

EDITORIAL

BLACK PROGRESS OR REGRESS?

by Bayard Rustin

The controversy over how little or how much progress blacks have made has been obscured by absurdities.

President Nixon, for example, has announced the resolution of the urban crisis, and presumably the racial crisis as well. This is, of course, ridiculous, and demonstrates that the President's efforts to cover up his domestic failures are equally as feeble as his Administration's attempts to conceal its complicity in the Water-gate scandals.

There are some liberals, however, who rival the President for inaccuracy by proclaiming that the civil rights laws and social programs of the 1960s were meaningless, and that blacks are as bad or worse off today as ever.

Reality lies somewhere between the President's assurances that all is well and the pessimism and negativism of liberals. The social, economic and political progress of blacks during the 1960's was substantial and incontestable; furthermore much of that progress has persisted in the face of Nixon's abysmal, incoherent policies.

A recent study by Richard Scammon and Ben Wattenburg, published in Commentary magazine, documents many of these gains. This article has provoked considerable criticism from black leaders largely because of the authors' assertion that the rate of progress has been sufficient to elevate the majority of blacks into the middle class.

The argument over whether most blacks have entered the middle class is largely irrelevant, although I feel it would be more accurate to say that most blacks are now part of what we generally consider the working class. I also feel Scammon and Wattenberg neglected two important points: the revolution of aspirations in the black community and the fact that for those blacks who were bypassed by the progress so many others enjoyed, poverty and the cruelty of ghetto life have become both materially and psychologically more intolerable.

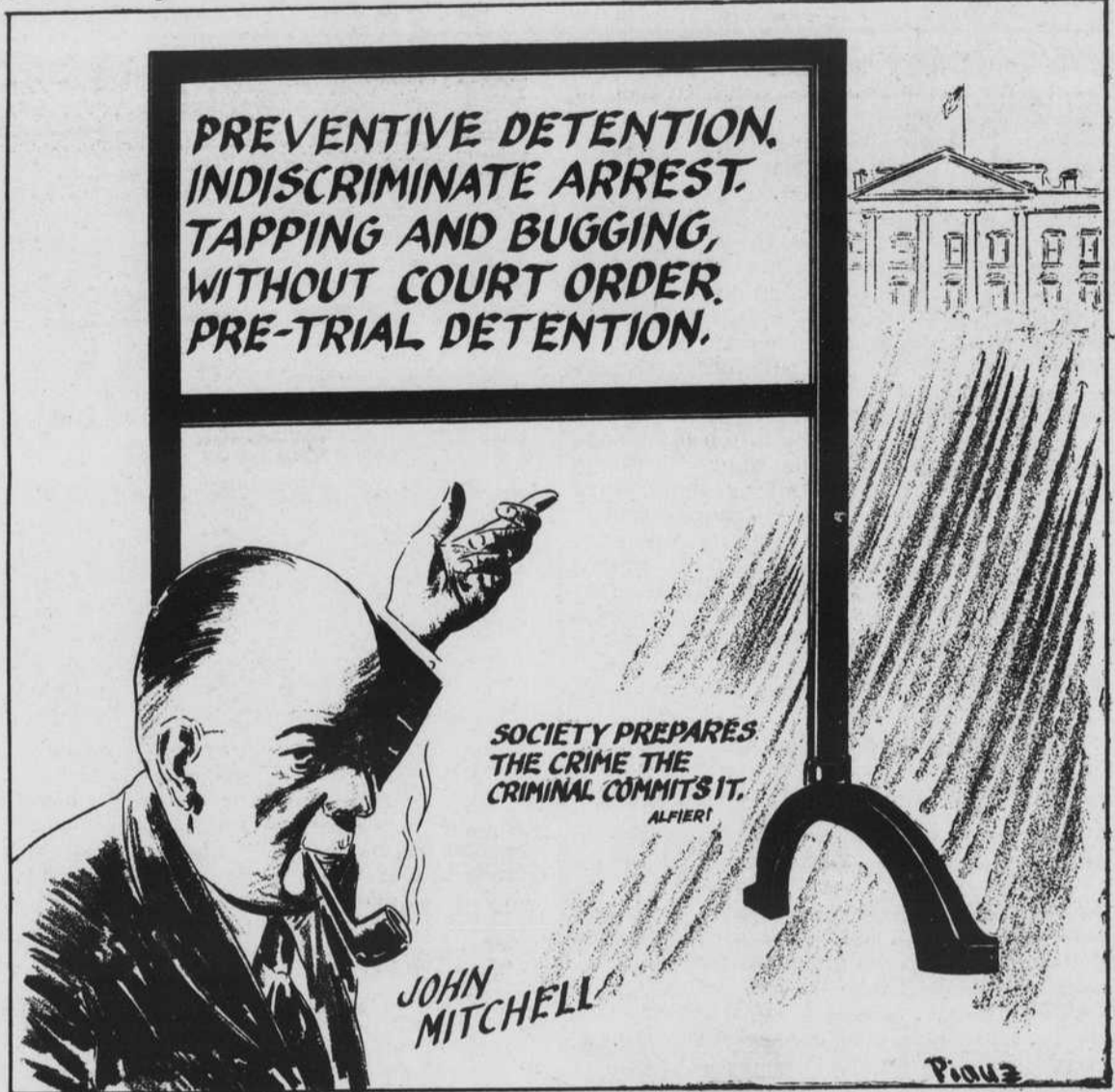
Nevertheless I consider the Scammon-Wattenberg article of considerable importance, particularly as it points out the importance of acknowledging the racial advancements of the '60s and understanding how this progress came about. Their point is simple, and has incalculable implications for the civil rights movement. They believe that by insisting that the policies of liberalism have failed -- that the housing programs, education programs, manpower efforts and expansionary economic policies have been unable to help those they were intended to help--liberals risk total public repudiation. To quote the authors, it is as if liberals were saying: "We have failed; let us continue."

A recent census report reinforces the conclusion of Scammon and Wattenberg that black progress is largely the result of liberal programs. Taken together, the Scammon-Wattenberg article and census studies reveal a pattern of steady advancement during the period between 1961 and 1969--when Presidents Kennedy and Johnson were in office--and social stagnation in the years since the election of Richard Nixon.

Between 1959 and 1969 there was a substantial decrease in the racial earnings gap. Where black median income was 50 per cent of white income at the beginning of this decade, it stood at 61 per cent by the decade's conclusion. Since 1969, however, the earnings gap has actually INCREASED to the point where the median black family income is only 59 per cent of that of whites.

In 1962 12 million blacks, 56 per cent of all Negroes, lived below the federal poverty level; by 1969 the abolition of Jim Crow, expanding social programs, and economic policies that created thousands of jobs reduced the number of black impoverished to 7.6 million or 31 per cent. Now, four years later, at least 100,000 more

"White House Horrors" He Advocated As Attorney General



blacks live in poverty.

One might put forward numerous reasons for the blunting of black gains; the answer, however, follows directly from the job policies of the Nixon Administration. There is a historical correlation between black advancement and periods of high employment. The years after World War II was one such period; the 1960s was another. An unemployment figure of 12.4 per cent in 1961 was cut in half by 1969; today black joblessness hovers around 10 per cent, and the situation is more depressing for teenagers, veterans and ghetto-dwellers.

The program of the Johnson Administration were no panacea; they did not go far enough or reach enough people to satisfy the justifiably accelerating aspirations of black Americans.

But if we are to press ahead with the struggle for a society that is equal and just, we must fully understand what enabled thousands to escape poverty. If it is true that the programs of the 1960s contained flaws, it is also true that they contributed to a reduction of black employment of 400,000 workers and helped lift over four million people out of poverty.

Liberals have made mistakes; their rhetoric often outstrips their record. But the liberal program, from Roosevelt on down to Johnson has brought a massive change in the condition of working people--black and white. By reminding us of this, Scammon and Wattenberg have made an important contribution to the future of social struggle.

LETTER To The EDITOR

Dear Sir:

A group's conception of itself as a minority group arises only after the fact of minority status has been thrust upon it. Any effort to interpret the status of a group so defined without recognition of this fact might well result in an intellectual exercise that promises to yield little more than historical sleight-of-hand. Once this status is achieved, one must recognize that it is maintained not in the splendid isolation of segregation of discrimination. For the survival of the minority and of the power group within a society depends upon the ways in which the communities interact as groups. Beyond this level of operation is another salient fact, the status and the interaction noted in minority group problems in the United States are functions of the dynamics of minority status. What the group does as a minority is done in order to support its feeling of self-regard, to provide meaning for its position and survival, and to develop strategies with which to deal with the problems the status has thrust upon them. But many of the minority group's movements will remain forgotten, and only an attempted self-sufficiency to integration and the search for a common humanity will be remembered.

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