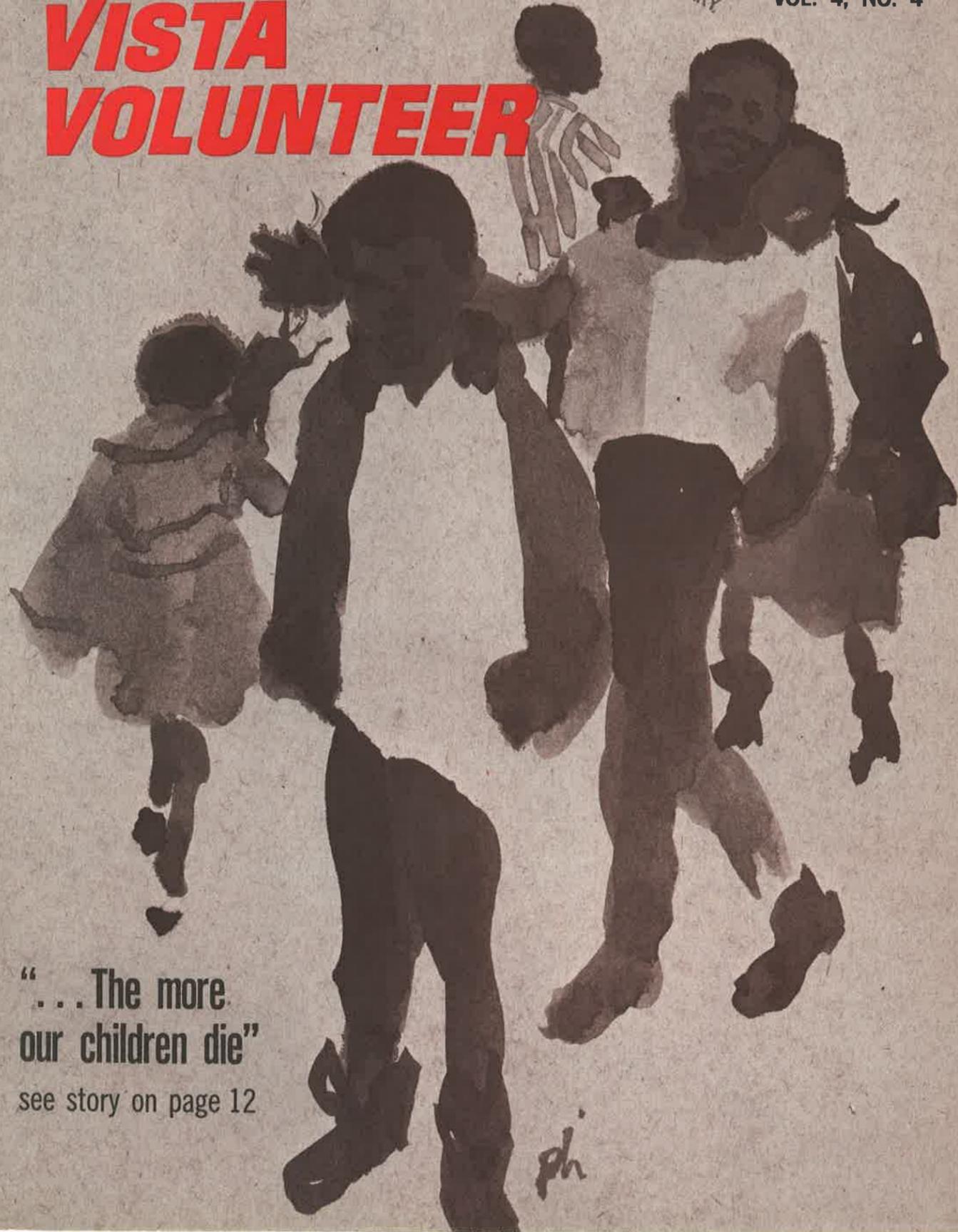


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APRIL, 1968
VOL. 4, NO. 4



“... The more
our children die”

see story on page 12

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WASHINGTON, D.C. 20506
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Several Days in June

By Steven P. Cohen

When the Report of the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorder was released it carried an indictment of our society: "Race prejudice has shaped our history decisively; it now threatens to affect our future.

"White racism is essentially responsible for the explosive mixture which has been accumulating in our cities since the end of World War II.

"What white Americans have never fully understood—but what Negroes 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."

VISTA Steve Cohen was in Buffalo last June when a riot broke out in that city. He witnessed the results of the nation's failure. Following is his account of those few days.

The last week of June, 1967, was marked by an outbreak of violence in the black areas of Buffalo, N.Y. It began for me on the night of June 26. I had decided to take one hour off and had gone down to a local bar that has been a VISTA refuge since the second day of training. My roommate, Bill Lorsung, and a couple of other VISTAs from the West Side were there. We were sitting around drinking beer when one of the guys started talking about some trouble down in the Lakeview projects. Lakeview is a city-owned housing project that has a majority of black residents. Some of the boys down there were playing basketball and had gotten into some kind of fight with the private security guards that patrol the area. Lakeview is on the West Side, surrounded by a rundown Italian neighborhood.

The boys down there were pretty upset, particularly because the mother of one of the guys that had been in the fight had been beaten on the head with a nightstick when she tried to pull her son away from the fight. Moreover, when a minister from the area, also a Negro, had tried to break things up, one of the guards pulled a gun on him. For a very short while, we VISTAs were sitting around sort of thinking about what we had heard. We realized we had to get to the project to see what was happening.

When we got down to Lakeview, some people from BUILD, a black militant organization, had gotten most of the kids together in a meeting. Our entrance brought a hush to the crowd until one of the people from BUILD finally asked whether the group was willing to let us stay at the meeting. (We VISTAs were about the only white people there.) We were allowed to stay. During the meeting, one of the kids with whom I've been pretty friendly motioned me to come outside with him.

"Steve," he told me, "you all better get out of here. And take Bill and Ken and Howard out with you. This place is gonna burn tonight."

He went on to tell me that a white face wasn't a good thing to have around the project that night. The two of us talked quite a while, debating the utility of violence. My constant question was, essentially, to what avail? If violence there must be, must you let the circumstances dictate the timing of your violence, or should you determine the time, place and methods? Frankly, I was stalling for time. I was confident there would be no violence in Lakeview that night and went back home.

That same night, there had been a similar incident on the East Side, the real black ghetto of the city. Again there had been a problem with the police, and again people were wondering why they were holding back.

Violence is not an answer; it is a reply. Law school education and middle class values have taught me to believe that a reliance on violence is the dangerous harking back to the "might makes right" philosophy. In our society, at least in theory, a poor man or a weak man can succeed against a richer or stronger adversary in a court of law.

There are, however, other sides to the coin. No court of law exists that

can award damages for the combination of factors making it a bad thing to be black. No court can really do much about such things as unemployment; Negro unemployment is twice that of the general population per capita. There is no way to pay back a young man who has been told that because his skin is black he had better forget about college, that he ought to learn a trade like printing—in an age of automation—or like carpentry—in a country where Negroes have difficulty joining construction unions. What kind of recompense is there for a person whose home is not heated in the winter, whose garbage is not collected regularly, whose streets are not repaired, who cannot afford to go to a dentist or doctor whenever he may need to? What can be done in court for a person risen to the top of his profession due to skill and hard work, who still can't get a taxi solely because of his color? What can you do about the man degraded in his own eyes because a supermarket chain employs him to pick up day-old meat in the white suburbs for delivery to supermarkets in the black ghetto to be sold as fresh meat at the same price as when it actually was fresh?

Today a friend of mine said, "Sure, white folks will hate us if we riot. But they hate us already. . . ."

A few weeks back, someone else quoted a line of Bob Dylan's, "If you

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haven't got nothin', you've got nothin' to lose. . . ."

Monday night, June 26th, had ended in an uneasy truce. The incidents were not forgotten, but there was no major trouble that night. The city had had a riot scare over the weekend, and there was hope that things would not get beyond the level of tension.

Such was not the case. Violence began late in the afternoon of the 27th. Cars and buses were stoned as they passed through the ghetto. My own awareness and involvement that night was tangential at most. I was aware there was trouble and was quite worried about friends, both white and black, who lived or ventured into the riot area. During one phone conversation with a VISTA living on the East Side I could hear a burglar alarm ringing in the background; the supermarket next door to my friend's house had been broken into—through the front window.

I spent the night getting reports from around the riot area and worrying and wondering what to do. The next morning a Negro guy told me how I could be useful. Under the combined auspices of the Buffalo Negro Lawyers Association, the local chapter of the American Civil Liberties Union and BUILD, a group of lawyers was brought together to try to deal with the police brutality problem.

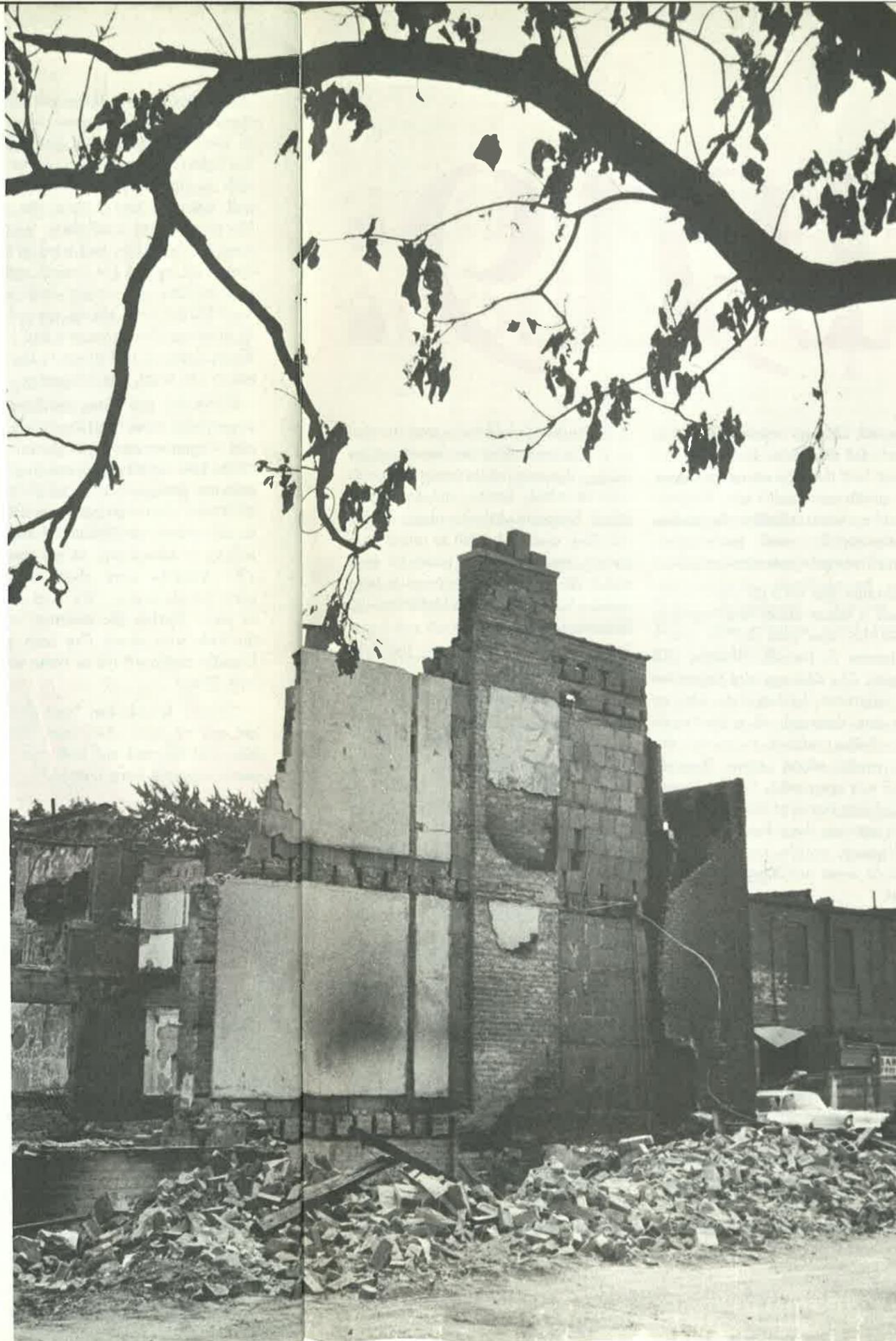
The overwhelming majority of policemen are white. As the functionaries of society licensed to use force, they have often represented the least attractive aspects, or perhaps the least palatable portions, of the mechanism of social control. But to the black community in this country especially, the police represent much of the repression so deeply resented. Add to this the knowledge that there are always individuals on the police force possessed

of authoritarian personalities who seem to delight in making things difficult for black people. Most racial violence in this country in the past few years has involved grievances over treatment by the police. And, as mentioned above, the violence in Buffalo was touched off in fracas between ghetto residents and private police. Our lawyers' group was drawn together to observe police behavior, to act as witnesses of the interaction of the police with people arrested during the rioting.

Since the majority of lawyers involved were white, we could not safely go into the riot area. We stationed ourselves at precinct houses around the city, watching people brought in, watching the police as they went out. The first nights we were present, a fair number of the people brought in to be booked showed signs of mistreatment; bruises about the head, bloodstains, and in one case, the inability to walk. As the days passed, suddenly it seemed that none of the prisoners were hurt; they were walking in ahead of reasonably polite policemen. None were being pushed or having their arms twisted. None showed signs of having been beaten. We could see policemen pointing us out to others as prisoners were being brought in.

But we shouldn't have *had* to be there. Our presence or absence should not have made a difference.

It is not difficult to come up with an argument that there was wrong on both sides, that policemen are actually risking their lives to preserve order. That is true, but it is not by any means a complete answer. It is perfectly reasonable and proper to be sickened by tales such as that of the policeman stomped to death in New Jersey. But for generations, black people have been victimized in like manner, raped



or lynched, beaten or castrated by white people. And altogether too often, the force of law has been wholly one-sided. So a man grows up with brutality against him—and this every day of his life. He lives in a country that satisfies itself with violence, in its fiction, movies and television series—as well as in real life with stories of cold-blooded murder pervading newspapers and politics. To a Negro, violence is the route to the mainstream. He goes into violent sports; he can succeed best in crime or the armed forces. And every day there are these white policemen, just a few perhaps, but there all the same, pushing his people around, arresting them for things white people might not be bothered for.

The rioters were not hardened criminals. They were eight- and ten-year-old kids who go to the settlement houses for recreation. They play basketball on local high school teams. They are not a hard-core, fanatical band. There are such people, but they are not leaders as much as people who show up to try to take advantage of the situation. It doesn't take leadership to make a Molotov cocktail.

So the riots ran their course. No deaths directly attributable. Property damage probably under \$250,000. And a set of promises of jobs and more services. The mayor promised 3,000 jobs. In response to the mayor's request, one large corporation offered to hire 100 people at \$1.50 an hour. At the time, the corporation was in the process of laying off union member employees doing the same job for more than \$2.50 per hour. The union would thus void the company's job offer.

So the end may not be in sight. ■