# CRISIS IN BLACK AND WHITE

Charles E. Silberman

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TO *Arlene*

to whose care, wisdom and patience every page bears witness,
this book is dedicated in love and gratitude.

# FOREWORD

A book like this is born in debt—the product of a union between journalism and scholarship. There are some, I know, who regard such a union as illicit; but living in both worlds, I have come to regard the union as invaluable. Scholarship has a dedication to the search for truth which the journalist needs; journalism has a passion for the relevant and the immediate which the scholar needs. The journalist is sometimes too impatient with the scholar's concern for substantiation; the scholar sometimes fails to remember what the journalist can never forget—namely that life can never wait until all the evidence is in, that important decisions must always be made on the basis of incomplete information. I have tried to combine the best attributes of the disciplines I have learned as a social scientist and as a journalist. There is a certain arrogance, I suppose, in any white man presuming to generalize, as I have done in the pages that follow, about how Negroes think and what they are likely to do; but the present situation demands that black and white understand each other. I have tried my best to achieve that understanding, and to help others to it. I have sought truth wherever it can be found—in novels and plays, newspapers and magazines, as well as in treatises in history, sociology, and psychology; and in conversation at every hour of the day or night. My debts therefore are almost too many to mention; as James Stephen once wrote, "Originality does not consist in saying what no one has ever said before, but in saying exactly what you think yourself." I have said what I think throughout; my hope is not that all will agree with me, but that all will find my meaning clear.

I owe a profound debt to my colleagues and editors at *Fortune* magazine, for the book is a direct outgrowth of an as-

signment I received nearly three years ago in the course of planning a series of articles on "The Public Business." We agreed that at least one article in the series should deal with the Problem of the City, and that the most pressing problem involved people rather than real estate; as an earlier *Fortune* series on "The Changing Metropolis" had pointed out, experience with public housing and urban renewal made it clear that poverty, and the social pathology associated with it, stemmed from something more fundamental than bad housing. The first working title for my article, therefore, was "Urban Squalor." As I studied and thought about the assignment, it appeared that there were several problems of urban poverty, but that the most pressing, as well as the most permanent, involved the difficulties recent migrants to the city have in adjusting to urban life; the working title was changed to "The New Immigrants." It did not take much more study to establish the fact that the difficulties the largest and most recent group of migrants were having stemmed less from their newness to the city than from their color. Indeed, the more I probed, the more apparent it became that just about *every* urban problem was bound up in some way with the problems of race and of racism. The result was "The City and the Negro," published in the March 1962 *Fortune*. I wish to thank Time Incorporated, publishers of *Fortune*, and in particular Brooke Alexander, Assistant to the Publisher of *Fortune*, for permission to quote from that article and from "The Businessman and the Negro" (*Fortune*, September 1963), as well as for permission to use material gathered in the course of preparing those articles.

My debt to Duncan Norton-Taylor, Managing Editor of *Fortune*, and Max Ways, Associate Managing Editor, is deeper and more difficult to express. The original article in *Fortune* would not have been possible without the encouragement and freedom they gave me to strike out in journalistically virgin territory; the favorable reception the article engendered, which stimulated the desire to expand it into a book, owes very much to their wise and subtle editing. I am grateful, also, for their invaluable criticisms of the first draft of this book. I am doubly indebted to Mr. Norton-Taylor and

to Hedley Donovan, Editorial Director of Time Incorporated, for their graciousness in giving me the time, at considerable inconvenience to themselves, to research and write this book. I was able to utilize the time they provided because of generous support from the Public Affairs Division of the Ford Foundation, which gave a research grant to Columbia University on my behalf. I wish to thank Dr. Paul Ylvisaker, director of the Public Affairs Division, for his encouragement and in particular for his generosity in giving me complete freedom to bite the hand that fed me. I am indebted also to Dr. Clifford L. Lord, Dean of the School of General Studies of Columbia University, and Professor Harold Barger, chairman of the Department of Economics, for their interest and encouragement.

In the course of researching and writing this book, I traveled the length and breadth of the country and talked to more people than I can acknowledge. I am particularly indebted, however, to Saul D. Alinsky, who opened my eyes to a world of which I had been only dimly aware, and who shared his wisdom and insight and his passion for justice in innumerable meetings, phonecalls, and letters. I owe a great debt, also, to Mrs. Mary Burch for her friendship and for her judgment on a host of matters both big and small; to Dr. Hylan Lewis and Dr. Martin Deutsch, for sharing the fruits of their research and their encyclopedic knowledge, and for giving me the benefits of their criticisms of my first draft; to Evelio Grillo, a superb teacher and a good friend; to Henry Saltzman and Dr. Charles T. Leber, Jr., for answering countless questions and providing invaluable advice; to Margery L. Gross, a resourceful, indefatigable, and wise research assistant; to Judith Bardacke, who performed the prodigious feat of deciphering my handwriting and my erratic typing in addition to tracking down facts, books, magazines, and journals; and to two colleagues and friends: Lawrence A. Mayer, whose catholic taste in reading and energy in clipping brought innumerable facts, articles, and opinions to my attention, and Mary Grace, whose unerring taste and sense of style contributed greatly to whatever literary distinction this book may have.

I should like to express my thanks also to a number of other people who shared their knowledge with me and who gave me access to their unpublished papers and files: Professor Morroe Berger, Professor Kenneth B. Clark, Professor Lawrence A. Cremin, David Danzig, Professor Dan W. Dodson, Leslie W. Dunbar, Professor G. Franklin Edwards, Professor Nathan Glazer, Mrs. Eunice Grier, Rabbi Abraham Joshua Heschel, Herbert Hill, Jacob Landers, Professor C. Eric Lincoln, Dr. John Henry Martin, Dr. Daniel Schreiber, and Professor Harry Sharp. I am indebted also to those Negro leaders who gave me time from their always hectic schedules: among them, Roy Wilkins and Dr. John A. Morsell of the NAACP; Whitney Young and Guichard Paris of the National Urban League; James Farmer of CORE; Rev. Martin Luther King and Rev. Ralph Abernathy of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference; Minister Malcolm X of the Muslim Mosque Inc., and Representative Adam Clayton Powell.

I wish to pay special tribute, moreover, to my beloved wife, Arlene Silberman, who put aside her own writing and teaching to act as research assistant, editorial adviser, conscience, and gadfly, and who taught me the meaning of courage and compassion; this book is dedicated to her and would not have been possible without her. I owe a very great debt, also, to David, Ricky, Jeff, and Steven, my four best reasons for hope, who endured eighteen months of paternal neglect without complaint. Nor could I conclude without acknowledging my deep indebtedness to my late father, Seppy I. Silberman, whose own life exemplified the Prophetic ideals of justice, honor, and reverence for God and for one's fellow man.

I hope that this book will serve at least as partial repayment of my intellectual and moral debts.

*Freeport, N.Y.*
*March 1964*

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# I

# INTRODUCTION: THE STORMY PRESENT

> The dogmas of the quiet past are inadequate to the stormy present . . . Let us disenthrall ourselves.
>
> —ABRAHAM LINCOLN

This book is addressed to my fellow Americans, both black and white. It will, I hope, offend and anger both groups, for it is impossible to tell the truth about race relations in the United States without offending and angering men of both colors. The truth is too terrible, on both sides, and we are all too accustomed to the veil of half truths with which black men and white men cloak the subject. Neither white nor Negro Americans have been willing to face, or even to admit, the truth.

But the truth must be faced—now, while there is still time. It is never too soon for a nation to save itself; it can be too late. For a hundred years, white Americans have clung tenaciously to the illusion that if everyone would just sit still —if "agitators" would just stop agitating—time alone would solve the problem of race. It hasn't, and it never will. For time, as Rev. Martin Luther King points out, is neither good

nor bad; it is neutral. What matters is how time is used. Time has been used badly in the United States—so badly that not much of it remains before race hatred completely poisons the air we breathe. America, as the Swedish social scientist Gunnar Myrdal warned twenty years ago, can no longer wait and see; she "must do something big, and do it soon."

But do what?—that's the rub. The prescription to "do something" appeals to the pragmatic bent of most Americans. But sheer busy-ness is not enough. Solving the problem of race is not only the most urgent piece of public business facing the United States today; it is also the most difficult. In approaching it, public officials and civic leaders might do well to ponder the traditional warning of mathematics teachers: don't worry so much about getting the right answer; what counts is setting up the right problem.

The prescription is easier to state than to fill, however. "American whites and blacks," the late Richard Wright wrote in 1945, "both possess deep-seated resistance against 'the Negro problem' being presented, even verbally, in all of its hideous fullness, in all of the totality of its meaning. The many and various commissions, councils, leagues, committees, and organizations of an interracial nature have constantly diluted the problem, blurred it, injected foggy moral or sentimental notions into it." The result is that a number of myths obscure the vision and misdirect the energies of those who are working toward improvement. For example, Northern white liberals frequently regard race as a peculiarly Southern problem that would be solved by desegregating Southern schools, buses, lunchrooms, and the like. Other liberals, particularly black liberals, see race as predominantly a white man's problem that would be solved easily if whites would just stop discriminating. A good many white Americans, on the other hand, insist that white prejudice and discrimination would disappear if Negroes would only "behave themselves"—*i.e.*, if they would just adopt white middle-class standards of behavior and white middle-class goals of

economic success. Like all myths, each of these contains elements of the truth; but as partial truths, they obscure as much as they clarify, and they permit, may even encourage, Americans to avoid the painful facts and harsh decisions.

White Northerners have been able to persuade themselves that racism is a peculiarly Southern phenomenon in part, at least, because their contacts with Negroes have been infrequent and casual. Yet a hundred thirty years ago, that most astute observer of the American character, Alexis de Tocqueville, observed that in the Northern states, "slavery recedes, but the prejudice to which it has given birth is immovable." Indeed, Tocqueville reported that anti-Negro prejudice seemed stronger in the states that had abolished slavery than in those where it still existed, and that the free states "do what they can to render their territory disagreeable to the Negroes as a place of residence." An English Quaker, visiting Philadelphia in 1849, wrote that there was no city in the United States in which "hatred of the colored population prevails more than in the city of brotherly love." (Five race riots had occurred in the preceding seventeen years, in which Negro churches, meeting halls, and homes were burned to the ground.) As late as 1869, four years after the end of the Civil War and only one year before the ratification of the Fifteenth Amendment, the state of New York refused to grant Negroes the right to vote; four states in the free and open West actually barred Negroes from entering. Woodrow Wilson, elected President of the United States in 1912 on a platform pledging the "New Freedom" and guaranteeing "fair and just treatment" for all, made it clear as soon as he took office that "all" referred only to whites. Negro employees of the Treasury Department were assigned to separate rooms and forbidden to use the lunch tables and toilet facilities they had always shared with white employees. When a Negro delegation called on the President to remind him of his campaign promises, Wilson lost his temper,

declaring that he would not be high-pressured. And, in 1919, one year after the close of the war which Americans fought to make the world safe for democracy, a Negro boy swam across an imaginary line separating blacks from whites at a Chicago beach, and thereby touched off a five-day race riot. Fifteen whites and twenty-three Negroes were killed, and a hundred seventy-eight whites and three hundred forty-two Negroes were injured during the fighting.

Thus the history of the Negro in the North is stained with prejudice. But the Union Army's victory in the Civil War gave Northerners a sense of moral superiority that has excused their own prejudice and dissolved their sense of responsibility. Just as the South convinced itself that it "knew" the Negro, and that the Negro was happy "in his place," so the North deluded itself with the notion that it had set the Negro free. Some Northerners still think that "their" victory excuses the de facto discrimination practiced in the North. In commenting editorially on the hundredth anniversary of the Emancipation Proclamation, for example, the Long Island newspaper *Newsday* warned Negroes to drop their militant demands and accept with gratitude whatever gifts of freedom were handed to them. The North, *Newsday* reminded Negroes with acerbity, "is acutely aware of its own shortcomings, but equally aware that its soldiers freed the slaves." (*Newsday* apparently is unaware that Negroes fought in the Union Army.)

The fact of the matter, as the abolitionist Wendell Phillips pointed out at the time, is that "The Emancipation Proclamation freed the slave but ignored the Negro." For a time after the Civil War, it appeared that the Federal Government might insist on a thorough reformation of Southern society to guarantee the freed men equality. But, in 1877, as part of a deal to elect Rutherford B. Hayes President, the Republicans agreed to the withdrawal of Federal troops, the dissolution of the Freedmen's Bureau, and a general acquiescence in the white South's demand that the Negro be

restored to his proper "place." And so the North washed its hands of the whole question and proceeded to look away from a principal fact of life in the United States.

White Northerners can ignore the Negro no longer; his physical presence alone makes this impossible. Increasingly, Negroes are becoming residents of the Northern city rather than of the rural South. Indeed, the explosive increase in the Negro population of Northern cities is one of the most dramatic social changes in urban history. Between 1940 and 1960, the Negro population living outside the eleven states of the Old Confederacy increased two and a quarter times, from under four million people in 1940 to over nine million in 1960—roughly half the total Negro population in the United States. Most of this increase was concentrated in the central cities of the twelve largest United States metropolitan areas;* these now hold a quarter to a third of all American Negroes. In two cities, Washington, D.C., and Newark, New Jersey, Negroes constitute a majority of the population. In Detroit, Baltimore, Cleveland, and St. Louis, Negroes represent one-third or more of the population, and in a number of others, *e.g.*, Chicago, Philadelphia, Cincinnati, Indianapolis, Oakland, they constitute well over one-fourth. Even at the height of European immigration to the United States, no ethnic group ever multiplied as rapidly, or made up as large a proportion of the big cities' population.

Thus "the Negro problem" is no longer hidden on the plantations of the Mississippi Delta nor in the sleepy towns of "the Old South," nor even in the bustling cities of "the new South." On the contrary, the most serious social problem confronting America today is to be found in the heart of the big cities that are the nation's ornaments: New York, Philadelphia, Washington, Chicago, Detroit, Milwaukee, San Francisco, Los Angeles—and in a score of smaller cities

* New York, Los Angeles, Chicago, Philadelphia, Detroit, San Francisco-Oakland, Boston, Pittsburgh, St. Louis, Washington, Cleveland, Baltimore.

like New Haven, Newark, Gary, San Diego. For there is not a city of any importance in the United States that does not now have a large and rapidly growing "Negro problem."

And so the North is finally beginning to face the reality of race. In the process, it is discovering animosities and prejudices that had been hidden in the recesses of the soul. For a brief period following the demonstrations in Birmingham in the spring of 1963—a very brief period—it appeared that the American conscience had been touched; a wave of sympathy for the Negro and of revulsion over white brutality seemed to course through the nation. But then the counterreaction set in, revealing a degree of anti-Negro prejudice and hatred that surprised even the most sophisticated observers. After interviewing whites from coast to coast, for example, the journalist Stewart Alsop and the public opinion expert Oliver Quayle reported in the *Saturday Evening Post* that "The white North is no more ready to accept genuine integration and real racial equality than the deep South." So strong and widespread was the prejudice they found that Alsop and Quayle concluded that for the moment at least "there is simply no way to reconcile the aspirations of the new generation of Negroes for real integration and true equality with the resistance to those aspirations of the majority of whites." Pollster Louis Harris, who sent interviewers all over the country for *Newsweek*, reached much the same conclusion. He found that "Whites, North and South, do not want the Negro living next door"; that "Most whites fear and shun social contact with Negroes"; and that "the white image of the Negro is . . . an implausible and contradictory caricature, half Stepin Fetchit—lazy, unwashed, shiftless, unambitious, slow-moving—and half Sportin' Life—cunning, lewd, flashy, strong, fearless, immoral, and vicious." Writing two months before President Kennedy's assassination, Harris estimated that the racial issue had driven some 4.5 million white voters away from Mr. Kennedy.

It's not only the "great unwashed" who are affected by