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THE LONG HOT SUMMERS OF YESTERYEAR

By John A. Williams

Race rioting broke out in American cities as the nation drifted reluctantly into war. Scattered incidents developed into major outbreaks costing dozens of lives and extensive damage to property. Finally there came a long, hot, agonizing summer when racial violence moved from city to city, beginning in the South in the spring, reaching a midsummer crescendo in Northern cities, subsiding southward again in the fall. While crusading to extend the
blessings of democracy abroad, Americans were forced to contemplate the failings of democracy at home.

Americans shocked and surprised at the recent epidemic of urban race riots might not recognize the passage above as a description of the years 1917-1919 but it is. The point is that there is nothing new about racial violence in American cities. There is indeed a long history of race riots, going back at least to the 1820’s. Successive waves of riots resembling the current epidemic occurred in 1829-1842, 1862-1877, 1898-1908, 1917-1921, and 1942-1943. As they do today, Negroes furnished the majority of victims in the riots of every period, although it is only in recent times that their role in the violence can be construed as an aggressive one. White aggression against Negroes was far more frequently the case and seems to have occurred most often as a response to challenges to prevailing patterns of white social, economic, and political supremacy. Even today students will find little attention given to the subject in history texts, but recently historians have attempted to recover this “violent heritage” and to interpret its significance for the violent present.

The term “race riot” is a deceptively simple description of a complex event. In few instances has violence sprung from racial antagonism alone. Economic and political factors were also involved, while there was often a strong racial or ethnic component in much of the industrial and political violence of the past. Job competition between Negro and white workers helped to cause race riots in Cincinnati in 1829, New York in 1863 (where the political issue of the draft was also involved), Chicago in 1919, and Detroit in 1943. The conflict at Ford’s River Rouge plant near Detroit in the spring of 1941, usually reckoned to be the last of the great industrial riots dating back to 1877, pitted white union members against Negro strikebreakers imported by the company from the South. The riots that accompanied the “redemption” of Mississippi and other Southern states from Reconstruction in the 1870’s were in fact massacres perpetrated by whites against Negroes, but their well-organized and selective use of violence bore a close resemblance to the political riots staged by patriotic mobs in American cities before the American Revolution. Like the colonial patriots who used force to gain extra-constitutional rights against British imperial authority, the “Redeemers” resorted to violence to suppress a Negro political majority that they could not have defeated by conventional means. All of these incidents could

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be labelled race riots; they could also be called political or industrial riots. The choice of terms must be based on the observer’s estimate of which factor was the dependent variable, the one “cause” that set all the other causes of violence in motion.

Like “race,” the word “riot” does not lend itself to precise usage. Writers have used it to describe a variety of events involving anywhere from a half-dozen to several thousand men. Detroit’s first “race riot” in 1863 grew out of a frustrated attempt to lynch a Negro named William Faulkner. A successful lynching by a white mob at Omaha is usually included in the catalogue of 1919 riots, as is an insurrection by Negro sharecroppers and tenant farmers in rural Elaine, Arkansas. Individual crimes with racial implications — assault, murder, arson, bombing — have often preceded or accompanied mass violence. Even mass outbreaks of clearly riotous proportions are characterized by different patterns of behavior.

Historians and sociologists distinguish two general types of race riots in the American past: the “Southern-style” riot, very much akin to the frontier massacre or the European pogrom, in which white mobs attacked defenseless and usually unresisting Negroes; and the “Northern-style” riot, a two-sided conflict in which both groups have more or less equal intent and capacity to harm the other. The characteristic race riot of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was the “Southern-style” riot or pogrom. Negro resistance gradually turned intended pogroms into “Northern-style” affairs around the time of World War I, a pattern that prevailed until the 1940’s. Since then a third type of riot has evolved, a kind of insurrection, involving whites in Deep South cities and towns and Negroes in Northern ghettos, both of whom rage violently although unsuccessfully against official representatives of “outside” authority (and in the case of the Negroes against local symbols of white economic supremacy as well).

Like the venerable Southern institution of segregation, Southern-style race riots first developed in the urban North. So long as the overwhelming majority of Southern Negroes were subject to the discipline of slavery, any challenge to the predominant pattern of race relations had to come from the minority of free Negroes and escaped slaves who began to concentrate in Northern cities as early as the 1820’s. The Negro challenge came in part in the form of job competition on the waterfronts of seaport and river towns. But, primarily, it was the mere presence of Negroes, a novel thing in itself in such cities as Philadelphia, New York, Buffalo, Utica, Cincinnati, and Portsmouth, Ohio, that gave rise to a wave of riots between 1829 and 1842.
Behind the Cincinnati riot of 1829, one of the worst of the era, lay an influx of over two thousand Negroes and a campaign among whites to expel them in accordance with the provisions of Ohio's "black code." Preparations for peaceful expulsion were actually under way when a mob of several hundred whites decided to speed up the process by violence. For three days beginning on August 22 the mob terrorized the city's "Little Africa." Despite armed resistance by some Negroes and subsequent punishment of the assailants by municipal authorities, the intended lesson of the riot was not lost. Some eleven hundred Negroes fled the city for Canada during the next few months. Cincinnati's race problem was temporarily solved, but new concentrations of Negroes brought a second "fugitive slave riot" in 1834.

The Civil War and its aftermath of course brought drastic changes in race relations and a new assertiveness among Negroes and their white allies in the abolitionist movement. Both developments produced violence. A favorable climate of opinion enabled abolitionists to wipe away much of the comprehensive system of racial segregation then required by law in Northern cities and states. But a contrary trend led Northern whites who were opposed to the war or to emancipation or who were frustrated by the conflict's inauspicious course before Gettysburg to take out their discontents on Negro neighbors. The Detroit riot mentioned above was only one of several outbreaks during 1862-1863, affecting such cities as Brooklyn, Chicago, Buffalo, and Boston.

The bloodiest wartime riot was the famous New York "draft riot" of July 13-17, 1863, a pogrom staged by Irish immigrants against city and suburban Negroes. The war was unpopular among the Irish; they resented the draft, from which Negroes were exempt because of official segregation policies; they also feared that Negroes would replace white draftees in their jobs, a fear justified by the employment of Negro strikebreakers in a labor dispute shortly before the riot. But while the plight of the immigrants arouses sympathy, the ferocity of their response does not. Upwards of thirty blacks were lynched on street corners or slaughtered in their homes. Some responsible estimates of the number of Negroes killed exceed one hundred and contemporary guesses were even higher. The high point of the riot was the burning of a colored orphanage. One effect of the riot was to confirm a tradition of Irish Negrophobia that, encouraged by a political alliance with the Democratic South, persisted long after economic competition between the two groups diminished and which presaged future conflict between Negroes and other immigrant ethnic groups.
The immediate outgrowth of the New York riot, however, was to convert much union patriotism (and anti-Irish sentiment) to the Negro's account, a trend further strengthened by the South's introduction to "Southern-style" race rioting during 1866. Riots broke out in Memphis (April 30-May 2) and New Orleans (July 30) which were quieted only by the intervention of federal troops. Both riots were pogroms. Forty-six Negroes died in Memphis and eighty were injured, compared with one white injury; the New Orleans count was thirty-four Negroes and four whites dead, two hundred Negroes and ten whites injured. Radical Republicans in Congress exploited adverse Northern reaction to these and subsequent events in the South to enact the Reconstruction acts and to imbed full civil and political equality for Negroes in the federal constitution. Congressional Reconstruction brought Negroes all over the country an unprecedented measure of freedom and security, but the interlude was by no means tranquil. In addition to the rural terrorism of the Ku Klux Klan and its imitators, race riots grew out of political conflicts in Meridian, Mississippi, in 1871 and in New Orleans and Vicksburg in 1874, killing at least one hundred people, an overwhelming majority of them Negroes. By the time of the Vicksburg riot in December 1874, economic depression and a growing weariness with Southern problems had sapped the North's determination to enforce the Reconstruction statutes. President Grant's refusal to send troops to Vicksburg or to other locations in the state during the turbulent gubernatorial campaign of 1875 encouraged white political leaders to adopt the "Mississippi Plan" for violent revolution against Negro political equality and Republican rule. The "redemption" riots there and in South Carolina and Louisiana which imitated the Mississippi Plan in 1876 were political in origin but racial in their ferocity, with estimates of the Negro dead running into the hundreds.

One must look first to changes within the white community to explain the third wave of race rioting that erupted in 1898 and continued for a decade. Steady erosion of Negro rights by a well-known process of judicial reinterpretation of the Reconstruction amendments, codification of segregation and political disfranchisement in the South and evasion of local anti-discrimination laws in the North, plus a sharp rise in the numbers of Negroes lynched during the last two decades of the nineteenth century all served to create by 1900 a condition that has aptly been described as "the nadir" of Negro life in America. Far from inviting further trouble, the majority of Negroes sought to insulate themselves against mounting pressure by adopting the submissionist philosophy of Booker T. Washington. But whites were sub-
ject to intensified racial feelings for several reasons. Demagogic campaigns for Jim Crow laws and Negro disfranchisement in the South raised racial tensions among whites to levels that could not be satisfied by legislative aggression and the "roasting" of an occasional "Negro fiend." The first riot of the period occurred in Wilmington, North Carolina, in November 1898 and followed the successful conclusion of that state's white supremacy political campaign. The Atlanta race riot of September 1906 grew out of a racemongering gubernatorial campaign during which rival newspapers tried to outdo each other with incendiary headlines about largely imaginary crimes of Negro men against white women. Progressive sentiment for political and moral reform helped to create pogroms in Atlanta and other cities as white reformers assigned responsibility for political corruption, drunkenness, and vice to Negro "vagrants." Throughout the country Darwinist intellectuals lent scientific authority to racist sentiment, while the acquisition of an American empire peoples by dark-skinned subject races encouraged further disregard for the rights of Negro citizens. The result was that Southern-style rioting returned to its Northern home after a forty-year interval, with outbreaks at Springfield, Ohio, in 1904 and again in 1906, Greensburg, Indiana, in 1906, and Springfield, Illinois, in 1908. In the latter city, a white mob, frustrated in its original objective of lynching a Negro accused of rape, raged over the city for three days, lynching two Negroes, beating dozens of others, burning and looting colored stores and homes. Reportedly the rioters' rallying cry was, "Lincoln freed you, we'll show you where you belong."

In the atmosphere of the early twentieth century, Negroes of course did not "belong" in cities, particularly Northern ones, or in industrial jobs that white men were willing to fill. To the extent that Negroes were beginning to violate these unwritten rules, they added to the tensions that led to rioting in this period. Urbanization and northward migration among Negroes, while falling far short of later proportions, increased steadily during this period and added to the race's visibility and vulnerability, especially in the rapidly growing cities of the "New South" like Atlanta and in the cities of the southern Midwest. The journalist Ray Stannard Baker reported a substantial increase in the Negro population of Springfield, Ohio, before its lynching-riot of 1904 and described a majority of the newcomers as "transients." This term, like "vagrant" in Atlanta, probably referred to the seasonally unemployed unskilled labor characteristic of a migrant class. Negroes north and south were also reaching for the bottom rung on the industrial ladder. Gradually many employers began
to exploit the vast pool of Negro labor, primarily as a club held over the heads of white workers, and thereby helped to intensify racist feeling among workingmen generally and among union members in particular. The use of Negro strikebreakers led to racial conflict on such Southern industrial battlefields as the New Orleans waterfront and the Alabama coalfields as early as 1894. Within a decade, similar developments spread to the North as race riots following labor disputes broke out in Chicago in 1904 and again in 1905.

Another “rule” that Negroes were beginning to challenge was their passive role in racial violence. Though with limited success, black men showed an increasing willingness to defend themselves. Two whites were killed in the defense of the Negro district of Brownsville in Atlanta in 1906. In the same year a riot at Brownsville, Texas, gave rise to a national controversy over whether or not Negro troops garrisoned near the city had been the aggressors. The soldiers hotly denied the charge of aggression, which was never proved, but it is clear at least that they were prepared for self-defense. Negro soldiers did take the offensive in Houston in 1915 in an attempt to retaliate against whites who had beaten some of their comrades, but police managed to halt their march into the city and to avert a riot. After the Springfield, Illinois, riot in 1908, the militant Negro leader, W. E. B. DuBois, joined with a handful of whites shocked by the desecration of Lincoln’s shrine to found the movement that became the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People two years later. By seeking to improve Negro status through legal action and propaganda, the N.A.A.C.P. offered an alternative to violence, but its earliest efforts attracted little support outside of a small circle of liberals and intellectuals in the North.

The tendencies present in early twentieth century riots were fully manifest in the violence that erupted during and after World War I. In terms of bloodshed and destruction, the wartime riots were the worst since Reconstruction. The riot at East Saint Louis, Illinois, July 2-4, 1917, caused at least forty-seven deaths, a record not equaled until 1967. The apogee of destruction was reached in the summer of 1919 when some twenty-five minor disturbances occurred across the nation, along with major riots in Washington, Chicago, Omaha, and Knoxville. Tension subsided gradually thereafter, with final outbreaks occurring in Tulsa, Oklahoma, in 1921, and Rosewood, Florida, in 1923.

A basic cause of the eruptions was massive Negro migration to the cities and a consequent rise in white fears of job competition. These fears, while very real in their effects on race relations, were
MR. PRESIDENT, WHY NOT MAKE AMERICA SAFE FOR DEMOCRACY?

— Morris in N. Y. Evening Mail

The reaction of one New York political cartoonist to the savage East Saint Louis race riots of 1917 suggests that President Wilson had to face much the same criticism as the present-day occupant of the White House.
not wholly realistic. Labor union propaganda greatly exaggerated the extent of employer recruitment of Negro labor in the South. Although some recruitment did take place, the Negroes moved citywards primarily in response to the reports of earlier migrants, publicity in the Northern Negro press, and the pool of jobs left vacant by the wartime industrial boom and the drain of manpower into the armed forces. Rather than pushing whites out of jobs, the migrants more commonly stepped in to fill unskilled and low paying jobs vacated by whites moving upwards on the pay scale. And the "last hired, first fired" policy, implemented in earlier decades even against Negroes who replaced whites during strikes, continued in effect when jobs became scarcer after the war. It is true, however, that the growth of Negro population in industrial centers gave employers a weapon that worked to the disadvantage of whites in wage negotiations.

Although the spectre of economic competition was present in nearly all of the wartime riots, a more direct cause of conflict derived from increased everyday contact between the races. It was competition for a place to live, a seat on a streetcar, a space to stretch out in the sun in city parks that, more than job competition, provided the sparks that turned tension into violence. As military production commandeered most public and private investment, no addition to the stock of urban housing, transit, and recreational facilities could be made. Existing facilities had to accommodate the needs of greatly expanded population, a situation which heightened the opportunities for racial contact and conflict. Chicago's riot erupted on a Lake Michigan beach and was preceded and followed by a wave of residential bombings intended to halt Negro expansion into white neighborhoods; the East Saint Louis riot, although more directly related to economic causes, followed a rash of racial incidents on streetcars.

As in previous decades, the World War I riots began as pogroms. But a rising level of black resistance transformed some of the conflicts into two-sided affairs. The East Saint Louis riot began with a Negro attack on plainclothes policemen whom the assailants mistook for white marauders who had earlier fired into Negro homes. While the violence there was predominantly one-sided, isolated groups of Negroes armed to defend themselves and the white mobs forebore from attacking the main Negro residential district. Instead, they set fire to a smaller downtown Negro slum, where a number of adults and at least two children were burned to death. Most victims, however, were isolated and unsuspecting Negroes trapped in places like stores, railroad stations, and streetcar trans-
fer points by a white mob milling through the city center. This pattern was repeated in the Chicago riot in 1919. Although white youths organized as “athletic clubs” made some raids into Negro neighborhoods, the dominant form of violence was assault by both races on individuals of the other race who found themselves trapped in the wrong parts of town. Fifteen whites were killed in this fashion, along with twenty-three Negroes. Washington’s riot had a number of unusual features. Whites outnumbered blacks among the fifteen dead and seriously injured; Negro war veterans organized an armed defense of their neighborhoods against white raiders, while carloads of other Negroes conducted retaliatory forays into white districts. As in other cities, a white mob—in this case massed near the White House—commandeered the downtown district and assaulted individual Negroes who by carelessness or bad luck fell into their hands.

By any standard, Negroes cannot be said to have “won” any of the riots. Even where they approached something like parity in the death toll, they furnished a majority of all casualties as well as of those arrested and prosecuted after the rioting. The price of resistance was high, as Tulsa amply illustrated in 1921. There, Negroes gathered at the city jail to protect a prisoner threatened with lynching, but a white mob drove them back upon their home ground and burned forty-four blocks of Negro homes and businesses to the ground. Still the few defensive victories were enough to send a thrill of pride surging through the black community. Wrote one black poet:

If we must die, let it not be like hogs
Hunted and penned in an inglorious spot . . .
Though far outnumbered, let us still be brave . . .
Like men we’ll face the murderous, cowardly pack
Pressed to the wall, dying, but—fighting back.

Not surprisingly many whites did not take readily to the idea of two-sided riots. Members of one white mob in East Saint Louis pleaded with national guardsmen to disarm a group of Negroes the mob was attacking so that it might proceed more safely in its work. “Now this is a two-handed game,” a guard officer replied. So novel was the idea of black resistance that the New York Times, the Justice Department, and Representative James F. Byrnes of South Carolina all agreed that it could only be explained by Bolshevist influence. Like it or not, it was apparent that Negroes could no longer be attacked with impunity.

The riots of 1942-1943 closely resembled those of World War I. Again, wartime migration, job and housing competition, and urban crowding worked their abrasive effect. Again the riots were two-sided. They were not, however, as
numerous as the 1919 riots, nor, with one exception, as devastating. The exception was the Detroit race riot of June 20-22, 1943. The riot began at the Belle Isle amusement park on a sultry night and quickly spread throughout the inner city. Investigators never agreed on exactly who started the trouble, but two groups assumed the lead which transformed it from a brawl into a riot: white sailors from a nearby naval armory and the patrons of a Negro night club. Both groups were stirred into action by reports of atrocities committed by the other race against their own women and children, untrue rumors nearly identical to those in circulation in East Saint Louis and Chicago two decades before. Except for the initial brawl near the approaches of Belle Isle, white and Negro mobs did not tangle directly. Instead a dual riot developed along the lines of Chicago's 1919 riot. Negro rioters, concentrated in the East Side slum of Paradise Valley, looted and burned white-owned stores and attacked whites who strayed into the area (accounting for most of the nine whites killed). At the same time, several thousand whites commandeered the main downtown thoroughfare, Woodward Avenue, beating Negroes that they ferreted out of theatres and restaurants and dragged from cars and trolleys, setting fire to some twenty Negro automobiles in the process. Police pressed vigorous action against actual and suspected looters, which accounted for most of the twenty-five Negroes killed; they did not break up the Woodward Avenue mob, although they rescued many of its black victims most of whom escaped with severe beatings.

Other World War II riots occurred in places as far-flung as New York, Los Angeles, Beaumont, Texas, and Mobile. A riot in New York's Harlem ghetto, August 1-2, 1943, forecast the shape of things to come. As the N.A.A.C.P. leader, Walter White, described it, Harlem was not the familiar two-sided riot but a "Negro uprising," a black insurrection against white authority in general but directed at those symbols of white supremacy most readily at hand—white-owned grocery stores and pawn-shops and the police. Like a similar but smaller disturbance there in March 1935, the Harlem riot broke out in response to exaggerated reports of police brutality, involving a Negro teenager in the first instance, a Negro soldier in the second. The restrained but decisive use of force under the direct supervision of New York's energetic major, Fiorello H. LaGuardia, halted the riot before it reached its devastating potential. Only five persons were killed, although property damage approached $5,000,000. Contemporary observers praised LaGuardia and the police and also credited the prompt intervention of civic leaders and New Yorkers' relative-
ly sophisticated racial attitudes with preventing the greater bloodshed and post-riot recriminations that characterized Detroit.

In Los Angeles, by contrast, police and military authorities looked the other way during the June 1943 "zoot suit war" between white soldiers and sailors and Mexican and Negro teenagers, while metropolitan newspapers egged on the mobs with inflammatory headlines.

The race riots of the 1960's, whether white anti-integration riots in the South and Midwest or Negro uprisings in ghettos across the country, are thus only the latest entries in an already long and grisly record. Riots in different places and different times varied in detail, while the dominant form of violence evolved from nineteenth century pogroms to "two-handed games" to separate although not unrelated insurrectionary stands on the rioters' home grounds, as in Birmingham or Watts. Nevertheless, it is possible to make some general observations about all of the riots of the past, many of which apply to those of the present day.

One of the most interesting patterns observable in this history of race riots is their timing. Although the American race problem has manifested itself in some form throughout our history, race rioting has occurred only in sporadic epidemics spanning a few years. All but one of these epidemics took place during or immediately after a war. Even more noticeably, riots have been concentrated in prosperous years rather than depressed ones. Needless to say, the peak of violence in every period was reached during the summer months, although the Southern riot season extended well into spring and fall. Of course there have been plenty of summer weekends, in peacetime and wartime, boom year and bust, that failed to develop race riots. The most significant aspect of the timing of riots appears to be its link with the status of Negroes. Each epidemic accompanied substantial changes affecting either the Negro's freedom and political and civil rights or his geographic and economic mobility.

The intervals between riot epidemics are also significant in that they were marked by successful application of other methods besides rioting of keeping the Negro "in his place." In the antebellum North, for example, the elaboration and codification of Jim Crow laws followed the riots of 1829-1842; during the same period, the racist wing of the anti-slavery movement, which sought to exclude Negroes as well as slavery from the Midwest and West, provided a further outlet for anti-Negro feelings. Two decades of peaceful legislative and judicial aggression against Negro rights, as well as the transformation of the frontier pastime of
lynching into an instrument of racial discipline in the rural South, preceded the renewal of rioting in 1898. World War I was followed in the 1920's by the development of peaceful methods like the restrictive covenant in real estate transactions which served the purpose that bombing and rioting had served before. In the 1960's unfulfilled Negro aspirations for advancement are important causes of riots and were never entirely lacking in the past. But historically the primary factor in rioting has been white resistance to—rather than Negro agitation for—change.

The problem of controlling riots and restoring order was as difficult for urban authorities in the past as it is now. The role of police and militia in quelling violence was inevitably complicated by poor training and equipment. Racial bigotry sometimes led police and national guardsmen to encourage white rioters, even to join them, instead of acting impartially to halt bloodshed. Inflammatory action by police bore a heavy responsibility for the East Saint Louis riot in 1917; a military board of inquiry there exonerated national guardsmen from participating in the beating and killing of Negroes only by ignoring the testimony of eyewitnesses of both races. Off-base soldiers and sailors frequently joined with mobs, and in some cases—Charleston, South Carolina, and Washington in 1919, Los Angeles and Detroit in 1943—they led them. Even had law enforcement agencies been equal to the task of riot control, mayors and governors hesitated for political reasons to deploy them promptly.

As Arthur Waskow points out in his analysis of the 1919 riots, quick and effective use of a neutral force—that is an agency acting impartially between races and commanding respect from both—inevitably cuts riots short and minimizes casualties and damage. The Charleston police, reacting promptly and impartially to an incipient riot between two groups of "outsiders"—local Negroes and white sailors from the nearby naval base—suppressed violence quickly in 1919 without loss of life. Federal troops, possessing superior discipline and commanding the respect of Negroes where racist local authorities did not, were generally successful in suppressing violence promptly, even when, as in Detroit in 1943, it had raged out of control for several days. The success of Mayor LaGuardia in containing Harlem's 1943 uprising was due not only to his personal direction of police at the scene but also to his attempt to deploy as many Negroes as possible in the effort; Negro policemen, soldiers, air raid wardens, civic leaders—any black that La Guardia could find with a vestige of authority—were conscripted, thus promoting the neutrality of the force and its acceptance
among Negroes. As a result, police action drew rare applause from Negro spokesmen, including New York City Councilman Adam Clayton Powell, as well as from whites. Unfortunately, for each Charleston and New York there have been a dozen Atlantas, Chicasos, and Detroits. Law enforcement complicated more riots than it controlled; most riots ended because they had played themselves out.

There are standard features in the public and private response to rioting that recur in every period. The immediate aftermath of major riots was a search for "outside agitators." Confederate agents were sought in New York in 1863, German agents in 1917 and Japanese in 1943. Communist "agitators" first appeared behind the scenes in 1919. Southern authorities were never at a loss for Northern scapegoats. A leading Southern newspaper blamed Yankee sunworshippers who descended seasonally upon Florida for a minor riot there in 1923; Southerners, it argued, might indulge themselves in an occasional lynching but mass murder was a Northern practice. Official investigations — congressional, state, and local — failed to turn up these conspirators in every case and so, with some important exceptions, blamed Negroes for the violence, whatever his role — passive, defensive, or aggressive — may have been. A Michigan inquiry in 1943 pinpointed Negro aspirations for racial equality as the cause of Detroit's trouble, for example. On the other hand, an Illinois commission created after the 1919 riots issued a scholarly multi-volume report accurately and impartially describing the sources of racial tensions but giving few practical recommendations as to how to end them. Atlanta after 1906 and Chicago after 1919, along with several other cities, created bi-racial agencies designed to ease tension. While some of these groups were fore-runners of later, more effective agencies, most of them expired unnoticed after a few years and had to be created all over again in the 1940's.

Perhaps the most depressing thing about the race riots of the past is the speed with which they have been forgotten (although not necessarily forgiven). Thus history repeats itself, as it is supposed to do among those who fail to learn its lessons. Like the violence itself, America's willingness, even eagerness to shrug it off goes a long way back. "These disorders are alarming from their general prevalence and frequent repetition and, more so, because their importance is little realized," wrote a French observer, Michel Chevalier. He continued:

A riot which in France would put a stop to business prevents no one here from going to the Exchange, speculating, turning over a dollar and making money. On meeting in the morning, each one asks and tells the news; here
a Negro has been hanged, there a white man has been flogged; at Philadelphia ten houses have been demolished; at Buffalo, at Utica, some people of color have been scourged. Then they go on to the price of cotton and coffee, the arrivals of flour, lumber, and tobacco, and become absorbed in calculations the rest of the day.

With the substitution of up-to-date details — the supermarket for the exchange, who knows where for Utica — this statement, which was written in 1835, would be current in 1968. Some writers have suggested that the present cycle of race riots might exhaust itself, ending not with a bang but a whimper. If it does, that too will be in keeping with our historical experience. But that same experience should warn us to expect a new epidemic of riots at some future date and another one after that. If history is a reliable guide, there will be race riots in America as long as there is a race problem, as long as, in the words of Chevalier, "democracy . . . is forgetful of the past and careless of the future."

BIBLIOGRAPHICAL NOTE