

OBSERVER

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America on brink of black-white war

from JOYCE EGGINTON: New York, 6 April

MASSIVE violence and arson are continuing to shatter an increasing number of American cities in the wake of Martin Luther King's assassination.

Today this is a country on the brink of a war within itself, caught up in a tragedy which threatens to become too big for the forces of law to handle.

It is almost impossible to describe the fear which has gripped the whites of this country since Dr King was murdered. As radio and television news bulletins have been grinding out their hourly broadcasts of spreading disaster, there is the horrified realisation that nowhere is safe any more—not the city streets, not the shopping centres, the buses, the trains or subways, not even the privacy of home in comfortable white suburbs.

By early today riots had spread to 46 major towns. At least 16 people have been killed—nine in Chicago, four in Washington, two in Detroit and one in Tallahassee, Florida. Most were Negroes shot by police while looting.

Six bullets

In Washington and Chicago, where the riots were worst, hundreds were injured and thousands arrested.

Whole streets of small shops were destroyed and firemen who attempted to quell the flames were shot at by screaming Negro youths. At the height of the night's open battle, Chicago's Mayor Richard Daley stated wearily: 'I don't know what this is, but I hope to God it subsides.'

As well as the deep division of hatred between blacks and whites, Dr King's death has widened the split

within the civil rights movement. While leaders of the Negro establishment are making helpless appeals for Dr King's policy of non-violence, vociferous 'Black Power' exponents are urging their race to take up arms in a new civil war.

Lincoln O. Lynch, chairman of the United Black Front, declared: 'It is imperative to abandon the unconditional non-violent concept expounded by Dr King, and to adopt the position that for every Martin Luther King who falls 10 white racists will go down with him. There is no other way. America understands no other language.'

He and Stokely Carmichael, who yesterday urged Negroes to 'go home and get your guns,' are men who spurned Dr King's preaching of peace and brotherhood while he lived, but are using his death as the excuse for unleashing all their pent-

up hatred of whites. Whether the assassin is brought to justice has ceased to be material. He was a white and, in the eyes of Negro extremists, Dr King's blood is upon the entire white American race.

In an incident which has parallels in other places, a Negro youth in Minneapolis reacted to news of Dr King's death with the vow that he would go into the street and kill the first white person he met. A few minutes later he shot a fatal bullet into an innocent stranger, a white man 25 years old. Then he stood over the body and pumped five more bullets into it.

Women held

Yesterday many integrated schools in major cities were closed for fear of the warfare which might break out even among children.

Thousands of white people can-

celled plans for social engagements which would take them out after dark. Offices closed early and workers hurried home in the bright spring sunlight, emptying the streets long before dusk. It was typical of the unpredictable Negro reaction that in a busy shopping district of Boston about 1,000 Negro youths surrounded a supermarket, blocking all doorways and holding the white women shoppers captive for hours.

Some of the worst riots took place within a mile or two of the White House, bringing to President Johnson the realisation that the conflict on his own doorstep had become even more immediate than the war in Vietnam.

National Guardsmen have been alerted in many States, police leave has been cancelled, the military is standing by. Overnight every city has become a potential Little Rock, a Detroit or a Watts. Some of the fear is justified, some of it is based on rumour. In New York the story spread that there was uncontrolled violence on the subways, and thousands of white office workers sought other ways home. There were, in fact, no subway riots, but there might well have been, or still be—so tense is the atmosphere.

While New York's Negroes went on the rampage of looting and arson, Mayor John Lindsay bravely walked the streets of Harlem in the restless dead of night. He sought to calm and reassure Negroes there, and afterwards he reported finding 'people weeping, frustrated and lonely, terribly lost and let down.' One Negro woman, wandering aimlessly in Harlem, remarked: 'I shed all my tears, I do not know what we are going to do now.'

Even Dr King's closest associates

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On the brink of racial war

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are not sure what to do. The Rev Wyatt T. Walker, a young negro minister who helped to organise the sit-in and freedom rides across the South, said that Dr King's death 'is going to destroy the faith of a lot of people like myself. We have been saying for 10 or 12 years that time is running out. I think that maybe time has run out now.'

Fearful of what the next days and weeks may bring, political leaders across the country are issuing appeals for the populace to remain calm, coupled with belated promises of immediate legislation to improve the Negroes' lot. President Johnson—whose reaction to the explosive and eloquent US Riot Commission report, published last month, was conspicuous by its absence—is to make a televised address to a joint session of Congress on Monday evening. 'We must move with urgency and resolve,' he stated after Dr King's death—a rallying call which, for most Negroes, promises too little, too late.

The reaction of most whites is one of apprehension, hurt and shock. Many are concerned about the image of America overseas. 'I wonder what people in other countries think of us,' a shopkeeper in an all-white New York neighbourhood said. 'They must think we are a nation of monsters. We murder our finest leaders.'

An effort

The relatives of that other assassinated leader have been quick to rally to the aid of Dr King's family—a wife and four young children, living modestly on a minister's salary (he always declined to take any more) in his home town of Atlanta, Georgia. Senator Robert Kennedy chartered a plane for Mrs King to fly to Memphis and return with her husband's body. Mrs Jacqueline Kennedy sent an emotional message to the widow deploring 'the senseless act of hate which took away a man who lived on love and hope.'

Earlier, as news of Dr King's

assassination broke, Senator Robert Kennedy—campaigning in Indianapolis—urged a Negro rally not to react violently. 'I had a member of my family killed, and he too was killed by a white man,' he told the crowd in a quiet, breaking voice. 'So we have to make an effort to understand...'

Close friends of Dr King sensed that he had a premonition of death in Memphis—a premonition which he had expressed only once before, on the freedom march from Selma to Montgomery, Alabama, in 1965. His last public speech before a huge crowd of Memphis Negroes on the night before his assassination was prophetic.

'I do not know what will happen,' he said. 'We have some difficult days ahead. But it really does not matter with me now because I have been to the mountain top. Like anybody, I would like to live a long life. But I am not concerned about that now; I just want to do God's will.'

'He has allowed me to go to the mountain top, and I have looked over

that mountain top and seen the promised land. I may not go there at the same time as all of you. But I am happy tonight. I am not worried about anything because I have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord.'

His last words were almost drowned by applause. Within 24 hours he was dead. The man believed to be his assassin, who fired the fatal shot from a televised address to a joint session was described by the hotel landlady as a youngish white man with sandy hair and a silly smile on his face, a smile she would always remember.

Day of mourning

Across the United States, Sunday will be a day of national mourning for Martin Luther King. There will be silent marches in scores of cities, and all the flags will be at half mast.

Yet nothing could be a greater memorial to the man and his purpose than a continuation of the non-violence he preached. And in this disturbed and disillusioned nation, nothing could be further from reality.

WASHINGTON DC, APRIL, 1968



A young American soldier on patrol in a riot-damaged street in Washington.