

Another Warning to Whitey

by Larry L. King

Long before the ghetto riots in Los Angeles, Detroit, or Newark, I briefly edited a harmless, carefully bipartisan little magazine limited in readership to Members of Congress and their staff hirelings. Normally we confined our coverage to the more pretentious Capitol Hill whiskey drinks, or we published bloodless articles revealing what Senator Wingwoah most enjoyed for

*Prelude to Riot:
A View of Urban America
from the Bottom*
by Paul Jacobs
(Random House; \$5.95)

breakfast. In one issue, however, after Congress refused to vote a paltry sum to sustain a playground in one of the more cheerless stretches of Washington's black ghetto, we challenged legislators to a personal tour of the city's jammed and archaic orphanages, hospitals, jails, and other public institutions properly their responsibility. We offered free transportation and—since we were dealing with men who probably hope to go to Page One rather than Heaven when they die—friendly publicity. Not one legislator responded. *Nothing* happened—except that some few Hill bureaucrats decreed that we had forfeited any right to distribute our journal in the Senate Office Building, and one congressman growled over his post-work highball that "We're too busy answering mail from our home precincts to take any bleeding-heart tours."

I was, truthfully, prepared for this reception. Having once worked in Congress I knew that many members even of the District of Columbia Committee had never once visited a single school, court, playground, or slum street they were charged with governing. The House was equally insensitive last year when—amidst cheap jokes about ending this business "rat now"—it voted against appropriations to eradicate slum rodents, and then sharply slashed overall anti-poverty funds.

The brutal, unknowing indifference of the affluent white majority toward

the nation's minority poor is the subject of Paul Jacobs' angry and perceptive *Prelude to Riot*. His post-riot study of Los Angeles' incendiary Watts district indictments, among others, Mayor Sam Yorty, L.A. police, many city and state agencies, the Federal Housing Authority, private money-lenders, gouging ghetto merchants, Congress, the McCone Commission (appointed by former Governor Pat Brown to investigate the Watts riots) and—most of all—white, mindless, middle-class America.

Since Mr. Jacobs is a self-described "full-time radical" who has been jailed as a street demonstrator, certain well-fed and righteous sources may dismiss him as just another "bleeding-heart" (as he was sneeringly called to his face by a Los Angeles police official) or even as a communist sympathizer (as insinuated by one angry California school authority). Anyone not drained of all human juices, however, cannot lightly dismiss this disturbing book.

Though the author is not above a little pedagogic sermonizing and sometimes exhibits a nervous tendency to overcompensate for his less-thoughtful white brothers ("Because he was a Negro, I wanted him to see me as his friend, and so I was willing to submit to behavior from him that I wouldn't have accepted from a white man," Jacobs writes of a young black man who, without visible provocation, had spit in his face), he has effectively portrayed, through personal experiences and oceans of statistics, those conditions of physical decay and spiritual rot inflammatory to the ghetto temper. There is a kind of quiet, cumulative horror in this book and by the time one has reached Jacobs' concluding chapter one is ready to agree that "America is polarizing at a fantastic rate of speed" in its social and radical outlooks and that "the next riot may be started by whites, burning down the Negro sections of the cities."

Jacobs invaded the L.A. slums to try, within the limitations of his white skin and visitor's role, to develop some sense of the endless daily grind facing

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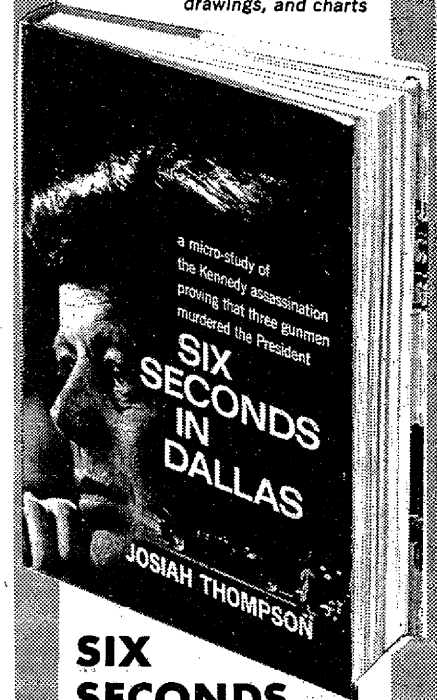
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