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## The Political Context of the Report: The Government and Civil Rights Movement

One can view the Moynihan report as an experimental stimulus, a natural intervention, which provides an opportunity to understand not only the dynamics of the controversy it precipitated but also the political context in which it took place. Necessary to an understanding of the Moynihan controversy is some knowledge of the status of the civil rights movement and of the administration at the time the Moynihan report was issued.

### *The Movement in the Spring of 1965*

Bayard Rustin wrote in February 1965, "The decade spanned by the 1954 Supreme Court decision on school desegregation and the Civil Rights Act of 1964 will undoubtedly be recorded as the period in which the legal foundations of racism in America were destroyed. To be sure, pockets of resistance remain; but it would be hard to quarrel with the assertion that the elaborate legal structure of segregation and discrimination, particularly

in relation to public accommodation, has virtually collapsed." \* In the spring of 1965, the civil rights movement was entering a new and undefined phase, but it did not know what this new phase would be. As a social movement, like social movements have in the past, it has faced the threat of destruction because of its victories. Charles Silberman has suggested that the leaders were estranged from their rank and file, were divided and uncertain where to turn. †

Not only was there growing uncertainty and conflict at the intellectual level but the civil rights organizations were experiencing a marked decline in public support in the form of contributions. From the NAACP to the newer, more radical organizations, the high-water mark of contributions had been a year or two earlier, and the concrete expression of concern and support that contributions represent had fallen off. There was good reason to fear that legislative successes were lowering motivations to dig into the pocketbook.

Without belittling the importance of the direct-action tactics that have proved successful within the last ten years, it should be pointed out that the institution of Jim Crow in the South is much different from the institutions of discrimination and segregation in urban centers, both North and South. In many ways one could view the South as an underdeveloped country which, perhaps beginning with the boll weevil, has been moving away from single-crop farming to an industrial economy. The need for labor in industrial centers in the South as well as the North encouraged migration from rural to urban centers. It is more efficient to hire people in an industrial economy according to their skill; to arbitrarily hire or not hire someone because of his skin color is not congruent with the requirements of an industrial society. The removal of Jim Crow can be seen as required for the South's industrial development. Similarly, segregation of public accommodations only impedes the flow of commerce. By the 1960's, segregated lunch counters were to a large degree symbolic manifestations of the previous society. Segregation in these forms is like the barnacles on a boat; once the boat begins moving, they produce friction that must be eliminated before full speed can be attained.

\* Bayard Rustin, "From Protest to Politics: The Future of the Civil Rights Movement." *Commentary*, Vol. 39, No. 2 (February 1965).

† Charles Silberman, "Beware the Day They Change Their Minds." *Fortune*, November 1965.

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The movement attacked these forms of racism at their weakest point. Because they were only symbolic and furthermore were barriers to industrial progress, small numbers of civil rights workers could, by "placing their bodies on the line," attack segregation in the South with success.

Also, supporters of white supremacy in the South had proved themselves to be considerably less skillful than the northern functionaries and power figures who support de facto segregation and discrimination. The southern racists strengthened the civil rights movement by accommodatingly playing their roles in open, often brutal, public confrontations; the northerners avoided or minimized open confrontations.

But while legal racism was destroyed in the United States, the decade of 1954 to 1964 can also be seen as the period of the development of de facto segregation. The year 1965 may be known in history as the time when the civil rights movement discovered, in the sense of becoming explicitly aware, that abolishing legal racism would not produce Negro equality. As Robert Carter, general counsel of the NAACP, said, "The 1954 Supreme Court decision did not produce integration of schools, marching on Washington did not produce equality, and demonstrating in lunch counters did not give people money to buy a dinner."

It was at this time that it became especially clear that de facto segregation and subtle racism were tied to our most fundamental socioeconomic institutions. More Negroes were unemployed in 1964 than in 1954. The unemployment gap between the races was wider. The relative income of Negroes had risen in the decade of the 50's, but not in the 1960's. A large percentage of Negro workers remained in jobs of the unskilled category — those most vulnerable to automation.

Now the problems of racism became very subtle. Again from Robert Carter: "This is an urban problem, not as crystal clear as other civil rights problems. The new problem is in urban centers in the North. Of course this problem is mixed up with problems of class, culture, subculture and so forth. It is not easy to tackle but we must do it."

In summary, then, we can say that in the spring of 1965 the Negro faced obstacles far more diffuse than the legal barriers he had been attacking. As Bayard Rustin wrote:

Automation, urban decay, de facto school segregation. These are the problems which, while conditioned by Jim Crow, do not vanish upon

its demise. They are more deeply rooted in our social-economic order; they are the result of the total society's failure to meet not only the Negro's needs, but human needs generally.

While the problem became more subtle, Negro leaders faced the additional problem of having generated the aspirations of Negro masses. That is, the decade of 1954 to 1964 can also be seen as the decade of the development of the "new Negro." The public image of the Negro American changed from the passive, downtrodden, Uncle Tom who hoped for integration to an active mass seeking to join American society. And more recently, there are those few who question whether or not they really want to join the society; they found after they had integrated the lunch counter they didn't like the menu.

While a new activism has begun to develop in the Negro masses, the civil rights leaders were estranged from, even afraid of, the urban masses. James Farmer wrote of the necessity for a mass movement, but sensed the potential violence of the urban Negro. The strategy of nonviolence that was effective against the lunch counters in the South may not be so effective with these new activists. Violence on the part of white tormentors in the South had not hurt the movement because the trained and disciplined small cadre of civil rights workers did not return the violence. This may not be so in the case of the urban northern Negro; he may well reciprocate.

Perhaps the best indication of the estrangement of the urban Negro is the experience of Bayard Rustin, who after the Harlem riots of 1964 found jobs for 120 teenagers in Harlem. A few weeks later, only twelve of them were still working. One boy told Rustin he could make more playing pool than the \$50 a week he had been earning; another could make more than his \$60 salary by selling "pot"; another turned down a four-year basketball scholarship to a major university because he preferred to be a "pimp."

While it is clear that the "movement" was unsure of what to do in the spring of 1965 it is also clear that it is difficult to speak about the "movement" as a single force in American society. There is a considerable amount of variation within it. Rustin, its "strategist," was appealing to the Negro leaders for the development of a mass political movement in coalition with labor. On the other hand, James Farmer and CORE, feeling the malaise of 1965, were looking for something else. Farmer's decision to resign from CORE and develop a new organization to fight

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\* Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., O

illiteracy was made in the spring of 1965, seven or eight months before it was announced. The NAACP continued to fight the subtle legal battle of de facto segregation and announced a program of "citizenship clinics" in the Negro community. The National Urban League with its program of self-help within the urban slum seemed in tune with the new phase of the movement. Only the young radicals of SNCC were not faced with the dilemma of 1965 because they continued to fight segregation in the South, where more than half the Negro Americans remained.

Rustin has written the best summary of the status of the movement in 1965: "The civil rights movement is evolving from a protest movement into a full-fledged *social* movement—an evolution calling its very name into question. It is now concerned not merely with removing the barriers to full opportunity but with achieving the fact of *equality*." James Farmer, writing in 1966 after the Moynihan controversy, said,

There have been great gains in job opportunities and educational opportunities for Negroes over the last few years and with organizations like CORE demanding justice, these opportunities will continue to expand. But we can no longer evade the knowledge that most Negroes will not be helped by equal opportunity. These are staggering problems for which the traditional CORE program of anti-discrimination is ill-equipped. We are now seeking new techniques and emphasis that will serve not only today's Negro masses but also tomorrow's teeming millions.

#### *The Government and Civil Rights, Spring 1965*

"To move a nation, a president has first to have the nation's ear. . . ." \* Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. suggests that a major problem for any administration is to generate popular support for any program that it wishes to initiate. Schlesinger's discussion of the early Kennedy administration leaves one with a feeling of a country with an ambiguous malady and no national economic collapse or war to move it into action: "Kennedy's was an invisible and intangible crisis and the nation had elected him president by the slimmest of margins."

An analogous situation in connection with civil rights existed in Washington in 1965 when it became clear that the voting rights bill would be passed. With legal equality now on the

\* Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., *One Thousand Days* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1965).

law books there was a fear that popular support of the civil rights movement would diminish.

The difference between the Johnson and the Kennedy administration can be seen in the different strategies each used in developing a public issue and generating popular support. Unlike Johnson, Kennedy "communicated a deeply critical attitude toward the ideas and institutions which American society had come in the 50's to regard with enormous self-satisfaction." Kennedy had a pervasive effect on the national mood which had left for Johnson a "radical critique of American society."

In contrast, Johnson with the wide margin of votes that he received in 1964 had used the strategy of developing a "consensus image" in order to push his administrative programs. He wanted to be President of "all the people"; yet it was clear that the coalition that elected him in 1964, an important part of which was the Negro vote, had within it major conflicts. The Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party not only gained recognition at Atlantic City but in its rejection of compromise gave the Johnson Administration a stinging indication of how real and overt was the conflict with the civil rights movement. Unlike the War on Poverty, the civil rights movement began outside of the government and had since its inception been beyond governmental control.

There is little question that Bayard Rustin and Tom Kahn are correct in suggesting that much of Johnson's "place in history" will be determined by the demands made upon his administration by the civil rights movement.\* Because of this pressure, he has been able to move in areas that otherwise would have been impossible even if they had been desired by the administration.

But, having reacted to the movement's demands for a decade, the government had learned that it was impossible to satiate the new Negro American. For each demand that was met another was made. Something had to be done by the Administration, not only to insure equality of the Negro American, but also so the government would not continue to be merely a "reacting" force. To quote one government source, "We could never catch those guys — the only thing to do is to get ahead of them." Another government source said that much of the Howard speech was designed to "leap frog the movement." And another, a man

\* Bayard Rustin and Tom Kahn, "Civil Rights." *Commentary*, Vol. 39, No. 6 [June 1965].

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primarily identified with the civil rights group in the government, said of the Howard speech, "Johnson had, more than any President, come out very strong, probably as strong as a President could be expected to, in the civil rights area. But the Howard speech went beyond this and surprised everyone."

One can imagine that men in the Administration, after seeing the Voting Rights Bill of 1965 passed through Congress, would begin to sit back and believe that the job had been done. But, if nothing else the 1964 Civil Rights Bill taught the Administration (1) that the passing of the civil rights bills did not solve the problem of discrimination in American society, and (2) that as strong as the 1964 bill might have been, it did little to reduce the amount of conflict between the government and the "movement." Thus it was clear in the spring of 1965 that the passing of the voting rights bill would not solve the problem of discrimination nor would it achieve consensus. That spring marked the time when the government began to seriously look around for an answer to the question of what to do next. High officials realized that laws would not solve the problem; and they were feeling around for some way to move toward a next step that would make it possible for the Negro Americans to realize the gains that the laws made possible.

In addition to the realization of limitations to the legal apparatus as an effective force in the final solution of the civil rights problem, there was also realization of the weakness, if not the lack, of a bureaucracy to deal effectively with civil rights matters. This was particularly true for those aspects of civil rights that involve social and economic aspects of the Negro's position in American society. As within the movement, the government was beginning to realize that the civil rights laws and the Supreme Court would not produce equality or consensus. A new administration policy had to be developed if the task was to be accomplished, but there was little or no bureaucratic or administrative apparatus designed to tackle social and economic problems in their racial manifestations. Perhaps the best indications of these difficulties are the number of civil rights agencies that have been developed within the government and the shifting of responsibilities among them.

It was in this atmosphere that Moynihan first introduced the White House staff to the ideas that were later to be written down in the "Moynihan Report." Long before the report was in its final form, Moynihan discussed his views with people in

the Administration and found his listeners anxious for new ideas. The report itself fitted an existing need within the Administration. It gave the Administration a specific target and a specific means to measure the effectiveness of existing or new programs aimed at the pathologies of the urban slums. It is little wonder that after distributing the paper, Moynihan received very positive feedback from high administrative officials — “Pat, I think you’ve got it.”

The liaison between the government and the civil rights groups had come a long way since Franklin Roosevelt’s White House cook provided the main link between the two, but the easy and frequent interaction at high levels that exists between business, or labor, or other pressure groups and the White House was still not in existence. For their part, recent administrations had been reluctant to develop close relations for fear of stimulating demands that could not be met. The rights groups had a comparable reluctance; too much camaraderie might be taken for “Uncle Tomism” particularly since it was not likely to lead to significant changes in law or more vigorous government enforcement of existing law. The Johnson Administration had settled on a kind of symbolic liaison — from time to time, the President would talk with the top civil rights leaders or call them on the telephone and tell them how much he hoped to accomplish with them and how much he needed their help. But beneath this, the elaborate staff linkages between pressure groups and White House that exist in other areas simply did not exist.

In such a context, the rights groups were distinctly nervous about the President’s vigorous utterances on civil rights (“We Shall Overcome”). If the President succeeded in persuading the public, including the Negro public, that he was now in charge of the civil rights movement it could only weaken their already small influence, particularly because they had no compensatory power base in the Congress. This was the civil rights manifestation of the “benign Machiavellianism” of the Johnson Administration. By embracing the movement figuratively (and its leaders physically), the President maximized his own options in action and minimized theirs. The Moynihan Report and the controversy it created were eventually pressed into the service of this strategy.

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