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## Civil Rights: Liberty in Peril

By a lopsided vote of 70 to 19, the U.S. Senate extended for two years the life and investigatory power of the Civil Rights Commission. Southern Senators predictably opposed the measure—and by their lights, they had good reason. For last week, after its continued existence was assured, the six-member commission released a massive report on its two-year, nationwide investigation into voting discrimination. The major finding: in some 100 counties in eight Southern states—North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia, Alabama, Mississippi, Louisiana, Tennessee and Florida—there was "reason to believe that Negro citizens are prevented, by outright discrimination or by fear of physical violence or economic reprisal, from exercising the right to vote." Items: > Liberty County, Fla., has 240 voting-age Negroes, but none are now registered. In 1956 some Negroes did register. There was an immediate outbreak of cross-burnings, fire bombs, abusive nighttime telephone calls. When all the Negroes except one had removed their names from voting lists, said the commission, the "troubles ended." The one defiant Negro "was forced to leave the county."

>In McCormick County, S.C., which is 62.6% Negro, 48 Negroes registered in 1960. Some immediately lost their jobs. As a consequence, only one was courageous enough to vote.

> In East Carroll Parish, La., Negro Farmer Joseph Atlas complained to the commission that he had not been allowed to register. Soon after, he discovered that white merchants would not gin his cotton, market his soybeans, or deliver fuel oil to his farm.

>In Hay wood County, Tenn., Negroes who registered had insurance policies canceled, were refused credit at local banks, were not allowed to buy at local stores, or were evicted.

> In Webster Parish, La., Negro Joe Kirk tried unsuccessfully four times to register. On his fourth try, the registrar invoked a proposed Louisiana law—which was not really passed until five months later—disqualifying parents of illegitimate children. Testified Kirk at a commission hearing: "She asked did I have any illegitimate children. I said, 'Not as I knows of. If I has, I hasn't been accused of.' She says, 'You are a damned liar.' I just smiled; I could still give the smile. Then she said, 'I know you were going to tell a lie at the first place.' Then she asked the question, 'What were "disfranchise" mean?' I said, 'Just like I am now. This is disfranchise from voting "

As a result of civil rights legislation passed in 1957 and 1960, the commission reported, some progress has been made in the nation's fight against such discrimination. But more stringent laws are still needed. With two

Southern members dissenting, the commission proposed federal legislation to make age, length of residence, a felony-clear record, and a sixth-grade education the only requirements for voting in federal and state elections.

But beyond such legislative recommendations, the commission took a basic approach to a formidable problem. Surveying some of the 100 Southern black-belt counties where Negroes represent the majority of population but a minuscule segment of voters, the commission found a recurring pattern. The counties were plagued by one-crop economies and sagging populations; though Negroes suffered more than whites from inferior homes, schools and income, the levels for both races were below average. Said the commission: "Perhaps the crucial conclusion to be drawn from this study is that the facts of economic life have a direct and significant bearing on civil rights generally, and the right to vote in particular."

The commission therefore recommended federal assistance: "agricultural aid to depressed areas undergoing change, Small Business Administration loans to help diversify the economy, assistance in training and relocating farm families who are displaced—these and other measures can soften the impact of disturbing economic changes, and in doing so promote the kind of economic climate that encourages better race relations." Concluded the report: "Where poverty exists, liberty is always in peril."

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