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# Warhol Paints History, or Race in America

IT MAY SEEM INAPPROPRIATE, given my title, to start with a photograph that puts us in Paris in 1964, at the Galerie Ileana Sonnabend (fig. 1). Andy Warhol had his first European solo exhibition there, a show he wanted to call "Death in America," though it actually opened under a tamer rubric, bearing only the artist's name.[1] The Sonnabend exhibition was proof that, only two years after his notorious debut as an "artist" (that show lined up soup can paintings on a shelf, just like soup cans), Warhol had made his name. And he had left his beginnings with Campbell's cans far behind. Even the most glancing description of the paintings shown in Paris—suicides, electric chairs, fatal car crashes, portraits of two women who lost their lives to tainted cans of tuna fish (unlikely saints, they seem literally to fade away, along with the instruments of their martyrdom)—explains why such an ambitious and morbid title was the first to come to Warhol's mind. There was only one image where death was not directly pictured, a version of *Race Riot* of 1963; yet it took pride of place in the installation. *Race Riot* will have the same status in this essay, and even supplies its subtitle: "Race in America." As in Paris, death is not far away.

Warhol produced at least thirteen canvases on this subject, though only three on the wall-sized scale of the one shown at Sonnabend; the group's existence is the reason I offer the blunt assertion: Andy Warhol was a history painter. This is not a notion with much currency, past or present; nor have Warhol's *Race Riot*s been studied before. Yet in this essay I claim that these pictures constitute a special—and specially recalcitrant—category within Warhol's work. Its difference from his other main mode of representation is above all a matter of race.

This is my main proposition. Making it stick involves first defining Warhol as a painter in general, the better then to spell out the implications of his foray into the particular genre called history. My argument proceeds from the conviction that our understandings of Warhol's painting and of history painting, and even our grasp on the notion of history, all have something to gain from the result. But above all there is something to be learned about the ways the two key terms work together: about what history painting has been, in the late twentieth century, and how it makes meaning from, or gives meaning to, contemporary events. Some of those meanings, where Warhol was concerned, involve race in America. Like

 


FIGURE 1. Installation photograph of *Andy Warhol*, exhibition at the Galerie Ileana Sonnabend, Paris, 1964. Photo: Harry Shunk.

much of the recent American past—the 1960s in particular—their implications live on in the present, in ways I mean to show.

Let me be the first to admit that the odds seem stacked against me: problems and objections crop up right from the start. There is an issue about definitions, for example. How satisfactory is it to call Warhol a *painter*, let alone a history painter? We can label him an artist, certainly, or even better, a conceptual artist; we can term him a performer and discuss him as a filmmaker. Those identities are by now securely ratified by critical interpretations and professional awards and mass-cultural notoriety and a Warhol museum sited back in Pittsburgh, the artist's home town. Such labels sit easily on an individual whose career aimed to rewrite artistry as pure mechanics, and who made this intention patently clear from the moment he first attracted critical attention. When Warhol first explained his painting to an interviewer, in November 1963, he famously declared: "The reason I'm painting this way is that I want to be a machine, and I feel that whatever

I do and do machine-like is what I want to do."[2] In keeping with this purpose, Warhol's techniques are a compendium of ways to circumvent the need to paint, from the projector he used to trace comic books and newspapers and advertisements, to the silk screen, where "painting" simply meant sliding a squeegee up and down and back and forth and side to side, and accepting any accidents of inking or registration that were the result.[3] But even this description may be too personal, may make Warhol seem too active in the process, may mistakenly evoke a notion too close to painterly practice. Note, therefore, that though he was sometimes photographed working, he was not necessarily the one to man the squeegee, certainly not the one to make the silk screen, nor the one to design the image from which the screen was cut. "This way," he said, "I don't have to work on my images at all."[4] In keeping with this practice, Warhol used images from elsewhere, raided tabloids and magazines and wire services and supermarket shelves; like a squatter he staked his claim to studio publicity photographs and mug shots and the strips of snapshots churned out by photo booths—this is how the nearly parodic narcissism of a serial portrait such as *Ethel Scull 36 Times* of 1963 came to be. He recycled his silk screens with appropriate disinterest in unique images and doubled, sometimes tripled, the square footage and price of his screened canvases by joining to them empty monochromes.[5] Is it any wonder he called his studio The Factory, or that photographers recorded its stacked-up contents as they would any warehouse packed with goods?

Is this painting? To pose this question is not quite the same as asking Is this art? The difference lies in the fact that Warhol's work—or these strategies and techniques of "mechanization" I am describing as his work—was easily assimilable to the notions of art-as-concept, art-as-decision, art-as-event, art-as-behavior so epochally ratified by Marcel Duchamp and so decisively renovated in the early 1960s, both in Europe and the United States. Hence Warhol's prompt emergence for his contemporaries as a questioner of traditional definitions,[6] as "one of the principal didactic artists of all time," whose main lesson was how to negate "the uniqueness of the art object, and even its claim to originality."[7] How better to support this claim than through recourse to Duchamp himself? Warhol's commentators made sure to cite Papa Duchamp's opinion on Warhol's signature work: "If a man takes fifty Campbell Soup cans and puts them on a canvas, it is not the retinal image which concerns us. What interests us is the concept that wants to put fifty Campbell Soup cans on a canvas."[8] To cite Duchamp on Warhol in 1965 was a way of signaling what interested the 1960s about Warhol: the possibility of assimilating his art to the emerging conceptual paradigm—of emphasizing its interest, not as picture, but as idea.

For some writers, of course, Warhol's lesson had (and still has) a somewhat wider scope; his appropriationist tricks were not merely ideas—they were ideas about the contemporary world. By these lights his art takes its cue straight from

PLATE 1. Andy Warhol, *Red Race Riot*, 1963. Synthetic polymer paint and silk-screen ink on canvas. Andy Warhol Foundation, New York. Photo: © 1996 Andy Warhol Foundation, Inc./ ARS, New York.

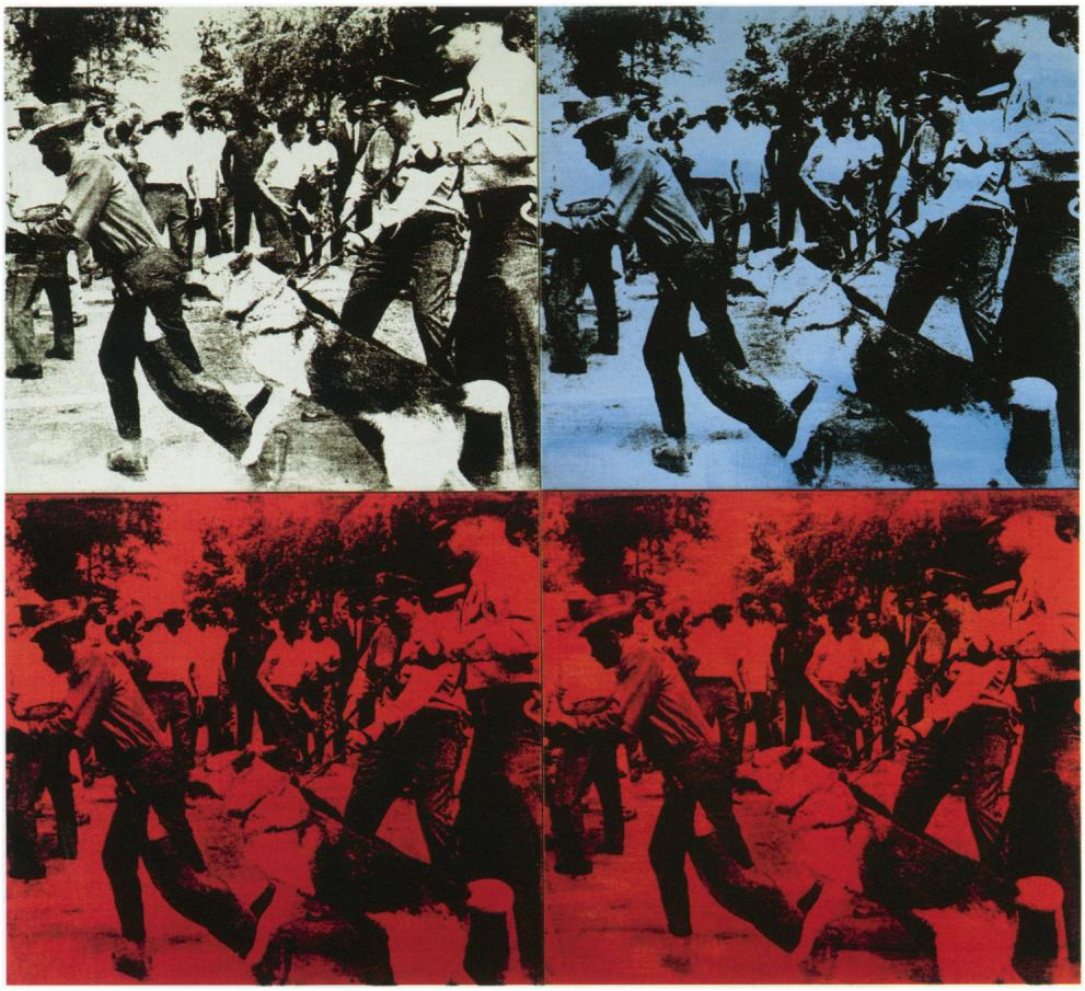

PLATE 2. Andy Warhol, *Little Race Riot*, 1963. Silk-screen ink on synthetic polymer paint on canvas. Present location unknown. Photo: Courtesy of the estate of Robert Mapplethorpe, © 1996 Andy Warhol Foundation Inc./ ARS, New York.

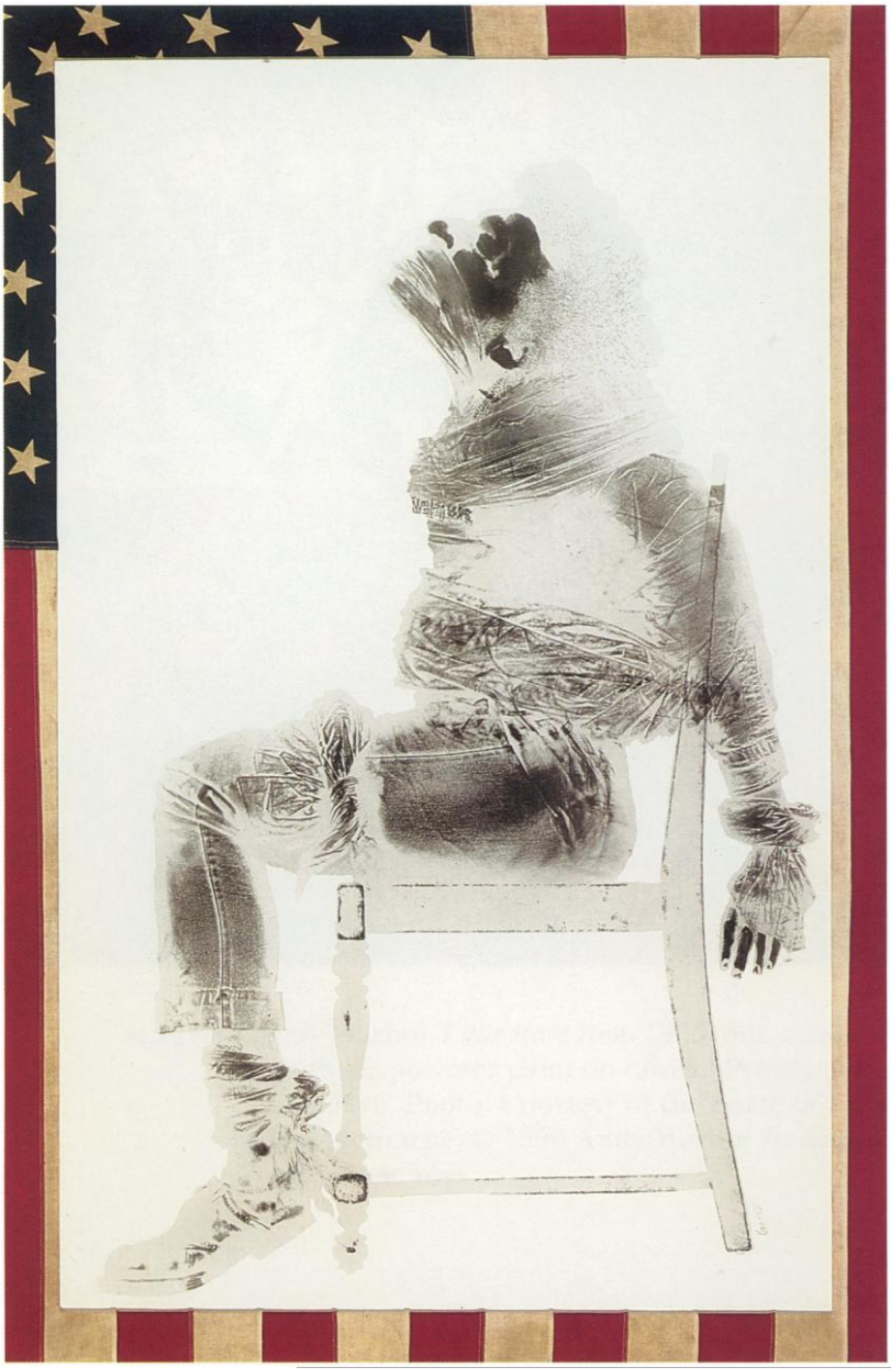

PLATE 3. David Hammons, *Injustice Case*, 1970. Mixed media print. Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Museum Purchase with Museum Associate Acquisitions Fund. Photo: 

modernity, though whether by posing as its clone or its critic seemed—may still seem—harder to say: did his work expose, or merely echo, the numbing repetitiveness of the commodity? The idea of Warhol's art as critique lagged slightly behind the notion of it as concept; its emergence seems, in retrospect, to have been contingent on the politicization of art and criticism in the aftermath of 1968. The Warhol machine was then retooled, regeared to take a different cultural and critical course. The new direction is clearly indicated in a 1971 essay by Gregory Battcock, a minor man of letters and art world weathervane.[9] Battcock's opinion is emphatic: "Warhol's greatest contribution to art is not to be found in the paintings themselves but rather in the fact that through his paintings he exposed the shoddy mechanics of both contemporary art and society. . . . He has revealed the hypocrisy of the social system and the absurdity of its culture."[10]

The main problem about putting these questions to the issue of the tone and posture of Warhol's art is not that the questions are not interesting. It is that they are not answerable in any very reliable way. The arguments boil down to claim versus counterclaim—the impassioned *yes* versus the vehement *no*. Does Warhol's art expose or reflect the culture it images? Both answers have been given, yet it has been the speaker's own beliefs and critical protocols that count the most in either case. And no matter which side is argued, in the first wave of Warhol literature one encounters few suggestions that his work functions in anything like a traditional way: as paintings, in other words, or as "retinal images," to cite Duchamp once again. One meets with few claims that the forms his pictures take shape or inflect their subjects and the viewer's understanding. Like Battcock, critics read past or through "the paintings themselves," without really asking how they look or how viewers respond to them—if, that is, the retinal has really been left aside. These omissions were necessary for Warhol to play his assigned role—they were needed if it was to be claimed, to cite Battcock still further, that "Warhol correctly foresaw the end of painting and became its executioner."[11] I want to argue, *pace* Battcock, that Warhol executed paintings, rather than acted as painting's executioner.

Against the uniformity of this critical backdrop (remember that I am describing the criticism of the 1960s and early 1970s above all), opinions to contrary stand out like sore thumbs. Yet they did exist: in demonstration of that claim, I want to cite the late Henry Geldzahler, who, from his base as a curator at the Metropolitan Museum, was one of the most influential forces in the art world of his day; he made the rounds of studios and galleries, and of course was to be spotted, microphone in hand, discoursing at a symposium on pop art convened at New York's Museum of Modern Art in 1963. The panelists spent the day trying to answer a question they found troublesome: they were discussing whether pop art is really art at all. By the following year Geldzahler had made up his mind. The answer, in the case of Warhol, was yes:

> Warhol's paintings sometime[s] strike us as not being art at all, as not being enough, as not being sufficiently different from life, from our ordinary experience. The artistry with which they are made is concealed and reveals itself slowly and the brash and brazen image, all we can see at first, becomes, in time, a painting, something we can assimilate into our lives and experience.[12]

Although Geldzahler's was an isolated opinion, I think it is an important one. It is important to my argument because it is the response of someone who does more than supply expectations to Warhol's work. Instead he seems to have looked at it and aims to speak of a process of viewing and its result, a transformation of image to painting. As Geldzahler describes it, that process involves distinct stages, each marked by changes in the status of the image. At first the image is too familiar, too close to ordinary experience for the viewer to see the difference—in other words, to allow a secure enough distinction from the experience of the everyday. Familiarity is the dominant characteristic of a Warhol canvas: it is "all we can see at first," and it initiates a purely visual experience of the work. To become a painting, Geldzahler claims, the image must come to seem *less* familiar. This happens as we look. Only in looking—in a paradoxical process—when it seems less visually present and obvious, does it become a painting; only then, when it can be understood as more than merely familiar, can the picture's artistry be seen, can it begin to mean something for its viewers' "lives and experience."

Geldzahler's definition of painting—of Warhol's painting in particular—crops up in this context because it is useful in understanding how his pictures might fit that category—the category "painting"—rather better than they do that of "conceptual art." The point is essential to my purpose—important enough for me to want to show straightaway how its terms might apply to a particular Warhol canvas. If familiarity is the key, what could be more familiar than Warhol's image of Marilyn Monroe—the *Diptych* he famously generated within weeks of her suicide in August 1962 (fig. 2). And what could be more brazen in its pursuit of just that "familiarity" effect? It is produced not just by Warhol's makeover of a studio portrait (a publicity still shot by Gene Kornman in 1953) into a silk screen inked and re-inked to look like a particularly fast and low-cost printing job; and not just by his careful choice of a photograph taken some ten years before Marilyn's death: his source shows Monroe in her screen idol heyday, as the representation the woman was to become.[13] The effect of familiarity also results from this painting's chief technical procedure; it revels in its own redundancy, insisting with each repetition that the viewer has *surely* gotten the point.

There's no question about it: one image equals the next, or at least differs from it meaninglessly; repetition prompts indifference and licenses us to turn away. It is only in refusing that permission, in resisting redundancy, that we are able to speculate about such differences and effects as do emerge:[14] perhaps, *faute de mieux*, we start to try to make sense of the contrast between color and black and white, for example, and to see it as a matter of medium, or to register the quasi-

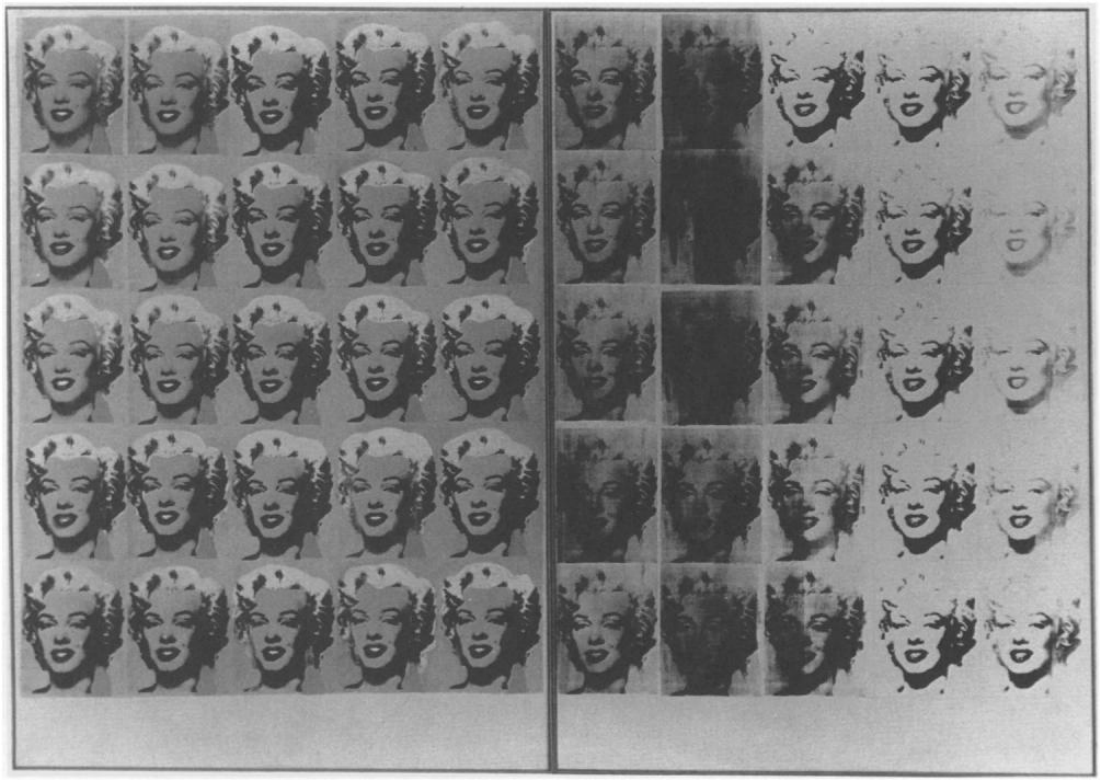

FIGURE 2. Andy Warhol, *Marilyn Diptych*, 1962. Silk-screen ink on synthetic polymer paint on canvas. Tate Gallery, London. Photo: Tate Gallery, London / Art Resource.

filmic succession of the image frame (filmic because changes are so very imperceptible); we note the way the image both blackens and fades, conjuring presence and absence through opposite means. The apparent integrity of Marilyn's glamorous visage—its parted lips and arched brows and beauty mark—becomes a mask that even familiarity cannot keep from fragmentation and decay. In its very exhaustion, the image is remade as its visual opposite. It is as if Warhol, in insisting so utterly on a single image as a singular meaning, is backhandedly courting a kind of referential plenitude.

It might be possible to claim this picture, and others like it—Warhol's *Blue Liz as Cleopatra*, for example, or his series of *Suicides*—as history painting by virtue of their registration of the glamour and redundancy and immanent violence of American life under late capitalism. These paintings declare their dependence on particular circumstances of time and place: indeed, their reliance on them is complete. Yet they do not describe or analyze those circumstances so much as adopt the moment's underlying protocols as their own visual terms and rules. The meanings of these works—if they have meanings—are not the particular events and individuals they illustrate—this car crash, that movie star, this can of

soup. Instead they refer outside themselves to a particular set of conditions, which, however real, *cannot* be illustrated as a totality. They refer, that is, to the system—the "image world"—of commodification and desire that gives them currency, and invoke that system as a set of generalities. We might say that they convey their meanings allegorically, producing themselves as "phantom proxies" of a larger whole.[15] Marilyn "means" the entertainment industry the way a mirror in a seventeenth-century Dutch painting "means" vanity: the equation seems sufficient, even satisfying, though this is only the case by convention, by a kind of tacit agreement or assumption. That these pictures can so refer is dependent of course on the initial choice of image; be it brazen or blatant, it must also possess the kind of content that can make it representative of a wider category—and conversely lack those contents that would stand in the way of such reference. The appropriated image must be both resonant enough—and empty enough—to allow the process of allegorizing to occur.

Warhol's work from 1962 onward demonstrates his utter commitment to this way of painting. Repetition and silk screen had come to stay, and their apparent simplicity almost hypnotically wills us to forget how deliberately these effects were achieved: it takes poking at the edges of Warhol's early production to understand that his brand of deadpan took some finding. We need to look, for example, at his early drawings and paintings of soup cans with the labels torn and sullied, or stuffed with dollar bills, to see that his most familiar models once were shown in different postures, even assigned a kind of attitude. There is plenty of metaphorical pathos in evidence in those drawings, and not much metonymic cool. Likewise we should look at other 1962 paintings—*Before and After*, for example, and the *Do It Yourself* series—to see with how much glee and irony Warhol bore down on regularity and dumb repetition as his paintings' central tropes.

I think it is certain that when Warhol painted his *Race Riot*s, sometime early in the summer of 1963, he borrowed the requisite images with these requirements in mind, with the intention, that is, of giving them his signature treatment (plate 1). Silk screen and squeegee stood ready to transpose three news photographs into a handful of paintings in red and mustard and mauve. We can only conclude that the chosen photographs seemed to Warhol to possess the necessary resonance—had allegorical potential—although given our own distance from this moment thirty-three years ago, it cannot come amiss to spell out why.

The reasons are somewhat more various than they might seem. For a start, *any* picture of black protest was in 1963 emphatically topical, given that black activism had reached new urgency and visibility under the John F. Kennedy administration and the leadership of the Reverend Martin Luther King Jr. Remember that since the late 1950s King had been advocating "direct action," his term for the strategy of peaceful demonstration in the name of civil rights—demonstra-