

FUEL FOR THE FIRES (Originally published April 1968)

Within the past year, we read with some difficulty Gunnar Myrdal's sociologic classic *An American Dilemma*, and more recently Alan Drury's *A Very Strange Country*, which report thoroughly on the extremely complicated racial problems in the Union of South Africa. Our reaction to the Report of the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders was one of annoyance and helplessness. Created to study the riots of 1967 and to come up with advice on how to prevent and deal with them in the future, the Commission responded only by proposing more, tired, utopian theory. The Commission's observations, conclusions and solutions deal in emotional generalities and merely rehash the material defined in the work of Myrdal thirty years ago. In the words of one critic, ". . . the Commission is unsparing with remonstrances and recriminations addressed to whites," and "clearly suggests that they have come as punishment for our sins and are to be avoided in the future by repentance and repair." One can only feel that the racial question in this country has been so distorted and magnified out of all reasonable proportion by the continued efforts of liberal extremists, white and black racists, and political opportunists, that all hope of a sensible and amicable solution is fast becoming a lost cause.

In the opinion of columnist William S. White, whose coloring is hardly conservative, the report is "plainly inflammatory in some of its conclusions and unwisely evangelical in some of its rhetoric." To indict such general concepts as white racism and poverty as the major reasons for rioting is like attributing the cause of thirty or forty simultaneous and widely scattered fires to the fact that all the structures involved were made of wood and other combustible materials. Its unrealistic proposals for dealing with the situation are like maintaining that faced with several more smoking buildings about to burst into flame, the elimination of all wood and other inflammable building materials must be first accomplished before allowing the firemen to use their hoses and other firefighting equipment.

No matter how it is disguised in sociologic double talk, the problem of the Negro is at the root of civil disorder and racial violence in this country. Until recently it has not been admissible in liberal circles to consider that the Negro and White races might differ. Modern anthropology to the contrary, most of us who trained in the fundamentals of medical science have always been capable of recognizing that there are anatomic, histological, physiologic and biochemical differences between racial strains. Through interpretation and bias, these can be minimized or maximized, but they do exist, and because of these differences in the human animal, variations in functional, psychological and emotional response patterns also exist. Although related to the problem, all of this has

little to do with citizenship and civil rights. The superiority or inferiority of particular strains or of some racial characteristics cannot be static and merely represent value judgments of the adaptation capability to some demand in the prevailing environment; such judgments are relative, and may be interchangeable when viewed from different vantage points. If any minority grouping is to function comfortably in an alien environment or within a social structure established by a differing majority grouping, it must do so by adapting to the common requirements of that environment. It has been the American Negro's misfortune to live away from his natural environment and to be measured by standards he did not set; this is the Negro's basic problem.

Despite the efforts of well-wishing liberal sympathizers to rewrite the history of society in North America with regard to upgrading the importance of the Negro and his contribution, the fact remains—just as it does in Cape town and Johannesburg—that the contribution was minimal. This, however, is entirely understandable for many reasons. For better or worse, Western civilization as we know it is primarily a creation of the Caucasian, Mediterranean peoples. It would be natural to expect that attitudes and prejudices of such a society would be those of its majority "white" elements. The Negro entered into North American society under circumstances that placed him in a subservient and inferior position, his opportunities have been limited. As he was forced by circumstance, or has chosen by desire, to remain part of Western society, the heaviest burdens of adapting to its customs have been chiefly his to bear. Notwithstanding the extreme difficulties of his position and the constant discouragements of discriminatory practices, the progress of the Negro in this country over the past century, and especially in the past twenty-five years, has been a success story unmatched elsewhere.

The Commission Report's emphasis on "white racism" would seem to be an unusually provocative and inflammatory way of recognizing that racial prejudice exists. Prejudice is not a monopoly of whites; it is a common failing of all humanity. Prejudices of color, and even shadings of color, as well as those of nationalistic, class and cultural origins are prevalent and widespread in all nations of the world; they are the norm in all of the nations who criticize us most about our racial dilemma. Yet there has never been a nation or society more determined to minimize such prejudice, nor one more dedicated to the principles of promoting equality and providing opportunity for all of its citizens than this one. It cannot be denied that our progress in this respect has been halting, stumbling and even retrogressive at times, or that our practices do not keep up with our principles. But neither should it be denied that tremendous progress has been made, nor that the nation is genuinely concerned and is expending enormous energy toward the solution of this problem.

The Advisory Commission's report, which places the blame everywhere except on the rioters and assumes that there can be only one side to the question, is an exercise in futility. Its hand wringing tone, its undue emphasis on the negative and its idealistically naive recommendations that the immediate elimination of poverty and white prejudice must be accomplished by setting up more bureaucratic programs and spending vast amounts of money can only serve to create more racial antagonisms. It has succeeded only in throwing more fuel into smoldering embers.

