

“*Rebellion*” at Newark

When we hear about Newark — or Watts, or Buffalo, or the other Negro insurrections of the past few years — the first thing we need to do is to gain and keep some perspective on these shattering events. One important point to remember is that the overwhelming majority of the dead and wounded from these conflicts have been Negro — and most of them shot by the National Guardsmen who are so quick to move into the trouble areas. In short, the most important lesson to be learned from Newark or Watts is that we Americans fool ourselves when we think of ourselves as living under a “free government,” when we think of our government as operating by some sort of voluntary consent. Ordinarily, when things are going well and there is little to disrupt the permanent reign of the State, we don’t *see* the violence, coercion, and terror at the root of the very existence and operation of all of our governments, federal, state, and local. But let any trouble arise to mar the peaceful workings of this coercive rule, and the State reverts — ever so quickly — to its true role: that of naked, organized violence.

Notice how rapidly and how eagerly the State mobilizes its National Guard at the first sign of any danger to one of its violence-wielding units: the local police. Notice how rapidly the State turns its cities into an armed camp, rumbling through the streets in its Armored Personnel Carriers,

shooting its machine guns and cannon at “anything that moves” — in the classical military terminology. Notice how quickly these minions of the State impose compulsory curfews on its peaceful citizens, how they block off — in violation of all human liberties — whole areas of a city and prevent anyone from going in or out, how they shut down all liquor stores and ban all sales of liquor. The philosophy of the State was never so well expressed as in an order that went over the Newark police radios when it was felt that violence by the State’s armed forces was insufficient: “Use your shotguns and revolvers. Use your shotguns and revolvers. That’s what you have them for.” And a voice answered back: “It’s about time.” There is the voice of the State.

A second point to realize is the background to the rebellion. Three things triggered the rioting: First, the ever-present evil of police brutality, a brutality which is endemic in the Negro ghetto areas, although those of us who are upper-middle-class whites feel it only tangentially and in passing (except if we happen to be radicals or “subversives”). Police brutality as a rampant, permanent fact should not surprise us, for any group given a legal monopoly on violence will proceed to use the violence and that monopoly as best and as often as it can. The other two issues that had angered the Negroes of Newark were both State aggressions against the Negro citizens who constitute a majority of the town, but have no power in its government. One was failure to appoint a Negro as secretary to the Board of Education of a town in which the school enrollment is over three-quarters Negro. Another, and far more important, was the plan of the Newark government to liquidate thousands of Negro homes in the center of the Negro district of the city to make way for a campus of the State’s College of Medicine and Dentistry.

It is no accident, finally, that the Negro insurrection began after a Negro cab driver was beaten up and arrested by the police; and began as a mob attack, escalating from tomatoes to Molotov cocktails, upon the offending police station.