

## The Civil Rights Struggle on Long Island in a National Context

by Alan Singer

On July 27, 1967, President Lyndon Johnson addressed the American public about the causes of violent uprisings by Black residents of U.S. inner cities. In his speech, Johnson, declared that "the only genuine, long-range solution for what has happened lies in an attack . . . upon the conditions that breed despair and violence. All of us know what those conditions are: ignorance, discrimination, slums, poverty, disease, not enough jobs. . . We should attack them because there is simply no other way to achieve a decent and orderly society in America." Two days later Johnson issued Executive Order 11365 creating a bipartisan advisory commission to examine the causes of urban unrest and to propose solutions. Otto Kerner, the Governor of Illinois was appointed chairman of the commission. John Lindsay, the Mayor of New York City, was appointed as the committee's Vice Chairman.<sup>70</sup>

A report issued by the Kerner Commission in the spring of 1968 declared that the riots in Black communities during the second half of the 1960's were a "culmination of 300 years of racial prejudice." The commissioners concluded that "today's problems can only be solved if white Americans comprehend the rigid social, economic, and educational barriers that have prevented Negroes from participating in the mainstream of American life."<sup>71</sup>

Within weeks after the report was made public, Lyndon Johnson announced his decision not to seek reelection as President because of growing public dissatisfaction with the war in Vietnam and Martin Luther King, Jr. was assassinated in Memphis, Tennessee. King's murder was followed by an eruption of rioting in nearly 130 urban Black communities. Army units in full battle gear were mobilized to protect the Capital building and the White House in Washington DC. By the end of a week, 55,000 soldiers had been dispatched to over 100 cities, 46 people were dead, more than 3,000 were injured, approximately 27,000 people were arrested, and there was over \$45 million in property damage. In Chicago, Mayor Richard Daley ordered police to "shoot to kill."<sup>72</sup>

In the 1968 Presidential election, Republican candidate Richard Nixon campaigned against open housing legislation and busing to promote school integration. He also promised to appoint "conservative" federal judges who would slow the judicial push for civil rights. Nixon's successful election strategy effectively mobilized white opposition to the Civil Rights movement, anger at urban Black uprisings, and disenchantment with Democratic support for social welfare programs that were perceived of as primarily benefiting the African American population. In addition to the vote for Nixon, approximately 14% of the electorate supported the blatantly anti-Black candidacy of Alabama Governor George Wallace.

On Long Island, voters tended to follow the national trends. In 1964, 58.7% of the voters in traditionally Republican Nassau and Suffolk Counties preferred Democrat Lyndon Johnson over Barry Goldwater. But in 1968, Richard Nixon received 54% of the Long Island vote, Democratic candidate Hubert Humphrey got only 40%, and George Wallace, 6%.<sup>73</sup>

Once in office, Nixon recruited Wallace supporters to the Republican Party with a "Southern Strategy" that appealed to white voters in the south, suburbanites, and white ethnic voters who opposed federal programs promoting racial integration. Nixon's strategy apparently attracted Long Island residents. In 1972, 65% of the Long Island electorate supported Nixon for reelection.<sup>74</sup> With the retirement of Lyndon Johnson, the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr., and the election of Richard Nixon as President in 1968 and 1972, the Kerner Commission's report about the causes of racial unrest in the United States and its recommendations for creating a more just society were effectively shelved.<sup>75</sup>

In many ways the history of race relations on Long Island during the 1960's and 1970's paralleled the national retreat from a commitment to racial integration as a way to achieve greater social justice. Long Island State Senator Norman Lent, who rose to prominence as an opponent of busing during the battle over school integration in Malverne, was elected to Congress from the 5th district in 1970. In Congress, he introduced a constitutional amendment that would have effectively banned school integration efforts. Lent argued that the purpose of the proposed amendment was "to return control of education to local school boards, to preserve the neighborhood school system and to eliminate forced busing and the threat of school district consolidation imposed to achieve purely arbitrary racial balances."<sup>76</sup>

Today Nassau and Suffolk Counties remain a checkerboard of racially segregated communities. While the overall public school student population of Nassau County in 1994-95 was 73.1% white, 12.7% African American, 8.6% Latino/a, and 5.6% other (primarily Asian), most of the county's 180,827 public school students attended racially segregated schools. In eighteen of the county's 56 school districts, with a total population of 57,050 students (32% of the Nassau County public school population), fewer than five percent of the student body was either African American or Latino/a. In four districts, Uniondale, Westbury, Roosevelt, and Hempstead, over 90% of the students were African American or Latino/a. These four districts alone had 41% of the African American and Latino/a students in Nassau County. If you include the African American and Latino/a student population of four other largely minority districts, Elmont, Glen Cove, Long Beach, and Malverne, eight school districts out of 56 (14%) had over 55% of the African American and Latino/a students in Nassau County.<sup>77</sup>

In his speech at the 1963 March on Washington, Martin Luther King, Jr. envisioned a world where "little black boys and black girls will be able to join hands with little white boys and girls and walk together as sisters and brothers."<sup>78</sup> As the world approaches the year 2,000, King's dream has still not been achieved in most parts of Long Island.