

LIBERAL ANALYSIS
AND
FEDERAL POWER

by TOM HAYDEN

Tom Hayden is a former
President of Students for
a Democratic Society and
now on the staff of the
SDS Newark project.

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At an increasing rate Americans are "informed" of bloody conflicts going on in the South. But tragically, facts are not weighted with passion, and reason tends to shy when its thrust points towards the need for drastic change. We seem blighted by the very way in which we analyze the given facts; intellectuals are placed at vantage points which, described as seats of reason, actually function to immunize the senses and turn incoming truths into trickling, instead of tidal, currents.

From such vantage points David Riesman and the editors of The New Republic recently reviewed the course of events in the South. Their observations and frail conclusions are reflections of the liberal conscience in a state of sincere worry, not the product of the cold war of imagination which frets about the adverse effect of our racism on the American image. However, much as the spirit of Riesman and The New Republic demand sympathetic respect, it is sometimes foolish to judge the open mind, the questioning spirit, as ipso facto good. From this liberal posture can come an ideology of inaction and irresponsibility, pronounced from heights of shelter and sophistication. This, unfortunately, seems true in this case.

Both Riesman and The New Republic editors are responding, in particular, to Howard Zinn's proposal for greater federal action in the South and, in general, to the broad question of what speed of social change is appropriate in segregated areas. Zinn has argued, in the October 26 New Republic and in the November-December Correspondent, that the federal government often refuses to implement its legal mandate to protect the constitutional rights of all citizens; that the government is denying the Constitution and the law when it claims to be legally helpless to act; that it is imperative to make the government enforce the law through the use of a special force of federal agents "to stand guard throughout the Deep South in the protection of the constitutional rights of the people in that region!"

Riesman and The New Republic restrict themselves only briefly to narrow aspects of the Zinn proposal. Riesman criticizes Zinn for "taking for granted" the possibility of Congress voting money for this federal force "when in fact they are hesitant to vote money for a domestic peace corps to do far less revolutionary things!" But surely Zinn would agree, and has done so in Nation articles - this, to him, is all the more reason for building intense pressure on Congress through demonstrations which make executive or congressional action imperative. The editorial in The New Republic skips this issue but points out that "obvious drawbacks" include the shift of responsibility for law enforcement from local to national levels - which, in case this concept seems radical, is only the implementation of the Constitution and the subordination of states rights to federalism.

From there, however, the liberals plunge into the deeper issues suggested by Zinn. Listing me as an ally of Zinn's, Riesman says that our remedy for the South is "in effect to elect Goldwater and then see what happens!" The "radicals" according to Riesman, argue for a policy "which would in effect expel the conservative and racist southerners from the Democratic Party, force them into the Republican Party, and have a real showdown between left Democrats and right Republicans!" This reminds Riesman of the radicals who criticized the Social-Democrats and the Weimar Republic, allegedly taking the risk of bringing Hitler to power "with the thought that things would have to get worse before they could get any better!" Riesman thinks a Goldwater election would be a "high price to pay for the ideological purity of our parties!"

The New Republic questions those "who believe that if the segregationists were subdued by force, they would of necessity change! Perhaps so, they go on in a historical vein, with which Riesman sympathizes, but on the other hand "force was tried once before, during Reconstruction, and the results were not exactly encouraging.... The long term objective of the civil rights movement should not be to subdue the white supremacist in the South, but to change him!"

The liberals are careful to point out that theirs are questions, not convinced judgments. They even muse. Riesman: "If I were a Mississippi or Alabama Negro at the end of a sheriff's prod, I might well feel (a Goldwater election) was a chance worth taking, although even then I might underestimate the degree to which my situation would become worse and the chance for escape from it even more attenuated!" The New Republic: "Sill, unless the white southerners show a little more flexibility, Mr. Zinn's approach may be the only alternative to anarchy. That this would be a catastrophe for the nation and would probably eliminate hope for civilizing the South in the foreseeable future, does not make it impossible!"

These arguments are important not simply because ^{of} the serious regard in which the authors are held, but because they may signify a wave of liberal concern akin to the revulsion against extremism expressed by Theodore H. White in his very influential Life magazine article of Nov. 22. Therefore a critique must deal in detail with each point of the new skepticism.

First, the use of historical references establishes a deceptive wisdom. Even if one accepts the foggy argument that historical events can be translated into clear lessons for governing current behavior, the liberal interpretation of Weimar Germany and of southern Reconstruction are questionable. Riesman and The New Republic are irresponsible for neglecting the complexity and conflicting interpretation of both series of events to which they refer. It would be cruel, but deservedly reciprocal, were they themselves attacked as typical representatives of the timid liberals who were blind and vapidly optimistic while counter-revolutions in Germany and the American South were allowed to consolidate.

(If Riesman is arguing that Hitler could have been staved off if the German radical left had given greater support to the Weimar government, then I believe we are in polar disagreement. The only deterrent to Hitler at that time would have required the radicalization of the German liberals and social-democrats, and a socialist program with a viable movement of millions backing it. The real parallel, therefore, is between the liberals of both times who were unwilling to try to organize a strong left-wing. For two different but interesting chronicles of these times, see Joseph Buttlinger's The Twilight of Socialism and Serge Chakotin's The Rape of the Masses. As for the parallel with Reconstruction, again the facts can be arranged against Riesman and The New Republic editors. It is true that immediately after the Civil War, during Reconstruction, there was considerable violence between Negroes and whites. It is also true that Reconstruction was a key factor in establishing cohesion among white classes - big planters and small farmers - in the Democratic Party, where once there had been class antagonisms and growing left-populism. But it is also true that official segregation was not entrenched until the restraining liberal northern forces withdrew from the South, leaving southern aristocrats free to use vicious means to suppress the Negroes and the populists in the nineties. Two crucial instances of compromise were in the political events of 1877 and 1896. In the first, the "liberal" Radical Republicans won the presidency (Hayes over Tilden) through a compromise in which they pledged to withdraw troops and massively invest in the racist southern economy. In 1896, the Democratic Party nominated Bryan and adopted a radical populist rhetoric without expelling the reactionary southern wing of the party. This trapped the decent southern populists whose only remaining alternatives were equally dismal: to remain Democrats and be subordinate in the South to the controlling privileged class, or to join the Republicans who now were dominated by northern businessmen and financiers. See V.O. Key's Southern Politics, C. Vann

Woodward's The Strange Career of Jim Crow and The Compromise of 1877, Tom Kahn's Unfinished Revolution.)

A second essentially false issue is developed by the criticism of Zinn's "radicalism." This tends to place Zinn in the category of extremism, when in fact his proposal is bold but not revolutionary. There are many civil rights leaders who believe that violence or every disruption short of violence is now necessary to make this nation choose between paralysis and progress. Zinn's proposal is not for the nonviolent blockage of Montgomery, not for radical disruption of our cities North and South--though both of these ideas are discussed by reasonable men who are aware of the boiling level of the crisis. Zinn's suggestion is primarily legalistic. But the issue, say the liberals, is deeper than this. To them the questions are first, whether federal coercion will create a near-permanent resentment and alienation among whites and, second, whether this resentment will be expressed in irrational deeds of violence and a political swing, supported by anxious northern whites, to Goldwater Republicanism as a desperate "way out."

This fear is based on a theory of "too much," after which negative effects result from good actions. But after a century of southern anti-Yankee sentiment, after the troops in Little Rock and Oxford, would this new single act really erase the possibilities for a future reconciliation? I think not. It is this well-meant, but paranoid, reasoning which time and again leaves initiative to the worst among us. The racist still knows there is almost no limit to liberal toleration; when will the liberal know there is almost no limit to racist inflexibility? Even in the late November days when political warriors everywhere put down their swords and meditated together on the death of their president, the Dixiecrat bloc stayed intransigent and organized in the face of growing sentiment in favor of a civil rights bill. Perhaps the most shameful instance of this intractable realpolitik was their refusal to applaud at all during President Johnson's moving comments on civil rights before the assembled Congress just days after the assassination.

The southern segregationist Democrats are able to act in this spectacularly evil manner because they have learned that liberalism is defused, lacking a point of moral explosion. Liberal laxness and federal policies of laissez-faire in times of violence in the South, whether for decent or opportunistic or whatever reasons, help to breed the conditions in which segregationist hordes have the incentive to rampage, "respectable" segregationist politicians and bosses permit the hatred of the hordes to go unchecked, and white southerners of good heart keep regretfully silent in the absence of national protection.

Even if this be denied, it is far from established that the use of federal power itself contributes to the degeneration of white attitudes. In fact some research, for instance about the impact of the 1954 school segregation decision, supports the hypothesis that federal enforcement of law prepares the very conditions in which gradual social change can occur with minimal strain.

(See Carmichael and James, The Louisville Story (1957), for a study of the constructive impact of the Supreme Court's 1954 decision. For a sample of social science literature see David M. Herr, "The Sentiment of White Supremacy: an Ecological Study," American Journal of Sociology, Vol. 64 (May, 1959), pp. 592-98: "The will to preserve segregation among white southerners is held to be a direct function of the social and economic gain resulting therefrom and an inverse function of the guilt engendered by critical contact with the value system outside the South." For a more eloquent analysis see Martin Luther King's "Letter from a Birmingham Jail" to religious moderates, available from the Southern Christian Leadership Conference.)

Overlooked in the liberal analysis also are the counter-processes which make for structural integration of North and South and which are more powerful than the forces which divide. Chief among these at present are, first, the immigration of

entrepreneurs and the aged from North to South; second, the development of bureaucracies in southern industrial cities with greater national than regional ties. These trends and others hollow out the sick regional mystique and create a southern basis for opposition to the continuous violent white resistance to change which Riesman fears.

But what would happen at the polls? Would the Democrats lose? First of all, it is a myth that the South provided the decisive edge in the 1960 elections; if Kennedy had lost all the South and kept only his Northern victories, he still would have been elected. (See Thomas Hayden, "The Power of the Dixiecrats," New University Thought, December-January, 1963-64, pp. 6-16. "...Kennedy scored huge majorities in the Negro areas of the North: 64 percent of the city vote in Baltimore, 75 percent in Boston, 64 in Chicago, 71 in Cleveland, 66 in Detroit, 54 in Los Angeles, 63 in New York, 68 in Philadelphia, 67 in Pittsburgh. Both Republican leader Thruston Morton and Robert Kennedy attributed Nixon's narrow defeat to a failure to hold the Negro voting percentages which Eisenhower secured in 1956 (Ike was supported by 36 percent, Nixon by less than 25 percent). ...Thanks to the South's pro-Democratic instincts, disclosed and undisclosed bargains, and the active work of Lyndon Johnson and Robert Kennedy, the President carried seven of the traditional ten southern states--but only five of them solidly. Excluding the Texas vote which Johnson personally captured, Kennedy's electoral advantage in the South was 70-43, with 14 Mississippi and six Alabama electors defecting from the New Frontier to vote independently. Kennedy reversed Ike's 1956 success in the South, when the GOP had swept to a 77-50 advantage in the same states. But it should be noted that JFK's surplus 27 votes from the South were still a "cushion" and not a decisive edge. The President finished 81 votes ahead of Nixon and 31 votes over the necessary 269 needed for an electoral college victory.") The new President, however, is likely to hold even more of the South than Kennedy could in 1964. This is true no matter how committed Johnson is to civil rights legislation, because he is a southerner and a long-time crony of many Dixiecrat oligarchs. Even if this interpretation, which points to a Democratic presidential victory in 1964 regardless of what action the government takes in the South, were inaccurate, today Riesman's earlier fear of a Goldwater triumph should be eased by polls which show the Arizonan slipping in popularity since November 22.

All the previous has been too abstractly sociological and political. It is a version of "strategic thinking" to be indulged in, but too fragile to count as the central basis for judgment in these matters. That it seems the basis for liberal judgment in this case is tragic. The primary basis, where such speculation about consequences is necessarily inconclusive, should be that of personal solidarity, of taking sides with the southern Negro in his immediate plight where he is facing organized violence and terror. If they thought in this fashion, the New Republic editors would have to go to the Deep South themselves to work on civil rights, or they would have to advocate an effective immediate support for the Negroes in their war for the vote. If the Negro is not supported in the immediate Black Belt crisis, he is either subdued or tortured.

The problem is that the institutions of gradualism are perverted in too many places of the nation, and missing altogether in the Black Belt. The courts at local and state levels are segregationist, and at federal levels they are too slow to prevent murder and suffering. The schools are barely "mixed" and remain vehicles for conformity to racist ideology. The unions hardly exist, and where they do, it is under extreme victimization by business and state power. The police, state and local, are executioners. The politicians are venal men locally and, nationally, as Riesman himself says, are unwilling to legislate the needed remedies. As a result of these circumstances, in Mississippi, people are starved out by Leflore County officialdom; in Georgia, Negro churches are burned in Dougherty County; in Alabama, little girls are bombed in their pews; in South Carolina, students are

stockaded for perfectly legal marches. Poverty, terror, mockery, and hypocrisy create an all but totalitarian system which is given patent by the whole society.

These realities challenge the drugging American belief in the external possibility of social change without pain to any but the most extremely reactionary individuals. This is anoble and naive aspiration. It is impossible today to take the Negro into the status quo; it is only possible surgically to remove that in the status quo which perpetuates human denial. There is nothing sacrosanct about the fabric of our society if the fabric is a snarl and a strangling cord.

A federal police force in the Deep South is a beginning, not a solution. It would make men realize that authentic meaning is being returned to words and laws. It would stop the riot that grows in the breach between the national ideal and permitted reality. It would not transform the South--and why not say we want, to begin with, a transformation of the South?--but it would make rapid social change more possible. I wish Riesman and The New Republic had not said simply that the federal police force is unachievable given the state of Congress. I wish they had suggested the strategies and program which can generate pressure to make Congress move. For instance, we clearly need:

- * quick action to end direct and indirect support of southern segregation by every governmental, business, labor, religious, educational and other professional organization. Men should take the lead which the late President haltingly began, by refusing to participate in any association which abets racism.

- * guarantees of economic security (through shipments of food, for example) and legal support by public and private agencies to Negroes who want to organize politically against the reigning powers.

- * the organization of poor whites for liberal economic change, if necessary outside of the conservative AFL-CIO, to stimulate political life in labor, and to deter degeneration into racism among exploited whites. A movement to organize the American poor is now in the air, and signs of its concrete beginning can be seen in the new programs of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, Students for a Democratic Society, the Northern Student Movement and other groups of seasoned young organizers. It should begin in the South and the North as well, and it should be supported by every liberal in America.

- * the sending of integrated counter-delegations from southern states to the Democratic National Convention in Atlantic City, to publicly challenge the credentials of Dixiecrats whose power rests on racism and disenfranchisement.

- * organized pressures demanding that racists be expelled from the Convention or excluded from committee assignments in the 1965 Congress. If a total purge is too difficult to muster, then at least Eastland and the Mississippi Democrats should be eliminated from the Party as a symbol and a warning to other conservatives.

- * a more radical March on Washington next summer, employing non-violent civil disobedience if a good civil rights bill is not passed by that time.

- * common agreement in the civil rights movement that in order to transform poverty into shared abundance, a distorted policy into a representative and democratic one, and a profoundly unstable world into one safe for an integrated society, there must be a termination of the arms and space races, and re-allocation of public money into areas of public need. There must be a massive public works program to employ men fully in the construction of a livable society, and at the same time a massive educational program to prepare men to live in an automated society where drudgery is minimized and craftsmanship made an ordinary pursuit of ordinary citizens. That James Farmer of CORE should take Seymour Melman to the White House to make such a proposal to the President is a wonderful signal that a new political concern is developing. What now is needed is a movement to lend power to concern.

This is not a program to bring "purity" back to politics, as Riesman charges. What it would do is end the Dixiecrat power over committee assignments in Con-

gress; create plural centers of political and economic power in the South and hence in the nation; establish a new agenda for Americans, with disarmament, the human use of abundance, and the creation of racial integration its trinity of goals. Then our discussion and our life might be richer than at present, when we still are impaled on the question of whether to implement for the first time laws which have existed since the 19th century.

But it will take extremism to create gradualism in the South, and not until then will we be able to turn fully to these richer issues.