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The Roots of Violence

The Federal Bureau of Investigation has presented a very mixed bag in its report to the President on the summer's rioting in nine of the country's cities. It is reassuring to have the Bureau conclude that the riots were not basically racial and were not organized on a national basis or planned by any single organization. But there are so many infusions of nonsense in the report as to call into serious question the validity of its central observations.

"While in the cities racial tensions were a contributing factor, none of the nine occurrences was a 'race riot' in the accepted meaning of the phrase," the FBI declares. "They were not riots of Negroes against whites or whites against Negroes. And they were not a direct outgrowth of conventional civil rights protest." This much has seemed obvious from the outset. Mr. Hoover's assertion of it affords a powerful rebuttal to repeated allegations by the Republican presidential and vice presidential nominees that the Administration encouraged crime and disorder in the streets by its sympathy for civil rights legislation and demonstrations.

Skepticism regarding the FBI's objectivity is invited, however, by the report's indiscriminating defense of local police forces and its apparent assumption that all policemen are always incapable of any unkindness. It is quite true that in the summer's riots the police generally behaved with exemplary courage, discipline and restraint; the country owes much to the calm control with which they faced extreme provocation. But it does not necessarily follow from this that individual officers have not on occasion been overbearing and even brutal.

The FBI report, for instance, dismisses the killing of a 15-year-old Negro boy in Harlem by a police lieutenant with unqualified acceptance of the officer's statement that the boy had a knife in his hand and without any consideration of conflicting stories by other eyewitnesses. This hardly has the ring of detached inquiry.

More distressing still is the FBI's complete endorsement of local police resistance to the idea of a civilian complaint review board. Fear of criticism by such a board, the FBI says, "virtually paralyzed" the police in cities where it existed. We think this does a grave injustice to the police. It intimates that they shirk their duty in order to avoid accusations of improper conduct. We cannot accept so sweeping and unsupported an indictment.

In addition to all this, the report affords expression to an old Hoover crotchet that juvenile courts mollicoddle young offenders by putting their emphasis on rehabilitation rather than retri-

bution and by withholding the identity of youths brought before them. "The youth, and particularly the lawless youth," the report declares, "are well informed of their privileged condition, including the fact that in many jurisdictions they cannot be punished at all by fine or imprisonment but only by probation or reform schools. This has encouraged the growth of contempt for the law." We think this is as foolish as it is irrelevant.

Perhaps the most useful aspect of the FBI report is its recognition that many of the areas from which rioting sprang "are characterized by miserable living conditions, houses that are badly maintained, many of them rat infested and filthy. Drunkenness, narcotics peddling, prostitution, idleness, frustration, poverty and lack of opportunity are part of the atmosphere many people in these districts breathe." We should think that correction of these conditions would be a great deal more conducive to the preservation of law and order than punishment of the youth who are its victims—and who are already convinced that the whole community has its hand raised against them.