

[Editorial]



In front of the Chicago Hilton Hotel, August, 1968

Repression and The Chicago Eight

CHICAGO—CITADEL OF GANGSTER LAW and spiritual dead-center of the country—increasingly projects itself as the symbol of America in crisis. In August 1968 it was a perfect setting for the lessons of the Democratic Convention: that the political system is rigged beyond reform; that the armed guardians of the law are there to break the heads of the unarmed conscience of the nation; that brute force reigns at home as well as abroad.

Now, a little over a year later, the grim auguries of 1968 are borne out. Chicago is again the metaphor; the trial of the Conspiracy Eight shatters the remaining illusions of a rule of law and an independent judiciary, and marks a major advance in a new wave of repression which in numbers jailed (draft resisters and protesters) and killed (blacks, especially Black Panthers) already dwarfs anything seen in the McCarthy era.

The eight radical organizers and sometime participants in last year's Chicago demonstrations stand accused of conspiracy (in effect, intent to advocate participation in an assembly of three or more persons where violence could occur). The law is all-encompassing and ridden with ambiguity. A discussion by long distance telephone about a demonstration that does not even occur can be made into a felony. It is almost a casebook model of that totalitarianism of language which is the precursor to a totalitarianism in fact. The ostensible crime,

denuded of its verbiage: "conspiring" to intend to demonstrate. The penalty: ten years in prison.

It is a fitting irony that the anti-riot act under which the Eight stand accused, and under which public dissent is in effect outlawed, was enacted in memorium to Martin Luther King, having been attached as a rider to the open housing law passed by Congress following his assassination. King himself would have been subject to anti-riot act imprisonment many times over for his organizing of civil disobedience demonstrations in pursuit of open housing. He could easily have been convicted, since the government admits to having tapped his phone up to the time of his death, in the interests of "national security."

The focal figure in the Chicago trial is Bobby Seale, last to be picked off of the three extraordinary leaders who launched the Black Panther Party and who have, one by one, become victims of political repression. Seale has been kidnapped, framed, and denied the counsel of his choice; he has been physically abused for trying to make his own defense, and finally, sentenced to four years for refusing to submit in silence to the attempt to railroad him to prison. He is already the man without rights in the police state.

It is no accident, of course, that it is the black defendant in Chicago who is cast in this symbolic role. As W. H. Ferry,

former scholar in residence at the Center for the Study of Democratic Institutions, has pointed out: "Twenty-one Panthers have been murdered by the police in the past year, and there would have been more stir in whitetown if twenty-one panthers in America's zoos had been wantonly slain. . . . The police are the effective rulers of blacktown today. Theirs is the paraphernalia of any police state. . . . Frame-ups, impossible bail, unwarranted searches and seizures and similar practices are commonplaces of ghetto life. Helicopters hover over black neighborhoods, searchlights glaring and bullhorns shouting, and the protests of citizens go unheeded. . . . Perhaps the most insidious practice of all is the infiltration by police of black institutions and organizations. The use of informers, the setting of friend against friend, child against parent, is the most familiar of police state strategies. . . ."

IN THE TRIAL OF THE CHICAGO EIGHT we see the extension of the police state from the black community, where it has taken root, to the white, middle-class culture of dissent. It is wholly indicative that 23 of the first 42 prosecution witnesses in Judge Hoffman's courtroom were police spies, undercover agents, or paid informants.

The Chicago trial is a political warning which is echoed loudly in Washington and in local seats of power across America. A national pattern of establishment confrontation and repression is falling into place. Its instruments are already totalitarian in scope: the Executive Branch's assertion of a right to wiretap without legislative control or judicial review; the Secret Service's directive that local police agencies should spy on those who voice "imaginary grievances"; the New York police force's admitted use of agents to pose as students and infiltrate high school classrooms; the University of California Regents' attempt to prevent Angela Davis from teaching.

Seen in this context, the actions of Judge Julius Hoffman in Chicago are not an aberration but rather a vintage expression of the form that repression will take. Behind Hoffman is the low-grade vituperation of the Vice President and the cold determination of the Attorney General, Nixon's closest advisor and the architect of the new order.

Men like Hoffman and Agnew seem laughable at first, but only because the political dominance of the crypto-fascist right is new to this generation. There should be no mistake on this point: the right is in power. And its strategy, plainly asserted, is to bludgeon and then silence the left and ultimately all the forces of change in America. It will stop at nothing to achieve those purposes, if for no other reason than because it has no other options.

However comfortable he may find it, Nixon is in a box forged by his predecessors. For eight years, liberal administrations made promises of a better future, offering a dream of new opportunities for America. Now the war on poverty is lost. The cities are approaching a terminal condition, the environment itself is being systematically poisoned, and whatever slim funds might have once been available to remedy these ills have been eaten up by the fight against the Viet-Nam inflation. The administrations of Kennedy and Johnson failed to deliver on change at home, and led the nation instead into imperial war abroad.

The liberal attempt to co-opt the awakening aspirations of the '60s without upsetting the status quo ended by stirring deep currents of hope that became currents of opposition and

frustration as the promises and programs revealed themselves to be little more than a public relations con. The broadening movements for black liberation at home and troop withdrawal abroad are increasingly difficult to tame with tokenism. The elusive light at the end of the tunnel is now recognized as a will o' the wisp that guides us ever more deeply into the morass.

On the other hand, the masses of "middle America" have come to feel cheated by a treadmill life of price inflation, debt and insecurity—and what seemed to be open-handed government giveaways to other groups. Ironically, *they* were the ones who were taken in by the rhetoric of the liberal administrations (according to Newsweek, 44 per cent of white Americans think that blacks have a better chance than whites to get well-paying jobs, compared to 21 per cent who think their chances are worse), and now they attribute their problems to being short-changed. Meanwhile, the ethos of hard work and respect for authority which was supposed to make it all worthwhile is being threatened by a war that could evoke no patriotism and a generation of youth skeptical about the old ways.

Faced with these rising forces of disenchantment—radical opposition and conservative resentment—the new administration has to come up with a strong positive program. The only positive program available to Nixon, hemmed in as he is by the failures of the past and the limits of the system, is to satisfy the silent majority with a scapegoat-enemy, thus pandering to conservative fears, reaffirming that tattered American Legion dignity, and mobilizing a new force to crush the movement for change.

THE NIXON ADMINISTRATION has thus launched a double strategy of polarization and repression, the inflammatory speech and the political trial. They are going for the jugular of the most exposed and active forces on the left, while launching a full-scale ideological assault on all opposition which is calculated to immobilize and intimidate the more moderate and tentative proponents of change. For example, those Moratorium marchers whose opposition to the war remains one simply of sensibility and impression, those who have not digested the political implications of the stand they have taken, may well be tempted under fire to accept the reprieve of dissociation from the radicals, and step out of the way. As the McCarthy era showed, this is the Achilles heel of the movement for change. As layers of broad support are stripped away, the radicals who have led the opposition are to be picked off one by one (as in Chicago today) and the country is to be pacified.

People must see the drama of repression being enacted in Chicago for what it is: a threat, not just symbolic, but direct and real, to their own political and social aspirations. They must be prepared to take the risks of active struggle against the repression *now*, while the forces of resistance are strongest. For the tide of repression will not abate of its own accord. Unity is the first principle; solidarity with the Chicago Eight, with the Panther leaders, and with other radicals singled out for attack, is an essential priority. The legal framework of a police state is already on the books. The will to enforce it has been demonstrated. The Reichstag has already been burned. The Chicago trial must be stopped and the defendants freed. Like Viet-Nam, Chicago is a war of example.—THE EDITORS