

Hades on the Hudson

NEW YORK — One forgets how utterly abominable New York City is in August. What passes for air in the Big Apple is like dirty, soggy, used cotton wool, heated up to a toasty 93 degrees F. Homicidal drivers try even harder than usual to run you over and jackhammers pound away in a special ear-splitting torment. Screaming sirens from police cars and fire engines drown out conversation 17 floors above the pot-holed streets.

Simply put, New York in August is hell—but what a hell. In fact, the hell of choice, filled with devilishly beautiful devilettes, satanically caloric temptations and soul-destroying shopping opportunities. If you have to go to hell, New York, that Hades on the Hudson, is the one to pick.

A lot of the nation's rich liberals also live here. They are deeply concerned about civil rights and the plight of minority groups. So the city's liberal elite has prodded Congress to enact all sorts of civil rights legislation aimed at fully integrating American society. Except, of course, for the Park Ave. co-ops in which they live.

You will not see a single black doorman or black elevator man in any of the splendid apartment buildings along Park or Fifth Aves. Rich, little liberals here in New York City don't go to the public schools either, where kids learn knife-fighting and how to shoot up in stairwells.

The good works of Gotham's limo liberals can better be seen and felt if you leave this magical isle and voyage a few miles up the Hudson River. For real Manhattanites, the world ends at 96th St., but up there somewhere in the great beyond is a city called Yonkers. Most New Yorkers only know Yonkers as a place with a horse racing track that's on the way to upstate. But it's also the state's fourth-largest city with 194,000 by now extremely grumpy inhabitants.

Back in 1985, Federal Judge Leonard Sand invoked liberal civil rights laws, and ruled that the city of Yonkers had discriminated against blacks

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for 40 years in education and housing. Yonkers' biggest sin, said the stern judge, was to locate almost all of its public housing in one corner of the city.

How very illiberal, and how embarrassing. Here was the U.S. busy blasting South Africa only to discover apartheid on the Hudson. Worse, fumed Judge Sand, Yonkers and its city council had been systematically blocking his integration plan.

This included orders to build low-income housing for blacks in the middle of white, middle-class neighborhoods. Which caused Yonkers' white residents to rise up in arms. Low-income blacks would bring street crime, drug dealing and litter. Property values would nosedive—no small fear for people whose entire life savings were in their modest homes. Furious voters got their councillors to block the integration plan.

An equally angry Judge Sand slapped the balking councilmen with fines of US\$500 per day and a geometrically increasing penalty against the city that would have grown to US\$63.8 million by Aug. 21 had a higher court not put a temporary hold on the fines. To date, legal fees alone have cost the city US\$15 million.

Meanwhile, the city is on the verge of bankruptcy. City services are near collapse, no one wants to serve on the council for fear of personal fines, voters are outraged and black residents are saying, "You see, Yonkers is a white racist town."

Who is right in this mess? Both sides, alas. Moving in black welfare families will probably mean the ruin of the white, middle-class neighborhoods. This has been the case from Watts to Boston. But keeping blacks in welfare ghettos clearly perpetuates and promotes a permanent and quite dangerous underclass.

Sitting down here in steamy Manhattan, it's easy to sympathize with both sides, particularly with the whites in Yonkers who are saying, "Why pick on us? Go integrate somewhere else."

Indeed, there are lots of places across the U.S. that are far more segregated, and which have done less for low-income blacks, than Yonkers. Tough luck. Yonkers has been singled out. Maybe the judge should have ordered some Park Ave. co-ops to be integrated—or at least to have a few black doormen.

All this to say that solving race problems in places like South Africa and even nearby Yonkers is not as easy as it looks from Canada where we do not have such headaches—yet. I wonder, though, what would happen if a Canadian court ordered native peoples off their reserves and smack into the middle of Toronto's yuppie and oh-so-liberal Rosedale.

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