist; and it exercised unusual powers in apparent and subtle ways--the 1948 covenant case (Shelley vs. Kraemer) being an excellent example.⁵² In this case, the United States Supreme Court ruled that while the covenants standing alone did not violate the Fourteenth Amendment, their enforcement constituted state action in the fullest and most complete sense of the phrase. While this seemed on the surface to solve the problem, the real estate interests soon found a way to offset the decision. The St. Louis Real Estate Exchange for example resorted to zoning the city (the pattern would be followed elsewhere) and forbidding any member of the exchange--under threat of expulsion--to sell property in the white zone to a Negro. Those breaking this rule could be easily identified and blacklisted by the exchange.⁵³

Despite the limited achievements of the anti-covenant movement, it remained at the center of the political thrust toward a decent housing program--one which bore fruit in 1949 with the passage of public housing legislation. In the long run, it proved to be one of the more outward signs of growing black aspirations in the cities. Paired with an emerging urban liberalism on the part of white people, it posed an articulate plea for

⁵²Shelley v. Kraemer, 334 U.S. 1 (1948).

⁵³Vose, Caucasians Only, p. 223.

urban reform. Moreover, the movement remained exclusively urban and foreshadowed a broader direct action appeal that reached a climax in the 1960's. In their book, From Plantation to Ghetto, sociologists August Meier and Elliott Rudwick pointed out the overall significance of these developments.

Involved was a steady radicalization of tactics and goals: from legalism to direct action, from participation by the middle and upper classes, from guaranteeing the protection of the Negro's Constitutional rights to securing economic policies that would insure the welfare of the culturally deprived in a technologically changing society, from appeal to the white American's sense of fair play to demands based upon the power in the black ghetto.⁵⁴

Indeed, the angry tone taken by the Negro press in the mid-1940's revealed a deepening urban frustration; and the fact that this cry for reform was delayed opened the way for a more direct action approach. After limited civil rights gains were attained from 1948 through 1954, it would build to a crescendo in the sixties--the Black Muslims being the most outstanding example. As C. Eric Lincoln revealed in his study of the Muslims, their appeal was largely to second and third generation slum dwellers, mostly to the young ones. For example, 80 per cent of their membership fell between the ages of seventeen and thirty-five, and was mostly male and lower class. In other words, they were the offspring of the generation

⁵⁴ August Meier and Elliott Rudwick, From Plantation to Ghetto (New York: Hill & Wang, 1966), p. 227.

that came of age before and during World War II--those blacks who had failed to realize any notable and lasting improvements in the ghetto. The Muslim's fundamental attraction involved identification with a source of power strong enough to overcome the domination of the white man.⁵⁵ In addition, the Muslims receive lessons on the glories of the Negro past and are constantly drilled on the necessity of a separate economic, political, and social community (since there is no healthy identification with their present inheritance). Moreover, they demanded a united black front through which Negro Americans (Afro-Americans now) would discover their identity and ties to a distinguished past, as well as providing outlets for their creativity. This united front concept also implied that the white man's economic domination enabled him to maintain life and death power over blacks. Therefore, the old Puritan virtues of work and thrift were to be encouraged anew.⁵⁶ And while the religious ideals were a vital part of the movement, this very forceful urban appeal must be given primary consideration if one is to understand the spontaneous growth of direct action in the cities from the forties to the present.

Building on the foundations laid by the Muslims, the more recently popular Black Power Movement of Stokely

⁵⁵C. Eric Lincoln, The Black Muslims (Boston: Beacon Press, 1961), p. 27.

⁵⁶Ibid., pp. 85-93.

Carmichael seems to have carried the resentment of the forties to its fullest expression. For indeed, the term itself expresses the deepest feelings of the black ghetto--feelings which had been building since the concentrated response of Negro intellectuals (more specifically, Carmichael is a real-life Bigger Thomas). This Black Power concept carries the direct action technique to its ultimate conclusion, and expresses the black identity crisis in its greatest extreme--a reaction totally different from the subservient one expected of the Negro by the white man. Here is the image of a strong, forceful black man with all the potential for revolution. This potential is strengthened by attachment to the desire of all black people in the world to overthrow Western colonialism. Africa provided the symbol for this awakening, but as the Kerner Report recently made clear, it was not an entirely new concept.

What is new about "Black Power" is phraseology rather than substance. Black Consciousness has roots in the organization of Negro churches and mutual benefit societies in the early days of the republic, the antebellum Negro convention movement, the Negro colonization schemes of the 19th century, Du Bois concept of Pan-Africanism, Booker T. Washington's advocacy of race pride, self-help, and racial solidarity, the Harlem Renaissance, and the Garvey movement. The decade after World War I--which saw the militant, race-proud "new Negro," the relatively widespread theory of retaliatory violence, and the high tide of the Negro--support-of-Negro business ideology--exhibits striking parallels with the 1960's.⁵⁷

⁵⁷Report of the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders (New York: Bantam Books, Inc., 1968), p. 234.

Stokely Carmichael, a product of the valleys of the big cities, who tried to transform the Negro's rural consciousness into an awareness of himself as an "urban man," assumed a most militant stance personally; however, he was really articulating further the urban black resentment of the 1940's. In so doing, he called for political power in the ghetto to be channeled in the direction of gaining more adequate employment, education, and housing for the black masses. And again, Malcolm X provided the best example of how this resentment could work to the Negro's advantage in mass society; for as he argued, all the civil rights legislation in the world would be useless unless Negroes eliminated the self-defeating concepts of themselves. In a speech shortly before his death, he made this point clear:

Our political philosophy will be black nationalism. Our economic and social philosophy will be black nationalism. . . . The political philosophy of black nationalism means: We must control the politics and the publicans of our community. . . . Whites can help us, but they can't join us. There can be no black-white unity until there is just some black unity. . . . We cannot think of uniting others, until after we have first united among ourselves.⁵⁸

Negroes then according to Malcolm had to transform the self-defeating concept of themselves from an obsequious, passive acquiescence to an active, proud self-assertion, or nothing would help them. And in order for the Negro to examine the depths and complexities of his own feelings,

⁵⁸George Breitman, ed., Malcolm X Speaks (New York: Grove Press, 1965), pp. 21-22.

Malcolm further urged a complete break with the dominant culture--either a separate nation in America, or failing that, a return to Africa. Malcolm was therefore attempting to fulfill what Richard Wright and other intellectuals groped after in vain during the 1940's--a role change. According to this view, the Negro must shed the role of a shuffling Sambo and cease appearing grateful for any small favor thrown his way by the white man. But unlike Bigger Thomas whose role change resulted in an act of murder, the Negro's self assertion (in reality) would be turned to constructive ends; however, in order for this black awareness to lead to a progressive fulfillment, it all depended upon the white man's complete acceptance of the Negro's new assumptions.

CHAPTER III

THE CITY AND THE AMERICAN CREED

Our cities today are full of dirt, slums, and traffic congestion. Every city has its blighted central districts where offices, factories, tenements, streets, parks, and transport facilities are in various stages of obsolescence. Why don't we do something about these conditions?¹

In the immediate post-World War II period, the attention and interest of most white liberals once again turned inward toward finding solutions to the problems at home. During the war years these men had devoted their time and energy almost exclusively to the victory effort. Now with the war out of the way, they began to see all around them the unfinished work of the pre-war era--the need for adequate jobs, decent housing, hospital care, and educational facilities. In nearly every case the problems were urban--urban because America was increasingly becoming a nation of large metropolitan areas. And almost without exception, each of these problems had either racial overtones or was exclusively a racial issue. The fact was clear and unmistakable that Negroes were the chief

¹Luther Gulick, "The Shame of the Cities--1946," The American City, LXI (December, 1946), 68.

victims of inadequate urban facilities and flagrant discrimination. As historian Richard O. Davies intimated, life in the mid-twentieth century was becoming increasingly technical, widening the gap between the predominantly black lower class and the rest of society.² It was this social, economic, and political gap which drew the attention of many liberals during the early Truman period.

In his brilliant study of American race relations, An American Dilemma, Gunnar Myrdal contributed immensely to an understanding of the emerging liberal effort to expose racial injustice and include the Negro in the mainstream of American life. Writing during the war, he asserted that "Americans of all national origins, classes, regions, creeds, and colors have something in common." They possess a "social ethos, a political creed"--one that embodies the principles of liberty, equality, justice, and fair opportunity for everybody--"the cement in the structure of this great and disparate nation." Myrdal further said that this "American Creed" is a vital part of the consciousness of everyone in the society--not from the standpoint of its actual implementation in social life, but as to "principles which ought to rule."³

²Richard O. Davies, Housing Reform During the Truman Administration (Columbia, Missouri: University of Missouri Press, 1966), p. 141.

³Myrdal, An American Dilemma, p. 3.

Myrdal was suggesting that the strains created in the white conscience--from depriving the Negro of the benefits of the Creed--exposed America's hypocrisy in posing as a "defender of the democratic faith"; when in truth, the nation denied all these benefits to its Negro citizens. The war then initiated a process of self-examination in which the white northerner awakened to the way he had been treating the Negro, thus opening his eyes to the blatant contradictions in the Creed.⁴ If Myrdal is correct in this assumption, then the war complemented the black intellectual response to this problem by bringing forth the humanitarian urge of many white Americans.

Myrdal's assumption that there was an emerging liberal concern over the ineffectiveness of the American Creed seemed to be confirmed in the findings of the National Committee on Segregation in the Nation's Capital. Formed in December 1946, the Committee represented the efforts of approximately ninety liberals who expressed a real concern about the widening class lines in the urban areas and its effect on Negroes. Some of the members of this Committee included Clarence Pickett, a director of the American Friends Service Committee; Marshall Field, millionaire Chicago newspaper owner; G. Bromley Oxnum, Bishop of the Methodist Episcopal Church; Hubert H.

⁴Ibid., pp. 1009-10.

Humphrey, Mayor of Minneapolis; Mrs. Franklin Roosevelt, and actress Helen Hayes.

After eighteen months of intensive research and hearings, the Committee issued in November, 1948 its final report. The report reflected a pouring out of the white conscience on a problem that had grown steadily worse in Washington since the 1870's. It stated that few Americans realized "what a shock Washington can be to visitors from abroad." Because Washington was supposed to serve as the "symbol of America," the gap between symbol and actual practice showed up dramatically here.⁵ The report featured photographs of one of the Negro ghetto districts with the Capitol and other government buildings in the background. When viewed in terms of the American Creed, such an existence for Negroes was disturbingly clear. As the report stated:

To the Negroes of Washington, their old slums are a kind of beachhead on their heritage as Americans. In shacks and huts they once were free to live anywhere in the city. But now they are driven back. . . . When their exclusion becomes a good business proposition, when it is capitalized in bonds and banks, when the American government drives them back, then their last chance is gone.⁶

The report carried this line of thought further with its charge that Washington dramatized the contradictions in

⁵Segregation in Washington, A Report of the National Committee on Segregation in the Nation's Capital, November, 1948, p. 7.

⁶Ibid., p. 47.

the Creed, for right here in the nation's capital Americans "have been building ghettos of the mind, body, and spirit. . . ." As the following words implied, the situation had deep and lasting implications for the Negro people:

The physical ghettos are the most obvious of all. They breed disease and crime, and give racism a base by the Lincoln Memorial. The ghettos of the mind have darker passages. They are built behind the walls of the segregated school system where children are taught not to know each other. They extend into the universities, into the minds of educators, doctors, and divines. The ghettos of the spirit are hardest to define, but their darkness is the worst. There are the dark places in a common humanity where men step on each other and take pride and profit in doing so. There are the ghettos that cramp the soul of the nation in the place of its pride, and lessen the meaning of its life. In the nation's capital, we must mean what we say, and give people of all races and colors an equal chance to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. . . .⁷

The progressive-New Deal impulses of many liberals were thus stimulated to action by the deplorable conditions of the nation's cities, highlighted by those of Washington, D.C. The necessity of preserving Negro rights and saving the cities converged until the two appeared to be inseparable. They merged in the liberal mind and it became difficult--if not impossible--to determine which attained priority. Both became goals of the post-war reform drive, most often appearing as part of an enlightened desire to broaden the base of democracy and make the American Creed a living reality instead of empty rhetoric. Jacques Ellul

⁷Ibid., p. 91.

refers to this impulse as part of an enduring urban concern that has manifested itself throughout history. As he said:

The city is the product of good will. There are none but the well-intentioned in the urban effort. Everyone works to enable men to live better. To give him better homes and leisure activities. To keep his life from being perpetually dreary. To get him to meet others and escape from his solitude. To keep from his eyes his humorless situation. To procure for him better and steadier work. To remove him from the rigors of the seasons. To protect him from men who might harm him, so he might no longer be subject to the devastations of robbers. . . . To insure him more comfort and what are called the joys of life, with all the guarantees of science, medicine, and pharmacology at his doorstep. To change the powerlessness of him who must watch those he loves die, unable to do a thing. . . .⁸

In his analysis of the urban reform impulse at the turn of the century, historian Samuel P. Hays contributed significantly to a deeper understanding of this urban effort referred to by Ellul. For Hays' findings throw light on the essence of urban reform not only during the Progressive Era which he was writing about, but also for the subsequent periods of reform since that time. As Hays points out, during the earlier reform period liberals and their business allies saw the city at the center of the capitalistic system. Together they came to the conclusion that ineffective and corrupt city government was detrimental to its future--hence, the move to adopt more efficient forms of government such as the commission and city manager plans.

⁸Ellul, The Meaning of the City, p. 60.

In their desire to improve conditions for all the city's inhabitants, and at the same time preserve the capitalistic system, these men were reaching out to bring under some kind of rational control "ever-wider realms" of urban life. Likewise, their more modern counterparts ultimately sought the same goal; however, the racial issue added a new and confusing dimension to the problem--one the earlier progressives did not have to worry about.⁹

Although their response appeared to be a much more restrained--and less personal--version than that of the Negro intellectuals, the white liberals did initiate and sustain a lengthy and compelling denunciation of urban living conditions. And while including in their dialogue many problems of urban living such as employment, health, sanitation, and transportation, the main thrust of their attack was directed against urban housing conditions. As a result of this development, some of the real problem areas were identified and white Americans began to make connections between poor housing and limited human achievements; between filthy surroundings and poor health; and between ghetto life and low cultural advancement.

Perhaps no single individual close to the urban scene during the early Truman period better exemplified this emerging liberal awareness than did housing expert

⁹Samuel P. Hays, "The Politics of Reform in Municipal Government in the Progressive Era," Pacific Northwest Quarterly, LV (October, 1964), 157-69.

Charles Abrams. Abrams had been connected with public housing since its inception in the 1930's, serving as head of the New York City Housing Authority during that time. He thus brought to the problem the experience and tradition of a twentieth-century progressivism, tempered by a perceptive understanding of the unusual demands of modern urban existence. His work provides a most significant link with that of Negro intellectuals such as Richard Wright and William Attaway--in that he raised the same disturbing questions they raised about the kind of life that faced urban Negroes. More importantly, Abrams anticipated a possible national program for better urban living conditions. In this regard he certainly fits Ellul's qualifications for the "well-intentioned" urban man.

In the summer of 1947, Abrams wrote a series of articles for Nation magazine which presented this liberal response in a clear and precise manner. Under the title, "Race Bias in Housing," Abrams spelled out the liberal viewpoint on housing and pointed toward a rapidly developing and changing outlook on the question of the Negro's need for some measure of urban improvements. Referring to the vast redevelopment plan of the Metropolitan Life Insurance Company for the heart of New York City, Stuyvesant Town, he deplored the fact that Negroes were to be excluded from its housing, calling it "subsidized discrimination." Abrams believed that nothing could be worse than the use of public moneys and public powers to establish

ghetto patterns in the cities. And even though protests against the project pressured Metropolitan into building a similar one in Harlem to house blacks, Abrams said this represented nothing but a continuation of the "separate but equal" doctrine for housing.¹⁰

These articles by Abrams further exposed the federal government's endorsement of race bias in all previous housing programs. During the New Deal the Public Works Administration, Home Owners' Loan Corporation, and the United States Housing Authority made concessions to local racial patterns. As for the Federal Housing Administration, it posed a special problem. Despite the totally public nature of this agency, it was a real practitioner of discrimination. FHA justified it on the grounds that stability of housing communities depended upon occupancy by the same social and racial classes--a viewpoint which Abrams directly opposed.¹¹

Two subsequent articles by Abrams discussed the white race's fear of "darkening" the neighborhood with Negro inhabitants. He said it was deeply rooted in their thinking and if allowed to continue would become increasingly difficult to undermine.¹² Abrams believed that open

¹⁰Charles Abrams, "The Great Hypocrisy," Nation, CLXV (July 19, 1947), 68.

¹¹Ibid., p. 69.

¹²Charles Abrams, "Will Interracial Housing Work?" Nation, CLXV (August 2, 1947), 122-24.

housing was the only answer. It would lead toward a more equitable distribution of minorities in all neighborhoods by spreading Negro families so evenly that their presence would hardly be noticed. Unless this was done, Abrams argued, the old ghettos would be replaced by new ones and the cycle begun all over again.¹³

Abram's position favoring open housing received especially strong support in the leading magazine on urban affairs, The American City. During the mid-1940's this magazine gave a great deal of attention to the effects of the Negro migration to northern cities. It tended to view the Negro ghetto as "an institution peculiar to the United States," and detrimental to the survival of the nation's cities. Regarding the restrictive covenant, The American City deemed it ironic that the ultimate decision that "millions of our citizens must continue to be brought up and live under these appalling conditions has been made primarily by a series of private agreements enforced by state and federal courts. . . ." ¹⁴

The magazine voiced an editorial opinion favoring a national housing policy in order to clear slums and blighted areas, and provide adequate housing for those Negroes who were living in unsafe and unsanitary

¹³Charles Abrams, "Our Chance for Democratic Housing," Nation, CLXV (August 16, 1947), 160-61.

¹⁴The American City, May, 1947, pp. 103-4.

accommodations.¹⁵ In a special study of Buffalo, New York by Charles Livermore, executive director of the City Board of Community Relations, it was revealed that an estimated 60 per cent of those immigrating to Buffalo during the war years--mostly seeking jobs in the war plants--were black; yet few sections of the city were opened to them. This "jamming of Negro families into narrow ghettos" sharply inflated property values, making it extremely profitable for property owners in these areas. Livermore pointed out that since these Negroes were shut out from suburban areas through covenants and gentlemen's agreements, they occupied housing for which there would have been no demand during ordinary times. The author's solutions called for the construction of unsegregated housing on vacant lands while the demand remained high. This would satisfy the immediate needs and prevent in the future the continuing practice of maintaining segregated islands in white neighborhoods.¹⁶

In addition to calling attention to the obvious fact that most cities lacked adequate housing, The American City showed a real understanding of another--and even more complex--problem; namely, the relocation of slum dwellers in adequate housing when evacuation was carried out. An

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 5.

¹⁶ Charles Livermore, "Segregation is Not the Answer," The American City, LXII (September, 1947), 115-16.

editorial on the question stated that unless displaced families were provided with decent housing elsewhere at a reasonable rent, they will "only be forced to move to other substandard areas of the city, and thus aid in the creation of new slums. . . ." ¹⁷ A subsequent article dealing with this issue in Detroit pointed out that since the very worst housing was usually occupied by Negroes, the displacement of these families was not just a housing problem but one of segregation. The extent of this segregation in Detroit was revealed every time Negroes attempted to move out of the central city areas into white neighborhoods. ¹⁸ This issue also came to the surface in New York during this time. Robert F. Wagner, Jr., Commissioner of Housing and Buildings, addressed himself to the problem and advocated expansion of cheap public housing for low income groups, as well as greater cooperation between owners, labor, tenants, and government. Speaking at a Harlem YMCA meeting in May 1947, Wagner suggested that "our big task is to make democracy work for all people, regardless of where they live or their race. . . ." To accomplish this, he said that all displaced persons must be relocated in decent housing in a "just and humane way. . . ." ¹⁹

¹⁷The American City, October, 1947, p. 5.

¹⁸Louis B. Wetmore and Edward J. Milne, "Rebuilding Our Cities--Is There Any Progress?" The American City, LXII (March, 1948), 120.

¹⁹New York Amsterdam News, May 10, 1947.

The need to fulfill Wagner's aims took on an urgency all its own in a number of instances involving the urban housing shortage, transforming the urban liberal response into a direct action approach. In Chicago during the summer of 1947 for example, a city housing project admitted eight black families and touched off a riot. Some whites marched into the area throwing stones at the Negro houses, and it required the efforts of over 1,000 policemen to disburse the mob and restore order. Nothing could have dramatized more clearly what Abrams referred to as the white race's "deeply rooted" fear of "darkening" the neighborhood than this incident, although it was occurring in other places on a less dramatic level. Homer A. Jack, a Unitarian minister and advocate of Abrams' thinking on housing, led the Chicago Council Against Racial and Religious Discrimination in an intensive effort to educate the people toward racial harmony. Jack urged a public-private coordinated housing program and full application of the nondiscriminatory policies of the Chicago Housing Authority. Pointing out that prejudice had been maintained by keeping people apart, he said that Chicago could be saved only by eliminating discrimination in all areas of city life.²⁰

Subsequent events proved Jack's position to be valid. In early October 1947, a tenement house fire in

²⁰Homer A. Jack, "Chicago Has One More Chance," Nation, CLXV (September 13, 1947), 251-52.

Chicago killed ten Negroes. The liberal Chicago Sun investigated and found that the owner was in the business of converting slum properties for Negro occupancy at a large profit. The Sun placed a picture of the mayor's residence on the front page next to a picture of one of the burned buildings. The paper found that the two-room apartments in the burned tenement had rented at \$78 per month. On the other hand, the apartments where the mayor lived rented for \$74.50.²¹

During the same period, a murder trial was held in Chicago that related directly to this housing problem. James Hickman, a Negro, was charged with the murder of his landlord--also a Negro. Hickman believed him to be responsible for a fire earlier in the year that resulted in the death of four of his seven children. The children had been crowded into a tiny attic cubicle, fourteen feet square, with one window and no water, toilet, gas, lights, heat, or fire escape.²² Hickman felt the landlord set the fire in order to get rid of the tenants in his substandard building and convert it into more profitable efficiency-type apartments. He managed to get off with manslaughter, and though it seemed to be a fair verdict, the real importance of the trial went beyond the courtroom itself. An

²¹Homer A. Jack, "The New Chicago Fires," Nation, CLXV (November 22, 1947), 551.

²²Ibid.

editorial in Nation lamented the children's deaths, stating that they were "victims of a social system which breeds hate out of housing shortages."²³ The Nation editorial spoke not just for Chicago, but for the entire industrial-urban complex of the nation. The housing situation was like a festering sore, and although the removal of restrictive covenants would have done away with the process of legalizing discrimination, it certainly offered no cure-all. The Negro would not have been able to move into all-white neighborhoods, and his growing numbers posed new threats to an already critical housing shortage.

In light of these developments in Chicago, it was only fitting that the most significant direct action response to the housing question occurred in that city--further dramatizing the pitfalls and anxieties of urban existence for the black man. This was the Report of the Mayor's Commission on Human Relations for 1946 in Chicago. Originally formed in 1943 as a response to the Detroit riot of that year, the Commission had since become interested in the underlying causes of such crises; and thus reveals the growing strength of the liberal response to urban needs. Its findings serve as an outstanding example of the intensity of discrimination found in a northern city, and are extremely important for an understanding of the immense

²³Nation, January 3, 1948, pp. 2-3.

task that faced President Truman's Committee on Civil Rights.

The report exposed the blatant discrimination in every area of urban life, particularly those of employment and housing. The Negro remained confined to semi-skilled and unskilled manufacturing jobs and the lower categories of service occupations, while employment agencies reported being deluged with job orders requesting whites only. Mirroring Abrams' warnings, the report called housing one of the "most dangerous and serious problems in human relations in our city. . . ." The physical shortage was coupled with the increased pressure of groups organized in protective property associations for the purpose of preserving socially pure communities, while racial hatred, bigotry, and intolerance were used openly during political campaigns.²⁴

Probing the housing question further, the report spoke of the "paranoid-like possessiveness" of suburban whites who refused to allow Negroes in their neighborhoods --referring to the latter as "invaders." This situation--combined with the inevitable overflow brought about by the critical housing shortage--created serious tensions in the local communities that threatened the security and welfare of the entire city.²⁵

²⁴Human Relations in Chicago, Report of the Mayor's Commission on Human Relations for 1946, Chicago, 1947, pp. 11-19, 80.

²⁵Ibid., p. 93.

Related to these two areas of discrimination in Chicago were other serious and far-reaching problems. Overcrowding in predominantly Negro districts was reflected in schools where buildings were the oldest and playground facilities the smallest in the city. The Commission also discovered a dire need for sanitation facilities and rat control, mainly because the building and health codes were inadequate and seldom enforced--a problem common in most northern cities. It did make note of the fact, however, that a municipal code for rat control had passed in the fall of 1946, and that gains were made in opening up public parks and playgrounds to all groups.²⁶

Health care was yet another area where discrimination existed to an alarming degree. From studies of sixteen Chicago hospitals, it was found that every one had segregated wards; moreover, there were no Negro interns in these hospitals nor clerks in the accompanying clinics. Only the Cook County Hospital drew praise from the Commission.²⁷ Several pages of the report gave attention to the "alarming number of violent acts against Negroes." There were thirty-five arson attacks on Negro property in 1946, and most of them came as a result of Negro families moving into white neighborhoods. There were also nineteen assaults by whites on individual Negroes. In addition,

²⁶Ibid., pp. 31-50.

²⁷Ibid., pp. 39-41.

discriminatory practices were common throughout the city in restaurants, taverns, hotels, and skating rinks.²⁸

The Chicago study is one excellent and revealing example of a local response to the continued mistreatment of Negro Americans, as well as statistical proof that with every passing year life for urban blacks became more and more grotesque. Indeed, the findings of this Commission bore a striking resemblance to the bleak picture painted in Native Son. The unrelentingly destitute and empty landscape of Richard Wright's fiction became the ugly reality of this report.

This growing concern over the Negro's urban plight and its meaning for the future preservation of America's cities attained its highest level of expression in an organization formed in early 1947--the Americans for Democratic Action (ADA). Growing out of the efforts to counter third party strength against the Truman Administration, while at the same time assuming a politically independent anti-Communist stance, the organization pursued a goal of creating a society in which each individual could enjoy the highest degree of personal liberty and economic security. Its attempts to make this goal a reality reflected fully the strains present in the liberal mind concerning the shortcomings of the American Creed.

²⁸Ibid., pp. 62, 71-76.

The ADA grew out of a World War II organization, the Union for Democratic Action (UDA). The UDA was devoted to a "two-front fight for democracy at home and abroad," and was headed by such liberals as Dr. Reinhold Niebuhr, Professor of Christian Ethics at Union Theological Seminary; Andrew J. Biemiller, a Congressman from Wisconsin; Freda Kirchwey, editor and publisher of Nation magazine; and Frank P. Graham, President of the University of North Carolina. During the war years, the UDA pushed a great many proposals in keeping with its "two-front" philosophy including: (1) giving small business a larger share of defense orders, (2) granting labor fair treatment, (3) formation of a Fair Employment Practices Commission, (4) promotion of democracy in European countries liberated from Nazi control, and (5) participation in a United Nations organization. All of these goals would promote the democratic way of life and enable the United States to serve as a model for the rest of the world.²⁹

Taking up the UDA goal of broadening democracy at home and abroad, the ADA found itself faced more and more with the unavoidable needs of urban America. Headed by such liberal Democrats as Leon Henderson, housing expert Wilson W. Wyatt, Franklin D. Roosevelt, Jr., Hubert

²⁹Summary of UDA Goals, June 1, 1945, Administrative Files, Union for Democratic Action Papers, Manuscripts Division of the Wisconsin State Historical Society. Hereafter cited as UDA Papers.

Humphrey, and Mrs. Eleanor Roosevelt, the organization embodied the best aspects of a twentieth-century progressive tradition. As Franklin D. Roosevelt, Jr., put it in a speech to the ADA organizing meeting in New Jersey:

We start with a great American liberal tradition--that deep current in American history which flows from the fountainhead of our Revolution down to the present day. . . . To this current belong the voices and achievements of Jefferson, Jackson and Lincoln; the spirit of the Grangers, the Populists, the Bull Moosers, the Wisconsin Progressives, the New Freedom of Wilson and the New Deal. The American liberal tradition does not rest on a set of dogmas or a blueprint. It is rather a spirit which each generation applies to the needs of its own time. It is based on a deep belief in the dignity of man, a faith in human reason and the power of free inquiry, a high sense of individual responsibility for one's self and one's neighbor, a conviction that the best society is one that enables the greatest number of its members to develop their potentialities to the utmost. And this spirit carries with it a willingness, a mandate to act through public instruments for the public good.³⁰

This "liberal tradition" Roosevelt spoke about revealed itself in the concerted efforts of the ADA on a national and local level to improve urban living conditions for all men. Furthermore, most of the ADA's leaders came to a genuine understanding of the close connection between meeting the Negro's urban needs and preserving the cities. Hubert Humphrey reflected this understanding in a letter to the United States Children's Bureau in which he called for

³⁰Address to Organizing Meeting of New Jersey Chapter of ADA, March 22, 1947, Franklin D. Roosevelt, Jr., Administrative Files, Americans for Democratic Action Papers, Manuscripts Division of the Wisconsin State Historical Society. Hereafter cited as ADA Papers.

"comprehensive housing legislation." Humphrey called attention to the nation's "six million urban dwellings unfit for children to live in," and said that it was criminal to allow them to grow up in such slums. Calling for enactment of the Taft-Ellender-Wagner Bill (a measure for increased public housing) as the very least the nation could do to meet the crisis, Humphrey put the matter in urgent terms with the following questions:

"What can democracy mean to the millions of children living in the slums? Will we, through continued inaction, permit them to grow up in such an environment?"³¹

In its efforts to find a solution for America's urban ills, the ADA quite naturally spent a great amount of time and energy on housing. To some extent its efforts simply repeated the UDA's wartime concern for adequate veterans' housing, but in the long run the ADA broadened this into an overall urban program for decent housing. In May 1947, for example, the ADA's Committee on Economic Stability issued an urban housing report which spelled out its position quite clearly. The report called for continuation of factory-built houses, construction--through public housing--of 500,000 rental units a year for low-income families, and passage of the Taft-Ellender-Wagner measure. The report concluded that these measures would go a long

³¹Humphrey to U.S. Children's Bureau, June 4, 1947, Administrative Files, ADA Papers.

way toward "eliminating our slums"; but even beyond this, it stated that "our cities must be rebuilt to provide light and air, parks and playgrounds, and to make certain that no area ever again degenerates into a slum."³²

On a local level--particularly in Philadelphia and Detroit--the ADA vigorously pushed for implementation of effective urban programs, thus opening the way for much wider support in the future. Pointing out that the "spiritual regeneration of our citizens and the physical reconditioning of our city are closely related," the Philadelphia plan supported a complete program including redevelopment of blighted areas, public low-rent housing, continuation of rent control, and safeguards for tenants against evictions and landlord code violations. All of these aims would be coordinated through city, state, and federal subsidies; and hopefully, would facilitate participation of minority group leadership at all levels of operation.³³

In Detroit, the ADA chapter carried out an intensive campaign during the 1947 city election in favor of the construction of 20,000 dwelling units a year, legal protection of tenants threatened with eviction, and more hospital, park, and playground facilities for the poor. And until these goals could be achieved, the Detroit ADA stressed

³²Report of the ADA Committee on Economic Stability, May 15, 1947, Public Relations Files, ADA Papers.

³³Philadelphia Program of the ADA, July 3, 1947, Chapter Files, ADA Papers.

the need for retention and improvement of federal rent control.³⁴

By late 1947, the ADA was moving toward a comprehensive program--based on the Philadelphia and Detroit plans--that would apply to all urban areas. Wilson Wyatt pointed out that it would require a total effort from all liberals interested in urban reform. As he stated, the task would not be easy.

Liberalism, now more than ever, has ceased to be a parlor game. It is a full-time battle. It must be given meaning in day-to-day political effort, in full citizenship, in the telling areas of intellectual debate. It required new and bold thinking as well as vigorous action. Even if we agree that government cannot be an innocent bystander in our economic life, we must still determine many of the concrete areas beyond housing, health, and education in which democracy can help to make human life more varied and serene for the great mass of people. Democracy must do more than provide a roof over every one's head or a new cellar to house the underprivileged. It must build homes that men and women will be proud to live in, giving them a deeper stake in the democratic system. Mass-produced, low-cost, factory-built housing--housing built for the mass market--can and should be the next great new industry in this country.³⁵

During the early months of 1948, the ADA stepped up its political activity and reaffirmed its commitment to applying progressive means toward the solution of new urban problems. In other words, the liberalism of the day would not just be an "echo of the New Deal," but instead a

³⁴Detroit Election Program of the ADA, September 10, 1947, Chapter Files, ADA Papers.

³⁵Draft of Wilson W. Wyatt's Program for Liberals, August 20, 1947, Public Relations Files, ADA Papers.

"widely dispersed and decentralized laboratory for democratic political action in the local neighborhood. . . ." ³⁶

This position was further clarified the following month at the ADA National Convention when the ADA dedicated itself to achieving high living standards and lasting peace through "democratic planning, enlargement of fundamental liberties and international cooperation." ³⁷

During the remaining months preceding the Democratic National Convention, ADA spokesmen concentrated their urban reform efforts for the most part on gaining a quick passage of the Taft-Ellender-Wagner Bill. In a letter to the Chairman of the House Banking and Currency Committee, ADA National Chairman Leon Henderson once again expressed the intense liberal concern for America's cities. He said:

ADA believes that decent housing is necessary to democratic principles and institutions. Slum clearance and the provision of decent housing for low-income families who cannot be served by private enterprise, therefore, are an essential part of the Taft-Ellender-Wagner Bill. A nation which recognizes the necessity of spending billions for the protection of democracy abroad cannot begrudge a few millions for a program which promises such large returns in the extension and preservation of democratic ideals at home. ³⁸

³⁶ Guidelines for the ADA, January 31, 1948, Convention Files, ADA Papers.

³⁷ Constitution and By Laws of the ADA, February 22, 1948, Convention Files, ADA Papers.

³⁸ Henderson to Jesse P. Walcott, Chairman of the House Banking and Currency Committee, April 24, 1948, Legislative Files, ADA Papers.

The most forthright statement on this measure came from ADA housing consultant George Edwards. Speaking to this same Committee, Edwards' comments served as a glowing testimonial to the power of the urban persuasion on the liberal mind during the 1940's. He started out by relating a visit he had recently made to one of the nation's largest cities--"where great numbers of human beings are living under intolerable conditions. . . ." The heart of the city, said Edwards, was a "rotting slum," and other parts "have begun to show signs of a familiar kind of blight--overcrowding, dirt, noise, smoke, and other diseases of cities that are affecting the health of thousands of its citizens. . . ." Edwards was speaking about his own home town of Detroit, Michigan. In the course of his statement, he spoke of the ADA investigations there which showed 70,000 families living doubled up, and 37,000 married veterans "holed up in rooms, cabins, shacks, trailer camps or poaching on friends or in-laws. . . ." Furthermore, in the entire metropolitan area there were only 300 habitable vacant dwellings and 300 houses for 107,000 families.³⁹ In his concluding remarks, Edwards called attention to the many years of urban neglect--pointing out that because of such neglect the cure "will be a costly one." Referring to the

³⁹Statement of George Edwards to House Banking and Currency Committee, May 17, 1948, Legislative Files, ADA Papers.

"promise of political freedom plus porkchops plus a decent place to live" as the "most dynamic positive revolutionary force at work in the world today," he urged America to make that promise a reality.⁴⁰

Indeed, the "promise" appeared to most liberals as both necessary and possible to achieve. And while those who vigorously pushed such action--particularly those associated with the ADA-- often appeared to be acting independent of, and sometimes at variance with the Truman Administration, it was certainly apparent that the problems of American Negroes and the nation's urban decline had a definite impact on the White House. That impact was best revealed in the President's appointment of a Committee on Civil Rights. The Committee's final report represented a vital and lasting response by the federal government to the nation's urban needs.

⁴⁰Ibid.

CHAPTER IV

TRUMAN'S APPEAL

The effects of the President's civil rights program cannot be evaluated yet in statistical terms. Its principal importance to date lies in the fact that for the first time in many years a majority of the American people are thinking hard--and doing things --about sore spots in the American democratic system. The discussion which the President's activities in this field have evoked is invaluable from an educational standpoint. . . . Communities all over the country are examining themselves in the light of the findings of the President's Committee and pressing for action . . . for minority groups . . . with which they were not previously concerned. Enlightened employers and labor unions are taking the words of the President and his Committee to heart and securing the employment of minority groups in ever greater numbers. Non-governmental organizations in every part of the country are urging local, regional, and national action to make the guarantees of the Constitution real for all. The jumping off point in their arguments in every case is the report of the Committee created by the President.¹

The national expression to America's urban dilemma came with President Truman's Committee on Civil Rights, created by Executive Order 9808 on December 5, 1946. This Committee highlighted the Truman Era's entire approach to the civil rights problem, exemplifying the collective black

¹Memorandum on Civil Liberties from Democratic National Committee to Philleo Nash, n.d., Philleo Nash Papers, Harry S. Truman Library. Hereafter cited as Nash Papers.

and white response. The action reflected the equalitarian impulse toward securing basic rights for all Americans within the democratic society, as well as a determination to make the cities safe places in which to live. In this latter sense, it was an extension of the earlier progressive desire to preserve urban capitalism through systematic processes. It marked the flowering of a liberal dialogue on the civil rights issue in general--a dialogue that had attained a new intensity because of its urban imperatives. Moreover, Richard Davies' study of public housing provides additional support for the assertion that Truman was genuinely sensitive to urban problems, and that he tended more and more to see the close connection between the preservation of America's cities and the capitalistic system itself. As Davies pointed out, Truman sought blanket application of New Deal reforms to new problems--mostly urban ones. And despite what seemed to be limited results in this area, Davies feels that Truman was the first President to "recognize clearly the importance of socially sound and economically healthy cities."²

It is truly a significant and immeasurable achievement that the main focus of Truman's urban concern was directed toward the Negro's economic, political, and social uplift. As state director of federal re-employment for Missouri during the early New Deal, Truman gained

²Davies, Housing Reform, pp. 141-42.

firsthand experience with the problems faced by Negroes in St. Louis and Kansas City. He thus tended to view the Negro's welfare as necessary for the preservation of urban capitalism--an assumption closely akin to the earlier progressive recognition of the laborer as a vital element in preserving the system.³ He expressed this feeling in a speech at the closing session of the NAACP Annual Conference in Washington on June 29, 1947. The President called for an end to discrimination in every phase of American life; and though not referring to urban conditions specifically, he put it in the guise of "basic American rights" by emphasizing the point that every man should have the right to a decent home, an education, adequate medical care, and a worthwhile job.⁴ Truman later summed up these thoughts--reflecting both the impulse toward extending democracy to Negro Americans and preserving the cities--in his explanation of why he created the Committee on Civil Rights. As he stated, the action was taken,

. . . because of the repeated anti-minority incidents immediately after the war in which homes were invaded, property was destroyed, and a number of innocent lives were taken. I wanted to get the facts behind these incidents of disregard for individual and group rights which were reported in the news with alarming regularity,

³For an excellent account of Truman's pro civil rights record as a U.S. Senator, see Richard M. Dalfiume, Desegregation of the U.S. Armed Forces, pp. 132-37. The author deals with Truman's growing assumption during the early forties that federal action on civil rights was a necessity.

⁴New York Times, June 30, 1947.

and to see that the law was strengthened, if necessary, so as to offer adequate protection and fair treatment to all our citizens.⁵

The Civil Rights Committee itself was composed of fifteen persons, two of them Negro. Various occupational types were represented among the whites, including Charles E. Wilson, President of General Electric and Chairman of the Committee; Charles Luckman, President of Lever Brothers; the Right Reverend Henry Knox Sherrill of Boston, Bishop of the Episcopal Church; Most Reverend Francis J. Haas, Catholic Bishop of Grand Rapids, Michigan and one-time head of FEPC; John S. Dickey, President of Dartmouth University; Frank Graham, President of the University of North Carolina; and Franklin D. Roosevelt, Jr., Chairman of the Housing Committee of the American Veterans' Committee. The two Negroes were Mrs. Sadie T. Alexander, Assistant City Solicitor of Philadelphia and Dr. Channing H. Tobias, a director of the Phelps-Stokes Fund, a foundation devoted to Negro education and general improvement of the race.

A glance at the above list will verify the close connection these people had with the cities. Therefore, it was not extraordinary that they tended to view a healthy urban life as essential to their own self-interest and the nation's. Economic historian Thomas Cochran asserts that in the post World War II period businessmen were feeling

⁵Harry S. Truman, Memoirs (2 vols.; Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Co., 1955), II, 180.

the unusual pressures of the Cold War, and were thus determined more than ever to make the American system adequately reflect its democratic ideals. Grounded in the uncertainties of a chaotic world, America's corporate and urban leaders were seeing a direct relationship between their own success and the social and economic welfare of the city; and through healthy cities, the unique American way would be articulated to the rest of the world.⁶

In a recent book on this subject, economist Morrell Heald has thrown additional light on the strength of this urban persuasion. Heald argues that one of the central facts--if not the central one--of modern industrial society since World War II is the increasing number of ways that corporate leaders are called upon to serve the public. More and more these efforts were directed toward solving the multifarious problems of the city. As the author stated:

By mid-century the fate of the large American city --now characteristically the center of an even larger metropolitan complex crosshatched by a host of intricately intertwined human, social, and economic relationships--had become a subject of widespread speculation and concern. Urban renovation and renewal programs, burgeoning welfare and relief needs, efforts to modernize and upgrade educational facilities, racial segregation and conflict, housing, highways, air and water

⁶Thomas Cochran, The American Business System, A Historical Perspective 1900-1955 (New York & Evanston: Harper & Row, 1957, original edition, Harvard University Press, 1957).

pollution, and a long list of other urban problems confronted and bewildered the nation.⁷

The urban concern Heald speaks about here was voiced by one of the Truman Committee's members in a magazine article. Charles Luckman talked about securing the rights and meeting all the needs of urban dwellers in order to preserve the cities. He said that if big business wanted to thrive, then it must help these urban people improve their lives; otherwise, there would be no future customers. Putting it strictly on a personal level, Luckman told of his experiences as a salesman in a Negro section of Chicago during the 1930's. The people wanted the soap he was selling, but simply could not afford it. He said he came to know and understand the underprivileged, and felt an obligation to help them.⁸

The Committee's final report, To Secure these Rights, was published in late October 1947, and in general was concerned with discrimination as a national problem. As Dartmouth professor Robert K. Carr, executive secretary of the Committee, stated:

There is no phase of American life in which the Negroes do not suffer discrimination. They are subject to the entire gamut of infringement on civil rights. Furthermore, the violations are

⁷Morrell Heald, The Social Responsibilities of Business: Company and Community, 1900-1960 (Cleveland: The Press of Case Western Reserve University, 1970), p. 227.

⁸Charles Luckman, "Civil Rights Means Good Business," Colliers, CXXI (January 17, 1948), 20-21.

closely interrelated; they interact upon each other, and each one contributes to the existence of the others. Any attempts to remedy the situation must therefore take the total picture into consideration.⁹

The report was based on intensive staff studies, information from interested private citizens, and a number of public hearings that covered many complex and controversial matters. For example, the Committee found police brutality disturbingly high in the South, while the poll tax was in use in Alabama, Arkansas, Mississippi, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, and Virginia.¹⁰ In addition to this, attention was called to the "longstanding techniques of terror and intimidation, in the face of which great courage is required of the Negro who tries to vote."¹¹

One more truly national aspect of discrimination revealed by the report concerned the armed services where the channels of opportunity were closed to Negroes. The Committee argued that this sordid situation offered a sad testimonial to a nation that prided itself on being a stronghold of democracy; moreover, "since equality in

⁹Memorandum from Robert K. Carr to President's Committee on Civil Rights, June 24, 1947, Records of the Civil Rights Committee, Truman Papers, Harry S. Truman Library. Hereafter cited as Records of the Civil Rights Committee. Carr was the author of a volume in the Cornell Studies in Civil Liberties series entitled, Federal Protection of Civil Rights: Quest for a Sword.

¹⁰To Secure these Rights, The Report of the President's Committee on Civil Rights (Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1947), pp. 26, 39.

¹¹Ibid., p. 40.

military service assumes great importance as a symbol of democratic goals, minorities have recorded it not only as a duty but as a right."¹²

But it was the considerable time and research given by the Committee to the detrimental affects of urban living on the Negro--and its meaning for white society--that is of special interest here. And once again, the nation's capital provided the focal point for the Committee's deliberations concerning this problem. On February 5, 1947, Charles E. Wilson, Robert Carr, and Committee member Morris L. Ernst talked in terms of securing favorable action for the District of Columbia and then extending it to other urban areas across the country. Carr even suggested that a special group get to work on a District of Columbia bill of rights to serve as a national model for urban reform. Committeeman Channing H. Tobias reflected the idealistic side of this position when he made reference to the great possibilities Washington offered in the area of promoting civil rights and making urban improvements. But instead, he sadly pointed out that the national capital stood as a "denial of everything that is included in the concept of democracy. . . ."¹³

¹²Ibid., p. 41.

¹³Records Relating to Meetings, Hearings, and Staff Interviews of the Committee, February 5, 1947, Records of the Civil Rights Committee.

From the start, the Committee hearings focused on Washington as the most glaring example of urban poverty, and then gradually reached out to expose these same conditions in the entire metropolitan North. The work of the National Committee on Segregation in the Nation's Capital provided the necessary statistical support, while at the same time adding a moral tone to the proceedings that further strengthened the Truman Committee's efforts to publicize the issue. Several times during the hearings different members of the Committee paid tribute to the efforts of the Washington organization, as well as other similar--but less well known--citizens' groups for giving the needed encouragement to the task ahead. A memorandum from the Truman Committee summed up the importance of such efforts by pointing out that--"a critical active citizens' body can encourage the Committee through the supporting and protecting influence of an organized public opinion to carry through the various implications of their detailed studies and findings. . . ." ¹⁴

Nearly eight pages of the final report were devoted to the various aspects of the urban question in Washington. Robert Carr returned to this issue time and time again during the hearings, always referring to Washington as a

¹⁴Memorandum on the National Committee on Segregation in the Nation's Capital, February 26, 1947, Records of the Civil Rights Committee.

"crucial area" if the country expected to deal with other northern cities in an effective way. As he pointed out, it was a border city in which the "patterns of the North and South meet," and what finally emerges here "will be of major significance in any attempt to rebuild the structure of group relations throughout the nation."¹⁵

Carr further spelled this problem out very clearly with an examination of Washington's Negro housing situation --most of which was substandard by any scale of measurement. He found that while the principal slum area of the District housed about 15 per cent of the whole population, 30 per cent of the black population lived there. In the southwest sections of the city, areas showing 90 per cent or more concentration of Negroes had slum characteristics; while in the southeast sections, the areas with the highest rate of crowding were occupied by low-income Negro families. Carr suggested that the reason for this was Washington's poor city development plans and the use of restrictive covenants and other discriminatory devices to contain Negroes within restricted areas, thus keeping them from spilling over into white residential sections. And while the city eliminated some substandard areas such as the alley dwellings, no provisions were made for housing the

¹⁵Memorandum from Robert K. Carr to President's Committee on Civil Rights, April 24, 1947, Records of the Civil Rights Committee.

many displaced families in the city. Furthermore, Carr pointed out that plans made by the National Capital Park and Planning Commission were threatening to displace more Negro neighborhoods for the purpose of building highways, parks, and public buildings.¹⁶

The Committee also gave attention to proposals on the District of Columbia offered by the Southern Conference for Human Welfare. This Conference represented for the most part the efforts of urban liberals in the South to establish a climate of racial harmony by breaking down Jim Crowism wherever it existed. The organization prepared a pamphlet in 1947 for consideration by the Truman Committee --calling for a program of new housing construction (30,000 new permanent dwellings in the Washington area), replacement of 44,000 deteriorated dwellings, encouragement of low-cost and industrial housing, elimination of the color classification from public housing applications, outlawing of restrictive covenants, and recognition that housing "means more than a place to live," and that new projects "be planned and oriented to contribute to a fuller life for all dwellers."¹⁷

¹⁶Memorandum from Robert K. Carr to President's Committee on Civil Rights, February 5, 1947, Records of the Civil Rights Committee.

¹⁷Pamphlet from the Southern Conference for Human Welfare to President's Committee on Civil Rights, "Toward Democracy in the Nation's Capital, Program of Action for 1947," Records of the Civil Rights Committee. Thomas A.

In the Truman Committee's final report, Washington drew severe criticisms in every major phase of city life. All public housing projects were segregated while whites locked themselves in Georgetown and other suburban sections (a trend that would continue in the years ahead). The report also noted that 70 per cent of the inhabitants of the city's three worst slum areas were Negro. Furthermore, the city hospitals maintained segregated wards and prevented Negro physicians from practicing there. In addition, almost all public accommodations and recreation facilities in the city were closed to Negroes.¹⁸

As the Truman Committee continued its discussion on urban topics, it became apparent that the entire urban North suffered from the same problems that were found in Washington. A staff statement--relying largely on the 1940 census--summed up the varied testimony on this subject, showing that practically "every important American city is now bulging with ill-housed Negro families whose condition is even more desperate than that of similarly-placed whites." Revealing how neighborhood agreements and social pressures worked against improving urban housing for Negroes, the

Krueger's book, And Promises to Keep: The Southern Conference for Human Welfare, 1938-1948, is an excellent study of this organization. The author contends that the Conference served as an alternative to southern conservatism until 1948, when the opposition labeled it a communist front.

¹⁸To Secure these Rights, pp. 87-95.

statement placed most of the blame on restrictive covenants. Echoing the editorial line of the Negro press (many of the Negro newspaper editorials and articles on this problem were made available to the Civil Rights Committee), it called for a concerted attack on restrictive covenants and FHA discriminatory practices, as well as legislation promoting the construction of "sorely needed housing," and also bearing in mind the "special needs of low-income groups regardless of race or religion."¹⁹

Lester Granger, executive secretary of the Urban League, gave additional testimony to the Committee from research gathered by the League--information that became the basis for the Committee's conclusions on the urban problem. Referring to the constant frustration of Negro urban dwellers in their search for equality, Granger denounced restrictive covenants, crowded living conditions, and discrimination in employment, health care, and public accommodations. He even hinted that the South was learning something about discrimination from the northern cities. He said:

It is ironic that housing discrimination practiced against Negroes has reached its point of greatest refinement in northern communities where Negroes have made their greatest employment progress at the same time. Only recently

¹⁹Staff Statement to President's Committee on Civil Rights, "Civil Liberties Implications of the Employment, Housing, and Social Adjustment Problems of Minorities," April 1, 1947, Records of the Civil Rights Committee.

have southern communities begun to borrow the northern idea, possibly because over many decades the South has become adjusted to its knowledge that there is an important proportion of its population which is Negro, that this Negro population must live somewhere, and that Negroes and whites can live side by side in the same cities and frequently in the same neighborhoods.²⁰

Granger's statement cut through the tangled legal aspects and got to the very heart of the problem--the interrelationship and interdependency of Negroes and whites in the cities. He concluded that the races not only can live side by side, but must if the urban areas are to survive in the future. The Committee discussions picked up this crucial theme and groped for a national solution. Franklin D. Roosevelt, Jr., for example, talked of how plentiful housing alone would render restrictive covenants innocuous. For as he argued, if there is an abundance of decent housing, the landlord is primarily anxious to fill it up and does not care whether he is renting to Jews, Gentiles, Negroes, or any other group because it is rent that matters most. But when you have a tremendous demand and not enough supply, "that is when he can become

²⁰Testimony of Lester B. Granger to President's Committee on Civil Rights, April 17, 1947, Philleo Nash Files, Truman Papers. Both the Nash files and papers are rich sources for materials concerning all minority groups. Though not often in the public spotlight, Philleo Nash represented the best strains of liberalism within the Truman Administration. He was an anthropologist and had once lived among the Klamath Indians in Oregon. He lectured at the University of Toronto from 1937 to 1944. Under the Truman Administration, he served as special assistant for minority problems.

restrictive, and he remembers that he has the restrictive covenant. . . ."21

Roosevelt's argument was reaffirmed in an extensive report to the Committee by the National Housing Agency. The report--presented in part by Robert Carr--pinpointed the various restrictive practices which limited an already sparse supply of housing for Negroes, and reduced the number of sites available for new construction. As the report concluded:

These practices contribute to racial segregation and the development of the ghetto, which constitutes a drain upon the economic, social, and spiritual resources of the entire community, often complicating further desirable urban rehabilitation and redevelopment and sorely needed community developments because there is no place for the displaced slum dwellers to go.²²

The Truman Committee also made use of a poll on racial matters that indicated both a need for, and potential white support in favor of, housing reform. The results on the housing question (Do you favor open housing?) that was asked of some New York City white residents revealed a great deal of support for abolishing residential segregation. These same whites favored such proposals as the elimination of discriminatory practices of both private

²¹Statement of Franklin D. Roosevelt, Jr., to President's Committee on Civil Rights, June 30, 1947, Records of the Civil Rights Committee.

²²Report on Housing from National Housing Agency to President's Committee on Civil Rights, n.d., Records of the Civil Rights Committee.

and public real estate and financial agencies, an increase in public housing construction, and educational programs to promote racial harmony on the housing issue as well as all areas of contact between the races in the urban areas.²³ That there was a real need for these proposals was substantiated by the 1940 census on housing, which the Truman Committee relied on during the hearings. The housing census showed that two of every three urban homes occupied by Negroes was substandard. These urban blacks occupied second, third, and fourth-hand houses that were ill-adapted to family size and incomes. Moreover, the housing census revealed that government policy greatly aggravated the situation by practicing discrimination in housing.²⁴

The Committee's discussions of the physical aspects of housing quite logically led to consideration of the adverse affects on the Negro's health from living in inferior housing. Robert Carr made a distinct connection between poor housing and health problems, pointing to the higher disease and mortality rates among urban Negroes when compared to whites. Carr noted that the Negro death rate from pellagra was more than fourteen times that of whites; more than eight times higher from syphilis; more than three times

²³Summary of Urban Housing Poll from Bureau of Applied Research of Columbia University to President's Committee on Civil Rights, n.d., Nash Papers.

²⁴Staff Memorandum to President's Committee on Civil Rights, May 8, 1947, Records of the Civil Rights Committee.

higher from pneumonia, tuberculosis, and influenza; and twice as high from whooping cough.²⁵ He believed that the Taft-Ellender-Wagner Bill offered a partial solution, for the addition of 500,000 public housing units would also mean more public buildings, health centers, clinics, playgrounds, and better school facilities to go along with them. The bill, Carr asserted, would "represent the greatest march into the Promised Land since the Exodus."²⁶

The Truman Committee also gave considerable attention to discriminatory employment practices in the urban areas with the help of special surveys in Kansas City, Philadelphia, St. Louis, San Francisco, Boston, Chicago, Cincinnati, Cleveland, and Detroit. The results showed the need for fair employment practices in light of widespread discrimination in hiring, firing, and conditions of employment. This also applied to labor unions, help wanted ads, job applications, and employment agencies. Unemployment for nonwhites more than tripled from July, 1945, until April, 1946, as compared to one and one-half for whites. For specific areas, the Negro unemployment rate was four times that of whites in St. Louis, three times more in Chicago, and twice as much in Pittsburgh, Philadelphia, and Baltimore.²⁷

²⁵ Staff Memorandum on Negro Health in the Urban Areas to President's Committee on Civil Rights, June 24, 1947, Records of the Civil Rights Committee.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ To Secure these Rights, pp. 56-62.

Certainly the final report of the Civil Rights Committee left little doubt that the city was asserting a very definite political influence, however subtle or hidden it may have appeared in the liberal political rhetoric of the time. As urban historian Blake McKelvey put it, urban problems had attained such depth that they would "never again be disengaged from the mainstream of the nation's history. . . ." ²⁸ Through the Truman Committee's hearings, the Administration offered what was perhaps the most forceful attempt of the entire post-war period to give proper executive guidance to the dialogue and goals representative of this urban problem. The Committee further reflected President Truman's own understanding--however he came to it--that the Negro's economic, political, and social uplift was a necessity if America was to fulfill its role as a model of democracy for all the world. As Truman stated in a letter commemorating the passage of the Thirteenth Amendment:

When President Lincoln signed the Joint Resolution proposing the Thirteenth Amendment, he set into motion the machinery which resulted in the abolition of chattel slavery. By this enactment the master and slave were both liberated; the master from the moral stain, the slave from the yoke of bondage. The cause of freedom is one we must all work for today and every day. As long as intolerance and bigotry exist, we must work to free intolerant men from the bonds of their own prejudice,

²⁸ Blake McKelvey, The Emergence of Metropolitan America 1915-1966 (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1968), p. 119.

and to free the victims of intolerance from the indignities which are too often heaped upon them.²⁹

The President also grasped the vital connection between the Negro's assimilation and acceptance into urban society on the basis of equality, and the preservation of that society. His most perceptive thoughts on this vital connection were revealed in the attention he gave to the needs of the Negro veteran. On a number of occasions, Truman bemoaned the fact that the veteran returned to a world in which "the tasks of finding a job and housing his family are complicated by whatever obstacles race prejudice may put in his way. . . ." The problems of the entire urban black community were telescoped in the veteran's plight, for as Truman said, "he returned to civilian life . . . with improved occupational skills and training," only to find that the opportunities "on the basis of individual merit and capability" simply did not exist.³⁰

Whatever President Truman's personal feelings and motives may have been regarding civil rights and the urban question, there is no doubt about the immediate political consequences surrounding his appointment of the Civil

²⁹Truman to R. R. Wright, Sr., Head of Citizens Committee in Commemoration of the 13th Amendment, January 31, 1947, PPF 30-A, Truman Papers.

³⁰Truman to L. D. Reddick, Curator of Schomburg Collection of the New York Public Library, February 4, 1947, PPF 30, Truman Papers. The Schomburg Collection is devoted exclusively to Negro literature and represents the largest collection of its kind in the United States.

Rights Committee--not to mention the long range significance of this action. As one historian suggested, Truman's appointment of the Committee assured him the liberal support he so desperately needed in the coming presidential campaign; while at the same time, it did not fully alienate southern support since the mere creation of the Committee did not commit the Administration to any specific legislative program.³¹ Whether or not the President's motives in this case were totally political is difficult--and probably always will be--to determine with any degree of accuracy. However, it is true that some men close to Truman made him aware of the political importance of civil rights and the urban issue, particularly following the Congressional election losses in 1946. In an assessment of the Negro vote in those elections, Philleo Nash indicated the Administration's awareness of its past importance, and more importantly, of its potential value in the future. Nash showed that the Negro vote had been largely responsible for Democratic party victories in New York, Chicago, Detroit, Philadelphia, Kansas City, St. Louis, Cleveland, Youngstown, and Dayton. In addition to these generalizations on the urban Negro vote, New York's Governor-elect Thomas E. Dewey carried no districts in Harlem.³²

³¹William C. Berman, The Politics of Civil Rights in the Truman Administration (Columbus, Ohio: Ohio State University Press, 1970), p. 52.

³²Memorandum from Philleo Nash to Presidential Assistant David K. Niles, November 12, 1946, Nash Papers.

Harry Truman most assuredly took this advice to heart during the 1948 campaign, because he made special appeals for the urban vote in these cities as well as many others. In a letter on the urban vote to presidential assistant George M. Elsey in early 1948, a New York political analyst stressed the opinion that the Republican party feared the effect of the minority vote, which explained why some Republicans had recently spoken in favor of FEPC, anti-poll tax, and anti-lynching legislation. The writer of this letter further believed that Truman's appointment of the Civil Rights Committee could well become the decisive factor in his bid for election in 1948. He therefore urged the President to follow up his action with a strong speech in favor of civil rights--a move which would "elevate him as the unquestioned leader of the nation in the civil rights field."³³

Following the issuance of the Civil Rights Committee's final report, the total political implications were revealed in a memorandum from George Elsey to Clark Clifford, special counsel to the President. Based on the most thorough observations of the political scene at the time, Elsey's note stated that "proper handling" of the civil rights issue could "virtually assure the election of the President by cutting the ground out from under Wallace and

³³Milton D. Stewart to George M. Elsey, January 19, 1948, Papers of George M. Elsey, Harry S. Truman Library. Hereafter cited as Elsey Papers.

gaining the enthusiastic support of the liberal and labor groups." The note further said that a strong speech by President Truman was particularly important while the news of the Civil Rights Committee was still fresh in the public mind. Elsey firmly believed that anything short of such action would appear to be a retreat. Regarding the problem of recalcitrant southerners, Elsey said that while there seemed to be little chance of appeasement, there was not much danger of losing the entire South. But assuming that there would be some defection from the South, Elsey pointed out that "it takes a considerable number of southern states to equal the importance of such states as New York, Pennsylvania, and Illinois. . . ." In conclusion, Elsey stated the Democratic party had everything to gain and nothing to lose from making the "most forthright and dramatic statement . . . and backing it with equally dramatic and forthright action."³⁴

This favorable assessment of Democratic prospects for the Negro vote seemed to be affirmed later by expressions of black discontent with the Republican party's reluctance to make a concerted commitment in favor of civil rights. Mildred Casey, a leader in the fight for Negro housing in Chicago, expressed the deepest strains of this

³⁴Memorandum from George M. Elsey to Clark Clifford, n.d., Elsey Papers. For an explanation of Clifford's important role in urging the President to deliver a civil rights message to Congress, see Berman, Politics of Civil Rights, pp. 80-82.

discontent in a speech at the Republican National Convention in June, 1948. Referring to the party as a "representative of the real estate lobby," she told the convention that the Negro would not forget that the Republican-controlled House of Representatives had "blocked all action on federal low rent housing. . . ." ³⁵ A post-election summary provided final and irrefutable substantiation of these earlier political assertions. It revealed that Truman's majorities in the Negro districts of Illinois, Ohio, and California exceeded the margin by which he carried the states. In Illinois, for example, he received 78.8 per cent of the vote in the Negro districts; 65 per cent in Harlem; and 90 per cent of the Negro vote in Philadelphia. ³⁶

Certainly these political considerations sharpen the total picture concerning the civil rights issue, but at the same time they reveal little with regard to the crucial importance of Truman's Committee to the future course of civil rights and urban reform. The Committee brought to fruition the growing body of assumptions most adequately defined as an urban persuasion. As Richard Davies again pointed out in his study of public housing, the real and lasting significance of the Administration's efforts was "that the basic problems were brought into

³⁵Memorandum on Civil Rights Speech at Republican National Convention, June 30, 1948, Nash Papers.

³⁶Memorandum from Philleo Nash to the President, November 6, 1948, Nash Papers.

sharp focus. . . ." ³⁷ But even beyond that, the Committee's proposals were designed to bring immediate improvement in the urban Negro's living conditions through such means as desegregation of public and private health facilities, removal of restrictive covenants, and a guarantee of equal access to public accommodations. ³⁸ And regardless of any shortcomings of the Committee's report, it pointed the way toward opening up a rapport between blacks and whites on the question of improving urban conditions, as well as revealing what many considered the heart of the crisis--a lack of "contact" between the races. This opinion was based in part on an experimental urban housing community where a majority of the white inhabitants who had previously expressed fears about mixed neighborhoods, changed their minds after living with Negroes for a few years. ³⁹

When President Truman followed the Committee's report with his February 1948 message to Congress, he made a definite commitment to the twin goals of securing Negro rights and preserving America's cities--a commitment that would provide the framework for every subsequent administration. Whether Truman or any of his advisers consciously recognized all of the implications of this

³⁷ Davies, Housing Reform, p. 141.

³⁸ To Secure these Rights, pp. 167-72.

³⁹ Ibid., p. 85.

commitment seems to be beside the point. The fact that there even was a Committee on Civil Rights gave new dignity to the civil rights cause in general, while more specifically summoning forth new and imaginative approaches to the problems posed by urban America.

CHAPTER V

A SOCIOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

While the black and white strains of an urban liberal impulse converged during the early Truman period, promising at the very least the removal of some of the obstacles in the path of the Negro's quest for inclusion in the larger American society; it became obvious to an increasing number of Americans who supported this quest that--because of the long delay--the task would be anything but easy. It was a relatively simple matter to pass some laws and revoke others, but to bring about any immediate improvement from such action was an entirely different matter. At the heart of the problem lay a serious gap between values and actions--one which showed up most clearly and tragically on the question of the Negro's place in American society. For the Negro was part of a culture which emphasized the success goal, but failed--and still does--to place equivalent emphasis upon the institutional means of attaining that goal. And while it is impossible to measure precisely the extent to which these values have been assimilated by Negroes, it

makes little difference when there is such an emphasis on the "moral" obligation of achieving success. Those who fail to attain it are judged by the dominant society to be personally at fault.

More than any other academic discipline, the field of sociology has laid the basis on an intellectual level for future studies of this problem. Some sociologists have shown that the gap between aspirations and opportunities--particularly in the large urban areas--has increased, thus subjecting the Negro to continual strains and enabling him to function only painfully at best. His appetite, therefore, not being controlled by a healthy public opinion, becomes disoriented--no longer recognizing proper limits. This state of deregulation is further intensified by passions being less disciplined, just when they need more disciplining. These conditions can lead--and indeed have led--to the attempt to bring about a greatly modified social structure. And though such a rebellion is often confined to small and relatively powerless elements in the community (Black Muslims, for instance), it can become endemic in a much larger part of the society, providing the potential for a revolution capable of reshaping both the normative and the social structure.

Recent studies on this "value concept" draw heavily on the work of nineteenth-century sociologist Emile Durkheim. His interest in a pervasive social condition known

as "anomie," raised many questions about the relationship of different classes within the same society. For Durkheim, anomie was a condition of deregulation and normlessness--characteristic of a society where there are socially structured barriers to the achievement of the culturally legitimate goal of "success" and "status." He saw these conditions endemic in societies where inequality of competitive arrangements and self-interested striving had been raised to social ends. Mere maximization of opportunities for the purpose of attaining success, he believed, would in no way end anomie--a vital point of difference between him and many modern sociologists who are interested in this problem. Durkheim's observations further led him to the conclusion that if the individual's needs require more than can be granted, or even something of a different sort, he will exist in a state of continual friction. As he stated:

Appetites, not being controlled by a public opinion become disoriented, no longer recognizing the limits proper to them. . . . With increased prosperity, desires increase. At the very moment when traditional rules have lost their authority, the richer prize offered these appetites stimulates them and makes them more exigent and impatient of control.¹

Over the past few years, Robert K. Merton has extended and modified Durkheim's concept, thus serving as a departure point for most of the recent discussion of this

¹Emile Durkheim, Suicide (Glencoe, Illinois: The Free Press, 1951), p. 253.

problem. Sociologist John Horton describes Merton's position as the "value free" concept--one which rests on acceptance of the success and self-interest ethic of the middle classes. As Horton suggests, this approach departs from Durkheim's in classifying a society as anomic where there are socially structured barriers to the achievement of the culturally legitimate goal of "success" and "status." Contrariwise, Durkheim saw these very "values" as the prime source of anomie.² Merton's thesis applies especially to the urban Negro's condition in the 1940's. As he pointed out:

Of those located in the lower reaches of the social structure, the culture makes incompatible demands. On the one hand, they are asked to orient their conduct toward the prospect of large wealth--"Every man a king," said Marden and Carnegie and Long--and on the other, they are largely denied effective opportunities to do so institutionally. The consequence of this--structural inconsistency--is a high rate of deviant behavior.³

A recent book by J. Milton Yinger has shown the pertinence of Merton's theory when applied to black lower-class conditions in the cities. Yinger argues that urbanization tends to raise the expectations well beyond the reach of the opportunity structure in the inner city, thereby contributing to the condition of anomie. Simply stated, Yinger is

²John Horton, "The Dehumanization of Anomie and Alienation," The British Journal of Sociology, XV (December, 1964), 283-300.

³Robert K. Merton, Social Theory and Social Structure (New York: The Free Press, 1947), p. 146.

implying that the increase in the gap between aspirations and opportunities nearly always seems greatest among blacks in large urban areas.⁴

Actually, Yinger's findings complemented an earlier classic on the Negro's urban status by black sociologist E. Franklin Frazier. Frazier's brilliant study examined the impact of urban life on the Negro family by giving attention to the fluid line separating the broken families of the lower class; the church-going families who attempted to advance themselves; and the various underworld dwellers. As Frazier revealed, homes in the central city most often contained all three types--further contributing to the disorganization of the black family in an urban setting.⁵ And in a work mentioned earlier, Oscar Handlin concluded that the instability of the family becomes a pervasive source of personal disorder. According to Handlin, the individual in such a situation futilely searches for the security of fixed relationships. The child or parent, deprived of outside control or any kind of discipline through solid ethnic institutions, and prevented--because of fears of color--from enjoying the values of the American community, becomes alienated and strikes back at the society which constantly

⁴J. Milton Yinger, Toward a Field Theory in Behavior, Personality, and Social Structure (New York: McGraw-Hill Co., 1965), p. 196.

⁵E. Franklin Frazier, The Negro Family in the United States (Chicago & London: University of Chicago Press, 1966, original edition, 1939), p. 225.

reminds him he is a stranger. Thus, with no supports to rely on, the Negro becomes an easy victim of disaster.⁶

The black urban problem is further complicated by the fact that the Negro's "inside world" does not stand forth as a "self-contained, self-generating, self-sustaining system or even subsystem with clear boundaries marking it off from the larger world around it." Elliot Liebow makes this assessment in his study of Washington street corner men. As he asserted, it is the continuous, intimate contact with the larger society--and the fact that this inner world is an integral part of that society --which makes it even more tragic for most urban blacks. On the one hand is the lure of the inaccessible world of the white middle class, while on the other is the oppressive situation that faces the urban black man. Standing alone,

armed with models who have failed, convinced of his own worthlessness, illiterate and unskilled, he enters marriage and the job market with the smell of failure all around him. Jobs are only intermittently available. They are almost always menial, sometimes hard, and never pay enough to support a family.⁷

As this study has indicated, such a world became crystal clear following World War II, perpetuating itself --as Kenneth Clark pointed out--through a "cumulative

⁶Handlin, The Newcomers, pp. 103-4.

⁷Elliot Liebow, Tally's Corner (Boston: Little, Brown & Co., 1967), p. 211.

ugliness, deterioration, and isolation." Yet, as Clark also suggested, the ghetto was not totally isolated. Bombarded by the mass media, there was a continuous communication of the values, aspirations, and life-style of the white-dominated society. The young people in the ghetto are aware from an early age that other young people are being educated to take their places in that larger world. Thus, they come to realize that their own fate is not the fate of mankind. They then regard their predicament as a consequence of personal disability or "imposed powerlessness," which all Negroes share. In short, it is this "other world" which serves to heighten the pervasive nature of the ghetto. As Clark stated:

The most concrete fact of the ghetto is its physical ugliness--the dirt, the filth, the neglect. In many stores walls are unpainted, windows are unwashed, service is poor, supplies meager. The parks are seedy with lack of care. The streets are crowded with the people and refuse. In all of Harlem there is no museum, no art gallery, no art school, no sustained "little theater" group; despite the stereotype of the Negro as artist, there are only five libraries--but hundreds of bars, hundreds of churches, and scores of fortune tellers. Everywhere there are signs of fantasy, decay, abandonment, and defeat. The only constant characteristic is a sense of inadequacy. People seem to have given up in the little things that are so often the symbol of the larger things.⁸

The work of Frazier, Handlin, Liebow, and Clark succeed in giving an urban meaning to Merton's "value free" concept, but do not go far enough in explaining the full

⁸Clark, Dark Ghetto, p. 27.

meaning of the relations between the dominant white and subjugated black elements of the society. For this purpose, the application of Marxian class theory--without accepting or rejecting it in an ideological sense--is most useful in carrying Merton's theory to a logical conclusion. The use of class theory in this context begins with the supposition that classes are social conflict groups, determined by their participation in, or exclusion from exercise of authority. In other words, every society is characterized by the coercion--whether outward or subtle--of some of its members by others. Such subordinate lines of stratification are particularly noticeable in an urban setting.

This Marxian conceptual model is therefore based on the assumption that certain structurally generated orientations of action proceed from positions of "domination" (members of the society seeking to maintain a social structure that conveys authority), and "subjection" (members seeking to change the system). The two interest groups are in a constant state of conflict--the (white) ruling group intent on preserving the ideology of its legitimate control, whereas the (black) subjected group constantly poses a threat to this ideology and the social structure it embodies. It is the interaction of these two interest groups--especially in the urban areas--that has drawn the attention of sociologists, and is therefore of real significance toward understanding the main theme of this study.

In applying this class model to the urban Negro's status, Dorothy L. Meier and Wendell Bell have expanded Merton's argument to a consideration of class identification in the lower class. These two authors see the solidification of lower-class values producing a distinct life style, thus presenting a barrier to voluntary action that would improve the individual's position in the larger society.⁹ And while the city does offer more avenues to mobility and achievement than rural areas, the urban Negro --seeing himself divorced from the main community--is not able to take advantage of this because he has acquired an intensified class consciousness as a result of internalizing his experiences.¹⁰ Herbert H. Hyman explains this "class internalizing" process further in referring to the lower class's "perception of reality." Although all individuals are governed by this "reality perception" to some extent, Hyman feels that the poor are more aware of their lack of opportunity than others; and thus limit their goals in light of such beliefs. To make matters worse, Hyman says that lower-class adults have directed their hopes toward their children's success, thereby

⁹Dorothy L. Meier and Wendell Bell, "Anomia and Differential Access to the Achievement of Life Goals," American Sociological Review, XXIV (April, 1959), 195.

¹⁰Lewis M. Killian and Charles M. Grigg, "Urbanism, Race, and Anomia," The American Journal of Sociology, LXVII (May, 1962), 661-65.

creating even greater mental strains when such aspirations are not realized.¹¹

Ephraim Harold Mizruchi's work reaffirms Hyman's contentions about the strength of lower-class beliefs; and further shows how its members are constantly measuring their own limitations against the middle-class attainment of success and continuous striving. This results in an easier rationalization for their failures; moreover, "getting ahead" for the lower class means "attaining limited rewards associated with work or, more simply, making their livings. . . ."¹² In addition, Mizruchi says that the lower class creates its own impediments to advancement with what he calls an "affiliation ceiling," or "remaining in one's place"--an antimobility sentiment which serves to "reduce the potential strains associated with striving for structurally unattainable goals."¹³ He also gives attention to the interconnection between class and minority status. As he stated:

We have suggested that the lower-class situation is similar to the minority group situation. Certain avenues to affiliation with members of higher-status groups are blocked, not only for the Negro and the

¹¹Herbert H. Hyman, "The Value Systems of Different Classes," in Class, Status, and Power, ed. by Reinhard Bendix and Seymour Lipset (New York: The Free Press, 1966), pp. 495-96.

¹²Ephraim Harold Mizruchi, Success and Opportunity (New York: The Free Press, 1964), p. 85.

¹³Ibid., pp. 116-17.

Jew in our society, for example, but for the lower-class Christian white as well. They are "damned if they do and damned if they don't. . . ." Like the minority-group member, the lower-class individual exposes himself to rejection and self-devaluation when he mingles with the middle classes in formal associations.¹⁴

Despite these tensions that characterize lower-class living, the fact cannot be ignored that its members still endure and go about their business in a normal way. Hyman Rodman explains this individual process of adjusting to their conditions as a "value stretch." By value stretch, he means that while a lower-class person is still influenced by the society's general values, he develops an alternative set to make up for his inability to fulfill those of the middle class. Rodman put it this way:

Without abandoning the values placed upon success, such as high income and high educational and occupational attainment, he stretches the values so that lesser degrees of success also become desirable. Without abandoning the values of marriage and legitimate childbirth he stretches these values so that a non-legal union and legally illegitimate children are also desirable. The result is that the members of the lower class, in many areas, have a wider range of values than others within the society. They share the general values of the society with members of other classes, but in addition they have stretched these values, which helps them to adjust to their deprived circumstances.¹⁵

It is quite likely that this value stretch serves as a safety-valve for the lower class against the pressures

¹⁴Ibid., pp. 112-13.

¹⁵Hyman Rodman, "The Lower-Class Value Stretch," Social Forces, XLII (December, 1963), 209.

of not attaining middle-class goals. This enables the individual to throw off his frustrations and accept things as they are no matter how deplorable. The end result of this process, says Rodman, "is a stretched value system with a low degree of commitment to all the values within the range, including the dominant middle-class values. . . ." According to Rodman then, a lower-class person is able to adapt to his circumstances "without certain more specific phenomena, such as deviance or revolution."¹⁶ For an explanation of this, Rodman made reference to his studies of the Caribbean lower class in which he found that such responses as mental disorders, juvenile delinquency, and rebellion did not occur with greater frequency because of the value stretch.¹⁷ Rodman sees this view as a middle position between two theoretical premises. As he said:

Those who hold that the basic values of the society are common to all classes are correct, because the members of the lower class do share these values with other members of society. Similarly, those who hold that the values differ from class to class are also correct, because the members of the lower class share values unique to themselves, in addition to sharing the general values of the society with others. The theories are both correct, both incomplete, and complementary to one another.¹⁸

Despite the lower class's apparent acceptance of a life style characterized by deprivation, it in no way implies that a sense of alienation and frustration does not

¹⁶ Ibid., pp. 209, 214.

¹⁷ Ibid., pp. 214-15.

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 210.

lie beneath the surface. The Black Muslim and Black Power responses to urban conditions, for example, showed definite tendencies toward normlessness and instability. Merton viewed a development like the Muslims as the "rebellion" adaptation to an anomic condition. Often confined to small and powerless elements in the community, this "rebellion" can spread and lead to the formation of subgroups that are alienated from the larger society, but unified within themselves.¹⁹ Merton expressed hope that this feeling of alienation could be transformed into an "innovative" adaptation, resulting in the formation of new institutionalized patterns of behavior. However, Merton seems to believe that there is no guarantee of any such progressive change unless education, employment, housing, and health programs are enacted for these black urban masses. Until these programs are achieved, alienation is likely to grow in the ghettos--alienation in this sense meaning any social condition that separates the individual from society to the extent that he is not free to realize his historical potentiality. As Merton argued, when the institutional system comes to be regarded as an obstacle to "legitimized goals," there is a likelihood for "rebellion"--as an adaptive response--to spread over a larger part of the deprived group or groups. For this to become organized political action, allegiance must be withdrawn from the dominant social

¹⁹Merton, Social Theory and Social Structure, p. 191.

structure and transferred to new groups possessed of what Merton calls a "new myth." The myth then serves the dual purpose of locating the source of frustrations in the social structure and presenting the alternative as the ideal.²⁰

It is true that the "rebellious" action Merton speaks about has been confined largely to restricted groups in the past such as the Muslims; however, there is no guarantee that the restraint displayed by most of the black community will be maintained indefinitely. If ghetto conditions persist, then it would be unrealistic to expect anything but violence. As a recent study of Negro life in Newark, New Jersey reveals, Negro life in that city grew progressively worse from the end of World War II to the present. The author gives special attention to the 1967 riot, referring to it as a "frustrated response--in terms of both repression and aggression--to seemingly impossible circumstances that have been increasing in our cities."²¹ In the 1960's, therefore, it appeared that the "adjusted response" Rodman referred to in his work had reached the breaking point. Alienation was revealed as a law of life in the ghetto, and it seemed to heighten the struggle between black and white, rich and poor.

²⁰ Ibid., p. 156.

²¹ Nathan Wright, Jr., Ready to Riot (New York, Chicago, & San Francisco: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1968), p. 11.

The real depth of this color and class division in the city has been clarified by a recent study of slum life in St. Louis for the years 1963 to 1966. Lee Rainwater's book, Behind Ghetto Walls: Black Family Life in a Federal Slum, is the result of an intensive study of Negro life in Pruitt-Igoe, a St. Louis public housing project. While the original purpose of the study was to learn what could be done by the government to develop more effective social welfare programs; it soon became concerned with questions involving changes in the socioeconomic system that would be necessary to eliminate the kinds of inequality peculiar to lower-class blacks. In the Pruitt-Igoe project then, one is able to see the full range of problems that the black urban dweller confronts every day.

Although generally accepting Rodman's "value stretch" concept, Rainwater's book leaves the impression that unless rapid improvements are made, feelings of permanent frustration will ensue with violent results. For example, in a questionnaire relating to their immediate feelings, Pruitt-Igoe tenants--almost without exception--spoke with the deepest regrets of the broken glass, trash, poor elevator service (not stopping on every floor), mice and roaches, and people defecating in halls. Also, women and children were constantly exposed to adverse living conditions--women being attacked in laundry rooms, halls, and on stairways; and children constantly hearing foul language and being

molested.²² And contrary to the popular belief that the poor have no concept of anything else besides such an existence, most of those interviewed expressed their desire for a good life centered around the solidarity of the family unit.²³

But instead of a solid family existence, this "unpredictable" and "deprived" world leads lower-class blacks into the strategy of making it on a day-to-day basis. Their experience teaches them "not to try too hard to achieve something they don't have, whether it be the longed-for companionship of a stable marital partner or the love of a girl or boyfriend. . . ." Such long range plans are unrealistic says Rainwater, "not only because the individual does not have the resources to feel secure about achieving them, but also because anything he may build up with the few resources he can pull together may be readily torn down. . . ." This point is particularly true because any lasting achievement requires two things the lower-class individual cannot count on: (1) continuing input, and (2) the cooperation of other people. With this kind of uncertainty, the individual builds relationships that result in "immediately expected rewards," such as the "seduction of a girl" or the

²²Lee Rainwater, Behind Ghetto Walls: Black Family Life in a Federal Slum (Chicago: Aldine Publishing Co., 1970), pp. 10-11.

²³Ibid., p. 54.

"immediate pleasures of marriage." The author further points out that with this "vulnerability of meaningful relationships," it hardly seems worthwhile to make heavy investments in marriage, school, and work.²⁴ What emerges here is a kind of ghetto conditioning that is tragically passed on to the children. As Rainwater said:

Because one must "go for yourself" and because he doesn't have enough to feel secure, strategies for survival encourage the individual to minimize or avoid the responsibilities he ought to assume according to the standards of the good life--to spouses, to children, to relatives, to others. This avoidance of responsibility is not just "selfishness" although it is often so regarded within his personal community when claims that should be acknowledged are not met. Rather, the individual knows that he cannot make good on many of the claims that others have the abstract right to make on him--the claim of a wife that he should be faithful, that he should not spend his time on the streets. One must be careful in the way he conducts himself with others so that he does not promise more than he can deliver. Unless, of course, he is embarking on a clear-cut exploitative strategy; then he may make promises to extract gains before the emptiness of the promise is revealed.²⁵

The author and his staff also probed what he called the "psychosomatic" aspects of the ghetto, and thus throws more light on the character of life in the inner city. Seeing the world as dangerous and chaotic, the lower-class person naturally feels that his body is likely to incapacitate him; thus, there is a sense of distance from bodily processes when he speaks of illness. In other words, "their tendency to think of themselves as of little account

²⁴Ibid., p. 74.

²⁵Ibid., p. 75.

is . . . readily generalized to their bodies. . . ." For the lower-class person, a body which does not function properly is equal to a "self with the same characteristics. . . ." And since this self-image is passed on to the children, it is perpetuated by each new generation. Rainwater referred to this as a "depressive adaptation." He said:

As they come increasingly to see themselves as slightly disabled by nervousness or excessive tiredness or some more specific physical illness, they seek to compensate by training their children to do their chores and by restricting their aspirations. They come to hope simply that each day will bring nothing worse than the previous day, and that when there is trouble, they will be able to cope with it. . . . This depressive style may be quiet, in which case the woman seeks mainly to mind her own business and to keep her children out of trouble. Or it may take a more agitated form, in which there remains still a quality of dramatic acting out and a more hostile orientation to those around her.²⁶

Rainwater maintains that this leads to a weak ghetto community structure, which "has not developed the same kinds of local control and surveillance that appeared in the white lower-class areas in the course of the odyssey of white immigrants to the city. . . ." This sustains an "anomic street system" in the ghetto community--one with unlimited possibilities for "manipulation" and "exploitation" of the members by one another. Moreover, the effect of this anomic condition on the family is a marital relationship in which neither partner can depend upon his or her spouse. Added to this unstable relationship is the

²⁶ Ibid., p. 109.

fact that the couple has more and more children because of poor access to contraceptive methods and little or no communication about family planning.²⁷

Rainwater's research also reveals the impact of rural values on ghetto dwellers. He found that these values were maintained even after an individual had lived for as long as thirty years in his new environment. And though the urban Negro on the surface appeared to be adjusted to the city, on a deeper level he offered no tradition of family solidarity. The fathers of nearly all of these families possessed signs of weakened masculinity, which of course is passed on to their children. As the author stated:

The black child's experience in the slums of the 1960's recapitulates the black man's experience in the New World, which has been most centrally shaming in stripping him of his power to make autonomous decisions in his own culture and society and preventing him from reconstructing a new society in which he was other than a slave or servant. . . . In his socialization he is forced continually to undergo experiences of being shamed, shamed by his own body which is hungry or hurts from the beatings he receives, shamed by those he loves who seem to want from him things he cannot possibly produce (and he cannot know they are simply not producible given his resources), and shamed by the caretakers of the community who are supposed to help him learn how to escape. His experience convinces him that he is too weak to meet the varying and conflicting demands made upon him by those who have the power to reward him with the things he values.²⁸

²⁷Ibid., pp. 166-67.

²⁸Ibid., p. 226.

Inside Ghetto Walls is indeed a significant book. It is a refined analysis of the earlier picture of Negro life portrayed in black novels, newspapers, and periodicals; and most recently, such works as Elliot Liebow's Tally's Corner, Kenneth Clark's Dark Ghetto, and Nathan Wright, Jr.'s Ready to Riot. Inside Ghetto Walls reaffirms and carries to a new empirical conception the full implications of black urban existence. In addition, Rainwater enlarged the various liberal perceptions this problem has summoned forth since the end of World War II --most notably, those coming from the Truman Committee on Civil Rights. But he reveals that the divisions along class and color lines are of a much more permanent nature than anyone previously realized. For "economic marginality" and "racial oppression" go hand in hand in the city and produce a weak community structure for lower-class Negroes--"weak and disorganized in its ability to provide constructive support and social control over its members. . . ." These twin facts of life in the ghetto have taught the Negro that the very best he can expect is "despised housing, an inferior diet, and few of the available pleasures" that other Americans both expect and usually enjoy.²⁹

But Rainwater carries this urban analysis even further. As he clearly shows, to be black not only means deprivation and frustration when measured against the rest of

²⁹Ibid., p. 371.

society, but also membership in a community of persons who think the worst of each other, who attack and manipulate one another in a desperate and meaningless way. Rainwater feels that their "real" condition is deteriorating further --that alienation will prevail over adaptive processes, simply because the latter will no longer provide even the smallest psychological relief.³⁰ If this assessment is accurate, the promising breakthrough achieved during the early Truman period will be greatly offset. Moreover, unless the goals first promoted by Truman's Civil Rights Committee are carried to conclusion, the chances for preserving America's cities may disappear.

³⁰Ibid., p. 387.

EPILOGUE

On February 2, 1948, President Harry S. Truman took a highly significant step toward meeting the desires and goals of those who supported civil rights for Negroes. By doing so, he highlighted the growing awareness of many Americans that the avenues to social, economic, and political equality were largely limited by a class structure not fully open at each level to all qualified men. President Truman delivered a message that day requesting legislative action along the lines suggested by his Committee on Civil Rights, a committee of vital importance to the future course of the Negro's struggle for fair and equal treatment. His request was symbolic of a response to the Negro's plight that had grown in intensity since the early 1940's, and indeed marked the culmination of that response.

The speech itself gave attention to the "serious gap between our ideals and some of our practices," and emphatically asserted that "this gap must be closed." He then asked Congress for legislation concerning the vital areas of voting rights, protection against lynching, and fair employment practices. He also asked for a permanent civil rights commission and a civil rights section in the

Justice Department.¹ And in an attempt to increase support as well as cool southern opposition, the President placed his civil rights program on a much broader plane. He connected civil rights with the nation's role in world affairs, thus giving it far more dignity than anyone had done before. He commented:

We in the United States are working in company with other nations who share our desire for enduring world peace and who believe with us that, above all, men must be free. We are striving to build a world family of nations--a world where men may live under governments of their own choosing and under laws of their own making. To be effective in these efforts, we must protect our civil rights so that by providing all our people with the maximum enjoyment of personal freedom and personal opportunity we shall be a stronger nation--stronger in our leadership, stronger in our moral position, stronger in the deeper satisfaction of a united citizenry.²

Several important developments followed as a result of Truman's action. A rapid-fire southern resentment grew in strength which helped shatter the urban northern and rural southern coalition of the Democratic party. To be sure, this was the first proposal of its kind since Charles Sumner's crusade for civil rights during Reconstruction, and in light of a pervasive tradition of "no progress" and preservation of Negro subjugation, such action sharply stunned the advocates of segregation. The repercussions were to go beyond the summer conventions, the election,

¹Congressional Record, 80th Cong., 2d Sess., 1948, Part 1, pp. 927-29.

²Ibid., p. 929.

and far into the future. John Redding, Director for the Democratic National Committee at this time, asserted that the message drove a wedge between northern and southern Democrats, thus costing the party dearly. Looking at it purely from a political perspective, he said it broke the "solid South" and deprived the party of a large source of its regular contributions.³

Most of the anti-civil rights oratory remained true to the southern tradition of irrational rhetoric when it involved the race question--a rhetoric that would intensify by convention time. For example, on February 3, Representative Arthur Winstead of Mississippi said that the majority of those on the President's Civil Rights Committee were "members of racial minority groups and most of the others of known racial views."⁴ Senator James Eastland, also of Mississippi, revealed the deepest fears of those southerners obsessed with the "imagined" Negro threat when he talked about the "pure blood of the South" being "mongrelized" by northern politicians "in order to secure political favors from Red mongrels in the slums of the great cities of the East and Middle West."⁵ Eastland's charge was carried further by Representative Tom Murray

³John M. Redding, Inside the Democratic Party (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1958), p. 132.

⁴Congressional Record, 80th Cong., 2d Sess., 1948, Part 1, p. 1008.

⁵Ibid., p. 1194.

of West Tennessee. Murray characterized the whole thing as a "conspiracy" leveled against the South. He challenged Charles E. Wilson, chairman of the Committee on Civil Rights, to tell who actually prepared the report to the President, inquiring whether any "real American" was invited to appear in opposition.⁶

The Truman Administration expected attacks from the ultra-segregationists. But there was also discontent reflected in the remarks of southern moderates such as Senators John Sparkman of Alabama and Richard Russell of Georgia, both of whom emphatically indicated their hopes that President Truman would step down as a candidate. Such moderate antagonism was further revealed at the Southern Governors' Conference in Wakulla Springs, Florida on February 6, four days after the message to Congress. The conference adopted a resolution in unyielding terms not to support any candidate for president or vice-president who advocated a civil rights program similar to the President's. The report stated:

Our inquiry has satisfied us that the virtually unanimous will of the people of the Southern States is to take every possible effective action within their power, not only to prevent the enactment of the proposed legislation but also to defeat those who have proposed it and any others advocating it.⁷

⁶Ibid., Part 2, p. 1703.

⁷Committee Report of the Southern Governors' Conference, Washington, March 13, 1948, p. 6.

This resentment was sustained on into the national convention and really exploded upon adoption of a civil rights plank. All the Mississippi delegation and one-half the Alabama delegation walked out of the convention hall, an action which led directly to the formation of the Dixiecrat party in Birmingham on states' rights principles. The southern recalcitrance was best revealed in the words of an obscure delegate from Clayton, Alabama, George C. Wallace, who defiantly shouted the nomination of Senator Russell as the vice-presidential candidate. Paraphrasing William Jennings Bryan in the old Populist tradition, Wallace said that Russell would prevent the South from being "crucified upon the cross of so-called civil rights. . . ." ⁸

Despite the threat of a Dixiecrat bolt and its political effects on the party, the liberal thrust of the Truman Administration maintained its momentum into the summer of 1948, reaching a crescendo during the platform battles at the convention. When a relatively unknown delegate from Minnesota, Minneapolis mayor Hubert H. Humphrey rose to speak in behalf of civil rights, it represented a brilliant articulation of a growing white liberal response to a dilemma which had plagued the nation for nearly a century. Humphrey's words also reflected the prevalent

⁸ Official Report, Democratic National Convention, p. 281.

attitudes of the ADA in its drive for domestic reform. Speaking for a growing minority position on civil rights, he told the delegates that America was 172 years late in dealing with the problem. He called for changing the platform to include praise for President Truman's courageous stand on civil rights, and more importantly, Congressional guarantee of "fundamental American principles" as the right of full and equal political participation, equal opportunity of employment, security of persons, and equal treatment in the armed services. His concluding remarks captured much of the spirit of the liberal rhetoric on this issue. He said:

Friends, delegates, I do not believe that there can be any compromise on the guarantees of the civil rights which we have mentioned in the minority report. In spite of my desire for unanimous agreement on the entire platform, in spite of my desire to see everybody here in unanimous agreement, there are some matters which I think must be stated clearly and without qualification. There can be no hedging. . . . I ask this Convention to say in unmistakable terms that we proudly hail and we courageously support our President and leader, Harry Truman, in his great fight for civil rights in America.⁹

Although the minority report was not adopted by the convention, Humphrey's dramatic move helped to bring a halt to the practice of shoving civil rights under the rug. His bold stroke brought the issue clearly into the open, reaffirming and elevating Truman's earlier stand. The majority committee plank that was adopted called for a lasting

⁹Ibid., pp. 191-92.

commitment to "eradicate all racial, religious, and economic discrimination," stating that "racial and religious minorities must have the right to work, the right to vote, the full and equal protection of the laws," and requested that Congress "exert its full authority to the limit of its constitutional powers to assure and protect these rights."¹⁰

Politically, the convention's developments probably enabled Truman to overcome opposition from two elements within the party--one among northern urban liberals who had grown disillusioned over the Congressional election losses in 1946; and the other a third party movement led by Henry Wallace, former Secretary of Agriculture and Vice-President under Franklin D. Roosevelt, and Secretary of Commerce under Truman. Wallace was fired from the latter position in September, 1946, for his outspoken opposition to the President's "get tough" policy toward Russia. He then became editor of the New Republic, using this liberal weekly magazine to attract discontented New Dealers and anyone opposed to the Administration's foreign policy.

Apparently, this northern urban revolt stemmed from the city leaders' fear of losing state and local offices in the coming election. John Redding called it a "panic move" on the part of these politicians who failed to realize that "dumping the President would be a confession of

¹⁰Ibid., p. 176.

failure of the Democratic administration. . . ."¹¹ Those leaders included such party stalwarts as Mayor William O'Dwyer of New York, Jacob Arvey of Chicago, and James Roosevelt of Los Angeles, all of whom made a concerted effort to draft General Dwight David Eisenhower for the presidency in hopes of strengthening the ticket. It is interesting that they continued their efforts until the eve of the convention despite Eisenhower's announcement in early July that he was not a candidate. He had made a similar one to Republicans earlier in the year.

The ADA also felt that Eisenhower could lift up the liberal cause. It was no secret that many New Dealers revolted at Truman's Babbitt-type reputation--a reputation he acquired as a result of membership in the American Legion and Masons, and experience as a haberdasher. This background contrasted sharply with that of the urbane Roosevelt, particularly at a time when memory of the latter was still very much alive. Through the efforts of such members as Leon Henderson, Hubert Humphrey, Franklin D. Roosevelt, Jr., Mrs. Eleanor Roosevelt, and others, the ADA turned into a spontaneous movement for the liberal cause. It continued its support for Eisenhower in the face of public opinion as revealed by the pollsters, nearly all of whom showed the President's declining

¹¹ Redding, Inside the Democratic Party, p. 148.

popularity. One poll in June 1948 revealed that only 26 per cent favored Truman against 53 per cent for Eisenhower.¹²

As for the Wallace movement, it offered what appeared to be a soothing balm to estranged liberals and Negroes. Wallace had acquired a reputation for opposing discrimination in all of its forms. In another sense, he was not a product of the cities and their political machines, but rather a fresh, new image--perhaps even the herald of a new order. At any rate, Wallace was helped by the fact that the seeds of liberal despair had been sown even before the death of Roosevelt, mainly over an apparent slowdown in the New Deal's reforming spirit. Roosevelt's death further multiplied a feeling of disquietude on the part of many liberals.¹³ After examining Negro attitudes on this question, Henry Lee Moon concluded that the colored vote was not a claim of the Democratic party despite Roosevelt's overwhelming black majority in the 1944 election. Moon referred to that as clearly a "Roosevelt" vote and not an endorsement of the party.¹⁴

The immediate reaction of the Negro community to the Wallace removal was indicative of one aspect of this

¹²Elmo Roper, You and Your Leaders (New York: William Morrow & Co., 1957), pp. 133-34.

¹³For an account of the Truman Administration's concern over Wallace's apparent strength in Harlem, see Berman, Politics of Civil Rights, pp. 90-92.

¹⁴Henry Lee Moon, Balance of Power: The Negro Vote (Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Co., Inc., 1948), pp. 197-99.

dispirited liberal feeling. The Pittsburgh Courier, a leading Negro newspaper, said the country had not seen nor heard the last of Wallace and that his "outspoken liberalism" was needed at a time when "so many men with their heads in the past surround the seats of the mighty."¹⁵ The Chicago Defender, perhaps the leading Negro paper, talked in terms of a "liberal purge" and called for the election of progressives--regardless of party--in order to force one of the major parties in a liberal direction.¹⁶ Another Negro paper, The Philadelphia Tribune, said that the removal of Henry Wallace cost the Negro his connection with the Administration.¹⁷

The formation of the Progressive Citizens of America in December 1946, was the most notable result of the Wallace ouster, and posed an apparent threat to the Democratic party's hold on the Negro vote. But as his campaign unfolded in 1947, it became clear that he was not in touch with the Negro's problems. He subordinated all issues to a concentrated attack on Truman's Russian policy, and by so doing, lost any chance he may have had of siphoning off a considerable portion of that vote. There were even some who questioned Wallace's pro-Negro attitudes. Lester Granger, head of the National Urban League for example,

¹⁵Pittsburgh Courier, September 28, 1946.

¹⁶Chicago Defender, September 28, 1946.

¹⁷The Philadelphia Tribune, October 1, 1946.

said that Wallace allowed the white landlords of the South to keep black tenant farmers from receiving parity checks when he was Secretary of Agriculture. Granger also charged that Wallace ignored the pleas of various Negro leaders who asked him to intervene over the execution of a Negro tenant convicted of killing his landlord in Virginia during this time.¹⁸

Despite these reservations about Wallace, Negro attraction to a third party remained a threat throughout 1947. Columnist P. L. Prattis of the Pittsburgh Courier reflected this sentiment when he urged Negroes to use the Wallace movement in making the other candidates "toe the line" on the race question.¹⁹ Walter White, while expressing doubts about a third party's chances in 1948, still felt the country needed one. He said:

We need a third party in this country because both of the major parties are afflicted with dry rot. If there were the ghost of a chance of a third party ticket getting on the ballot of each of the 48 states, that would be a horse of another color.²⁰

The Defender editorialized along the same line, commenting on the reactionary elements in both major parties--particularly the Republican party. But the paper cautioned all Negroes against "following left wingers up a blind.

¹⁸Pittsburgh Courier, December 27, 1947.

¹⁹Ibid., January 3, 1948.

²⁰Chicago Defender, January 24, 1948.

alley."²¹ The Courier stated that both major parties were "in a rut," and the Negro's hope lay in forcing them to a positive stance on civil rights.²² White further showed how this political concern of the Negro could help decide the election. The Negro, he said, held the balance of power in the industrialized areas which accounted for 223 electoral votes. He placed particular emphasis on Chicago, New York, Los Angeles, San Francisco, Detroit, and Philadelphia.²³

As the Democratic convention came to a close, President Truman had added civil rights to his arsenal of campaign issues against the Republican dominated Eightieth Congress--charging the opposition with obstructing progress rather than serving the needs of the American people. Those who supported the twin goals of securing civil rights for Negroes and preserving the cities could now rally to an Administration which made a definite commitment to solving these problems. On the other hand, the Republican party had failed to make a unified effort toward either goal, and were quite obviously vulnerable in the big cities during the election. Growing support from these urban areas seemed to favor Truman's chances for election in 1948.

²¹Ibid., January 3, 1948.

²²Pittsburgh Courier, January 10, 1948.

²³Walter White, "Will the Negro Elect Our Next President?" Colliers, CXXI (November 22, 1947), 26, 70-71.

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