

Draft -
Transcript of
Taped Conversation with
MR. WHITNEY YOUNG
First Tape of the Second Interview - April 29, 1964

MR. WARREN: Let's, for a starter, Mr. Young, let me take a phrase or two out of some of your writings that I have been reading. The speech, The Social Revolution, Challenge to the Nation, you have a phrase that you will be able to put into its proper context: "Responsibilities of the Victims of Injustice," that is not elaborated in the context. Would you like to speak to that point? What are such responsibilities, responsibilities of the American Negro?

MR. YOUNG: I have been concerned, as the Urban League has been for years, with the fact that with rewards, with rights, go responsibilities. I've been reluctant to-- and inhibited in elaborating on this more and publicly, and especially before all-white audiences, by two facts: one, the fact that I'm not sure that the average white American is aware of the great sense of responsibility that Negro citizens have already shown throughout history in providing for their own long before many of the welfare programs and social security benefits or other agencies that provided health and welfare facilities were open to them. Negro citizens, through their churches and their organizations, were forced to provide for themselves, and there has been a history of self help within the negro community that I think is largely missed in history and is largely unknown to the white American, and to at this point in

time concentrate too much on this, would make it appear that this is a new experience for him. So when I talk about negro responsibility it's reminding them of their continued and increased responsibilities as they get new resources, as they move into middle class status, as they develop certain stable family life in order to help out, as other immigrant groups have their own who are less fortunate. Nor the other reasons that I mentioned, and I developed this more in a speech, that inhibits me somewhat in talking about the responsibility of Negro citizens as much as I should like to, is that the-- so many of the columnists and so many of our newly appointed advisors ~~have taken this line~~ in the press and--

MR. WARREN: You mean self-appointed--

MR. YOUNG: Self-appointed advisors have taken this line almost solely, and these are people who have in the past been largely indifferent to the plight of Negro citizens and to ⁱⁿ discriminations against them, they've been people who fought against civil rights laws (I'm thinking of columnists like David Lawrence and Fulton Lewis); and who have done little to see that the Negro acquired his civil rights. These are people who now speak of Negroes assuming certain responsibilities before these rights are to be given. And also there is a tendency on the part of so many of these people to make it appear that before the Negro citizen as

a group can get-- even deserves his civil rights, each and every Negro must measure up to some kind of level of a standard of morality and decency and responsibility.

MR. WARREN: May I cut across there to ask a question bearing on this? How much does the reluctance which you mention in yourself to discuss this publicly, relate to the old split in attitude and in policy between Booker T. Washington's self-improvement program and casting-down-the-bucket-where-you-are program and all of that, as opposed to DuBois's approach that is that is the very notion poisoned by the perhaps random and casual association with the Washington heritage. Is that part of it?

MR. YOUNG: Yes, I think very definitely there is an element that the word self-help has been throughout history tied in with the whole philosophy of Booker T. Washington.

MR. WARREN: So we're dealing with-- this is a symbol, then, which carries the wrong flavor rather than with the actual concrete specific reference. Is that right?

MR. YOUNG: Yes, but I wouldn't want to leave the impression that even with that reluctance is an absence of this altogether, and I think my speech "The March on Washington" is an example. You will note in the speech that I did this by tying it in not as an either/or, but I spoke about the responsibility of Negroes to do a lot of different types of marching. I pointed out that while it was necessary important to march in front of city halls

and in front of courthouses and in front of 5-and-10-cent stores, to get elementary rights, that at the same time we must also march our children to the libraries and their parents must march to the adult education centers, the re-training centers and to the PTA meetings and to these other places, to be assured that once those rights were won and the doors were down, that the people would be in a position to take advantage of them.

MR. WARREN: I know your ^{you're} position. I was more interested in the context of misunderstanding by both whites and some Negroes on this whole question. Lately, I heard Dr. King speak ^{ing} at Bridgeport and he wound up by not a "cast-your-buckets-down," but if you're a street-cleaner, be the best in the world, you see.

MR. YOUNG: Yes.

MR. WARREN: That line--

MR. YOUNG: "That pine on the top of the hill be as strong as the bush in the valley."

MR. WARREN: All of this. And this-- in another context would sound exactly like Booker T. Washington.

MR. YOUNG: Yes. But again, I've--

MR. WARREN: In another context.

MR. YOUNG: I've heard, I'm sure, a similar speech by Dr. King that this always is preceded by a most militant posture, and this comes sort/as ^{of} after. But I think it's important. I know that in my speeches and in many of the

speeches of Negro leaders when in the all-Negro audience, 90 per cent Negro audience, just like we oftentimes speak in church groups, their congregations, we deal with this a great deal, and the speech is an entirely different speech. 75 per cent of it is a reminder to the Negro citizens that the removal of barriers alone will not insure first-class citizenship, so we don't have that same reluctance to do this with an all-Negro group. And that's why I think that the other is a more important consideration than the Booker T. Washington, and that is that this is what white people are saying; and since many of them are enemies, have been historically enemies of civil rights, we don't want to be ^{part of the} parrot in the same lamb, And what I was trying to say, in this speech, if the white community wants to hear responsible Negro leaders speak more to their people about their own responsibilities, then let them speak to the white community about their responsibilities and we in turn will do this other. And I never want people to forget the amazing sense of responsibility that Negroes have shown throughout history probably more than any other ethnic group, given the provocations and the conditions of the responsibility of remaining loyal to the country, not being taken in by the communists, responsibility for not getting violent and for being restrained in the face of all kinds of provocations, the responsibility of taking care of their unwed children when white parents

could either arrange for abortions or could get their kids sent off into institutions that were closed to Negroes. In a way this is a kind of higher responsibility and a higher sense of morality than has been present in the other community. And we have historically taken care of our aged who didn't have the benefits of social security, because domestic workers couldn't get social security. We've had to do this.

MR. WARREN: There's a question relating to that, to this list of facts which you have given. There are complaints now and then by responsible Negroes that the actual cash outlay now, you see, in terms of philanthropy, in terms of support for organizations, is less than in ratio than might be expected from Negroes. This complaint occurs pretty often from responsible sources. I mean there's a kind, another kind of responsibility to one's own that's different from the kind you've enumerated, which is being complained about, the lack of responsibility by some people.

MR. YOUNG: I think there are two factors here. No race throughout history that within its generation knew poverty, has ever distinguished itself by its generosity or its humanity, its philanthropy in that same generation; there's an old saying that once you've been hungry, you're never full. And there's the constant haunting fear of a return to poverty, of your children suffering the same

fate. Now I would expect the generation, the next generation of Negroes-- remember, this is the first generation, really, of Negroes who had anything approaching reasonable security. It was only after World War I and Negroes began to get some jobs in war plants and even so it's just a handful, but I still think that given the Negro income, what it is, and given the fact that Negroes have to spend so much time and so much money to fighting for elementary rights, we have to give ^{to} the NAACP, which we can never list on our income tax returns, this can never be listed, and you can't even list the Urban League if you live in the South, without being called in and questioned about a lot of other irrelevant things, even though it's a tax-exempt organization. You have to really measure the Negroes' giving in terms of the number of Negro doctors who serve, clients who never pay them, the numbers of lawyers who serve who never pay them, and the fact that we haven't really developed any substantial wealth. We have a few businesses and the demands on them are terrific. The average Negro who is a school principal or who is the administrator of a social agency, occupies a status in the Negro community that's completely unrealistic, but it makes him an attraction for everybody. Every church in that community that wants a donation and the white community, the Negro principal or the head of a social agency, is not even looked to, hardly, for a substantial contribution.

But he is in the Negro community and I think ~~this~~ this we have to take into consideration.

MR. WARREN: Let me check this, a second. There's another quotation from the same speech I'd like to refer to: "As we win the battle for civil rights, we can and might well lose the war for human rights." You know the context of that?

MR. YOUNG: Yes.

MR. WARREN: I'd like to have you explain, if you will, please, sir.

MR. YOUNG: Well, here again is a real fear that I have that so many Negro citizens may have been led to believe that the solution of the problems of poverty which they face and poor housing, will be reached when the civil rights bill is passed or when the signs are taken down, and this is dangerous, because a type of disillusionment ~~is~~ that may set in. In reality we know that this will not do it, and this is particularly true in an age where automation is taking over and increased education is needed and technical knowhow, and that I am fearful that Negro citizens will not understand the need for a diversified approach in this whole attack, and that there are many forces at work today that on the surface are really indifferent to race: the forces of automation, what's going to happen as a defense budget is cut down and defense industries

are closed. I doubt seriously if the American public will immediately convert that same money into the social sphere-- all this will pose some real problems.

MR. WARREN: There's another approach to that question which is touched on by Oscar Handlen in his new book: It's this: (I'll paraphrase it without bothering to quote) His point is that there are many instances where it will be necessary to treat individuals as, as it were, move them around to say the school bussing and various other things. We should not neglect the fact that these-- this would give us a conflict of goods or a conflict of rights, and that they are not to be equated one with the other. That is-- he said this is not a defense of segregation, it's just a recognition, but even in achieving integration, sometimes you must cut across other rights. You must balance the right against the right. He said that human rights actually ^{underlie} underline a broader band of proper integration may be violated. Well, do you know what I'm getting at?

MR. YOUNG: Yes. I'm not sure, though. But one of the major points that I remember that he makes in the book is the fact that--

MR. WARREN: This is not major, by the way.

MR. YOUNG: Yes. --is the fact that the Negroes may even prefer and may desire segregation, and we may find

ourselves necessarily building permanently a segregated kind of societies, because the white community will-- there's such strong resistance to artificially eliminating segregation, to techniques such as bussing, and what have you. And I don't quite agree with Handlon on this point because while I don't think the masses of Negroes are anxious to-- for integration, per se, I think the-- what they're anxious for is first-class accommodations, housing, education, health facilities and all this, but I think that they are deeply convinced that as long as there's segregation this will never-- they will never receive this, that segregation automatically makes it possible for a group to receive, to be identified and to receive inferior services and never throughout history has a suppressed group ever been given superior services. But the thrust for integration isn't so much a thrust for association as it is a disbelief in quality services in a segregated city.

MR. WARREN: While I don't want to misinterpret Handlon, he is not opposed to integration.

MR. YOUNG: No.

MR. WARREN: He is simply distinguishing it from the question of equality as a different concept, and sometimes they don't match. And if I remember correctly, let me ask about another question he raises. He says equality tends to reinforce ethnic centrality rather than to

reinforce the tendency to merge, this has been the record of other minority groups in the United States. ~~Once equality~~ ~~is achieved~~ ~~the other people tend to follow their taste~~ ~~and they tend to go back together, because they have nothing to prove, in a sense, of mixing.~~ Once equality is achieved, the other people tend to follow their taste and they tend to go back together, because they have nothing to prove, in a sense, of mixing.

MR. YOUNG: Do you agree with that, really? I don't agree with that. That certainly isn't true.

MR. WARREN:

MR. YOUNG: minorities. Isn't the Jewish minority now has become almost completely assimilated?

MR. WARREN: But Glaser says it is.

MR. YOUNG: Well, I think he's right and then wrong. It is true that a divided group, in order to-- a divided, suppressed group-- reaches a ~~ps~~ point where it recognizes that its plight can only be corrected through group solidarity, and through building of unity and a certain confidence within the group's ability to influence power and all this, and so as it moves from that point of division and disunity into one of unity, there is a certain amount of enthusiasm and a flaunting of power and a satisfaction that grows out of the ability to be unified and the victories which can be achieved in that situation, that many people may mistake for an end that the people themselves desire. Which is not true at all; this only makes it possible for people to get the psychological security that's needed and the educational and cultural and material

resources, the equipment, with which to really branch out. Now what will really happen is that in these communities where the group solidarity will ultimately be responsible for improving the educational facilities in these communities, and will be ultimately responsible for removing any feeling of inferiority on the part of the Negro, that same-- those same things will be responsible for giving him the security that will enable him to integrate. You see it sometimes-- it's a defensive device when a person isn't quite sure within himself that he either has the psychological strength or the educational equipment to compete. Then he says publicly and acts like he wants to stay together, but I think this is a temporary position and you'd will find almost without exception that the Negroes who have secured top education and are topnotch professionals, do then move out in, and comfortably so, both socially and residentially and everything else into an integrated pattern, and I don't think they will be any exception.

MR. WARREN: You were saying that this has ~~not~~ not been true, that Handlon said this has not been true in the Jewish communities.

MR. YOUNG: Not at all. I think there's a great concern in the Jewish community and has been since the Second World War that the American Jew has become so assimilated that he has lost all of his Jewishness, and would say this is true of all of the racial minorities who have

become integrated here. It certainly is true of the Italians-- it certainly has become true of the Irish.

MR. WARREN: But this is a counter to what Glazer and Monahan argue and what Handlon argues. I have no way of judging this, you see, except by my random observations.

MR. YOUNG: The concern also seems to me almost wildly premature in regard to the Negro. The Negro is so far away from achieving any of the things that Handlon is taking for granted they're going to achieve, again it sounds like one way of putting the Negro off, and I might say I find it rather irritating. I think it's kind of a wishful thinking. It may be sort of a strategy that some of our sincere liberal friends might be adopted in order to assuage the fears of white people that the Negro really doesn't want to integrate; what he wants is equal facilities and if we give him that then he will not then try to ~~move~~ move into our neighborhoods and into our societies. I think it's a dangerous theory because I don't think it'll work out that way, and I think instead we ought to press for the reverse, and that is what a terrible thing this would be for white people if Negroes do not attempt to move into their neighborhoods because it means they, too, will be left with this kind of in-culture in terms of sameness and all that that is so uncreative. And I would anticipate that white people will soon see the value of diversity as against the perpetuation of sameness and will be encouraging this.

MR. WARREN: Are we-- excuse me, please go ahead.

MR. YOUNG: When in history has any group remained in a ghetto once it emerged from a ghetto?

MR. WARREN: Is it "ghetto,"-- is the point if you have perfect freedom and-- if you have perfect mobility and choose your way of life?

MR. YOUNG: But the Negro is concerned because he does not have a way of life because he's not been given a way of life.

MR. WARREN: He doesn't have it now, no.

MR. YOUNG: He hasn't been given a way of life, and to think as Handlon does, is to think pretty much the way the Black Nationalists do, that the Negro is in some way a superior being and left to his own devices will form his own culture and his own society, and this can-- as far as one can make out over the last three hundred years the Negro's tendency is to do just the opposite.

MR. WARREN: Let me raise a question that's related to that. We're speaking of pluralism in society and the enriching result of having variety and that this is a good thing, not a bad thing. Now we have two impulses, then, operating, two desires, we'll say, and I'm with you on the-- there's no question that to have a richness of variety makes life worth living. You like this, you don't want it all evened out, made identical. But on one side the drift that you are arguing about, the complaint about

the Jews becoming de-Newed so he's losing the--

MR. YOUNG: And more American.

MR. WARREN: And more American, and he's losing his role as an interesting variation, a human variation. So this impulse is working too.

MR. YOUNG: Except my concept of integration doesn't mean that any group gives up all that it has and adopts all that another group has. My concept of integration is that we explore and identify within each group the positives that have been developed out of ~~that~~ that group's culture. Even the Negro, I think out of suppression, has developed a kind of compassion and humaneness, certainly a kind of patience and tolerance that General Motors could use, you see. So we're-- I'm not just talking about his music and his rhythm, I'm talking about some other qualities that the larger society can use. So my concept of integration is that we identify these positives in both now the white culture, the technology, and all this that they have, these other things that the Negro has, we reject the negatives, the poverty of the Negro, his lack of education, the lack of culture that he's developed that we reject in the ~~the~~ white, the meanness, the selfishness, the inability to give up privilege and advantage that's found all too often in the white society and we move toward another society, you see, that's much better, that reflects a synthesis of these. This is what-- so I don't think it's really giving up at all.

MR. WARREN: Well, I see your point. Well anyway, we can't legislate the future in this respect.

MR. YOUNG: No, but I think we can plan this. You see my theory here is that the kind of separate societies that have been developed in our communities has not happened through chance, but this has been consciously, deliberately planned, that what they did was play upon the status needs of people and they set a norm of exclusiveness as a criteria of success. Now this was done deliberately through very clever advertisement of certain subdivisions and conscious effort to keep out Negroes, and this way-- We can change the norm, that's been true of all human history in terms of classes as well as terms of races, and sometimes all a matter of class and very little a matter of race, in some societies.

MR. WARREN: Well, I'm not fighting that battle.

MR. YOUNG: This is where-- you're not talking about our economic situation, a classless society where everybody--

MR. WARREN: Economic and social distinctions which have nothing to do with race. This is the-- Greek situation is not a racial situation; it is a class situation. But in America it's a race situation.

MR. YOUNG: I'm talking about the kind of situation where Ralphe Bunche is told he can't get a hotel reservation in Atlanta, Georgia, while a drunken white man in overalls walks in and registers. Now that's a race, that's not class.

MR. WARREN: That's race. That's race.

MR. YOUNG: And that's what we're dealing with at this point now. When we lick this problem, you see, then maybe I'll move into this other one, but right now I'm saying that a community can set any standard it wants to, a school kid, a neighborhood, as long as it doesn't set a standard of race, and the Negro then should be asked to measure up and can measure up and get in it. But right now they're saying that you can have any kind of--

MR. WARREN: We have no argument. I'm not arguing this as a point. Clearly, that is the most obvious fact, but the question is how far the race question intersects and fuses with the other considerations, right now with us. That you cannot have a solution merely in terms of race is, I'm-- the question I'm raising.

MR. YOUNG: Well, I've discussed this in the centennial edition of Ebony Magazine in an article, my concern about even the class situation within the Negro community, and that my concern was that we were developing a gap here, and that the choices that the Negro faced all too often was a choice either between bread and water or champagne and caviar, either sending his kids to slum ghetto inferior schools or to plush prep schools, either living in a hovel or living in a suburb. My concern is that this is creating a vacuum here and it is denying the lower class Negro of leadership potential, and it is a situation developing

not so much of an attempt to escape the Negro on the part of the middle class, but an attempt to escape the ghetto, which is symbolic of a lot of other things in his society that he wants to escape. But the class problem is basically an economic problem, in America. America is not yet so cultural, so sophisticated, so esthetic; you see, when you really think of the suburbs in cities like Chicago and other places, they are inhabited by the gangsters, all white. There are some twelve suburbs in Chicago, the most fabulous suburb in Chicago, that's all white. It has nothing to do with any kind of class, moral or cultural value at all-- it's money.

MR. WARREN: Oh yes. How much of that split between the let's say the Negro mass and the Negro upper-middle, upper class. Is that split wider or not than it was, say, ten years ago?

MR. YOUNG: Oh, it's much wider.

MR. WARREN: It is wider?

MR. YOUNG: Yes, and the reason it's wider is that the jobs are disappearing in that jobs that would put people in what would normally be a lower-middle class or an upper- and lower class, are disappearing.

MR. WARREN: This is not what is said by many Negroes, of course. They deny that, what you have said. They will deny that a split was widening, they say it's narrowing.

MR. YOUNG: Well, I'm talking about a purely economic fact of life now, that while we have more middle-class

Negroes than ever before, but we have more poor people than ever before, and we have fewer people in that income ~~class~~ class that we put them. So I'm talking sheer economics now, and the figures will show that we have more unemployment and more impoverished Negroes today than we had ten years ago. But we also have more in the middle class; so just from the economic standpoint, the gap is there.

MR. WARREN: The question is what is the spiritual gap? What is the gap in-- of a failure of identification?

MR. YOUNG: Yes.

MR. WARREN: Well, that's the distinction I'm getting at now. I'd like to talk about that now.

END OF TAPE 1 in a Conversation with MR. WHITNEY YOUNG.

MR. WARREN: Now you were going to say something about the split between lower-class Negro life and middle-upper-- upper class Negro life. First, economic split; you were talking about, and now the matter of the spiritual split-- is it widening or narrowing?

MR. YOUNG: Two things are happening. On the one hand there is a greater sense of pride in race and there is a solidarity as far as goals are concerned, but there has developed and is developing this gap on an economic basis that sets up social and geographic distances; and in the North it poses another problem in that the ability to