***In this* excerpt from “A New Sense of Direction” delivered *to the SCLC a few months before his assassination, Martin Luther King, Jr. discusses the race riots that occurred in Northern cities in 1967 in relation to the progress of the Civil Rights movement. In the selected section of the speech, MLK poses and responds to two questions: “First, is the guilt for riots exclusively that of Negroes? And [second] are they a natural development to a new stage of struggle?”***

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In the past decade little has been done about the gross problems of Northern ghettos. This fact was evident because all civil rights legislation had been designed to remedy [fix] Southern conditions. A sense of frustration spread and choked against the hardened white attitudes. Non-violence as a relevant protest form was under attack...Northern Negroes expressed their dismay and hostility in a succession of riots. The decade of 1955 to 1965, with its elementary constructive periods, had misled us. Everyone underestimated the amount of rage Negroes were suppressing and the amount of bigotry the white majority was disguising.

The riots are now in the center of the stage and are being offered as the basis for contradictory positions by whites and Negroes. Some Negroes argue that they are the incipient [initial] forms for rebellion and guerrilla tactics that will be the feature of the Negro revolt. They are represented as a new stage of Negro struggle, replacing the old and allegedly outworn tactic of non-violent resistance. At the same time some white forces are using riots as evidence that Negroes have no capacity for constructive change and by their lawless behavior forfeit all rights and justify any form of repressive measures.

Now I would like to examine both questions. **First, is the guilt for riots exclusively that of Negroes? And are they a natural development to a new stage of struggle?** A million words will be written and spoken to dissect the ghetto outbreaks. But for a perceptive and vivid expression of culpability [blame] I would like to submit two sentences that many of you have probably heard me quote before from the pen of Victor Hugo. "If the soul is left in darkness, sins will be committed. The guilty one is not he who commits the sin but he who causes the darkness."

In summing up the general causes of riots, we would have to say that the white power structure is still seeking to keep the walls of segregation and inequality substantially intact, while Negro determination to break through them has intensified. **I find five basic causes of riots—the white backlash; pervasive discriminatory practices; unemployment; the war in Vietnam; and the urban problems of crime and extensive migration.**

1. The ***white backlash*** is a primary cause because it explains the emotional content of the [African-American] outbursts and their spontaneity. The depravity [evil] of the white backlash shattered the hope that new attitudes were in the making. The reversion to barbaric white conduct marked by a succession of murders in the South, white hoodlumism in the Northern streets, and cold systematic withdrawal of some white allies, [has] constituted a grim statement to Negroes. They were told that there were firm limits to their progress and that they must expect to remain permanently unequal and permanently poor.
2. The ***pervasiveness of discriminatory*** ***practices*** has been so much taken for granted that its effect is easily forgotten. Even as the Negro manages to grasp a foothold on the economic ladder, discrimination threatens to push him off after he has only ascended [climbed] a few rungs. It hounds him at every level to stultify [numb] his initiative and insult his being. For the pitifully few [African Americans] who climb into economic security it [racism] persists and closes different doors.
3. …Related to discrimination is one of its worst consequences, namely, ***unemployment***. You will remember that the United States teetered on the edge of revolution in the 1930's when national unemployment mounted to 25% of the populace. But throughout the South and expressly in the North, in the midst of historic prosperity, unemployment for Negro youth, according to government figures, runs as high as 30 to 40% in many cities. Understanding that most of their lives are yet to be lived, the slamming of doors before their faces can be expected to induce rage and rebellion.
4. The fourth cause is the ***war in Vietnam***. We are committing grave atrocities in Vietnam...The bombs in Vietnam explode at home—they destroy the dream and possibility for a decent America. I must also comment that the poor are conscripted in double measure for combat. They constitute more than 24% of the front-line troops in a war of unprecedented brutality. Our young men are marching under slogans of democracy, supposedly to defend a Saigon government that scorns democracy. At home they know that there is no genuine democracy for their people and that on their return they will be restored to a grim life even if they are bedecked [covered] with hero's medals.
5. Finally, there exists a complex of causes, found in the ***degenerating [squalid] conditions of urban life*.** Our cities are choked with air pollution, dense traffic conditions, and insufficient water systems. Public facilities are outworn and inadequate. Within this chaos of neglect Negroes are stifled at the very bottom in slum conditions, the equal of which are not to be found in any industrial nation of the world. Every large city reaps the results of the myriad poor and black people who have migrated there in desperate search of the American fulfillment.