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The empty-head blues: black rebellion and white reaction

AARON WILDAVSKY

Liberals have been moaning those empty-head blues. They feel bad. They know the sky is about to fall in. But they can't think of anything to do. Having been too sanguine and too self-righteous about their part in the civil rights movement, they are too easily prey to despair when their contribution is rejected by those they presumed to help. Torn between a nagging guilt and a secret desire to turn on their black tormentors, white liberals have become spectators watching with frozen horror as their integrationist ideals and favorite public programs disintegrate amidst violent black rebellion. How did this maddening situation come about? What can be done about it?

How to enrage whites without helping blacks

A recipe for violence: Promise a lot; deliver a little. Lead people to believe they will be much better off, but let there be no dramatic improvement. Try a variety of small programs, each interesting but marginal in impact and severely underfinanced. Avoid any attempted solution remotely comparable in size to the dimensions of the problem you are trying to solve. Have middle-class civil servants hire upper-class student radicals to use lower-class Negroes as a battering ram against the existing local political systems; then complain that people are going around disrupting things and chastize local politicians for

not cooperating with those out to do them in. Get some poor people involved in local decision-making, only to discover that there is not enough at stake to be worth bothering about. Feel guilty about what has happened to black people; tell them you are surprised they have not revolted before; express shock and dismay when they follow your advice. Go in for a little force, just enough to anger, not enough to discourage. Feel guilty again; say you are surprised that worse has not happened. Alternate with a little suppression. Mix well, apply a match, and run. . . .

The dilemma of liberal politicians is exquisite. Now they play only "minus-sum" games in which every player leaves the contest worse off than when he entered. The first rule is to get yourself hooked on purely symbolic issues. This guarantees that if you fail to get your policy adopted you are revealed as impotent and useless to the deprived. If you win your policy objective, you are even worse off because it is soon clear that nothing has changed. A typical game played under this rule is called "Civilian Police Review Board." The objective is to force a racist response from the voters who are fearful of their safety on subways and in the streets. The game begins with a publicity campaign focusing on fascist police, various atrocities, and other lurid events. The police and their friends counter with an equally illuminating defense: nothing is wrong that a little get-tough campaign would not cure. The game ends with a ballot in which white voters are asked to choose between their friendly neighborhood policeman and the specter of black violence. The usual result is that the whites vote for the police and defeat the review board. If a review board is created, however, it soon becomes apparent that a few judgments against policemen have no effect on the critical problem of securing adequate protection for Negroes. But the game is a perfect loser: everyone's feelings are exacerbated and the conflict continues at a new height of hostility.

There are many similar games. In Milwaukee, for example, wave after wave of Negro demonstrators cry out for a fair housing ordinance. The certain result is that whites are made furious. The sad thing is that, if the punitive marches succeed in their immediate goal, only a handful of Negroes at most will be helped. Or consider the drive to achieve school integration by bussing children to different parts of the city. If such integration is accompanied by huge efforts to create equality of educational achievement among black and white, all praise is due. But if black children continue to read poorly, race hatred may well increase. Black radicals will then be certain to condemn the liberal integrationists who have again left them and their children holding an empty bag.

The liberal politician is damned if he does and damned if he doesn't. He breaks his back to get two historic civil rights acts passed only to find himself accused of coming in too little and too late. The

rat control bill is a perfect example of the classic bind. When Congress originally failed to pass the bill, it was made into a bitter example of inhumanity. Yet it can safely be said that had the bill sailed through Congress it would also have joined the list of those liberal measures that are not good enough to do the job. Too little and too late. How much all this is like Groucho Marx's famous crack that any country club willing to have him as a member wasn't exclusive enough for him to join.

We have learned some hard lessons. Every time we try to deal with problems of race we end up with symbolic gestures that infuriate everyone and please no one. Why? The American dilemma is a compound of racism suffused with class differences. Since America appears to be richer in economic resources than in brotherly love, it would be natural to tackle economic problems first. Few of us expect a quick solution to the lesser problems posed by large class differences among white people. None is surprised that upper-class whites do not integrate with their lower-class racial cohorts. Yet we persist in following policies that attack racism before economic equality has begun to be established. The result is that neither poverty nor racism is diminished.

Disheartened by the magnitude of the change required in racial behavior, unwilling to recognize the full extent of the resources required to improve economic conditions, we are tempted to try a lot of small programs that create an illusion of activity, ferment, and change. But nothing much happens. Confusion is rampant because it looks to some (mostly white) like so much is being done, and to others (mostly black) that nothing is happening. Hence the rival accusations of black ingratitude and white indifference. It is apparent that we should abandon symbolic policies that anger whites and do not help blacks and should concentrate instead on programs that will materially increase the well-being of poor people in the United States. Programs should be large rather than small, and provide tangible benefits to many citizens, not symbolic rewards for a few.

Income and education

The most compelling need is for a fast and vast job program designed to virtually end unemployment among Negroes. The best alternative would be a superheated economy in which jobs searched for people and employers served their own interests by training any available man. Inflation would be a problem, but one of much lesser magnitude than present dilemmas. The next best alternative would be large government subsidies to finance decent jobs with futures, again leaving training to employers and motivation to indigenous groups and the near-universal desire for legitimate gain. Nothing else is possible until we end high rates of unemployment.

But any program designed to improve the longer-range prospects of the disadvantaged would also have to involve a fundamental change in elementary education. There are many things we do not know about improving education. But we do know that the child who reads well can do most anything, and the child who cannot is lost. If you are fourteen and cannot read, you know there is no future for you in ordinary American life. Following the principle of "bottle-neck" planning (i.e., concentrating every effort on the most critical resources), one might abolish all subjects in the curriculum except reading and a little mathematics. Every six months there would be examinations in reading, and teachers whose classes fell behind would be held to account. Principals would be promoted on the basis of the accomplishment of their students in reading. Although family conditions may overwhelm all other factors in ability to learn, as the Coleman report suggests, this is a conclusion to which we should be driven only after making the absolute maximum effort to get every child to read.

Would these employment, income, and education policies stop black rebellions?¹ That is bound to be the question. Alas, it is a mean-spirited question because it deflects attention from human needs. But it will raise itself insistently, so we had better attend to it, especially if (as I believe) rebellions are bound to increase for a time. Let us assess the adequacy of these remedies by evaluating them in the context of theories of racial rebellion.

Reward and blackmail theories

We are everywhere confronted with exceedingly primitive notions of the causes of racial disturbances. According to one popular model, rebellions are caused by giving rewards to the people who engage in these activities. The reward theory posits ever-increasing violence in response to the hope of getting ever-increasing rewards. This vulgarized version of learning theory (Christians call it sinning to abound in grace) suggests that outbursts will continue so long as Negroes are rewarded by governmental policies designed to improve their conditions. Would it be true, then, that the less that is done for Negroes, the less the probability of racial rebellion? What will we do when at all future moments we will be looking back at past rebellions, passing through present rebellions, and anticipating future rebellions?

¹One has to be careful not to commit semantic aggression. The word "riot" is too aimless to apply to a phenomenon that is national in scope and that is clearly directed at expressing rage against the conditions of life of black people. To use "revolt," however, would suggest far more leadership, organization, and concerted action than appears to have been the case. So we are left with "rebellion," an appropriate word to designate violence by people who wish to express their hostility toward prevailing conditions but who are not yet organized to attack the larger society.

Another currently held model suggests that white people help black people only because black people rebel. Blackmail is an appropriate designation for this theory. Rebellions by blacks cause whites to provide rewards; these rewards presumably lead to a reduction in hostility. But, on this theory, a decrease in hostility inevitably leads to a lesser willingness by whites to give rewards to blacks. Hence there will be more riots.

Obviously, if one begins by assuming a connection between riots and rewards, one can only conclude that riots cause rewards or rewards cause riots. Disaster is predicted if help is given and doom if it is not. Perhaps a slightly more complex analysis would be helpful.

The theory of relative deprivation

America is a country to which people who were worse off have come to be better off. And so it has proved to be for most of us. But not for Negroes. Not in slavery and not afterward. The southern system of slavery so effectively cut off Negroes from former home, family, and culture that comparisons with the past which sustained so many others against the initial adversity of life in America became meaningless. Being better off than in slavery hardly recommends itself to anyone as a criterion of judgment. For better or worse, black men have been born anew in America. Negroes can only compare their positions to their recent past or to others in America. They have evidently chosen to be Americans if they can. That is our common hope. But it can also be our despair because it is so difficult to satisfy people whose standard of comparison is the richest segment of the richest nation on earth.

Imagine that our fondest dreams were realized: we had secured virtually full employment and higher income for Negroes as well as other Americans. There would certainly be an improvement in the Negro condition. But there would also be an increase in "relative deprivation." The higher starting point for other Americans would guarantee that result. The arithmetic is as follows:

Assume that Negroes make \$4,000 a year and that other Americans they compare themselves with make \$10,000 a year. If whites increased their income 5 per cent a year, Negroes would have to gain an incredible 15 per cent a year in order to gain equality of income in ten years. If we take the more reasonable assumption about the best that could happen — a 10 per cent increase per year for Negroes and a 5 per cent for others — the absolute difference in income would actually continue to increase for the first decade! So, if rebellions are caused in part by relative deprivation — by resentment at inequality — there will be more rebellions.

Now take education. The most optimistic assumption about education would be that the gap between whites and blacks would narrow

dramatically in ten or twenty years and not sooner. While the quality of education might improve significantly and quickly if we are very lucky, the benefits would take time to manifest themselves. Moreover, higher educational achievement, while desirable in itself, would likely lead to still higher aspirations. Ergo: things will get worse before they get better.

Job, income, and education policies may be necessary to stop rebellions in the future but they will not suffice to halt them now. Before accepting this melancholy conclusion as the final sentence on our racial crimes, let us see if a closer look at black rebellion will not suggest to us additional remedies.

The anger-plus-opportunity theory

The most straightforward explanation of riotous behavior is that the violence is a combination of anger and opportunity. That whites have long despised Negroes is no secret. That Negroes suffer numerous indignities on account of their color is all too evident. When extraordinary levels of unemployment (running as high as 30 per cent for black youth) are added to these daily causes of resentment, it is no wonder that many Negroes feel enraged. But it is one thing to feel mad and angry and another to feel safe enough to act out those feelings. The relative lack of black violence in the South may be partly attributed to the well-founded fear by Negroes that severe retribution will be visited upon them. Just as soon as Negro strength increased sufficiently in Northern cities and whites became troubled about brutal retaliation, it became safer for Negroes to act on violent feelings. The faint stirrings of white conscience may have had the paradoxical effect of legitimizing black violence without simultaneously leading to actions that dramatically alleviated oppressive conditions.²

To the degree that this overly simple theory is correct, it also helps explain the essential perversity of the racial situation. The theory implies that one way of mitigating violence would be to reduce the pattern of injustice that gives rise to feelings of rage. So far, so good. But recognition of the problem and mobilizing political support to begin to act require widespread dissemination of information on just how bad things were and continue to be. The message to Negroes is that they have been and are being treated badly. There cannot help but be the suggestion that Negroes are justified in taking strong actions to improve their position. There are bound to be white people whose guilt disarms them when faced with destructive acts. Thus the

²Support for this hypothesis comes from a study of anti-white violence in Africa, which shows that there was little bloodshed in countries that engaged either in consistent repression or gave independence to the black majority; violence did occur when whites vacillated.

laudatory efforts to reduce the desire of Negroes to act violently actually increases their opportunities for using force without the corresponding expectation of severe punishment. The two sides of the desire-plus-opportunities theory of racial violence are not in balance; attempts to reduce the desire have the exasperating effect of increasing the opportunity.

Black violence has reduced support for measures designed to help Negroes. Yet the polar opposite tactic — nonviolent pressure — is impossible to maintain. The emphasis of the civil rights movement on nonviolence was unnatural. It reassured whites and helped get bills on voting rights passed in Congress. But it left no place for self-defense. Where was all that black rage to go? Instead of a normal stress on self-defense, therefore, many Negro activists have shifted from turning the other cheek to abusing the man. One extreme has simply been substituted for another.

In such a situation it is easy for black men to succumb to a politics of outrage in which violent rhetoric provides a substitute for remedial action. Caught between rage and impotence, held responsible by no mass following of their own, Negro spokesmen compete in ragging the white man. Negroes can't help enjoying the fun, but we should be as clear as they are that the whole act is directed toward "Whitey." If whom a man loves can be determined by whom he can't resist talking to, then Whitey has captured all the affection these people have. No doubt this perverse form of Uncle Tomism will eventually be exposed by Negroes who want leaders to pay attention to them. In the meantime, we risk the consequences of a rhetoric of violence that angers whites without aiding blacks.

I conclude that all of us in America will need an acute sense of humor to survive the next decade. There will be rebellion if we do the best we know how. There will be even more violence if we do not. Almost harder to bear will be the incredible provocations — mixtures of arrogance, slander, paranoia, and duplicity. There are spectacular fantasies among black people about the deaths of Kennedy and Malcolm X right next to saccharine remarks about law and order from whites who have long practiced violence against Negroes. The one truth which white liberals are supposed to avow is that they do not know, have never known, and will never know anything about black people. Yet one would suppose that if two groups have contact, each would have an equal chance of failing to know the other. The old truth may have been that blacks were invisible men for whites. The new truth is that whites are invisible because they all look alike.

The language of "black power" should not, however, be dismissed without serious consideration. The fact that it means so many different things to different men does not prevent our observing that the slogan strikes a responsive chord among black men. At a minimum, black

power signifies a widespread concern for a political dimension that has been conspicuously missing from previous theories of racial conflict.

The identity and legitimacy theory

It will add to our understanding if we decide which features of the black rebellions we want to explain. The extensive looting, for example, does not appear especially deserving of explanation. There is looting all over the world when riots occur. That is why martial law is so often declared in the wake of natural disasters. When the police appear uncertain or absent, the urge to loot is apparently more than most of us can resist. Nor do we need to spend an excessive amount of time on the snipers. Virtually every society has small groups with an urge to disrupt its activities. The interesting question is why the mass of citizens in the ghettos did not react against the snipers and the incendiaries who put the torch to their neighborhoods.

The beginning of wisdom about black rebellion is that we are dealing with a problem in social control, with feelings widespread in an entire community, and not with just a few wild men. An entire community has become disaffected. That is not to say Negroes share common views on public policy. Indeed, they can hardly agree on anything. But they will not turn in one of their own to the white man. They will not defend what they have against the violence of their own people, not necessarily because they have nothing to lose, but because they do not have enough of the one thing that they would otherwise risk losing — participation in a common American life.

The great question raised by black rebellion is: Who will call himself an American? That has been the modal drama of life in America. Loyalist and patriot, patrician and plebian, slave and free-man, Southern man and Northern man, employer and worker, ethnic and Wasp, all have shattered the quiet of our vast continent with their wars. Today's rebellion is part of this struggle to forge a worthy American identity for black men. Black rebellion presents a crisis of legitimacy — a questioning of "white" authority. Hence the incessant demands for new power relationships. The immediate problems posed by black rebellion are, therefore, political, and require a political response.

Political solutions

The most obvious political need is for mechanisms to reduce the blatant conflicts between Negroes and police with the police being the most visible and oppressive manifestation of governmental authority. Increasing the number of Negro policemen (and firemen) might help by blurring the purely racial nature of the encounters. The

measures necessary to accomplish this end — allowing entry to people with minor police records, changing various requirements for health and examinations — are within our grasp. There are also various proposals for altering the role of policemen by putting them more in the role of helpers, and by sensitizing them to the problems of life among the severely deprived. It is difficult to quarrel with such humane measures. Yet they do not quite go to the heart of the matter. For policemen do have certain evident law-enforcement functions that may be blurred but not hidden. The rest of us manage to get along with police, not through mutual good will, but by avoiding contact with them unless we make a specific request for help. Not love but distance is the answer. A substantial increase in employment and rise in income will reduce the opportunity and need for crime. (Even the dope addict with a higher income is likely to be able to make arrangements that will keep him clear of the police.) Relationships with police could also be markedly improved by following Jacobus ten Broek's proposal to abolish the law of the poor. One reason that we have "two nations" in America is that there is literally a separate law for poor people. The difficulty is not merely that poor people receive less justice, but also that laws about sexual conduct, home finance, drug addiction, and dozens of other matters apply severely to them but laxly to other Americans. Hiring more Negro policemen will not be successful unless the frequency of unhappy contacts between them and the citizenry is sharply reduced.

Even were all this accomplished, however, it would not meet the profound Negro demand for autonomy, for control of some portion of their lives, for the self-esteem that comes from being powerful. If we cast aside the cynicism that tells us no man is truly master of his fate, we can recognize insistent political demands that may be accommodated or crushed but cannot be ignored. For present purposes we can dispense with a lot of research and simply assume that the best way to feel in control is to exercise control. Can this be done at all? Can it be done without generating the violence that will bring about the retribution that ends our hopes?

The usual American response to difficult political problems has been to disperse and fragment them into smaller conflicts that take place in different localities and times. Problems of church and state and education have been handled in just this way. Applying this procedure to racial problems in the past, however, has meant victory for racism or at least the status quo. Deprived of opportunities to exert influence at state and local levels because of official racism or lack of effective political resources, Negroes had no alternative except to look to the national government. This choice of a favored site for conflict was always opportunistic. Calhoun's doctrine of the concurrent majority meant control for regional racists. States rights and local autonomy were doctrines for keeping the Negro and the poor

things they can do, such as providing better recreation facilities, improving housing inspection, and the like are strictly marginal improvements. They lack the money and the power to do more. Yet they are held responsible for every evil. Rebellions appear to occur at random, afflicting cities whose mayors try hard to do the right thing and cities whose mayors are indifferent or hostile. What incentives will mayors have to do what good they can do? Since they cannot possibly do enough, the do-nothing mayor appears no worse off than the better mayors. (A major possibility is that mayors will learn to concentrate on the one area in which they might do well and reap credit from some segments of the population — suppression of rebellions.) Therefore, working with neighborhood corporations, invigorated by fresh infusions of federal funds, should prove attractive to mayors who despair of their present situation.

Politicians in the Democratic party are frantically pursuing ways of handling racial problems that will not end in disaster for everyone concerned. Buffeted between the hostility of blue-collar workers to civil rights legislation and the inability to satisfy radical Negroes no matter what, the politicians fear their party will be split on racial grounds. They foresee waves of repression and a permanent estrangement between black and white in America. But consider what a new orientation would have to offer to Democratic party politicians. They would not try to bid for the support of racial radicals, white or black. The Democrats would turn down both mass suppression and mass violence, avoiding especially symbolic issues that embitter whites and do not help blacks. The politicians would espouse primarily policies promising immediate and substantial improvement of the economic condition of poor people. Decent jobs at good pay come first. Next, there should be the most powerful education program that can be devised to enable the presently disadvantaged to participate as equals in the market place and the political arena. These policies should be presented at face value as measures for making good the promise of American life. These policies are consonant with the traditions of the Democratic party, and they need not divide the races. The poor need help. We are a rich nation. We can and should give that help.

No doubt a party promoting these income policies might lose an election or two. But when it did get into power it would have goals worth achieving. The difficulty with existing policies is that even when properly pursued they do not help enough people immediately in direct ways. The usual mode of alleviating difficult problems by incremental attack along diverse fronts does not work because there is no solid base on which to rest these efforts. We will never know what long-run contributions anti-poverty programs can make if we continue to insist that secondary programs substitute for primary ones, that supporting programs be adopted in place of the basic efforts they are intended to assist.

Democratic divisions over these issues also provide extraordinary opportunities for Republicans to recover from decades of declining support. The danger is that an anti-Negro stance will appear to offer hope of detaching white voters from the Democratic party. The resistance of these voters to conservative economic policies would be submerged under a tide of racial anger. There is another stance, however, that would be productive at the polls and fit comfortably with Republican principles. A massive employment program could be expected to win over some Negroes and poor whites while not alienating existing Republican support. Such a program would hold out greater long-run hope of alleviating rebellious conditions than would suppression. Republicans would presumably not support federal subsidies for radical community action. But a program that stressed local autonomy through neighborhood governments should prove attractive to conservatives. Indeed, Republicans are much less weighed down than are Democrats with commitments to existing welfare and education policies that Negroes find so disagreeable.

A response to rebellion

There will be rebellions; that much we can take for granted. The question is not whether these things will happen but how Americans will choose to react. It is easy to win tactical victories — disperse mobs brutally — and lose strategic battles. In the midst of consummate gall and endless effrontery, there is considerable danger of committing strategic suicide. What we do should depend on what we want. The prevailing confusion makes it advisable to take the risk of restating the obvious.

Just as Lincoln put preservation of the Union above all else in his times, so should we put construction of a multi-racial nation as our major objective. Our goal is that we all consider ourselves Americans who pay allegiance to the same political symbols and participate as citizens in the same national life. In pursuit of this goal, we must reaffirm our dedication to integration of the races for all who wish it. Wholly white or black communities can be one mode of participation in a common life. But integration is the preferred way of life for those who believe that there must be a single nation in America. A surface integration, however, must not be pursued at the expense of equality of achievement among black and white, for then integration will become a barrier to the creation of a joint American identity.

If we do not wish white and black men to live as citizens in the same country, we will have no difficulty in finding policies appropriate to that end. We can continue what we are doing. Better still, we can let violence feed on violence. The early riots have largely been aimless affairs in which destruction has been visited by Negroes on their own neighborhoods. Mass repressions visited indiscriminately

upon black people can give them new reasons for race hatred and further violence. White people can be turned into proto-blacks — people who fear destruction because of their color. The difference between the races is that whites possess more abundant means of committing mayhem.

Americans who wish to hold open the possibility of emerging as a single people should not engage in mass repression. The surest way for black bigots to get a following is for white racists to create it. We want to open and not to foreclose the possibilities of being American together. There will be riots, and they will have to be put down. But our aim should be to separate the actively violent from the rest of the black community. Force should be limited, specific, and controlled.

Capitulation to lawless behavior would be bad. The hunger for humiliation shown by the New Left can only succeed in demeaning everyone. The black man's dignity cannot be won by the white man's degradation; the bread of humiliation will feed few people. The most destructive elements will simply be encouraged to raise the level of abuse. White anger will rise. Acting out the ritual frenzy of hatred will close all doors.

Our program should be neither suppression nor capitulation, but affirmation of common possibilities in a civil society. Without promising what no man can deliver — an end to the rebellions that are the consequences of our past failures — we can try to do what we now see to be right and just: A massive employment program, a concerted effort to improve educational achievement, and then support for a process of self-generating growth in the urban ghettos.



