

## THE KERNER REPORT and White Backlash –Toni Imperial Stands for Law and Order

*Racial polarization fueled the backlash against the Great Society. In 1968 the Presidential Commission on Urban Disorders, headed by former Illinois Governor Otto Kemer, issued its report.. In a statement that was widely quoted, it cautioned Ameyica about its racial divisions: "Our nation is moving toward two societies, one black, one white—separate and unequal. " Below is the brief summary that introduces the commission's long report.*

The summer of 1967 again brought racial disorders to American cities, and with them shock, fear and bewilderment to the nation.

The worst came during a two-week period in July, first in Newark and then in Detroit. Each set off a chain reaction in neighboring communities.

On July 28, 1967, the President of the United States established this Commission and directed us to answer three basic questions:

What happened?

Why did it happen?

What can be done to prevent it from happening again?

To respond to these questions, we have undertaken a broad range of studies and investigations. We have visited the riot cities; we have heard many witnesses; we have sought the counsel of experts across the country.

This is our basic conclusion: Our nation is moving toward two societies, one black, one white-separate and unequal.

Reaction to last summer's disorders has quickened the movement and deepened the division. Discrimination and segregation have long permeated much of American life; they now threaten the future of every American.

This deepening racial division is not inevitable. The movement apart can be reversed. Choice is still possible. Our principal task is to define that choice and to press for a national resolution.

To pursue our present course will involve the continuing polarization of the American community and, ultimately, the destruction of basic democratic values.

The alternative is not blind repression or capitulation to lawlessness. It is the realization of common opportunities for all within a single society.

This alternative will require a commitment to national action- compassionate, massive and sustained, backed by the resources of the most powerful and the richest nation on this earth. From every American it will require new attitudes, new understanding, and, above all, new will.

The vital needs of the nation must be met; hard choices must be made, and, if necessary, new taxes enacted.

Violence cannot build a better society. Disruption and disorder nourish repression, not justice. They strike at the freedom of every citizen. The community cannot-it will not-tolerate coercion and mob rule. Violence and destruction must be ended-in the streets of the ghetto and in the lives of people.

Segregation and poverty have created in the racial ghetto a destructive environment totally unknown to most white Americans.

What white Americans have never fully understood-but what the Negro can never forget-is that white society is deeply implicated in the ghetto. White institutions created it, white institutions maintain it, and

white society condones it.

It is time now to turn with all the purpose at our command to the major unfinished business of this nation. It is time to adopt strategies for action that will produce quick and visible progress. It is time to make good the promises of American democracy to all citizens-urban and rural, white and black, Spanish-surname, American Indian, and every minority group.

Our recommendations embrace three basic principles:

- To mount programs on a scale equal to the dimension of the problems;
- To aim these programs for high impact in the immediate future in order to close the gap between promise and performance;
- To undertake new initiatives and experiments that can change the system of failure and frustration that now dominates the ghetto and weakens our society.

These programs will require unprecedented levels of funding and performance, but they neither probe deeper nor demand more than the problems which called them forth. There can be no higher priority for national action and no higher claim on the nation's conscience.

We issue this Report now, five months before the date called for by the President. Much remains that can be learned. Continued study is essential.

As Commissioners we have worked together with a sense of the greatest urgency and have sought to compose whatever differences exist among us. Some differences remain. But the gravity of the problem and the pressing need for action are too clear to allow further delay in the issuance of this Report.

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*PAUL GOLDBERGER, "Tony Imperiale Stands for Law and Order"*  
(NY Times, 1968)

*In communities around the country, local groups channeled their fears and frustrations into organizations aimed at protecting, they believed, their own neighborhoods and achievements-often "taking the law into their own hands. " In 1968 Paul Goldberger profiled one such group, centered in Newark, New Jersey, and headed by Tony Imperiale.*

It was a warm Sunday evening in May, and the crowd, jammed elbow- to-elbow in the tavern parking lot, was wildly enthusiastic. "Give 'em hell, Tony," an old man shouted. "Tell 'em where to go."

Tony began quietly. "I didn't see any flags in the city of Newark lowered to half mast when Gov. Lurleen Wallace died," he said. [Lurleen Wallace was George Wallace's wife; she was elected governor because Georgia term limits disqualified George Wallace, and was considered his surrogate in office]. "Why not, when they could do it for that Martin Luther Coon?" The audience cheered, and Tony gained momentum. "When is it gonna stop?" he cried. "Everybody says, 'Don't bother 'em now. Leave 'em alone, and they'll calm down.' Well, it took riots that burned down half of a town before we learned."

Tony is Anthony Imperiale 5 feet 6 1/4 inches, a tough-muscled 230 pounds, 39 years old. That evening in Nutley, NJ., five miles north of Newark, he was hailed as a savior by hundreds of white residents who are convinced that the Negro is taking away everything the white man has earned. Tony isn't going to give it up without a fight-and Tony is their man.

Imperiale is, the organizer of Newark's North Ward Citizens' Committee, which claims a dues-paying membership of 200 and thousands of enthusiastic followers. In their leader's view, they are "defenders of law and order," banded together in the wake of last summer's Newark riots to stand up to Communist-inspired racial pressures. In the view of Gov. Richard J. Hughes, they are "vigilantes."

They own guns and take karate training from Imperiale, a Black Belt in the art. Ten of their radio-equipped cars patrol the North Ward each weekday night (17 on weekends) to ward off criminals and/or invaders from the adjacent Central Ward, the black ghetto. Chapters in five suburban towns, including Nutley, mount their own patrols. Imperiale used to boast loudly that the committee owned a helicopter and an armored car, and he insisted that members on patrol wear fatigues-but he has of late soft-pedaled these matters.

Last month the windows fronting the committee's cinder-block headquarters on North Seventh Street were shattered by three explosions. No one was injured in the 1:20 A.U. bombing, but it was a close call. "If a guy hadn't talked me into taking another drink at a bar I was in," Imperiale says, "me and my wife Louise would have been sitting right where the plate-glass window was torn out." He has few doubts about who placed the dynamite, and he has doubled the night patrols. He has also expressed uncertainty about his ability to control committee members: "If this kind of thing happens again, I won't be responsible for what these people here will do."

Tony Imperials is not alone in America 1968. In Detroit there is Donald Lobsinger, chairman of a 6-year-old organization called Breakthrough. His formula for security: "Study, arm, store provisions and organize." In Warren, Mich., druggist Ronald Portnoy leads a group known as Fight Back. Its literature proclaims: "The only way to stop them is at the city limits." In Oakland, Calif., the leader of the Home Defense Association is Herbert Clark. It has published a manual recommending firearms and ammunition and containing chapters on "Defense of an Individual House" and "Neighborhood Perimeter Defense." . . .

Imperiale is of another stripe. Last month he sought election to a council that will oversee administration of the Federal Model Cities program in Newark. There were four posts open in each of 13 districts-248 candidates for 52 seats. Imperiale not only won in his district but polled more votes than any other candidate in the city. He called his victory "an affirmation of the people's desire for law and order." Now he is running for the City Council, and his eye is on the office now occupied by Mayor Hugh J. Addonizio.

The Imperiale platform is basically the same cry for law and order that sets crowds cheering wherever he speaks. Some of the planks:

"The American people are very gullible. They let the politicians yield to the radical. And the Communists take the radical and exploit him.... In the riots, billions of dollars of property was destroyed, and the Constitution of the United States was thrown into the gutter. When is Washington gonna put down their foot and say 'Look, law and order must prevail?'"

"We look at the policemen-they've been abused, they've been harassed, they've been rubbed under the nose with anything that these radicals wanted to do, and they got away with it. Because the quislings, the politicians with no guts, were selling the decent people out.... The first thing I'm gonna do is take politics out of the Police Department.... And I intend to fight any group who tries to tie the hands of the police by shouting 'police brutality' or this or that. I'm gonna fight you, tooth and nail."

"They oughta register Communists, not guns." "Are there no poor whites? But the Negroes get all the antipoverty money. When pools are being built in the Central Ward, don't they think the white kids have got frustration? The whites are the majority. You know how many of them come to me, night after night, because they can't get a job? They've been told, 'We have to hire Negroes first.' "...

In the view of Imperiale's constituency, he tells it like it is. The large majority of the ward's 43,000 residents are Italian-American, though there has been something of an influx of Negroes since the 1960 census, when the proportion of Negroes was 17.6 per cent. White Protestants have been leaving the area, and Roman Catholic population has increased and some Negro congregations have taken over property formerly owned by white Protestant churches.

It is a shabby neighborhood, once firmly middle-class, now in the grip of a slow but insistent deterioration. The percentage of owner-occupied homes has dipped. Many single-family homes have been converted to multiple-occupancy dwellings. There is a crowded, ticky-tacky feeling about it all.

Perhaps the most unhappy facet of the North Ward, however, is a pervasive-and in many ways valid-mental set. The people sense that their backs are to the wall, that conditions are worsening and no help is on the way. There are state and Federal funds being poured into Newark, but they are being spent elsewhere; for bad as the ward's problems may be, they don't compare to the problems of the city's black ghettos.

More than half of Newark's 400,000 residents are Negroes. A third of the city's housing is substandard; unemployment in black areas such as the Central Ward is officially set at 12 per cent, unofficially as high as 20 per cent; there are 17,000 households "living" on incomes of less than \$3,000 a year. Newark leads all cities of the nation of its size in crime and venereal disease and maternal mortality rates.

When the city celebrated its tricentennial in 1966, it adopted the slogan, "Pride in Newark." But the statistics above don't lend themselves to being pointed to with pride; Tony Imperiale and his followers point to them with fear and anger, and the presence of black faces in their North Ward is a constant reminder that "it could happen here."

It is not, Imperiale insists, that he and the members of the committee are racists. He tells of inviting a Negro neighbor and his family over for a meal. When a Negro woman died in his neighborhood this summer, he took in her 7-year-old boy for several days; the boy still spends as much time with the Imperiales as with his own family, Imperiale says.

But Imperiale is quick to defend whites who attack Negroes entering the ward ("The colored just come looking for trouble"), and he is convinced that the Negro is incapable of dignified living ("Look at this," he says, pointing to a 15-year-old photograph of a North Ward neighborhood. "And look at it now, with garbage on the streets." A committee member adds, "They don't know how to live here; they have no pride." Later, a tour of the neighborhood turns up only a few signs of deterioration. "The garbage man must have just been here," the committee member quickly explains)....

Patrols start at headquarters, a one-story building that contains a small office with radio equipment and several telephones. Behind the office is a multipurpose room, once the karate school gymnasium, the walls of which are painted bright orange. A bulletin board is posted with clippings-pro and con-about the organization. Judo posters line one wall, and literature published by black militants is displayed on another. Street maps abound. A sign beside the door reads: "No profanity. Fine 25 cents."

The office is usually staffed by neighborhood housewives while their husbands patrol the streets and their young children play hide-and-go-seek around the building. They are, respectively, members of the North Ward Women's Auxiliary and the North Ward junior Auxiliary. The most singular artifact in the office is a telephone directly connected to LeRoi Jones's Spirit House in the Central Ward....

Most of the members of the patrol are young, and the cars they drive tend to be old. As dusk falls, the street in front of headquarters comes alive with the roar of faulty mufflers and the impatient engine

revving of youth craving excitement. They wear black construction hats decorated with the committee's initials, N.W.C.C., embossed in white. They talk together with a kind of false bravado.

Imperiale gives the word, and the four-man patrols move out. They follow carefully planned routes, studying the scene, looking for signs of trouble. At first, the police used to stop the cars to search them for weapons, and some such searches still occur. "They never find any guns," says Imperiale, "because we never carry any. It would be stupid." The patrol is intended to prevent conflict, he says, not start it.

For Imperiale, a patrol consists of driving from one corner gathering of white youths to another. Invariably he is recognized, and he knows most of the boys by their first names. "Hi ya, Angelo." "Wadaya doin', Stevie?" He urges them to stay cool, stay out of trouble. Older residents often spot his elderly black Cadillac. "Go get 'em, Tony, " they shout. "They're out to get you. " The bombing of committee headquarters is fresh in their minds....

Because of such patrols and the other activities of the committee, Imperiale believes, an all-out race war in the city and suburbs can be avoided. "It doesn't necessarily have to come to that," he says, "We're showing the radical blacks that there's whites that will stand up. We're proving that it can be prevented."

This optimistic outlook is not shared, however, by all of Imperiale's followers. Tom Benecchi, the former coordinator of the committee's Nutley chapter who has withdrawn to form his own group and do his own thing, views his role mainly as that of delaying race war, not preventing it. "It's bound to come," he says. "Some crazy colored bastard, a Negro militant, will start shooting at whites, and then some crazy white bastard will start shooting back. But maybe when they see 500 of us with guns, maybe then they'll think twice about coming into our town .... . .