# THE IMPOSSIBLE REVOLUTION
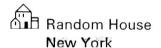
## PHASE 2:
## BLACK POWER
## AND THE
## AMERICAN
## DREAM

### Lewis M. Killian

# THE IMPOSSIBLE REVOLUTION,
## Phase II

Black Power and the American Dream

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Random House
**New York**

# THE IMPOSSIBLE REVOLUTION,
## Phase II

*To my children Kit, Lew, and John,*
*with the wish that their world*
*will be better than I predict.*

# Foreword

In the first edition of this powerful and troubling book, Lewis M. Killian viewed with unhappiness the future of what was then called "The Negro Revolt." He worried especially that the then-strident call for black power did not really signal a new beginning. He speculated that this new mood in the black communities would exacerbate the white backlash and contribute to the end of America's second period of Reconstruction.

Relating the background and history of black protest, the author touched, time and again, on four most significant areas of concern for black Americans: psychological well-being, political recognition, economic security, and social status. He documented the ebb and flow of the various civil rights movements that had sought, each in its own way, to come to terms with these matters. He specified the achievements of and paid special homage to "the forgotten heroes," those civil rights leaders, from William Burghardt Du Bois to Martin Luther King, who had paved the way for the struggles of the sixties. He indicated the reactions of Americans —white and black, northern and southern, conservative and liberal —to their efforts. Speaking out on current issues, Professor Killian laid bare the depth of the cancer of racism pervading our society and the increasingly desperate sense among blacks that the time had come to stop turning the other cheek. "Look out whitey, Black Power's goin' get your mama" was the sort of battle cry that had replaced the more integrationist "We Shall Overcome."

Killian's prognosis was a dire one. Black people in America, he argued, suffered in a manner unmatched by any other ethnic group, and white people had done little to alleviate that suffering. Our society itself he viewed as the source of the disease and black power he saw as a last-ditch attempt to eradicate it.

It was a desperate attempt indeed and Killian feared that blacks would be unable to translate their rhetoric of estrangement into a remedy that would cure the disease without killing the patient. In his opinion, there was no easy way out of the dilemma. Old techniques had failed because they didn't help those who needed help most, the members of the black underclass. The new techniques advocated by the then-active spokesmen for the cause, Stokely Carmichael and H. Rap Brown, would fail, he predicted, because they would inevitably alienate those whites whose continued support was necessary to make the transition from segregation to true freedom.

The first edition of *The Impossible Revolution?* offered no solutions. Nor does this edition. Killian is not unmoved by the trauma he describes. He is simply unwilling to offer the kind of easy answer that too often greets the reader in the final chapter of a book on this most important of all our domestic problems.

This second edition is not a rewrite of the earlier one; the bulk of the first edition has been left intact. A new introduction describes what has happened during the years since the question emerged of how "possible" the black revolution actually was. New material gives substance and detail to the events of the recent past and offers new views of what the author calls "The Second Phase of the Black Revolution." Killian discusses the visible signs of black progress but warns that the reader should not construe these as indications that all is well or that he was wrong in his earlier pessimistic predictions despite his wishes to the contrary.

Killian is impressed with two recent successes of blacks: their greater psychic well-being, shown by a far more positive sense of selfhood, and their greater political clout, shown in a variety of ways, from the rising number of black mayors to the potential, if

not yet realized, strengths of black caucuses. He acknowledges certain gains in the economic arena and in social spheres for some blacks but feels that these are, by and large, exaggerated and exploited by those who say, "See how far we have come." Poor blacks remain poor and *nouveaux riches* blacks, like *nouveaux riches* anybodies, find themselves in a very precarious position in these days of stagflation. Moreover, in terms of neighborhood and school integration, the traditional measure of progress, there has been hardly any forward movement at all. In many communities in the North as well as in the South there seems to have been considerable backsliding.

The revolution has cooled. The violent phase has subsided, Killian writes, not because the racial crisis passed, but because "white power has demonstrated that open black defiance was extremely dangerous and often suicidal. The ranks of the most dramatically defiant black leaders were decimated by imprisonment, emigration, and assassination." Fragmentation from within and a certain amount of co-optation from without (which Killian calls "institutionalization") also took place, serving to further weaken and contain the movement.

Killian suggests that our whole society, blacks included, seems to be in a "holding pattern" today, with no one quite knowing what will happen next. There are some clues, however, in the shifting activities of those still absorbed in the struggle. Perhaps the most significant of these is the move for "group rights," which acts on an ideology that threatens the liberal view of meritocracy and frightens many nonblack minority persons (especially the so-called "white ethnics") into positions of defensive pluralism. Ironically, this represents a sort of throwback to an earlier time in our history when "bloc power" was the name of the political game and it was through collective action—from ward-heeling to lobbying in the hallowed halls of Congress—that power was most effectively asserted. The author discusses this, noting that "the next phase of the black revolution will demand recognition of the black community as a political entity with power that is not dependent on white goodwill."

After an examination of the issues of black consciousness, violent and nonviolent strategies, pluralism in America, and the meaning of Third-World politics (particularly the relevance of détente with Communist China and the new strength of the Arab bloc), Killian concludes that the revolution is not dead but merely dormant. He argues that "all of these themes add up to the most radical rejection of, and challenge to, America as a white man's society yet posed." The question remains as to whether such a potential threat can ever be successfully carried out.

All told, Killian appears only slightly more optimistic in 1974 than he was in 1968. And this clearly muted optimism depends upon the extent of American society's willingness to recognize how far there is still to go and its willingness to do something other than speak of gradualism instead of genuine change. "To subscribe to the general principle of racial equality is one thing; to pay the personal price in terms of sharing traditionally white-held advantages is quite another." And that, as Killian notes, is where the problem really lies.

The first edition of *The Impossible Revolution?* was hailed as a masterful dissection of this country's racial ills. Some may disagree with Professor Killian's new interpretations and analyses—there are places where I do—but few will claim that he hasn't, once again, offered a literate, humane, and moving view of the continuing struggle for racial justice in the United States.

*Peter I. Rose*

*August 1974*

# Preface

Since the appearance of the original edition of *The Impossible Revolution?*, I have often been asked by students and colleagues, "Are you still pessimistic about the future of black-white relations in the United States?" This second edition is my answer to that question. The times still seem ominous in spite of the façade of peace and progress that overlays the yet-unresolved racial crisis.

Once again I acknowledge my indebtedness to my patient, ever-supportive wife, Kay, and to Peter Rose, Consulting Editor. As well I wish to thank my colleague Michael Lewis, who not only offered suggestions for the improvement of the additions to the volume but lent moral support when my pessimism seemed oner-ous even to me. Martha J. Martin deserves my special thanks for being able to transcribe my hand-written first draft into a legible typescript. Robert Toye, editorial assistant at Random House, pro-vided valuable assistance.

L. M. K.

*August 1974*

# Introduction

The final, last-minute changes in the original edition of this book were made in the early autumn of 1967. This new edition, with a new concluding chapter, "The Second Phase of the Black Revolution," constitutes another look at *The Impossible Revolution?* in the light of the many, often bewildering, changes in race relations in the past six years. The first seven chapters, only slightly revised, offer a socio-historical analysis of the shift of the ethos of the black protest movement from civil rights to black power.

In the new conclusion I propose that the "impossible revolution" is not only possible but has already begun. To many observers, however, neither the racial crisis nor the reactions of black Americans to persistent inequality in 1974 appear as grave problems as they were in 1968.

At the time of the writing of the first edition, the black protest movement appeared to be at a crossroads. In one direction lay the continued pursuit of assimilation through the integration of individual blacks who could measure up to white American standards of achievement. This option meant "working within the system" nonviolently and taking maximum advantage of the new civil rights laws. In the other direction lay the pluralism suggested in the term "black nationalism," involving rejection of white America as a reference group and a readiness to use any means necessary to promote black pride and black self-determination.

Many observers, both white and black, were proclaiming the death of the civil rights movement and the decline of integration

as a goal for blacks. To this writer it appeared that, with the rise of the black power movement, black protest had moved far enough along the path of pluralism to evoke a widespread white definition of it as "revolutionary" in the sense that it threatened basic traditional American values. Encountering adamant and often violent white resistance to the actual fulfillment of their newly defined rights, black Americans seemed to be relying more and more on coercive public protest rather than on conventional politics. Hence, a black revolution, engendered by the nature of the white opposition to the initially legal and peaceful tactics of blacks, did not seem impossible at all. Instead it was argued that the black protest movement had already entered a revolutionary phase, which would soon escalate.

Indeed, the first edition of *The Impossible Revolution?* appeared almost simultaneously with the *Report of the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders,* which contained dire warnings of racial polarization—of "one nation, divided." Stokely Carmichael and H. Rap Brown were still making headlines as advocates of the reckless pursuit of black power. Martin Luther King, Jr., was struggling to maintain his position as the foremost black leader, while increasing numbers of blacks were rejecting his philosophy of nonviolence.

By the end of the decade of the 1960s, both the sense of racial crisis and the threat of the "impossible revolution" had diminished greatly. Following the murder of King in April 1968, black rioting in the cities reached its high tide. The vacuum left by his death was not filled by a new leader of comparable stature. Instead, black leadership became more diffuse and the movement more fragmented. Just as the conduct of the Vietnam War had preempted the concern of the federal government under Lyndon B. Johnson, demonstrations against continued United States involvement in that conflict replaced black protest in public attention. To the dismay of many blacks, the repressive tactics used by the authorities against white student protesters, particularly at Kent State, aroused far greater public concern than did the use of official violence against blacks throughout the country. The "law and

order" that Richard Nixon and Spiro Agnew promised "the silent majority" became directed as much at long-haired white youth as at black protesters. By the time of the 1972 presidential election, neither the continued social inequality of blacks nor the threat of black protest loomed large enough to be a major campaign issue. Attention in the matter of race relations centered on the issue of bussing to achieve racial balance in the schools.

The subsidence of the kind of black protest that had evoked such alarm in the 1960s might be taken to signify that black progress had been so great in those years that a racial crisis no longer existed and that the black protest movement had returned to the path of peaceful pursuit of integration. This notion has restored the liberal optimism that was so badly shaken by the brief ascendancy of the black power movement.

A less sanguine view of the relative quiet on the racial front holds that the movement has not moved decisively upon either course but stands confused and divided, wavering between assimilationism and pluralism, tentatively exploring each. It holds that both the civil rights movement and the black power movement left important legacies that will affect the nature of the next upsurge in black protest. For acceptance of the premise that the racial crisis still exists but has dropped from public attention suggests that there will be another such upsurge, despite the fact that many of the projections advanced in the first edition have not yet materialized.

The prediction that the end of massive United States involvement in Vietnam would serve as an accelerator for the black revolution has not been borne out by events in the period following President Nixon's proclamation of "peace with honor." The fate of the many black veterans of that conflict remains to be seen, however. There are indications that many of them have encountered great difficulty in obtaining employment after being discharged. They remain a potential source of recruits for violent protest. Moreover, the abandonment of the draft for a volunteer army has increased the proportion of blacks in the army. This increase comes during a time when the success of the army's program of racial integration has been challenged by growing polariza-

tion of the races. "Fraggings" of white officers in Vietnam, black power organizations among soldiers serving in Germany, and incidents of interracial violence in camps both at home and abroad have revealed that growing black consciousness in civilian life has its counterpart in the armed forces. The question may be raised as to whether the American military will remain a bulwark against black revolutionary action.

The effect of the economic situation as an accelerator remains to be seen. The American economy is in a state of uncertainty that baffles even erstwhile optimistic economists, with inflation reaching a crisis level, while unemployment remains at about five percent— and double that for blacks. In 1974 the nation seems closer to the brink of another depression than at any time since the 1930s, and black workers can be pretty sure that the rule of "last hired, first fired" will continue to apply to them.

Although the black power movement has lapsed into disorganization and inactivity, its influence has survived in an emphasis on blackness in many aspects of the lives of black Americans. In the realm of politics, black power has been translated into "bloc power" in areas where black voters are sufficiently concentrated to determine the outcome of elections of congressmen as well as of state representatives and local officials. Yet in both 1968 and 1972 black influence on the outcome of the presidential election was less than it had been in the past, and in both years the proportion of eligible blacks who voted declined, except in the South. Thus, it is still not certain that the revolutionary force of black power has been safely diverted into the channels of conventional political activity.

The black power movement did not completely supplant the civil rights movement. Instead, the tension between pluralistic and assimilationist goals has become a constant and perplexing part of the racial scene in the United States. It is suggested in the present edition that it is the pluralistic overtones of black power that will most strongly affect black-white relations in the remaining years of the twentieth century.

The psychological appeal of conflict to blacks, as oppressed people, has not been manifest in further mass uprisings. It may be

seen, however, in a new spirit of defiance among many blacks, displayed in ways ranging from aggressiveness in interpersonal relations with whites to acts of terrorism committed by small groups such as the Black Liberation Army.

One projection that has moved closer to fruition than was expected is that police and military forces have been strengthened as if a black revolution did constitute a genuine threat in the United States. The rapid decline in the intensity of civil disorders after 1968 and the shift of the Black Panther party to less defiant tactics can be ascribed as readily to the threat of quick and effective repression as to the alleviation of conditions in the black ghettos.

Events on the international scene are still reflected both in the relationships between black and white Americans and in ideological debates among blacks. The first edition notes that such a debate developed among black leaders over support of the American military effort in Vietnam. Since the end of that conflict, some blacks have become involved in another bitter controversy with other blacks and with the Jewish community over United States support of Israel. Thus, identification with Third-World peoples still challenges the allegiance of blacks to the United States.

As was true of the first edition, the chapter entitled "The Second Phase of the Black Revolution" reflects a search for the most foreboding, potentially conflictive aspects of black-white relations. The peace that prevails today, as compared to the disorders that were so widespread in 1968, makes the prospect of racial conflict intense enough to be perceived as a black revolution seem less plausible. Yet it should be remembered that, while civil disorders declined after 1969, so also did the ranking of the eradication of racial inequality in the nation's priorities. The election of Richard M. Nixon to the presidency in 1968 confirmed the end of the "second Reconstruction." While desegregation and affirmative action have opened many doors previously closed to blacks, massive segregation still exists and is even increasing in the centers of the great cities. Although the color line has shifted, its persistence cannot be denied; the United States is not yet color-blind. The frantic efforts made in the 1960s to pacify angry blacks by real or token concessions have been replaced by gradualism and "benign