

RPW: This is Tape #2 of the conversation with James Forman - proceed. When I was talking the other day with Mr. Malcolm X, he referred, not in these words but to unselective reprisals as similar to a war, say between the Negro movement and society at large. Any war, any kind of reprisal is justified. This leads to a question, not of that gross absolute sort but of construction of the role of the Negro movement in relation to general society, as an in movement or an out movement - outside society working - or inside society as a reformist movement. Or is that distinction relevant?

Mr. FORMAN: Well, I don't - I'm not sure about the relevance because I don't understand necessarily the terms. I think I have - let me state what I think that you mean by this so we can communicate so that I can -

RPW: Let me interrupt with this - he says it's a war - Negro against society, so anything goes in a war. You bomb a city, you don't care who gets hurt. It's the ethics of war - lack of ethics of war instead of the ethics of a reformist movement in a society. He accepts society as the mood that you yourself are in.

JF: Well, I don't think that the protest movement currently in the United States is depicted by a lot of people as any type of war because basically most of the people are seeking reforms within the structure of American society - you know. In fact, many Negroes in protest movements are very apologetic, you know, for the society. Now, whether or not it ought to be a war or something is I think

what Malcolm X is perhaps projecting. But I don't think that in reality one can say that the Negro is at war with the society in the sense that many people don't conceive of anything like that. On the other hand, I can understand certain phrases and - let me just say something here that I am not one to readily respond to what other people have said, because first of all I don't - sometimes know what they mean, and that's the point I want to make in terms of this artist. Now, I would not want it to go on record that I'm saying that I'm opposed to Ellison because Ellison has said - is supposed to have said that he considers himself as an artist and then as a Negro. If that is his position then I say that I don't understand what people mean by what's an artist. The same is true in terms of Malcolm X, for instance. I can see within a certain framework where the Negro is at war with the society, but I don't agree with the conclusions that are drawn from this statement. In other words, what I am saying is that the values of the society are basically racist values that continually suppress the dignity of the Negro, and this puts the Negro at odds, which may be a less potent word as war. It puts him at odds with the society and he must struggle to change the society, to change the values and structures of society that make him this way in a sense. Now, I don't agree, on the other hand, because one is at odds with the society that therefore anything that goes in order to change it. But again, as I said, - now, I'm interpreting for Malcolm X, you see, and this may not be what Malcolm X has in mind, and I would like to clearly state unequivocally that I'm

not one generally given to reacting to what other people say - I don't care who he is.

RPW: Yes, but I wasn't trying to put a particular interpretation on Malcolm X. We can take as a starting point what you think. I don't think Ralph Ellison ever said that he was an artist first and a Negro later. He's saying he aspires to being an artist -

But he sees that as different from using literature as a device of protest. I think that's all he meant to say. Did you read the various statements, or did you participate in the statements on the question of the outbreak of hoodlumism over the weekend on the ferry and the subways? Did you give a statement on that?

JF: No, I didn't give a statement on it. I have some personal opinions about it. I think - I read some of the reports that were in the newspapers. The only opinion that I read about it happened to have been an editorial in the New York Times - I think it was Sunday morning or Monday. I think that the editorial did not go far enough, that it did not go far enough in the sense that one has to understand the milieu, the structural situation which allowed these people to be placed. And the thing that surprises me is not that we have one or two incidents of outbreaks of violence on the part of the Negroes, but that there is not more of this, because the frustration which is produced by the society in which we live makes me from an objective point of view again wonder what it is that people do to contain this, you see. And I don't have any answers. I have a few suggestions. But it's an interesting subject as to why the Negro has

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not reacted in a more violent fashion, why he has not been more destructive. And one of the answers of course is that within the group the Negro culture itself, there are many destructive tendencies, you see, which are just simply reactions to the frustrations produced by the society.

RPW: The white man and society have an obligation that is clear, it seems. These things are the result of a defect in society. Meanwhile, there are two other questions. What kind of containment is possible, and 2) What kind of responsibility from the Negro society as distinguished from over-all society is desirable. What ~~severs~~ kind of responsibility is there?

JF: Well, first of all I think that - it's my feeling that the Negroes even in slavery effectively controlled or effectively attempted - well, attempted to control some of the frustrations and some of the anger. I think that you have the Negro church has been an outlet to some of the frustrations. I think that even within the civil rights movement itself, that the posture of nonviolence has helped to control some of the anger and the frustrations. And that goes back to this old problem of, you know, why there hasn't been more. So that I don't think that the Negroes themselves can be indicted, one, for acts of violence that have been committed on the part of Negroes - I'm referring now to an article or a letter that I read in the Times this morning, where someone said that, you know, you don't blame all the Italians for the Mafia and so forth, you know. I think that the basic responsibility that all Negroes have and all Americans is to

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hurry up and changes the conditions that first of all make it necessary for me to be giving you the kind of interview that I'm giving and for you to have this kind of interview. There are other things which we could be discussing, I believe, but the nature of our existence is that the racial problem is paramount and so now we're talking about it. But I much would prefer not to be talking about it. So I'm not just talking about removing the conditions that produce somebody that would strike out on the subway - let's remove the conditions that make it necessary for me to be even discussing the problem - you see. In other words, let's get rid of the racialism in the society.

RPW: What about the question of a white slum boy who goes berserk?

JF: Well, I think that here again that I'm not - I'm not saying that it's necessarily race, but I would say that we have to remove from the society which is going to be a very long process, those conditions that don't produce the good life for anybody - you see. I mean, I think that there are many things fundamental to the society - our whole parole system, our whole prison system - things which are not racial necessarily but do take racial forms. I don't think that our prison system is at all rehabilitative. Nowhere in the United States. There may be one or two isolated spots. I think that the whole question of what is an adequate welfare program - these are problems - these are the larger problems to which we should be addressing ourselves, which I should be devoting my energies to, if I may be so presumptuous. But because I'm so caught up in this racial

thing that the whole question of allocation of energy makes it - and interest - makes it impossible for me to be devoting my time to these other problems.

RPW: But they do intersect in a very crucial way, don't they?

JF: There's no question about it - I mean, and you're absolutely right that there is a great deal of interlocking in these areas.

RPW: When you say crash program or Marshall Plan for the Negro, you have to revise that - or do you, and say the crash program - Marshall Plan for all underprivileged people?

JF: I think that that's the most desirable thing. But then on the other hand I am not opposed to saying a crash program or Marshall Plan for Negroes because I think that if the Negro is to ever present legitimately his demands before the society, that he has to take an interest group point of view. But at the same time, you know, people articulating this I am sure are aware of, you know, the implications for all people in a sense, and the necessity to deal with these interlocking problems.

RPW: Adam Clayton Powell said to me the other day that all the civil rights organization leaders were dead - don't bother with them - they're not significant, any more. They only touch matters now that the most, while the real Negro heartbeat is elsewhere - the eighteen million, you see.

JF: I don't think that that's true. I don't think that - you know - and he probably would exclude us from that category - maybe - I don't

know. But on the other hand, I think that the civil rights movement certainly touches more than nine hundred thousand people. I think that the March on Washington is just one disproof of that particular assertion. I think that the fact that you have the Congress now debating certain issues in the national forum - so far as I am concerned is a vindication of the efforts over the last four years of students and other people to force the nation to come to grips with this problem. Let's remember that prior to 1960 there was concern among many people, you know - I'm not at all stating that, but it was certainly not the kind of concern that is now being expressed, and I could cite that, you see, and I think that this was because people have consistently hammered away in the public forum, through the channels of propaganda and communications that we have, and have raised the whole dialogue to a great level of consciousness. It's not something now that you just hide and you don't talk about, you know.

RPW: What effect did Birmingham have on this, if any?

JF: I think that Birmingham intensified this kind of a dialogue, and I think that Birmingham, considered in the context of other movements, further intensified it, such as Nashville in the summer of '63, Greenwood, Mississippi, where the dogs first came out in 1963 - and I happen to have been over there. Cambridge, Maryland - a lot of these things exploded in the summer of '63 culminating in the March and forced a great deal of issues. But here again, you

have to understand the antecedents, you see. I'm not saying that the world began in 1960 when the students signed in at Greensboro, because there were many, many portents and many, many things that made all of this possible. But I do think that one of the significant characteristics of the student movement is that it created a bombshell in American society through going to jail, through forcing public opinion to grapple with this, and even has produced what a lot of people now are talking about the movement in the North. You know, I was raised in the North. I'm not - and I think I know this nation just about as well as most people, and I certainly know that in Chicago prior to the Montgomery bus ~~boy~~ boycott, that among Negroes there was a lot of ^{diversity} diversiveness, there was a lot of feeling that Negroes can't get together, you see. And I think one of the grandest things about the March - the Montgomery bus boycott was that it was a little spark of Negro somewhere in this land uniting on a mass level. I'm not talking about on the tearoom level or at the conference table. But forcing it in the area of public opinion. And the great glory of the student movement was that it began to force nationally and internationally the issues surrounding racial segregation and has resulted in many good things.

RPW: Several people, including Louis Lomax, have commented on the fact that after the victory in Montgomery, a year later or so, when the FCLC had a convention there, it was to be a mass meeting at the end of the convention. Not a single church in Birmingham had any facilities for that - the FCLC mass meeting - I mean, Montgomery.

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JF: I don't know about that, so I guess I can't comment.

RPW: It's a strange fact about mass support or some leadership division you see.

JF: I don't think that's true, you know. I mean, I really don't think that that statement is true. I don't know. But - I mean, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference is made up primarily of Negro ministers, and I - Ralph Abernathy was there a year after the bus boycott, so I just don't believe that.

RPW: Well maybe a year and a half. He had left. Anyway, the church, including the church that Reverend Abernathy had been pastor of - no church with any facilities to the mass meeting, the last night.

This - Lomax is my authority for this.

JF: I just don't believe that. I mean, frankly. And I - the reason that I don't believe it, first of all, you say - when you say no church - now, if you say that maybe three churches or four churches didn't want a mass meeting, then I -

RPW: Wouldn't allow it in their facilities - in that church.

JF: Well then when you say no church in Birmingham - I cannot accept that.

RPW: Montgomery.

JF: Montgomery - no church in Montgomery, because the leadership of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference is made from Negro ministers, and that's a distinct contribution that it has made and it has galvanized some of the Baptist Negro preachers, you know.

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RPW: What do you think in general of Lomax' rapportage on the movement?

JF: Well, here we're getting into the great area of controversy, which I -

RPW: Well, we're going to live in it.

JF: Well, it's true, but I don't -

RPW: That's where we live.

JF: Yes, that's right, but the fact that we live in it doesn't mean that I have to contribute to the building of the house. And so therefore I'm not one to begin to make critical public comments about people who do have something to offer in a sense. I mean, I have told him publicly concerning an article that he wrote about the Negro colleges, that I felt that he could marshal his evidence a little bit better, but, you see, I think that one of the troubles in the civil rights movement now is that there has been a lot of in-fighting - somebody has asked what do you think about that, and then this comes out, and then there's reaction to this, and that this is debilitating, so that I'm not getting into this question. And again I think that that's relevant to what I said at first about I'm not prone to comment on certain things of which I don't have very much of evidence.

RPW: Well, the question of in-fighting is one thing motivated by power lust - in-fighting on matters of fundamental principles or issues is another thing, isn't it?

JF: Yes, but the question was what did I think of the rapportage of -

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RPW: That was the question. I'll give you another kind of question which involves - well, something that's bound to be critical. Let's take the matter of Kenneth Clark - Dr. Kenneth Clark on Dr. King. I'll give you a quote. Dr. King's philosophy on the surface appears to reflect health and stability, while Black Nationalism betrays pathology and instability. A deeper analysis, however, might reveal that there is also an unrealistic if not pathological basis in King's doctrine. The natural reaction to injustice is bitterness and resentment. The form which such bitterness takes need not be overtly violent but the corrosion of the spirit seems inevitable. It would seem, then, that any demand that the victims of oppression be required to love those who oppress them places additional and probably intolerable psychological burdens upon these victims. How would you react to that?

JF: Well, you know, Dr. Clark is speaking from the point of view of an eminent psychologist, and I don't agree with his position but maybe for different reasons. One, because I don't know all of the psychological implications, you see. My position, then, is that it is not necessary for people to love one another, but that what we must do is to change the structures that don't permit people to get along, you see. I think that a lot of the problems simply rest on structural basis, and that our position is not to go around talking about, you know, we must change the attitude of these people, we must make them love us - and I'm not sure that that's completely King's position -

RPW: That's not his view -

JF: That's what I'm saying - I don't think that that's, you know, his position. But our position is that we must change the structures, we must change the systems that breed intolerance and that breed segregation, because if you convert one person and you still permit the system to rest there, it's just going to produce another type of individual.

RPW: But am I to infer, then, that you regard nonviolence as a tactic rather than as a philosophy?

JF: No, you're not to infer that.

RPW: Well, please correct me then. I'm asking you.

JF: Yes, I mean, you know, because I can believe in nonviolence as a way of life and still think that the way that one can change things through nonviolence is by changing the various structures, you see, that breed intolerance or I can believe in it as a technique, and still feel that this is the position. Now, there are many people in the movement who don't accept nonviolence as a complete way of life. I just happen to accept it, and I don't think it's relevant that, you know, that I began to state what are some of my personal beliefs in terms of nonviolence or anything else.

RPW: Well, why couldn't we? It's important.

JF: Well, you know, it's a matter of degree. I mean, it's a matter of interpretation. I mean, I think that you can state positions. I don't mind telling you that I happen to accept nonviolence as a way of life in a sense. But at the same time, I am sophisticated enough to understand that one has to change systems - that breed violence rather

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than trying to change a particular person who may be violent.

RPW: What about the effect of the fortitude in the face of violence which has been demonstrated by numbers of Negroes in mob collisions, you see? It's a moral effect, isn't it - certainly one of the objectives of the -

JF: It's important. It produces reactions in the consciousness of people who are not even there in a sense, and it's one of the things that has advanced the movement to the point where it is. There's no question about that.

RPW: Dr. King says, of course, that this sort of criticism that these people have not . What about ACT - that organization. Do you know much about it?

JF: Yes, I know something about it.

RPW: Would you mind telling me about it?

JF: Well, you should go to the people in ACT to find out about ACT. I mean, I think that - you know - there are very good people who could talk to you about it. But just briefly I can tell you it was primarily formed as a result of a meeting or a series of meetings held with people that were engaged in school boycotts during the month of February, and that the people who were engaged in these school boycotts were not within the traditional civil rights organizations, except Chicago - Larry Landers, the chairman, was the chairman of our Chicago Friends of Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee.

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RPW: As your role was defined, your organization, how do you think we could define their role or their potential role - that is, what vacuum do they fill?

JF: Well, I think that ACT is simply a further manifestation of the deepening roots of the civil rights movement, that it's inevitable either that the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee would begin action in the North, or that some other organization would then come to the forefront. Because the boycotts that were being handled were meeting a need that ^{a lot of} ~~allowed~~/the traditional organizations in the North just were not fulfilling, you know. There's no question about that. In fact, the second school boycott here was fought but yet there was great response to the second school boycott, which meant that the boycott was meeting some need. And I think that it has the potential of again further deepening the struggle in the North and offering another alternative or another method of dealing with certain problems in Northern cities. Now, my personal position is that we either needs fifty thousand more organizations or five hundred thousand more people working on the problem, so that I'm not opposed to ACT.

RPW: Well, I wasn't considering that you were.

JF: No, I'm just stating this categorically so that you can understand my position.

RPW: In the matter of the particular schools, the question emerges whether integration is a touchstone in cities like New York and Washington - that question.

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JF: Pardon me? I didn't hear your question.

RPW: In cities like New York and Washington, where there is a vast majority of public school children are Negro, or at least colored - non-Caucasian - quotes - the question of integration becomes more and more difficult to take as a criterion of school management, it would seem, as opposed to equality - another concept. It may be idealism coincides. What can be done in a city like Washington, D.C. to integrate the schools. What question does that raise theoretically or factually?

JF: Well, I just can't speak for Washington because I don't know Washington. And I'm not trying to be evasive. I just don't know Washington, D.C.

RPW: They have eighty-five percent of the public school children are nonwhite - how do you integrate?

JF: Eighty-five percent of the public school kids in Washington are nonwhite?

RPW: Something like that.

JF: Well, I'd think it would be almost the reverse, wouldn't it? I mean, it's mostly the white ^{parents} ~~trash~~/who have the kids not in public schools - right?

RPW: That's what I said - the nonwhites are -

JF: Oh, yes, I'm sorry - yes. Well, if - you know, if that's the case, then there's the whole question of where the boundaries. I think that the whole question of integration in the North also revolves around on how it revolves first of all on housing patterns,

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secondly revolves on the fact that both the housing zoning and the school districts have basically been drawn in most Northern cities as to perpetuate segregation. And I think that you have to have an open housing law and that you have to have open school districts.

RPW: Well, even open school districts - what is the effect - you can have open districts but it's a ratio of public school children is very heavily toward the Negro or at least the nonwhite side.

How do you integrate?

JF? Yes, well, now, if - here you see if a parent chooses not to spend the city's taxes to educate his child but prefers to send that child to a private school where he bears the financial responsibility for the child's education, and a parent has a right to send his kid anywhere he wants to send him. Now, on the other hand, if the city is going to maintain an educational system, then the city has a responsibility to help provide some form of changes that's going to best produce some semblance of democracy in a sense, and if that -

RPW: But there aren't enough white children to go around.

JF: Well, if there just aren't enough to go around - that's all. I mean, you can't deal with the impossible. We can't go out here and create white people - I mean, you know, that's just impossible.

RPW: How do you feel about, say, the - you may say you choose not to answer this - I'm not trying to badger you into an answer - but you take a man like the Reverend Gulammuson who's children are in private schools. Would that be an issue in your mind at all or not?

JF: Well, I think that, you know, that there are certain questions to

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be raised in terms of a man active in the public school fight whose children are in the private schools, in a sense. That's one of the - I mean, I don't know what his rationales are - I mean, what his rationale happens to be. I've never talked to the man, I don't know him personally. I've just seen his name in the paper. But I think that one would have to raise that question because one of the problems in most of these cities is that the people who make the laws for the public schools have their kids in private schools, you know.

RPW: I don't criticize him. It doesn't raise a question in my mind if he does that, you see. I'm not myself - I'd say, all right, he does - period.

JF: Yes, well, it - I said that it raises the question whether or not it's important to me or not is not significant, but it raises the question in a general form and as - in terms of why should he do it, and the fact that he does is that you ask me the question, you know. So that it raises a question in public form, but in terms of judgment-wise, then, you know, I reserve that.

RPW: This is the end of Tape 2 of the conversation with Mr. James Forman. Proceed with Tape 3.

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