

ROBERT PENN WARREN    JAMES BALDWIN    TAPE #2

Mr. WARREN: This is Tape #2 of the conversation with James Baldwin - continue. Let's see, where were we? On the question of leadership and the struggle for power.

Mr. BALDWIN: I don't know if it's only a struggle for power. I mean, there are some things -

RPW: Not merely.

JB: Not merely - no. There are some figures in the movement or on the periphery who impress me as being opportunistic - you know. But I think the problem is more complex than that. I think it's involved with the pressure of being brought to bear on everybody, by the people in the streets especially, by the poor and by the young, so that one is always in the position of having to assess very carefully one's tactics, one's moves in terms of the popular desire, because avoid another danger which is this, that if the people feel betrayed you've lowered their morale and then nothing - and then you've opened the door on a holocaust. So there are some things that people have agreed to do. The March on Washington is a very good example. It was not the most popular thing dreamed up. It was not dreamed up by the leaders so far as anyone knows. It was brought off because there was nobody to call it off - nobody dared to call it off.

a series of race riots.

RPW: How much was the idea based on the old March on Washington movement of -

JB:                    ? Very heavily I think. I wasn't in on the - you

know, I was hardly ever backstage on this thing, but I think it springs from that border event in the '40's. And it was a very significant day, one that was, we say, contained in - but it was also a turning point. I thought then and I still think that you will never get two or three thousand people to come to Washington again, because - to petition for a redress of grievances.

RPW: How do you explain that?

JB: Well, I think the Negro in America has reached a point of despair and disaffection, you know, and that people now talk about certain techniques being used as destroying the good will of white people, but nobody gives a damn any more about the good will of people whose good will has never been - has never done anything to help you or to save you. Their ill will can hardly do more harm than their good will has. And this is a very significant despair.

RPW: Yet you want to avoid the holocaust.

JB: Indeed - we want to avoid the holocaust, but you see there - that is not simply in the hands of the Negro leaders. That's in the hands of the entire country.

RPW: It's not a one way ticket.

JB: It's not a one way ticket at all. If you have people up there filibustering about whether or not you're human, then obviously you're going to have a reaction in the streets.

RPW: Clearly.

JB: And Farmer and King and all those people are doing everything they can, but they cannot do it alone. It's simply not possible. To

James Baldwin - Tape #2 - p. 3

avoid the holocaust one is going to have to have some help. And very little help is forthcoming.

RPW: Do you distinguish, however, between what you might call legitimate and illegitimate demonstration?

JB: Well, it's becoming increasingly hard to distinguish between them, you know. Is a demonstration in front of the Florida Pavilion at the World's Fair legitimate or illegitimate? It depends on the point of view. I think it's legitimate - you know.

RPW: Well, let's say that I think so too - as I do. We can distinguish between a school boycott or a March on Washington on one side, or, say, an orderly demonstration inside the fair grounds, and a stall-in. There's some distinction.

JB: There is some distinction. The distinction would have to be I think in terms of the clarity of purpose and the likelihood of achieving any - one dare not say concrete gains - there have been so few - but in terms of pinpointing a specific - dramatizing a specific thing - a specific issue.

RPW: That is the - a specific target or a specific issue - then it is . But when it's a random protest -

JB: Then I think it can do vastly more harm than good.

RPW: - a random protest which may carry grievous social consequences.

JB: Yes, well, of course this entire revolution can carry grievous social consequences.

RPW: Yes, that's always true. Changes are consequences. But the question of the ambulance dashing down the street with a dying man

James Baldwin - Tape #2 - p. 4

is one thing as opposed to the consequences of somebody having to refurbish a tenement.

JB: Yes. That's an area in which one simply has to play it literally by ear, you know. A school boycott depends very much on where the school is, you know. It depends on a whole complex of issues, and of course a school boycott is designed, as I see it, to dramatize the situation of the school which is really not a situation of the schools but a situation of the cities, you know. It's not only the school boards which are involved - and they are - but it 's also the structure of our cities which has created this dilemma. And it's where rent strikes - the same thing, you know - on the face of it one has no right not to pay the rent. On the other hand, the landlord has no right to keep you locked from the tenement and, you know, to penalize you in this way. And one way to dramatize it is to stop paying the rent.

RPW: What about a policy deliberately directed at getting a little bloodshed for the papers?

JB: I haven't really heard of this.

RPW: Well, I know of only one case - a man who sat in such a meeting told me, and the names - or the person made a memorandum, we've got to get a few heads broken here or we are going to lose out.

JB: It sounds very unrealistic to me. In the first place, the problem of getting heads broken doesn't seem to me a problem at all. On the contrary. I don't understand the nature of that - you know, it's obviously madly and criminally irresponsible. But I myself haven't

James Baldwin - Tape #2 - p. 5

come across that serious suggestion as a tactic yet.

RPW: I have. Just one case - documented. At least, I take the word of the man -

JB: I believe you - I believe you - it just seems insane to me, since - I repeat, it's never been a problem to get your head broken. You haven't got to arrange that.

RPW: Do you see the pattern building up that Congressman Powell said to me was true the other day, that the old organization is on the way out - count?

JB: Well, I'm not so sure they don't really count, but they're certainly either on their way out or in the process of radical changes. And this would - you wouldn't even have to be critical of them to realize this, because there are certain things they will simply have to do if they're going to remain in positions of responsibility or power which they've never had to do before. The situation dictates it, and those that can't do that are on the way out - yes.

RPW: You find an argument now and then, such as this one I heard from Dr. Henry in Mississippi, that the NAACP approach had made it possible for man to know his - well - rights - to give a definition of his rights.

JB: That seems a little simplistic to me, but I see what he's saying. I think that -

RPW: Their history had given him this sense.

JB: I think there's more to it than that. I think that - I think that's true, but there is more to it than that. I think that the

James Baldwin - Tape #2 - p. 6

whole stream of the American history in a way has done that, even though it never intended to. And the events of the last twenty years have done that, too. In the terms of the NAACP it would seem to me that you'd have to be talking about which chapter - you know - it would not apply to some chapters in the North, it would seem to me.

RPW: He was taking the long range effect, you see, of the various legal cases over thirty years.

JB: Well, this would apply I think more in the South than it would in the North. Much more in the South. I think it's a very different organization in the South than it is in the North.

RPW: Do you follow the line of thought that Dr. Kenneth Clark takes that Dr. King's method in the South has merit but it's inapplicable in the North?

JB: Yes, I'm afraid I'm forced to agree with that. Negroes in the South still go to church, some of them, and Negroes in the South - which is much more important - still have something resembling a family around which you can build a great deal. But the Northern Negro family has been fragmented for the last thirty years, if not longer, and once you haven't got a family then you have another kind of despair, another kind of demoralization, and Martin King can't reach those people.

RPW: But he doesn't know he can't reach them.

JB: I think Martin does know it, you know. I think that he's determined to - he can't abandon them, on the other hand, either, you know,

and his influence is absolutely negligible, you know, he is still the national leader and the national figure.

RPW: He packed a hall in Bridgeport.

JB: Well, he can pack a hall in Bridgeport, but it's - you know - I have packed halls too - it depends on what you're packing the hall with. I mean, the fact itself can mean a great many things.

RPW: Well dressed, middle class people - from observation in Bridgeport - I've heard.

JB: Yes, but he can't pack a hall - you know, the boys in the pool room stay in the pool room, and they're more - it's more important to reach them, you know, to do something about their morale. And I'm not blaming Martin for this. It's not his fault at all. But it - you know, to reach them is very difficult. Malcolm X can reach them. You know, those kids are not Christians and it's very hard to blame them for not being Christians since they are so few in this Christian country.

RPW: Let's take some specific episode, like the school bussing program in Harlem.

JB: I don't know anybody who has a very clear notion what they think about that, and I don't either. I have nieces and nephews who were being bussed for a while, and some of them still are, and their parents took the attitude that if the kid was willing to undergo this, then it was then maybe - you know - it was worth it. But no one thought that it couldn't have any effect, really, since after all these kids come back home.

RFW: To the same house.

JB: To the same house - the white kids do and the black kids do. And what happens in the school day is not going to make that much difference. I think the problem has got to be attacked on another deeper level, though I'm not an expert in these matters.

RFW: Well, God knows I'm not. I've talked to several people about it who know more than I do, like Dr. Clark, for instance, and I've talked with Dr. Dodson - Dan Dodson, and a few people like that who have special interests and special concerns. There's a large group that takes the view, apparently, that bussing except in limited fashion is useless. If you have to have a big crash program of building schools as best you can, and then have integration follow rather than precede the process or at least concomitant with it, but you can't make it as an arbitrary outside criterion.

JB: I would tend to agree with that, but it gets to be a vicious circle because it's not doing to do any good to build schools until you start building neighborhoods. And you've seen New York City neighborhoods being destroyed the last twenty years for money - they're in the hands of, you know, a gang of real estate gangsters, you know. And there are no neighborhoods in New York any more. And if you don't have neighborhoods I don't see what you can do much about schools. Do you see what I mean?

RFW: Yes, I do - yes, I do. Of course, there's the other proposal of having the great school parks which draw from all sorts of neighborhoods.



James Baldwin - Tape #2 - p. 9

JB: Well, that's a more interesting proposal, but it still isn't going to get to the root of the matter, which is why we allowed the city to be run this way.

RPW: But meanwhile somebody has to do something.

JB: Yes, I quite agree. The problem there is - what, in terms of schools? I confess myself to be almost completely baffled by it - limited bussing, school parks - yes, but these things, it seems to me - it seems to me that sooner or later we're going to have to carry the battle straight into the real estate boards and banks. That's where the trouble is.

RPW: Well, let's agree on that. This is a peripheral question, but one that has some significance because people are ready to shed blood on it, and Mr. Galamason would say wreck the schools unless we get integration on my time table, immediately - or almost immediately. This is the sort of argument that makes the bussing a symbol of a thousand other things, and makes a symbolic solution rather than a real solution.

JB: I'm opposed to symbolic solutions, and I - I don't know Reverend Galamason and I never met him so I can't really discuss his position -

RPW: I don't know him - I give this as an example, not as an attack on him. I don't know him.

JB: But I don't see any point in trying to wreck a school system which is very nearly wrecked already in any case. I don't see any point in saying so. I can only go back to what I said before - in the first place, obviously, you know, if you're going to try to

and all this, you can't say - you may determine in your own mind, but you can't say, you know, we're going to have integration on my terms or not at all, because if you're going to be realistic about it - and you have to be - you have to try - one has got to realize that it will take some time. The trick is to get it started, you know. And in this context especially one is not going to get it started, it seems to me, by inflammatory statements of that kind. After all, one is trying to save the children if one is trying to do anything. It does seem to me that one has got to sue for some real confrontation between the city and the schools - between the city, that is, and the forces of integration. That's where the problem is. I repeat, that is where the problem is.

RPW: Well, it would seem that that is the root problem. Other things are involved -

JB: Yes - other things are involved and that and the tactics I suppose one has to evolve and would like to have as their purpose to bring about this confrontation. That's a very delicate and incendiary matter.

RPW: Or ameliorative measures along the way.

JB: Well, ameliorative measures along the way are really probably going to be doomed to failure. I think one has got to bring about the confrontation. What ameliorative measures in effect really can anybody make - bring about in this situation?

RPW: If I am not mistaken, Dr. Clark is prepared - I don't want to be certain of this - prepared to accept a period of nonintegrated

James Baldwin - Tape #2 - p. 11

lower grades because of some massive difficulties and aim for high school integration - offer part.

JB: That seems on the face of it. - I'm not talking to him and I feel I'm not an expert in it - I can see why he would take that position and on the face of it I would tend to agree, you know.

RPW: On the face of it I would because the massive complications of the option.

JB: Yes, exactly - exactly. I think that there might be much more hope in that, so it's - still, it's obviously a half measure.

RPW: It clearly is, this is a half measure. How do we get whole measures -

JB: Well, I think you're going to get whole measures by dealing with a great many half measures.

RPW: That's not call a half measure a whole measure in

JB: Exactly - exactly.

RPW: Well, we sound very wise on that point, don't we?

JB: Yes - my golly. I think Ken is right about that.

RPW: I have a quotation here from Oscar Handlin's new book - may I read it to you since you can't read my writing? The general disillusionment since 1954 - he's talking about - well, you read his book, "Bell in the Night" - The attention of Negroes has focused on one cause, segregation, and on one cure, integration. They have come to consider racial separateness the root of difficulties and racial balance as the sole solution. In arriving at this conclusion, they

James Baldwin - Tape #2 - p. 12

have paradoxically enough accepted the contention of the white separatists - white supremacists - that there is really no difference between the North and the South. As a result of this development the practical civil rights movements has shifted and racial balance becomes a primary objective rather than equality and justice.

rather than an element in it - to paraphrase some other things he said about it.

JB: Well, it's not such a recent development, and long before 1954 I concluded - and every Negro I knew concluded - it wasn't even a conclusion - it was taken as a fact of life - that the difference between the North and the South were really when the chips were down, that they had different techniques of castrating you then than they had in the North, but the fact of the castration remained exactly the same, and that was the intention in both places. And furthermore, it is impossible to be separate but equal. It - if one is equal why should he be separate? And it's that - it's the history of that doctrine which created almost all of the Negro's despair and also the country's despair. So I think that the instinct to destroy that doctrine is quite sound.

RPW: Separate but equal?

JB: Yes, that's right. It's really an attack on the white man's assumption that he knows more about you than you do and that he knows what's best for you, and that he can keep you in your place for your own good and also for his own profit.

RPW: Shifting around a moment - the separate but equal, or the

James Baldwin - Tape #2 - p. 13

white man knowing best - of course you read Irving Howe's piece in the Sat. about you and Ralph.

BB: No, I didn't - I was in rehearsal but I heard about it.

I have it on my desk but I haven't had time to read it.

RPW: I wish you had read it, I'd like to ask you a little bit about that. Well, it's called in passing Irving Howe--Bilbo thinking he knew best Ralph's place. I'm not asking you to comment because you haven't read the pieces, but this has got that far along - the white man always knowing best.

JB: I think I can imagine some of the things that - you know - there is a tendency - I'm not talking about Irving Howe, because I haven't read the piece, but there's a great tendency on the part of a great many of the Negro's friends - let's put it that way - unconsciously to - and really unconsciously - you know, this is not meant - they don't mean to say the things that they say - but it is an unconscious assumption that somehow, you know, if you don't fit into - you don't take this road or do this or act this way or feel this way, that you have somehow - well, you've betrayed something. What you've betrayed is the image of you. Then of course, when the black man rises then he's furious.

RPW: That's exactly the point that is involved here, that you and Ralph have betrayed Richard Wright - that's the point.

JB: We've betrayed Richard? How?

RPW: Well, you want to be artists instead of keeping angry enough you know, and -

James Baldwin - Tape #2 - p. 14

JB: Ralph is as angry as anybody - you know - can be and still live and so am I.

RPW: you and Ralph are in the same boat, that you have betrayed the trust, you see, and -

JB: Well, who is Irving?

RPW: I don't know - that's the next point - that's Ralph's point. That's going back to the Bilbo story.

JB: I myself don't feel that I have betrayed Richard, and I - I certainly don't feel that Ralph has. In the first place I don't know how we'd do it. Richard - you know, Richard's achievement is Richard's achievement, and you have every right in the world to disagree with him and you have every right in the world to go further than he. In fact, we have every duty to do that, and if that offends Irving Howe, well, that's just too bad for Irving Howe.

RPW: How did you feel about the - this is something in the morning news - the news Saturday - of the complicated tangle which you have on the NAACP suit about construction - the injunction, you know, to stop construction in New York state - by a strange series of authorities, the judge passes on - signs the rejection - was a Negro judge in the state court.

JB: That's one of those -

RPW: That's one of those - it was on, I gather, technical grounds, but it makes a strange situation, doesn't it?

JB: Yes, but - it doesn't seem as strange to me as it might seem, you know, to you.

James Baldwin - Tape #2 - p. 15

RPW: I don't think it seems strange to you - or to me either. The man is a judge -

JB: A judge is a judge - yes, that's right -

RPW: - the psychological effects can go in many different directions.

JB: The psychological effects - yes.

RPW: Speculating about those psychological effects for both Negroes and whites -

JB: That sort of keeps me awake at nights. It's really the subject of a novel which is very dimly - you know - in my head. I don't know what that - I really don't know what that means. I just have to sort of beg off. That gets us into the whole realm of - oh, I don't know - power politics, private lives of people, and it is also a fantastic assault on the whole idea of race and the whole myth that Negroes and whites are different, you know.

RPW: But he reads the law - presumably - he's honest.

JB: And that's what he has to do, yes.

RPW: He has to - but people are going to call him hard names for that.

JB: Of course - of course - but that's -

RPW: (talking together)

JB: I think so too.

RPW: Or take the case in the Supreme Court where the dissenting justices - Black, Douglas and two others - were out to protect present Governor Johnson of Mississippi and old Ross Barnett in federal court by being for the jury trial. You get the four liberals on

James Baldwin - Tape #2 - p. 16

a legal technicality are trying to throw the case back into the Mississippi courts where we can

JB: Yes, I know - I know what you're saying and I know - I don't know how we're going to get out of this labyrinth.

RFW: Well, here's sort of the same situation, just taking a quote from Handlin again - this is the last book I've read - where forced integration - that is, forced - positive, he calls it - that is, bussing backed by edict of our boards and things - shifts by force - or any shift by force to make racial balance threatens to reduce the individual to to be shuffled about by any authority without reference to any preferences. There may be circumstances under which this is necessary, but those who advocate it usually show no awareness of what this - this does not change the roots of prejudice and - or has other repercussions, principally in law and society.

JB: Well, what that comes to, is that there are going to be very dangerous moments in this struggle which we'll have to avoid if it's at all possible, creating certain very dangerous precedents.

RFW: That's the idea.

JB: That is - that's the trickiest element in the entire revolution, if that is what it is, because one has got to be reconciled, I think, under such stress, to do very dangerous things, and then try to prevent them from having repercussions that they might have. One has got to undo a hundred years of work, you know, in a very short time, and it will not be able to be done as tidily as one might wish.



James Baldwin - Tape #2 - p. 17

RPW: It won't be tidy.

JB: No. I'm going to have to go fairly soon because I'm getting a little - just a little sick. I have to get home.

RPW: Well, shall we -

JB: And I'm sorry to say that.

RPW: Shall we knock it off on this tape?

JB: Yes.

RPW: All right. What is - let's take one question - we have a minute or two left - what is the responsibility of a Negro as you read it - establish equality or justice? Some of the white men's responsibilities are glaringly apparent. What responsibility does the Negro have?

JB: Well, I can only answer that for myself because I'm not altogether sure I know what a Negro is.

RPW: Well, I mean -

JB: You know what I mean - but I suppose I consider the responsibility to be something like this, to - I think one has to take upon oneself a very hard responsibility, which is something you do with the morale of the young, which has to do with a sense of their identity and a sense of their possible achievements, and a sense of themselves. And for this I think one has to take upon himself the necessity of trying to be an example to them, you know, to prove - you know, to prove something by your existence. And further than that, I think one has to try to - if one could get at the morale, then a great many of the problems would be minimized - the problem, for example, of the schools

- the problems we were talking about before - the problems of delinquency - which are all problems of despair and demoralization. Then I suppose one has to say, do things like Jesse Gray is doing in Harlem, which is to mobilize the people - less landlords really, to give the Negro a sense of what they can do for themselves, which is the bottom reason, as I read it, the bottom purpose of the rent strike, because if one can bring this off, then there are several other things that one might be able to think of doing. Part of the problem of being a Negro in this country is that one has been beaten so long - they've been helpless so long, one tends to think of oneself as being helpless. So I think probably the primary responsibility would be I suppose to convey to the people whom one sort of helplessly represents the fact that they are not helpless. And that if they are not helpless they must try to be responsible and to create a leadership out of these boys and girls in the streets, which indeed is happening. They're doing it themselves. I think it 's our responsibility as their elders to bear witness to them and to take their risks with them and - because if they don't trust their elders then we're in trouble too. This is what - something like that is the way it looks to me.

RPW: I'm going to ask a question now that probably has no answer, and I see some of the to the question right away - how many Negroes read your books? It's like trying to find how many Southerners read your books - you know - white Southerners.

JB: Yes - it's an impossible question to answer. But I do know this,

James Baldwin - Tape #2 - p. 19

my brother who lives in Harlem, says that the whores and junkies and people like that steal the books and sell them in bars, which is - there have been a lot of hot things sold in Harlem bars, but I never heard of hot books being sold in Harlem bars before, so I gather that means something.

RPW: How do you feel about audience - this is a stupid question because I know what - I think I know what most any writer feels about audience

JB: I don't think of it, you know - just don't think of it.

RPW: That's what I mean. It isn't the way it starts.

JB: No - you just hope whatever you do finds its own audience. It may take a long, long time.

RPW: I think that's about all.

JB: I wouldn't have to go except that I've been a little sick, and this is - I feel sort of shaky, and I got -

RPW: There's no point in torturing you.

(end of tape)