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Negro Leadership in a Crisis Situation*

WITHIN RECENT YEARS, the changing character of Negro leadership has become one of the significant forces initiating change in the area of race relations. Most social scientists agree that, prior to May 17, 1954, Negro leaders were predominately of the "accommodating" rather than the "protesting" type. Ostensibly, situations of racial harmony are conducive to the former type of leadership. However, in situations of racial crisis, protest leadership seems to become dominant. The emergence of this latter type of leadership indicates, among other things, the diminishing influence of the white community in the determination of Negro leaders.[1]

This exploratory study focuses on a limited facet of the broad problem of Negro leadership in a specific crisis situation. It was designed to determine the nature of leadership in the Negro community and to describe the features of such leadership. Thus, the report does not pretend to explore all aspects of Negro leadership. It is limited to leadership that is associated with a specific social issue — school desegregation.

The study was conducted in 1958-1959, the year following the closing of public schools in Little Rock, Arkansas, and employed research techniques similar to those used by Hunter.[2] The writers have had many years of "participant observation" in the Little Rock Negro community and are personally acquainted with many of its leaders. From news-

* This study was financed by the Anti-Defamation League of New York.

1 Gunnar Myrdal, *An American Dilemma* (New York, 1944), p. 729.
2 See Floyd Hunter, *Community Power Structure: A Study of Decision Makers* (Chapel Hill, 1954) and Ernest A. T. Barth and Baha Abu-Laban, "Power Structure and the Negro Sub-Community," *American Sociological Review*, XXIV (February, 1959), 69-72.

paper reports, "participant observation," and a previous study,[3] a list of leaders in the Negro community was constructed. These sources provided the names of thirty-one leaders. Early in the interview, each respondent was asked to name the most influential Negro in the city in the determination of educational desegregation policy. This "snowball" technique added no new names to the original list. From the verified list of leaders, twenty-six interviews were secured.

In the study, the concept "leader" is limited to those individuals who are identified by prominent or influential persons in the community as functioning legitimately to pattern the collective action of the community members during a crisis period. The major conceptual dimension of this notion of leadership is awareness, or the prominence-notoriety salient. Analytically, two elements essential to the legitimation of leadership are stressed: first, the degree to which an individual is known; and second, the degree to which the relevant role and status (power) of the individual are known. Thus, our appraisal of a selected facet of the leadership system within the Negro community of Little Rock relies heavily on the element of prominence.

Several consequences result from the above approach. The delineation of Negro leaders depends upon complex and intricate relationships between the rater and those rated. Also, the action-bonds between the leaders and the masses of followers are problematic and indeterminate. These considerations urge caution in interpreting the findings of the study.

Furthermore, it is hazardous to study specific instances of Negro leadership in action without some appreciation of the historical development of that leadership in American society. Present leadership patterns of the Negro community are, to an important extent, residues of the eras of slavery, Reconstruction, and post-Reconstruction. The dynamics of Negro leadership, as of powerless groups in general, make possible the development of diverse typologies. The unequivocal writings of Oliver C. Cox[4] and Gunnar Myrdal[5] are of seminal significance for meaningful insights into Negro leadership behavior.

When the Negro leadership structure is analyzed in terms of Samuel A. Stouffer's leadership types, several interesting observations emerge. Stouffer wrote:

> The existence of different types of leadership must be recognized, and the reactions of each type to given situations demand further analysis. One fundamental distinction in regard to the leaders can be advanced, and that is the distinction between the "zealots" or "innovators" and the "influentials." The former are more mobile, less rooted or established in their communities. They will initiate changes, and will often be sacrificed to the resistance of the community. The influentials, on the other hand, seldom initiate change. They tend to remain on the sidelines until an issue has developed and its ultimate outcome seems fairly assured.[6]

Stouffer's "innovator" compares in many respects with Myrdal's protest leader. The innovator attempts to alter the power and prestigeful arrangements in the community through the manipulation of economic and political influence. Since the protest leader usually struggles without powerful economic and political influence, he faces a severely limited leadership potential because of the differentials in power and prestige as these relate to racial status. Little Rock's protest leaders seek to remove race as a dominant factor in social differentiation. Another distinction between the "innovator" and "protest" leader is that the outstanding protest leaders are often well-established and long-time residents of the community, while Stouffer's innovators are "mobile, less rooted or established in their communities." His "influential" compares roughly with the Negro accommodation leader. While the "influential" will seldom initiate change, the "accommodation" leader seeks change as long as it can be contrived quietly and without the kind of publicity that will single him out for attack from the white community. Notwithstanding these distinctions, the classifications of Stouffer and Myrdal are somewhat similar and are generally applicable in the present study.

CHARACTERISTICS OF LEADERS

An analysis of the occupations of Negro leaders in Little Rock reveals that there is an element of economic independence among the persons most frequently named as leaders (see Table 1). They are business people, ministers, or lawyers. Also, one may venture the proposition that, as the character of Negro-white relationships changes, so does the nature of the source of Negro leadership. A related proposition is that, as the "accommodation" leader moves closer to the characteristics of the "protest" leader, his influence increases. Protest leadership gains widespread vicarious, if not always active, support from Negroes because it is an effective expression of latent hopes and aspirations of the inarticulate masses. In Montgomery, Alabama, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., expressed the Negro "protest" through utilization of the Ghandi technique and became the acknowledged leader of the vast majority of the Negro masses.

The Negro leadership structure is strikingly different from the white leadership structure. White businessmen constitute the largest occupational group among their leaders while ministers constitute the largest occupational group among Negroes.[7] In our original list of thirty-one Negro leaders developed through the "snowball" technique, thirteen or 42

3 Tilman C. Cothran and William M. Phillips, Jr., "Negro Suffrage in Arkansas," *Journal of Negro Education*, XXVI, No. 3 (1957).
4 Oliver C. Cox, "Leadership Among Negroes in the United States," in Alvin W. Gouldner (ed.), *Studies in Leadership* (New York, 1950), pp. 228-71.
5 Gunnar Myrdal, *op. cit.*, Part IX, "Leadership and Concerted Action."

6 Samuel A. Stouffer, *Communism, Conformity, and Civil Liberties* (New York, 1955), pp. 501-2.
7 See Anna Holden, "White Leadership Structure in Little Rock" (Unpublished manuscript, Anti-Defamation League, New York, 1959) and Floyd Hunter, *op. cit.*

percent were ministers; five or 16 percent were in the field of education; four or 13 percent were physicians; three or 10 percent were in business; and the others were drawn from various professional groups such as editors, lawyers, or labor leaders. Table 1 gives the occupational distribution of Negro leaders.

Table 1

Occupational Distribution of Negro Leaders in Little Rock, Arkansas

Occupation	Number	Percent
Minister	13	41.9
Educator	5	16.2
Physician	4	12.9
Businessman	3	9.8
Editor	2	6.4
Labor Leader	2	6.4
Social Worker	1	3.2
Lawyer	1	3.2
Total	31	100.0

It has been mentioned that the Negro leader in racial conflict situations must possess a certain degree of economic independence, i.e., he must receive his income from many contributors in such a manner that no single person has control over his economic life or he must possess a measure of security from economic reprisals. This fact, in conjunction with the minister's traditional leadership role, is a possible explanation for the large number of ministers recognized as leaders. Historically, Negro ministers received a large measure of their financial support from the white community. Apparently, this economic support is declining in relative importance.

Negro businessmen in Little Rock, unlike their counterpart in the white community, exercise little influence as leaders. This is accounted for largely by the fact that their businesses are usually small; they are without a strong organization; and they are often dependent upon the white community for credit, business permits, and goods. Negro educators who work in publicly supported institutions find their aggressiveness neutralized by the danger of losing employment. One informant remarked: "It is unfortunate that our best prepared leaders are generally found in the public schools and colleges. They are not in a position to take a stand on this issue nor to offer leadership." Since economic independence is a prerequisite for protest leadership, doctors in this Southern community are beginning to occupy important positions in the Negro leadership structure, although possibly not in proportion to the strength of their economic security.

An age analysis of Negro leaders supports the hypothesis that leadership and recognition are associated with older persons. This generalization is based on data shown in Table 2. The ages of Negro leaders

ranged from 25 to 80. The median age, 49, is almost identical with the median age, 49.1, of Negro men listed in *Who's Who in Colored America*, 1950.[8] Twenty or 77 percent of the Negro leaders interviewed were forty or more years of age.

Table 2

Age of Negro Leaders in Little Rock, Arkansas

Age in Years*	Number	Percent
Under 30	3	11.5
30 - 39	3	11.5
40 - 49	7	26.9
50 - 59	7	26.9
60 and over	6	23.2
Total	26	100.0

*Median age of 49 years.

In addition to age, other social characteristics will be stated succinctly. Negro leaders had lived in Little Rock an average of 27.5 years. Only four in the group had lived outside the South, and this was for short periods of time spent attending graduate or professional schools. Four Negro leaders held graduate or professional degrees; two had only a high-school education; and the remainder had spent from two to eight years in college or professional school. The Negro leaders in our sample spent an average of 16.1 years in school. Twenty-four were married; thirteen were Baptists; ten were Methodists; two were Presbyterians; and one was an Episcopalian. Finally, the Negro leaders were similar to other professional groups in that they had on an average of 2.2 children.

LEADERS IN ACTION

When the panel of twenty-six leaders was asked to name the most in-

Table 3

Negro Leaders Ranked by Number of Choices from Twenty-six Negro Leaders in Little Rock, Arkansas, 1959

Leader's Occupation	Number of Choices
1. Journalist	22
2. Minister	15
3. Minister	13
4. Businessman	11
5. Minister	9
6. Attorney	9
7. Minister	8
8. Educator	7
9. Journalist	6
10. Physician	4

[8] Thomas P. Monahan and Elizabeth H. Monahan, "Some Characteristics of American Negro Leaders," *American Sociological Review*, XXI (October, 1956), 590.

fluential Negro in the community, twenty-two listed a journalist who is the State President of the NAACP. Of the other persons among the top ten receiving the highest frequency designations four were ministers; and one came from each of the following professions: business, law, teaching, medicine, and journalism (see Table 3). It was obvious that the desegregation issue is so dominant among the social problems facing the Negro community that most respondents confused general leadership within the community with leadership in the desegregation crisis.

In response to the companion question "Who are the most influential Negroes in determining policy on educational desegregation in the Little Rock community," twenty-four of the twenty-six respondents named the State President of the NAACP. Only four other Negro leaders were mentioned as many as two times. One established leader of long residence in the community remarked:

> The only outspoken Negro leader in this area has been from the NAACP. The other Negro leaders have remained silent and have allowed her to become the spokesman. There is unity among Negro leaders on the question of integration. They all will agree that integration is a desired goal.

While there is some latent hostility toward the top desegregation leader, there seems to be a very high degree of consensus among Negro leaders in favor of integration. Any Negro in a leadership position who takes a public stand for segregation loses prestige and often is subjected to ridicule. A Negro leader related:

> He [The Prophet] used to do a lot of stunt speaking on the streets supporting segregation; but it is now too dangerous to do this, for there have been threats of physical injury. Even the kids will stone his house or automobile when they pass going to school. Any Negro leader who advocates segregation immediately draws the ire and dislike from Negroes generally.

Although most traditional Negro leaders generally refrained from using their leadership potential during the desegregation crisis, there was widespread feeling among them that the leadership during the crisis was worthy of praise. Table 4 reveals that 42.3 percent of the leadership took this position.

Table 4

Assessment by Negro Leaders of Negro Leadership During and Following the Desegregation Crisis

Responses	Number	Percent
Worthy of Praise	11	42.3
Poor Quality of Leadership	6	23.2
No Leadership Except NAACP	2	7.7
Real Leaders Handicapped by Profession	1	3.8
New Leadership Emerged	1	3.8
No Answer	5	19.2
Total	26	100.0

An outstanding characteristic of Negro leaders during the desegregation crisis was the absence of overt dissension. Some of the leaders were willing to express privately their dissatisfaction with the character of the leadership, but they were careful to make a point of the widespread agreement among them on the desirability of the cause. One leader said:

> There seems to be not only a unanimous feeling for integration among the Negro leaders, but it is also supported by the vast majority of parents and students. The Negro maids will tell the white people what they think the white people want to hear; but when they return to the Negro community, they will not hesitate to express their approval of integration.

Social theory recognizes the fact that conflict often contributes to group unity or harmony. On this point, Park and Burgess wrote:

> Just as the individual, under the influences of contact and conflict with other individuals, acquires a status and develops a personality, so groups of individuals, in conflict with other groups, achieve unity, organization, group consciousness, and assume the forms characteristic of conflict groups — that is to say, they become parties, sects, nationalities, etc.[9]

In spite of conflict among Negro leaders for prestige and status, racial conflict as symbolized in the integration crisis achieves unity of purpose among these leaders in their support of the integration ideal.

Those who felt that Negro leadership was inadequate during the crisis thought that this was due to the absence of aggressive participation on the part of the old leaders, that it was due to a division among Negro leaders, or that the established leadership was unwilling to take a stand on such a hot issue. One Negro parent with a child enrolled at the desegregated, formerly all-white Central High School remarked:

> We have a shortage of leaders. There are a lot of would-be leaders, but the problem is that when trouble starts they won't stand up and be counted. My child is involved in this thing and so it is close to my heart. The NAACP President is the only leader who has stood up for these children. She has been more helpful than anybody. The Methodist Bishop has been of help, too. He ordered his preachers to go to school with the children, and that is why you had some preachers there.

An explanation for the lack of public pronouncement on the part of established Negro leaders is related to the fact that there was general agreement on the need to end segregation and there was the feeling that it was necessary to show unity on the problem. This interpretation gains support from one leader who said: "All and all the Negro leadership came together as never before. All seemed interested in following any leadership to keep up morale."

Table 5 shows a quantitative description of Negro leaders' explanations of their leadership during the crisis. Combining the first and sec-

[9] Robert E. Park and Ernest W. Burgess, *Introduction to the Science of Sociology* (Chicago, 1924), p. 642.

ond responses reveals that four out of five leaders felt that the Negro masses demanded or expected aggressive leadership or leadership which supported school desegregation. The racial element in the crisis was so crucial that a high degree of apparent unity among the leaders was required. A leader expressed this view when he remarked:

> Negroes have been preparing themselves for a long time for this thing [desegregation]. All the people [Negro] were determined that, since we have come this far, there would be no turning back.

Table 5

Explanations of Negro Leadership by Negro Leaders

Responses	Number	Percent
Negro masses demanded aggressive leadership	12	46.2
All leaders favored integration	8	30.8
Good leadership isolated in colleges and schools	2	7.7
Personality clashes	2	7.7
Traditional for Negroes to follow	1	3.8
Had to protect the morale of children	1	3.8
Total	26	100.0

Thus, in racial crisis situations, "protest" leadership becomes dominant and secures, at least, tacit support from many "accommodation" leaders.[10]

INTERRACIAL COMMUNICATION

There are two types of contacts between Negro and white leaders in Little Rock. These contacts are on an individual, informal, or personal basis and on an organizational basis. It was not possible to assess, from the nature of the data, the relative significance of these two types of contacts. While organizational contacts seem to have been on the increase prior to the desegregation crisis, it cannot be said that these contacts have supplanted in importance the traditional personal contacts. It can be observed in Table 6 that informal meetings were listed almost as frequently as the Ministerial Alliance — a formal meeting.

Table 6

Types of Contact Between Negro and White Leaders

Type of Contact	Frequency of Listing
Ministerial Alliance	6
Informal Meetings	5
Thursday Morning Dunbar Meetings	4
Urban League	3
Professional Societies	2
Others	6

Both Negro and white leaders were inclined to view race relations prior to the school crisis as being "good" or "improving." However, for

[10] See Lewis M. Killian and Charles V. Smith, "Negro Protest Leaders in a Southern Community," *Social Forces*, XXXVIII (March, 1960), 253-57.

the Negro leader this is a relative statement. "Race relations are good" when compared with those in comparable Southern cities; they are not good when compared with what they should be. One leader answered: "Contact between racial leaders before the crisis was pretty good to a certain extent." This statement represents the Negro's skepticism with reference to the "white liberal." [11]

Although many interracial organizations were listed, it was the general feeling that there was little significant contact between the two leadership structures. An educator commented:

> There is little contact between the leadership and the organizations of the white and Negro communities. This is a major problem. Basically, the type of communication that we have had has been on an individual basis; but now even this is lacking.

This typical comment tends to indicate that, from the Negro leader's point of view, little significant communication has existed between the two groups since the onset of the racial crisis. The contacts of significance that continued during the crisis were in social welfare organizations, in professional organizations, and in two interracial organizations, with only the latter organizational contacts possessing direct influence on racial relations change.[12]

The organizational contacts between Negro and white leaders in Little Rock appeared to be between the secondary white leaders and frontline Negro leaders. The men who constitute the core of the white power structure are not generally participating members in the interracial organizations in which Negroes hold memberships. Thus, it is possible to draw the tentative conclusion that Negro leaders have little, if any, contact with the core of the white power structure; and in the absence of this contact, any significant communication is between top Negro leaders and secondary white leaders. Even in instances of social contacts between Negro and white leaders of limited "real power," it is doubtful that meaningful communication takes place. There is always present an awareness of racial differences and an awareness of living in a Southern city which preclude the possibility of "free-flowing" communication. An educator had this to say: "The racial factor is definitely known and felt. There is a consciousness of race in interracial contacts now whereas before this was largely latent." This condition holds true in meetings of interracial organizations and in meetings on an informal or formal

[11] For a discussion of Negro conceptions of the white liberal, see Tilman C. Cothran, "Negro Conceptions of the White Liberal," *Proceedings of the Arkansas Academy of Science and Technology*, 1950.

[12] Negro leaders listed nineteen interracial organizations and agencies through which they had contact with the white community. They are: Community Chest, National Association of Social Workers, Pulaski County Tuberculosis Board, Advisory Board of the Salvation Army, Little Rock Recreation Commission, Pulaski County Medical Association, Little Rock Nurses Association, Friends to the Library, Thursday Morning Dunbar Meetings, Ministerial Alliance, Arkansas Council on Human Relations, League of Women Voters, United Church Women, Methodist Church Women, Urban League, YW and YMCA on some occasions, Health and Welfare Planning Council of the Community Chest, NAACP, and State Department of Education. Seventeen Negro leaders have memberships and are active in some of the listed interracial organizations.

basis. The awareness of racial identity precipitates a state of relative racial isolation in spite of some obvious contacts between the races.

Although interracial contacts may not afford a true indication of the meaningfulness of the communication, even these contacts have been on the decline since the beginning of the crisis. Sixty-nine percent of the respondents expressed the view that interracial contacts have decreased. Only one leader (Table 7) replied affirmatively to the question "Has there been an increase or decrease in such contacts since September 1, 1957?"

Table 7

The Effect of Crisis on Interracial Contacts

Responses	Number	Percent
Decrease	18	69.3
No Effect	3	11.5
Increase	1	3.8
No Answer	4	15.4
Total	26	100.0

With respect to the question on the present quality or status of interracial contacts, Table 8 reveals that almost one-half of the respondents replied "Poor or Almost Non-existent." A prominent minister said: "My contacts in the white community have continued since the crisis. However, relationships are strained."

Table 8

Present Quality or Status of Contacts

Responses	Number	Percent
Poor — Almost Non-existent	12	46.2
Normal	5	19.2
No New Contacts	2	7.7
Good on Personal Basis	1	3.8
No Answer	6	23.1
Total	26	100.0

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, ministers have played significant leadership roles in the Negro community. This was due in part to education and relative economic independence. However, in the past twenty years, there has been an important increase in the number of Negroes in other professional fields who effectively challenged the ministerial monopoly on leadership. With the increased militancy of Negroes throughout the United States in the area of civil rights and the subsequent emergence of "protest" leadership, ministers continue to play crucial leadership roles. The occupational distribution of Negro leaders shows important differences when contrasted with the occupations of white leaders. In the capital city of Arkansas, ministers constituted the largest occupational

group among Negro leaders while businessmen made up the dominant group among the white leaders. This finding is consistent with those in Tallahassee and Montgomery. It seems probable that these findings will not be very dissimilar from the results of replication or similar studies in other Southern communities.

In the Negro community, leadership dynamics are inextricably interwoven with the total complex of forces operative in the general character and nature of the relationships between the races. The desegregation crisis in Little Rock and the associated economic reprisals, threats, actual violence, and legal proscriptions have conspired to bring about a greater unity of purpose among Negro leaders. Unity of purpose among the leaders does not gainsay the existence of personal struggles and rivalry for prestige and status. Differences of opinion existed prior to the crisis and will undoubtedly continue to exist for a long time to come. Yet, on the question of desegregation, the Negro community in general and leaders in particular view desegregation as a legal and moral necessity.

Accordingly, the role of the "accommodation-type" leader is rapidly becoming untenable. Any Negro leader advocating acceptance of segregation or even "gradualism" and compromise not only immediately loses adherents, but also is often subjected to sanctions by the Negro community. The findings of this study are in substantial agreement with the conclusions of Killian and Smith in regard to the fact that "protest leadership" has gained the ascendancy, especially in the two distinctly different types of racial crisis situations studied — educational and bus desegregation. There is ample reason to believe that this phenomenon is not limited to the cited studies. Since desegregation is a "generalized goal" in the Negro community, the accommodation leader cannot afford to oppose this dominant community trend. Additionally, he is not schooled in the techniques and skills of aggressiveness. According to our data, the old leader has developed two adjustive maneuvers. First, he may move quietly to the background and attempt to give advice to the new leaders, or in rare instances he may go underground and attempt to continue to speak for the Negro community in his personal contacts with members of the white community. Second, the accommodation leader has, in several dramatic instances, successfully adopted the techniques and strategy of protest leadership.

It is interesting to observe that, prior to the ascendancy of the "new" leader, the "accommodation-type" leader gained his position of prominence and prestige through the acceptance and support of the white and Negro communities. The protest leader, on the other hand, gains his prestige and status through acceptance in the Negro community and rejection by a considerable part of the white community. However, the white community makes a negative contribution to the importance of

protest leadership in the sense that the repudiation, economic, legal, and physical sanctions administered by whites bestow a certain "charismatic" quality on the victim and tend to leave no doubt in the minds of the Negro masses that the leader is more interested in their welfare than in personal aggrandizement.

Protest leadership is not only likely to alter or encourage diminished communication between the races but it is also likely to change the framework within which changes in race relations occur. In situations where accommodation leadership prevails, changes in race relations are gradual and are initiated by negotiation, compromise, and the impersonal forces of the market, technology, urbanization, and international relations. When protest leadership acquires a position of prominence, changes in race relations occur through the manipulation of judicial, political, economic, and moral power. Race relations characterized by superordination and subordination are no longer based on social synergy (Negro acceptance) but such relations become symbolic of the racial power struggle in a social system which is characterized by the unequal distribution of power between the races. Interracial communication is essential in either type of leadership. Under the accommodation-type, it accepts the white community's definition of the "Negro's place." But the communication immanent in this type of leadership seldom, if ever, involves direct contact with the core of "real power" in the white community.

The extent to which the accommodation leader can be said to exercise power is dependent upon tenuous support from the white community. He has to win occasionally some minor concessions in order to impress his importance upon the Negro community. The possession of power based on economic or political resources is exceedingly rare for either type of Negro leadership. In instances of protest leadership, the leader often controls negative economic and political sanctions in the form of boycotts and protest votes. These sources of power are, by their very character, of limited usefulness. It may be hypothesized that the greatest source of power at the command of protest leaders is located in the refusal to cooperate with the processes of segregation and discrimination in a social system in which these are negative values. Failure to cooperate with racial superordination and subordination through the utilization of negative sanctions, "non-violent" resistance, legal attacks on segregation in federal courts, sit-in demonstrations, etc., questions the legitimacy of the application of power by the white community to maintain the existing system of race relations.