

Power of Positive Action

Rockville, Maryland, moves quickly to prevent violence when Negro family moves into suburb.

By RICHARD C. WERTZ*

Leonard Manley¹ is a computer programmer analyst at the Pentagon, a college graduate in business administration, a member of the Episcopal Church and the first Negro to move his family into Hungerford Towne, a residential neighborhood in the Washington suburb of Rockville, Maryland.

The initial reaction early this summer among most of Mr. Manley's new white neighbors in Hungerford Towne was anger and fear. A rumor quickly circulated that his house had been purchased by the N.A.A.C.P. at a price far above the normal market value for homes in the neighborhood and that the Manleys were only the vanguard for more Negro move-ins in the near future. The white neighbors, fearing a loss in their property values as a result of a mass Negro influx, began to talk of possible courses of action.

From all indications, this anger and fear could have easily turned into the same type of racial violence that has occurred in so many cities across the country in the last few months. However, it did not. No rocks were thrown, no threatening phone calls were made, no riots occurred in protest. What factors made this move a

peaceful one? How did the city avoid the overt unpleasantness which has all too often accompanied the arrival of a Negro family in a previously all-white neighborhood?

The settlement of the Manley family in Hungerford Towne was as much of a surprise for the city officials in Rockville as it was for the white residents in the neighborhood. No one at city hall had prior warning that the move-in would occur. The first news of it came to city hall less than two hours before the Manleys' arrival at their new home.

The city officials' first move was to attempt to determine whether this was just another rumor of the type that periodically comes across their desks or whether this was finally "the real thing." Reconnoitering of the neighborhood by an unmarked city police car soon brought word that a Negro family was indeed in the process of working about the house, in apparent preparation for moving in.

A telephone call to a local clergyman who had been active in interracial affairs confirmed that the move-in was actually about to take place. Having double-checked their initial information, the city officials moved quickly.

Their most immediate concern was that violence should be prevented. The city and county police—who had concurrent jurisdiction over the area—were alerted, and patrols of the

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neighborhood were stepped up. Officers were instructed to make themselves seen but not to become involved in discussions about the reasons for their increased activity. It was felt that the physical presence of the policemen in the normally quiet residential subdivision would serve both to reassure the residents that there would be no violence and to discourage racial trouble-makers from outside the neighborhood.

At the same time, phone calls were placed to several persons and organizations who might have information about the circumstances surrounding the move-in and about the new family itself. It was learned that a community organization devoted to "open occupancy" housing had been instrumental in bringing about the sale to the Manley family, and this organization was prevailed upon to prepare a fact sheet outlining the background of the sale and providing information about the Manley family which indicated that they could be good neighbors if given the opportunity.

The next phone call went to the editor of the local newspaper, who was provided with a full description of the situation on a "background only" basis. He agreed that, so long as there were no disorders or demonstrations in the neighborhood, there would be no special newspaper stories about the event. With the immediate situation apparently under control, city hall turned its attention to the ultimate solution of the problem.

A specially called executive meeting of the city council provided council members with background on the situation and served to give the council an opportunity to prepare a posi-

tion on the matter. The council was not unanimous in its feeling about the move-in. But it was the clear consensus of the group that, from a number of varying viewpoints, the city had a responsibility to ensure a peaceful transition.

The council recognized at the outset that the government had a basic responsibility to preserve law and order; it felt that this responsibility went beyond a requirement to cope with actual disorder as it occurred to the prevention of such disorder. It also felt that the city government had a clear responsibility to the community to prevent the marring of its "image," as had happened with a number of communities which had been the scenes of racial strife in recent months and that economic and social progress had been set back severely in many of the cities in which overt disorder had been permitted to occur.

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The council also noted the importance of helping white families in the affected neighborhood to preserve their investments in their homes by making available information which would tend to prevent panic sales at temporarily depressed prices. Information provided to the council indicated that the experience of most other suburban communities was that real estate prices tended to fall only where a number of properties went on the market at the same time so that the sellers were competing with each other for buyers' dollars.

Finally, the council recognized its moral responsibility for bringing about the peaceful transition of the neighborhood.

In the next few days the city government, proceeding without publicity or fanfare, broadened and deepened its efforts. The key to the city's approach was a conviction of the necessity of reaching and developing good affirmative leadership within the immediate neighborhood of the move-in, not of "directing" activities from above. Fortunately, the people of good will in the area identified themselves rapidly. At the very time that fearful neighbors were gathering to "see what could be done" to protest, others were quietly making the Manleys feel welcome. One neighbor brought coffee, another dinner. Another invited the children to play in her yard.

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Alone, these friendly neighbors following the dictates of their consciences could not have exerted a strong counterforce to those who were deeply incensed about having Negro neighbors. But with support and help they were able to bring about a decisive change in the mood of their neighborhood. They gave wide distribution to the fact sheet which laid to rest a number of the more exaggerated rumors about the sale and which provided reassuring information about the Manley family. They calmly discussed the matter with many who had no ill will but were misinformed and apprehensive about the results of the move-in.

It should be noted that it took courage for these individuals to come forward in this way; they had to be willing to face much disapproval and in some cases outright ostracism. Certainly, the sense they had of strong official backing from a government that would stand firm helped them to

follow the course of action they had chosen.

Another extremely important source of support during the critical period came from members of the clergy who in many instances worked together with city officials in handling the situation. The chairman of the open occupancy housing organization, a minister, devoted many hours to visits with a number of white families, assuring them that his organization did not intend to bring about a major influx of Negro families into the subdivision. Clergymen were called upon to give counsel and advise restraint to those persons who were taking a leading part in urging direct action against the Negro family or its property. Where actions of neither neighbors nor the clergy sufficed to influence these individuals, close friends or employers were asked to intervene.

Throughout this period, the efforts of the city government to maintain peace were never publicized. Although the city's position was understood, its activities were not apparent. And when it was finally clear that the people of the area could go back to their normal summer life with no further disturbance, official action relaxed, ready to step in only if and when needed.

At the end of the Manleys' first week in Rockville, the neighborhood appeared to be returning to stability. Only a slight recurrence of the previous week's agitation took place when a local realtor distributed fliers throughout the subdivision proclaiming that he had buyers for the homes of any white family that wished to sell. A quick visit to him by city offi-

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of a commission to review the whole problem and to propose a series of amendments to the constitution for new apportionment formulae.

Two of the major city newspapers took diametrically opposite stands on the issue. The *Daily News* commended Mr. Mahoney for his proposal, saying it would bring relief to the underrepresented suburban voters if reapportionment were to take place under the present formulae. The *New York Times* criticized the idea of a special session if the present formulae were to be used. Instead, the *Times* advocated a special session to start action toward adoption of a new formula.

Maneuvering Begins On Selecting Electors

There is one group of representatives selected by the voters of the United States who perform only one function, whose names frequently do not even appear on the ballot and who do not even convene as a body to perform their quadrennial duty. These are the members of the Electoral College, chosen to select the president of the United States.

State practices in the election of Electoral College members vary greatly. Although the election is still more than a year away, maneuvering for control of several southern state delegations has already begun. Alabama and Mississippi are in the process of making it possible for uninstructed and uncommitted electors to appear on the November 1964 ballot.

In Louisiana, segregationist-conservative forces within the State Democratic Central Committee won a 53-to-42 victory to prevent a pro-Kennedy slate from automatically representing the Democratic party on the 1964 ballot. Led by Leander Perez, Sr., political leader of Plaquemines Parish, the committee passed a resolution providing for two slates of presidential electors. One will

be pledged to support the Democratic party's nominee as selected by the national convention next August. The other will be pledged to an "independent" candidate. Selection of the winning slate will take place during next summer's congressional primary.

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cialists produced a promise that he would cease any unusual efforts to bring about sales in the area until the crisis had passed.

After two weeks, it was apparent that the critical days were behind the community and the city officials breathed more easily. The neighborhood was quiet; no mass exodus had taken place; and few people outside the immediate area were even aware of the crisis it had met and weathered.

The Manleys' move-in could easily have made Rockville the setting for a bitter racial clash. All the ingredients were present. Ordinarily good sensible people were angered, nearly to the point of reacting overtly against the new family, by the thought of great economic loss and by the fear that their new neighbors would mean an end to the peace and security of the neighborhood.

Violence and property loss were averted because city hall recognized its responsibilities and provided clear and decisive leadership in a situation in which hesitation might have permitted or encouraged the racial flare-up which has occurred in too many communities across the nation. Rockville's experience may well serve as the basis for a fundamental re-evaluation by other suburban governments of their responsibilities in a new and dynamic era.