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Washington: The Strangled Cry

BY JAMES RESTON

WASHINGTON, April 6—The nation is appalled by the murder of Martin Luther King, but it is not appalled by the conditions of his people. It grieves for the man, but not for his cause. This is the curse and tragedy of America.

At least the extremists have kept their promises. The white racists said they would kill King, and the black racists said they would burn us to the ground. And we will not hear again that strangled cry or the rolling Biblical cadences of that magnificent voice; and the smoke is drifting this weekend through the cherry blossoms by the Jefferson Memorial, and the rest of us have not kept our promises to the Negro people.

The Real Crime

This is the real crime of which the assassination of Dr. King is but a hideous symbol. It will not be redeemed by the capture of the murderer. It can only be redeemed by the transformation of the lives of the Negro people, and even now America has not faced up to the cost of this historic debt.

When President Johnson's riot commission surveyed the results of the twenty major outbreaks of racial violence recently, it reached the conclusion that, despite all the turmoil

and the efforts of many concerned citizens and officials, the main reaction in the ghettos of Los Angeles, Detroit, Cleveland, New York and the other trouble spots was that "nothing much changed—one way or the other."

The Balanced Costs

When Gunnar Myrdal, the Swedish social philosopher who has followed the Negro problem in America for forty years, came back here recently, he felt that a great deal had changed for the better, but concluded that we had greatly underestimated the scope of the Negro problem. It would take a revolution in white attitudes, and twenty years, and "trillions of dollars" to deal with it, he felt, and the cost of not dealing with it would in the long run be much more.

The revolution in the white attitudes is probably the main thing. Neither the Congress nor the Court will solve it. President Johnson may appeal to the conscience of the nation and get another civil rights bill passed, and that may help some, but it is not the answer.

For the problem is not that the Congress is unrepresentative of the American people on the question of jobs and open housing for Negroes, but that it is representative. It may even be ahead of the people. Even if the war in Vietnam ended

this month, the chances of getting Congress in its present mood to transfer the war appropriations to the ghettos would be extremely remote, and the reasons are fairly clear.

Despite the progress of the last decade in Negro education, jobs and housing, the evidence is that a majority of the people are opposed to open housing and many other Negro demands for an equal and integrated society; and while Negro violence may produce concessions, it is rapidly reaching the point where it will produce fear and counterviolence that could reverse the trend toward a more compassionate society.

One of the many tragedies of Dr. King's death is that it has silenced the most eloquent Negro voice for nonviolent protest and tipped the balance toward the black nationalists who call for war and guns. Here the need is for the transformation of the attitudes of the young Negro militants and their hoodlum gangs. For there is a violent strain in the American people, and if the black arsonists carry the torch from the ghettos to the white communities, it will take more than troops to quell the bloody reaction.

At this critical point, therefore, the leaders of every community—all of them, black and white, labor and management,

educational and religious—will have to mobilize to deal with their local situation, whatever it is. The revolution will not be contained by Federal or state officials and appropriations alone, or even by local mayors, and fortunately we now have the beginnings of a structure for doing just this through the Urban Coalition led by John Gardner, the former Secretary of Health, Education and Welfare.

Further Polarization

For this is not a problem of government alone, but of American attitudes and assumptions. There was an outcry from some quarters when the President's riot commission suggested that we were moving toward two separate nations, one white and the other black. But the fact is that for most white and black people in the North, this is already a fact, and violence on both sides will merely hasten the process.

The evidence is plain before our eyes. For violence, while it can destroy indifference, which is the curse of the moderate middle class, cannot choose. It destroys good as well as evil. Brute coercion and savage intolerance of the Negro must be destroyed, but they cannot be burned away by raging demons intoxicated with illusion.