



Eugene Patterson

A Resource Of Great Value

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Next Monday the finance committee of the Board of Aldermen will consider its appropriation for an agency that has given Atlanta cause for general thanksgiving, the Community Relations Commission.

Operating with only \$25,000 from the city in its first year, the commission pulled itself together with unexpected effectiveness. It wants \$60,000 to improve its work in the coming year. At a minimum, it needs \$35,000 to \$40,000 to keep its hold on racial problems.

And it has, in fact, taken hold. At the outset nearly everybody took a show-me attitude. What good was a talk shop? Negroes didn't trust the commission and whites called it do-good.

Yet it promptly got on top of a lot of problems, and it functioned.

For the first time a lot of angry people had somebody to talk to. Grass roots organization in the slums is a useful concept. But if there's nobody above who'll listen, grass roots groups are simply organizing their frustrations.

Mayor Ivan Allen used to try to run the whole thing out of his hat. At times he was doing little more than receiving delegations. Likewise the Board of Aldermen, the Board of Education and others had moments when their time was consumed with the business of listening, or else they were denounced for refusing to listen. No agency of government can get away entirely from contact with the citizenry, of course.

But the Community Relations Commission has shown real promise of becoming a listening post for everybody. Its sometimes controversial executive director, Mrs. Eliza Paschall, has the confidence of Negro citizens and this is a key to effectiveness which is lacking in most cities. She keeps the commission in contact with the problem. The biracial commission in turn has kept its brains on straight, under the strong chairmanship of Irving Kaler. Its members have dedicated a lot of energy and time to hearing after hearing, right in the slums.

Atlanta had no riots last summer. The commission had to be part of the reason. It gave people with a buildup of tension some place to blow off. And it gave the city government a realistic appraisal of what needed doing. Not many cities have kept the contact. Their poor feel cut off. Their governments fly blind.

An abstract by-product may be the most important contributor to the commission's success. The members are exposing themselves to the problem raw, not reading about it or riding through the slum peeping at it or sitting uptown and thinking about it. They are learning—and through them, many Atlantans are learning—to converse across lines of class or race or fear, and to listen for the real and the genuine undertones in the angry noise, as opposed to the stylized and exploited issues which frequently aren't the main issues.

If Atlanta didn't have such a commission it would have to invent one. To have one, and to have it going, is a resource of great value for the future.

