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Fear of the Police

BY JAMES BALDWIN

I HAVE LIVED through two race riots in Harlem, the riot of 1935 and the riot of 1943, and part of my family and many of my friends are living there now. I may, therefore, perhaps be pardoned a weary sharpness of exasperation when I observe the general reaction to the present disorder—which any citizen of Harlem could have foreseen and which many of us, with no help whatever from the municipality or the government—and still less from the American citizenry—did our best to avert.

The riots always have the same stubborn cause—the conditions of life in the ghetto. These are conditions which almost no white American is willing to imagine, and from which he deliberately averts his eyes. On the other hand, the citizens of the ghetto are exposed to the white world, and under the most intolerable conditions, every working day. This means that for Negroes the contrast between the black and white situations is perpetually and hideously vivid. White people, wishing to deny the contrast, have no idea whatever, therefore, of the resulting tension of fury and bitterness.

Lacking this, they are always reduced to a bewildered anger and guilt whenever the Negroes rise.

As for the fear which these uprisings evoke, it is not merely an objective fear, the fear, for example, of being physically attacked; it is a deeper fear, a sleeping fear which has been there all along, a fear of the Negroes' vengeance, or their will to vengeance, which then seizes on the objective disorder as a means of justifying injustice. This is why, in one of the most dangerous and lawless cities in the United States, the Negroes are immediately called upon to respect law and order. *Whose* law, one is compelled to ask, and *what* order?

There is a very good reason for the Negroes to hate the police in Harlem. Leaving aside the general level of their competence, which is abysmal, and their terror, which is so great as to be indistinguishable from cowardice, and which is responsible for their brutality—for they *are* brutal: They know no other way of coping with the forces to which they are exposed—their real role in Harlem is simply to corral and control the citizens of the ghetto and protect white business interests there. They certainly do not protect the lives or property of Negroes—I know people in my own family who, having been robbed three times in as many months, simply ceased reporting these robberies (for which, of course, no culprit was ever found; it would appear that Negroes are arrested for robbing white people) and took steps to protect themselves.

How can one be expected to respect the Law when it is overwhelmingly clear that the Law has no respect for you? And as for Order—are the citizens of Harlem seriously expected to become accomplices to that Order which locked them in the ghetto in the first place, and which, according to almost all available evidence, intends to keep them and their children there forever? I know that these are very grave statements, but they pertain to very grave questions that we face—or rather, alas, for the most part do not face.

The police become the immediate focus, especially under specific tension, of the ghetto's discontent, and it is by no means insignificant that the people of the ghetto, and especially the youth, know that the police are afraid of them. In 1935, if I remember correctly, the specific tension involved the question of whether or not Negroes would ever be hired as clerks in the five-and-dimes and other stores on 125th Street where Negroes helplessly spent, and spend, so much of their money; presently a policeman, or a plainclothesman, was accused of beating up a young Negro boy in one of these stores, and this was enough to set Harlem aflame.

EDITOR'S NOTE: *The 1935 riots actually were touched off by a rumor, not by an actual encounter between a policeman and a Negro boy.*

In 1943 the situation of the Negro soldier was a source of great anxiety and bitterness for everyone; presently a policeman was accused of shooting a Negro soldier in the back in the lobby of the Braddock Hotel.

These days it is the situation of Negro youth—which is another way of saying the future of the race—which obsesses everyone; no Negro has forgotten, nor yet recovered from, the bombing of the Sunday school in Birmingham; and, once again, it is the fact that a policeman had been accused of killing a Negro youth—in self-defense!—which pre-

resents the power to which they owe their suffering and their danger; and, therefore, no policy could be more calculated to bring about disaster than the augmentation of the police force as soon as a more than ordinary tension is in the air. The augmentation of the police force simply guarantees a stiffening of resistance and an immediate increase of hostility.

And, finally, the ghetto, as best it can, and using the only means open to it, vents its despair. Nor will the problem be solved or even seriously ameliorated by assigning black policemen to Harlem. They, too, will be working for the white power structure and will risk being even more hated than white policemen—to say nothing of the tensions that duty in Harlem must necessarily set up in a black policeman's breast and the ways which he will find of coping with this tension.

For the trouble in Harlem is simply that it is a captive and mainly miserable population in the middle of one of the most important cities of a wealthy and pretentious nation. It is one thing to be captive and hungry in a captive and hungry nation. It is quite another thing to be captive and hungry in a nation which so vociferously and relentlessly boasts of itself as being affluent and free.

Mr. J. Edgar Hoover has been vastly more successful in discovering Communists and criminals than he has been in discovering those responsible for the bombings in the Deep South—so that I have no doubt that he and his so highly esteemed Bureau will, during their investigation in Harlem, flush out criminals by the score, and Communists, possibly, by the dozen.

I don't, to my knowledge, know any Communists in Harlem, but I know a great many criminals—maids stealing from kitchens, boys janitors playing the numbers, junkies—but I suggest that he pay just a little attention to real estate boards and to landlords, to leave it only at that. It is grotesque and insulting, in any case, to suppose that race riots in Harlem are fomented by Communists.

They are, on the contrary, fomented by the American republic. Every Negro in America lives with the suspicion, which his daily life endlessly confirms, that his countrymen despise him—despise him so deeply and so helplessly, and from the very bottom of their hearts, that they will flee cities, as they do, and close libraries, parks, playgrounds, schools, and beaches, as indeed they do, rather than be contaminated by his presence.

One feels that they would pollute the very water one drinks and siphon off the air one breathes, if only they knew how. "The spirit of the South

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is the spirit of America": This has been said to me more than once, and, alas, alas, it is true. Or, as a black veteran of Mississippi work farms puts it: "It's the same plantation, all over the United States."

And what better proof is needed than the grotesque wrangle over a Civil Rights Bill, which should have been law a hundred years ago, and which yet remains, on many broken heads and by way of many broken lives, to be tested, and—hopefully!—one day to be enforced?

What does the rise of Governor Wallace, and, still more, the candidacy of Senator Goldwater, mean to a Negro, and what *can* it mean, except that his countrymen are determined to destroy him? It is late in the day to expect that the black citizens of the United States will yet once more trust to the good will of white Americans. It is scarcely possible, so runs his despairing reasoning, for the ill will of white than their good will has done already.

What is needed now is a determined and clearheaded assault on those forces responsible for this despair and our common danger. Who, for example, runs the South, and for whose benefit?

Who profits from Harlem, and by what mandate? To what forces and to what panic do we owe the extraordinary — extraordinary even in a country so enamored of the mediocre — phenomenon of Barry Goldwater?

In my view, these are the questions, and questions much harder than these, to which we must address ourselves if we hope ever to see peace or maturity or freedom in that country which arbitrarily calls itself America, but which actually occupies a small part of the American continent, and (in spite of Texas) a much smaller part of the globe. ■ ■

JAMES BALDWIN

Harlem-born and bred, author James Baldwin was in Paris working on a new novel when last summer's riots broke out in Harlem. He wrote this article a few days later for the *New York Post*. At 40, Baldwin is one of America's major writers. His latest works are *The Fire Next Time*, a book of essays, and the recent Broadway play, *Blues for Mister Charlie*. He also wrote the text for a new book of photographs by Richard Avedon, *Nothing Personal*, published in November. Last June, Baldwin's bitter childhood in Harlem was vividly portrayed on television in a special program called *My Childhood*.