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The FBI's Report On Recent Riots

THE PRESIDENT requested the Federal Bureau of Investigation to ascertain the extent to which recent riots have been "systematic," i.e., to ascertain the extent to which they were planned by regimented agents of disorder. Meaning the Communists, and the more militant of the civil rights groups. J. Edgar Hoover's report to the President, published last week, was to the effect that the riots that made this such a hot summer were not in fact "race riots," and not consciously motivated or directed by the Communists or by the gung-ho civil rights groups.

Hoover's agents reported that the riots, which consumed lives, limbs, and property, were primarily the result of material causes. To be sure, Hoover pointed out, there were here and there individual agitators whose ties to the Communist Party or to the Black Nationalists are a matter of public record, who urged the rioters on. But there is no evidence, said Hoover, that these folk instigated the riots. Rather they opportunized on them—saw them, moved in, and did their best to make them as extensive and bloody as possible. The headlines, accordingly, proclaimed the Communists and the Negro ideologues as blameless.

There can be no question about Hoover's probity in the handling of facts. But Hoover cannot be expected to pass judgment on the effects upon the public morale of the strident exhortation of recent years to anarchic resentments. Hoover did not attempt an inquiry into whether the Communists and the civil rights militants had prepared the more restless elements of the community to believe in the essential rightness of taking the law into their own hands and simply smashing up the joint, as a way of manifesting their general dissatisfaction with life.

It is the context of this failure of Hoover that one reads with surprise his altogether tangential observations concerning the riots' causes: "The social and economic conditions in which much of the Negro population lives are demoralizing. While steady improvement of these substandard conditions is a long term goal, the anti-poverty program as well as other private and public activities should result in steady improvement."

That is what is known in the academic world as a "value judgment." That is to say, the position may or may not be true, it is merely one that happens to appeal to the person who puts it forward. The so-called anti-poverty program means, in the public ear, the program instigated in recent months by President Lyndon Johnson.

To put forward a casual relation between poverty and the explosions that took place in the United States during this summer is to dally with premises that are alien to the general line of thought of the Director of the Federal Bureau of Investigation.

There are nations in the world infinitely poorer than the seamiest sections of Rochester and Harlem and Philadelphia, where people have not recently rioted: for instance, Bombay. There are areas in the world resplendent in wealth where the masses have recently rioted: for instance, Tokyo. Riots are, as a general rule, an expression of the chronic discontent of the soul, a manifestation of everyman's latent rowdyism. Riots are uncorrelated to material poverty.

In 19th century America the average person did not dream of such material advantages as are enjoyed by the typical rioter in Philadelphia, yet it was rare when mobs broke store windows and lugged away other people's properties, overturned vehicles and threw bricks on the defenders of the public order.

It is commonly asserted that the so-called revolution of rising expectations makes relative poverty a problem that absolute poverty never was. There may be some truth here. But if so it is too elusive even for the super-sleuths of the FBI.

The FBI has defended itself over the years by reminding its critics that it is exclusively a fact-finding agency, not an agency that draws social or political conclusions from the work it engages in. It is under the circumstances disturbing to read in the current report what amounts to the FBI's indorsement of a controversial anti-poverty program. Disturbing because it suggests a move towards the politicalization of the FBI by the executive branch.

J. Edgar Hoover is a hero to most Americans, including myself, because he has over the years resisted any effort to corrupt the integrity of his arm. The report on the riots was under the circumstances disquieting.

We must hope that future attempts to conscript the FBI as a propaganda agent for the administration's policies will fail, and one bases one's hopes that they will on a high regard for the integrity of John Edgar Hoover.