

Inciting A Riot

Fifth Estate Collective
Alvin Harrison

1966

On August 9–12 a fantasy now known as the “East Side Riot” was staged by the Detroit Police with the assistance of the prosecutor’s office, city government and the press. The major villain of the drama was Alvin Harrison, Director of the Afro-American Unity Movement and spokesman for Black Power. Below is The Fifth Estate’s interview with Mr. Harrison.

FIFTH ESTATE: What is the purpose of your organization—the Afro-American Unity Movement—and how has it functioned in the past?

ALVIN HARRISON: I think in order to understand the Afro-American Unity Movement, you have to understand some of the changes that we ourselves have gone through.

We started out as a number of other organizations in the past have started—thinking that integration somehow represented utopia for black people in this country. We found out that this concept of integration meant that black people had to totally submerge their own identity, their own desires, and their own needs to white America. We found out that the only thing that really counts is power. Economic and political power.

Every other ethnic group in this country understands this. White people certainly understand what power means. But we have been the only ethnic group that somehow has believed that by being all loving, all kindness, all generous, and all forgiving, and by submerging our own culture to the point where white America would accept us, it would somehow mean a change. We understand now that it doesn’t mean a change. We understand that the only thing that counts is power. It doesn’t matter how you get that power, as long as you have it.

I would say that the east side of Detroit and particularly that area which is bounded by Cadillac, VanDyke, Kercheval and Mack is probably the most sophisticated area in the city. The Afro-American Unity Movement, and prior to that, the Adult Community Movement for Equality, has been in operation for approximately 2-1/2 years. In that time we have undertaken the task of making our people aware of our history, of giving them some pride in themselves and generally trying to create a power block that would be effective and meaningful. It is because of this that the police department is out to destroy the organization as they will attempt to destroy anyone who dissents from their policies. There are certain kinds of dissension they can tolerate. They can tolerate a few white liberals who don’t really oppose the system but who complement it. But they can’t tolerate anyone who talks about a basic change in this country. They can’t tolerate anyone who talks about racism because racism is what this country was founded on and is based on.

FIFTH ESTATE: I assume then your organization stands for black power. I wonder if you could explain what is your concept of black power and what it would mean in Detroit.

ALVIN HARRISON: I think that anyone that understands what white power means understands what black power means. Black power means basically the same for black people as white power has meant for white people. It means that black people have the power both economically and politically to meet the needs of their people. Specifically in terms of Detroit, black power means controlling the police department. Black power means that if

we make up 30 or 40% of the population of the city of Detroit, then we control 30 or 40% of the seats of power in the city—the common council for instance. We have to begin to think in terms of a black police commissioner. Black power means that we have to begin thinking of the black community themselves controlling the police department because it doesn't really matter if you have 5,000 black police if they are responsible to a racist like (Police Commissioner) Girardin. Black power means that the people in the community have to think about how they are going to control white shopkeepers if those white shopkeepers refuse to meet the demands of the community. Then they have to leave. Black power means a black prosecuting attorney, which is a real seat of power.

FIFTH ESTATE: Does black power mean violence?

ALVIN HARRISON: Black power means violence if white America refuses to grant black people those things that they need in order to exist. Black power means violence only in the same sense as white power has meant violence whenever white people have run up against resistance from opposing forces.

FIFTH ESTATE: Why do you think that whites oppose black power so much?

ALVIN HARRISON: Whites oppose black power so much because they can't believe that if black people get into positions of power that black power won't mean the same thing to them that white power has meant to black people in the past. White people understand very well what white power has meant for black people. White power has meant racism, brutality, murder, rape—and that is exactly what white people are afraid of. They can't believe that black people will be more humane to them than they have been, and I think that's a very legitimate fear.

FIFTH ESTATE: What do you think of Mayor Cavanaugh's concept of "shared power"?

ALVIN HARRISON: I don't think very much of Mayor Cavanaugh's concept of shared power because there's no such thing as "shared power." You either have power or you don't. White people have power, black people don't. Mayor Cavanaugh has power, I don't. So how can you talk about sharing power when he has it all and I don't have any?

FIFTH ESTATE: Do you see any role for whites in your struggle?

ALVIN HARRISON: Yes, I think there's a role for white people in this country. Those whites that are sincere have to begin educating their own people to understand the nature of racism in this country, because unless this happens we can only look forward to Armageddon. I just don't think that at this point in history white people are prepared to be as gracious and as humble as black people have been under white power. So I think that a legitimate role for whites who are sincere is to move into white communities and begin to confront other whites with their racism, because unless that is done I see nothing but disaster ahead.

FIFTH ESTATE: Do you favor steps towards integration such as Martin Luther King's march into all-white areas in Chicago?

ALVIN HARRISON: I would not suggest that any black people risk their lives to live next door to those screaming, raging, foaming-at-the mouth, racists in Cicero. No. I am not in favor of integration because I don't think integration is the answer. I think improving the conditions of black people is the answer. And I don't think that is necessarily analogous with integration. I certainly don't want to integrate with a bunch of morally corrupt people, as evidenced by their Leader. Prime Minister Verwoerd of South Africa gets killed—a racist, a savage and a beast—and Lyndon Baines Johnson sends a telegram stating his regrets instead of cheering and ordering a national holiday because a racist is killed. I am certain he didn't do the same thing for Lemuel Penn's family, or Jimmy Lee Jackson or Medgar Evers.

FIFTH ESTATE: On October 16, 1965 you made a statement at an anti-war rally. You pointed at the American flag and said "that's not my flag, baby." Do you still feel like that?

ALVIN HARRISON: Certainly the American flag doesn't mean the same thing to black people that it means to white people. I would have to be a fool if I went out and spent \$150 to \$200 to celebrate Independence Day when I understand that on July 4, 1776, black people were slaves in this country. I also understand that when the constitution was ratified, black people were counted as 3/5 of a man in this country, so certainly it doesn't mean the same thing to me that it meant to white people.

If I were white, probably the American flag would mean a great deal to me because democracy more or less works for white people. But democracy and the American flag represent to black people Selma, Alabama, Jackson, Mississippi, Chicago, Cicero, George Wallace, Lyndon Baines Johnson—it represents America.

FIFTH ESTATE: Stokeley Carmichael advised black youth not to participate in the war in Vietnam. Do you share his views?

ALVIN HARRISON: I certainly do. I can't see any rationale for blacks in this country who are suffering the way black people are to go off to fight a war when black people in this country have to have 2,000 armed national guardsmen protect them so that they can walk down an American street. Why should black people fight a war which they didn't help to create, and which is against people who are fighting basically for the same thing that we are fighting for over here?

I think that if the government were prepared to send black troops to South Africa or to Africa period to drive whites out of Africa, and drive them into the ocean if necessary, then I would say yes—join the army and go off and fight. But as long as this government is going to use black people to further its own aims in underdeveloped countries, I am not in favor of fighting for it.

FIFTH ESTATE: Was there a riot on Kercheval on August 9th?

ALVIN HARRISON: No, initially what happened was a response on the part of an oppressed people to the most obvious form of their oppression—the police department. What happened was not spontaneous in that it was set off by a single incident. What happened was a result of years of oppression.

Wilbert McClendon, who was very active in ACME, is an arch enemy of the police because he is not a head-scratching, foot-shuffling, Uncle Tom, and he refuses to be subservient and submit to the slave status that the Man has in store for him. Wilbert McClendon has been cited by the police as being a very dangerous person, primarily because he is capable of influencing others by his own conduct and activities and his refusal to be a slave. This applies to anyone and this is essentially what happened. Tuesday night, August 9, the police acting in their traditional role of gestapo, stopped on the street and ordered the “niggers” to move on. Only they ran into some “niggers” who refused to be niggers” and refused to move on! The police decided that they would crush this rebellion as violently and as rapidly as they could, which they certainly did.

But they got more than they bargained for. And I think you can see signs around the country of what's happening to SNCC, for example, and what's happening to the peace movement in this country, that there is a very clear indication that President Johnson and all his cohorts are determined to crush any and all dissent in this country, that there is a very clear indication that President Johnson and all his cohorts are determined to crush any and all dissent in this country as exemplified by the 1966 Civil Rights Bill and an amendment which was tacked onto it making it illegal to travel from state to state for the purpose of inciting to riot. That means that all 22 million black people in this country are subject to being charged with inciting to riot because anyone black is subject to this charge. Any black person who stands on the street corner and talks the truth is subject to being charged with inciting to riot.

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