

J.M. - 1

Where Do We Go From Here?

The question of "what happen now?", enters one's mind when he views analytically the aftermath of Thursday's so-called riot and the riot itself, what started out as a peaceful march turned out into an affair that leaves the white community wondering what happened to our city's fine race relations and the Negro community answering that race relations in this city never were that good to start with.

The preliminary activities before the march gave but [illegible] indication of what was to happen. People waiting for the arrival of Dr. King had already lined up from Beale and Hernando to Vance and Hernando and were estimated at some six thousand strong. [Illegible] on nearby porches added to those milling around on the sidewalks waiting to join the ranks. Inside the church, at the same time signs were being handed out, a [illegible] black power advocate [a member of a group called the "Invaders"] was admonishing those inside to really get the true meaning of the march. As I walked up and down the street viewing the marchers - teachers, high school and college students, local thugs, labor officials, nuns, religious leaders, and most important, the sanitation workers themselves - I got the feeling that something constructive was about to happen even though a group of boys talked about joining the march to see what they could get out of the stores. At this point, the march marshals, with yellow armbands, called for everyone to get in line so they could get some organization.

At about eleven-thirty, after Dr. King had arrived, the march started and the huge procession marched from Claiborne Temple supposedly onward to City Hall to protest for the grievances of the sanitation workers. Just about the ---

326

J.M. - 2

---time my portion of the march was a block from Main Street, the first stick went flying through the air and the shattering of plate glass windows was heard. The people ahead broke ranks in the march with no marshals around to keep them in line. The people behind hesitated for an instant not knowing what was going on. The line surged forward again only to have the semi-calmers erupt ten minutes later when the second stick found its mark. Then, in rapid succession the sound of breaking glass was heard. People, in confusion, ran toward all directions - some back toward the church which the leaders urged them to return to, and others north on Main. Those in Main (as I was) met a line of some twenty to thirty policemen linked arm-in-arm to push the pressing crowd back down Beale Street to the church. Those in the end carried rifles and all were equipped with mace, a chemical [illegible]. Bedlam broke loose as the policemen pushed and shoved the crowds back. Strangely enough, the policemen on Beale at the time when the first stick was thrown or even during the ten minute lapse when the succeeding sticks were thrown, but when the crowd threatened to get near the large stores like Rheinberger and Goldsmith, they moved quickly to press the crowds back by brutal force.

In all the chaos, I moved toward Front Street in an opposite direction from the large body of the crowd when a shot rang out in front of the Malco Theater. Soon, people began moving toward Front Street, tears streaming down their faces, the result of being sprayed with mace. As we circled Front to Union, then back to Main, businessmen in their shirtsleeves stared at us with a look more akin to intense dislike than curiosity. A look of fear and aggression was seen here and there in the faces of others.

The police had cordoned off a position of Beale Street, but the ---

327

J.M. - 3

---part we saw was in shambles. Clothing stores were wiped clean of display merchandise and mannequin lying in the streets. The police were riding up and down the streets having six officers assigned to a car and travelling with motorcycle processions of eight.

The ramification of the initial looting and destruction seemed to be a chain reaction of this sort of activities. Stores in Vance were broken into, furniture stores and corner drugstores, all owned by white merchants, were bricked and looted all over the South Memphis area. An immediate curfew was put in effect over the city and National Guard troops were hurriedly called in from Nashville to quell the disorder. Even though the curfew was in effect Thursday to Sunday, March thirty-first, isolated incidents of vandalism took place. Though the curfew restrictions were relaxed on Saturday and Sunday, the relaxing of the restrictions was into and for whites [illegible]. Negroes were arrested for curfew violation. The lifting in the lull before the [illegible] this week when Dr. King returns to lead what he terms a "truly non-violent march." The question of "what happens now?" is answered by an attitude of "wait and see".

328