

CONVERSATION WITH MR. JAMES FARMER

A. Let me go back to a topic suggested earlier, by your remarks about CORE. I know some of the criticisms and difficulties that have come to NAACP because of interracial character. Now, have you had the same experience with CORE?

Because of the interracial character?

A. Yes. Some of the criticisms have reached the NAACP on that basis. remarks by Adam Clayton Powell and many other sources.

Well, Powell included us in his criticism of the NAACP, he criticised NAACP and CORE, for having white people in positions of leadership. Well, CORE from its very beginning has been an interracial organization, and this with us is a matter of principle. We don't see how we can fight CORE in open society, through a segregated organization, and this is a policy position which we intend to maintain. We have an interracial staff at all levels, offices are both Negro and white, membership in all of our chapters except the chapters in the deep South are Negro and white. We expect to maintain it -- of course we run into difficulty. I expect that this difficulty will increase rather than decrease within the next few years.

A. What kind of difficulty, Mr. Farmer?

Well, there are many, many Negroes who do not work -- will not work, and the organization is interracial because of their suspicion of whites, because of the distrust which they have for whites, some of this suspicion and distrust is the result of bad experiences in the past -- but more basically, I think it is the result of the fact that we have lived in separated worlds for so long. Negroes have grown up in a black world, whites in a white world. Many of the

youngsters who have come into the civil rights movement within the past two years, have had no interracial experiences at all. The only white people they have had any dealings with, have been their landlords or their bosses.

A. This leads to something else now -- for instance, the most publicized remark is from James Baldwin -- that is, the white liberal is an affliction -- his famous remark -- and you hear it in many forms elsewhere. What is the role of this 'the white liberal'?

Well, as you know --

A. Does he have any role in the Negro revolution, or whatever you choose to call it.

'White liberal' has become a bad word -- like Uncle Tom, like you name it. I think the white liberal does have a role. At the present stage of the civil rights struggle, his role cannot be one of leading the struggle. He cannot be the top leader of any of the civil rights organizations, if those organizations ought to have any impact in the Negro community right now. If there is a white leader of the organization, then the organization will become irrelevant as far as Negroes are concerned. I think that the white liberals must, and certainly should, be willing to work within the organization in the rank in file, and in roles of secondary leadership and as technicians -- that is, persons that have certain skills which cannot easily be found in the Negro community now, because Negroes have not had the opportunity to develop them. Part of CORE's strength is the fact that we have an interracial staff.

A. What about the white man who is outside the organization --

he comes in for a little bit different treatment -- Say put it that way. The person who is concerned with the state of the health of the entire community, and subsumes the Negro situation on this bias, as it were -- on this idea, rather than in terms of organization. You

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Yes, I do, I do indeed. I was just thinking about it for a moment.

A. President Johnson, we trust.

Yes, he is. On President Johnson, I would say that I think he has a real dedication and commitment on the civil rights issue. His speeches -- especially his speeches on the South -- have been very significant, in my opinion. Furthermore, he has taken some stands which do not seem to be calculated to help him politically. It is a matter of conviction and a feeling, an emotional matter with him, too, so I respect him for it.

A. I do, too, I am not staring at you.

Yes. But the question you raised is a good one, a valid one. The feeling in the Negro community now is that this is the key issue, and all of the other issues must be secondary, and if there is any conflict between two issues, this one must prevail. If there is a conflict between fighting militantly for civil rights and a civil liberatist point of view, for example, then the civil rights issue must prevail. My own view is that all of these issues are so definitely interrelated, that while the civil rights issue is the key domestic issue of our time, we have got now to begin bridging the gap, and showing the relationship between the struggle for equal rights for Negroes and the struggle for a stronger and

better America. I think the civil rights movement can make as one of its most significant contributions, providing motivation and trust, for example, toward solving the problem of poverty in our country -- solving the problem of unemployment -- because it happens that Negroes are the poorest of the poor, with the most unemployed of the unemployed, and the poorest houses of the house, and ^{have} the worst health of the poor health, -- the poor people of poor health.

A. You find situations like this -- a white man that I know, who is quite a distinguished writer, has had some pressure for him to become an activist, at least associate himself outside. He has written very eloquently and is planning on something that is very important, which would be on this subject, and ^{he} will be totally committed to ~~it~~; yet he has come in some very harsh words because he won't go march.

Oh, yes. Well, we have gone through that stage and I think it is just a stage and I think we are just about through it now, where the feeling has been that the only important contribution that a person can make, is in the streets. There are some people who will not be in the streets for various reasons, marching with us. But there are other things that they can do, and in a sense it has been our failure in not having pointed out specific things that they can do to help the revolution -- the civil rights revolution. If the civil rights revolution is to succeed, then we have got to work out methods of using people at the level in which they are able to operate to help the cause. We haven't done that effectively, we are trying to do it now.

A. You find this also about certain Negroes, Ralph Ellison comes to mind. He is a man of enormous talents and high distinction. Did you see in Descent last Fall, the article by Irving Howell called "Black Boys of Native Son"? And Ralph Ellison replies in New Leader?

Yes, yes. I didn't see the replies.

A. He wrote two very elegant pieces in reply. He said Irving Howell as a new kind of billboard -- he has picked my place out for me and puts me in it -- there is rough outside of optimism but enormously effective. He has come to a great deal of criticism from both people like Howell and certain Negroes I know, because he hasn't been in the streets -- the same thing more sharply focused.

Yes, well, in the case of Ralph Ellison, I don't know whether the criticism is only that he hasn't been in the streets -- Baldwin, for example, has not been in the streets, but his writing has been oriented toward the streets.

A. Well, the invisible man has had an enormous impact --
Ralph has had an impact

Yes, that is true. I repeat or reiterate what I have said -- that I think now we have got to find roles that others can play to help the revolution, which will not necessarily be picketing or marching or sitting in.

A. Black or white.

Black or whites, we need their talents. I attended an interesting meeting yesterday, which there was discussion of a relatively new idea, of urging people who have money and who invest that money to tithe in their investments. In other words, to see to it that

one tenth of the funds which they invest are invested in a planned and deliberate attempt at creating open occupancy housing, and that they also follow the other money they invest, by seeing to it that their money is not unwillingly being used to support and maintain segregation. I think that this is something that people can do.

A. Adam Clayton Powell said to me some weeks ago "The leadership of the organization is finished -- they are dead, nine hundred thousand people altogether and those are duplicates, their phase is over". I know you don't agree with that ---

Well, I would say that reports of our death have been greatly exaggerated. I would say that Adam Clayton Powell would have great difficulty mobilizing nine hundred people, not to speak of nine hundred thousand people. I would say as far as CORE is concerned, we are ^{growing} ~~gaining~~ constantly, we are doubling at least, each year, and have been growing at that rate for the past three years, and I see no end to it in sight.

A. Now, the big change in the role of CORE was where -- lets see -- was in fifty -- the sit ins - the big turning point, wasn't it?

That was one turning point, yes, that was the major one -- in 1960 -- the students sit ins yes, but I would say that we had an earlier sprig of growth -- about 1957 -- as a result of the Montgomery bus boycott and the . Then at that point, you see, the technique of nonviolence became popularized and this was a technique that CORE had been using for some 14 to 15 years. We had a growth in 1960, then we had additional speedy growth in 1961 with the freedom rides, which were a CORE project; so that 3 years ago, we had 23 chapters and about twelve thousand members.

Now, 3 years later, we have 175 chapters and at least 75 thousand members, so our day is not ended, we haven't reached our peak.

A.No. In the question of leadership, general leadership of the movement, in ordinary revolutions we find that the tendencies are always toward centralization of power, winding up usually in a person -- that is the pattern. You have a symbolic role as well as a practical role in power. Do you see this tendency in the Negro movement, for the centralization of power?

No, quite to the contrary -- the present tendency is toward proliferation of leadership and diffusion of power. There is no one Negro leader now -- there are Negro leaders on local levels, regional levels and more or less national levels, springing up every week as the movement becomes larger. I, myself, do not see this as a liability -- I think it is much more of an asset. I think it strengthens the total movement, it creates ferment within the movement -- contention within the movement, its true, but it keeps all of us on our toes.

A. Now, this ferment in the movement, contention within the movement is pulling against the notion of a united front, though, isn't it, in leadership or in policy.

Well, no, I would say that there are two trends -- there is a trend toward proliferation of leadership, and there is also a trend toward greater coordination.

A. Now, these at first glance are contradictory, aren't they?

Yes. But actually I think they are not. You will find that within the past 2 or 3 years, there has been a rash of unity committees or councils on local levels. Almost every major city has

its united civil rights committee, which includes CORE, NAACP, frequently the urban league, etc.. On a national level, we have a number of such groups -- we have the civil rights leadership conference, of which Roy Wilkins is chairman, we have the council ^{united} for civil rights leadership, which includes 6 or 7 of the major civil rights organizations including CORE, with a rotating chairmanship. My time is next -- currently it ~~will~~ ^{would} be ~~XXXX~~ ^{Young} as chairman of the group and I will follow him. We have the March on Washington Committee, which was a unity committee, too, so I think that you find this development running parallel with the perlfiration of leadership.

A. There is another question that is always merging in the discussion of popular debate movements or in revolutions. As leadership is open -- up for grab, you know -- ambitious men have to act ambitious, then, and there is a kind of over-reaching in promises -- promises to the public, or over-reaching in terms of appeals to all sorts of dark motives of violent expression and emotionalisms of various kinds. Now in the newspapers, one can see some of that going on -- enevitable. Now, do you expect any real danger from that, or how is that to be contained -- lets put it that way. -- this human and natural impulse.

Well, I think that this tendency will go on, I don't see any way to avoid it. There will be jockeying for positions of power, jockeying for leadership -- there will be internecine warfares -- this is inevitable because the stakes are so high and the prize is so great, that ambitious men will let their ambition run rampid. I would say, actually, it is not a bad thing to have this bind for

leadership -- the competition in itself tends to be good. The competition is good and it keeps us on our toes; if we go to sleep, then somebody else is going to replace us. We cannot afford to rest, we cannot afford to sleep and we must keep on the alert. I would say in addition, that there is a tendency within the movement now, for verbalism to be substituted for leadership, or to be confused with leadership. One can gain a following, at least temporarily

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See Tape #3