

ROBERT PENN WARREN      VERNON JORDAN      TAPE #2

Mr. WARREN: This is Tape #2 of a conversation with Mr. Vernon Jordan, Atlanta, March 17 - resume.

VJ: Well, I guess as the DePauw story goes, I stayed there four years, - active in everything from being head waiter for two years or two and a half years at Longden Hall, to losing the presidency of the student body by - I don't know - 6 to 10 votes - I was on the Student Senate there for three years - very active in the local fraternity that was acceptable to those who didn't want to be Greeks - those who the Greeks didn't want - a Negro - I was quite active in the Men's Hall Association - I participated in - I worked as an orientation counselor, I won oratorical contests - as a matter of fact, I was the first winner of the Indiana Interstate Oratorical Contest with DePauw since Senator Andrew Beveridge - I always thought quite a bit of that, having these polished orators from DePauw - not from De Pauw but from Wabash College and from Notre Dame - I was quite - it was quite satisfying, and I went on to place third in the Interstate Oratorical Contest at Northwestern in 1955. And I won at DePauw the local Margaret Noble Lee extemporaneous speaking contest in my freshman year, and I generally had the reputation around the campus of being a big man on campus, an orator, I was active in ~~sorority~~ athletics, intra-mural athletics - I played some basketball - I was involved in everything, and in the decision-making aspects of the student-

faculty administration life, having served on the faculty administrative council while there - I did all of this in the background of Negro students who had traditionally come to DePauw, most of whom were Phi Beta Kappa - they were all extremely able students. I was not an able student, I was pretty much the average student, but who had a knack for extracurricular activities - spent a good bit of time in extracurricular activities, and tried to dispel to some extent the notion at DePauw that all of the Negro students were ~~Rich~~ Phi Beta Kappa. I shall never forget the Phi Beta Kappa Chapel in my senior year, when people looked around and the professor called off the names in alphabetical order, when he got to the J's and the name of Vernon Jordan was not called - even some professors who expressed their disappointment that I had not made Phi Beta Kappa. They should not have been disappointed. Rather, they should have been pleased that I had not with my segregated Southern education flunked out of school. My experiences at DePauw were sobering, were enlightening - I guess one of my memorable experiences at DePauw was that as a thesbian, having had the lead role in a play called "Backwater", having made the dramatic honorary Deux-a-deux - that is, a sort of college thesbian - this was another breakthrough in a sense at DePauw, because most people had a stereotyped notion that the Negroes were all - those who came to DePauw were extremely brilliant, they were not at all a part of the campus activity, but were guys who generally studied and got their lessons. I made very excellent friends at DePauw - I went around with a bunch

of guys who were pretty much - much smarter than I, but I always had something to contribute. My parents were quite pleased with DePauw and my stay there. After DePauw of course I left and went because of my interest in civil rights - went to the Howard University Law School, where I received my LL.B. degree in 1960.

RPW: At that point you decided to be active in civil rights questions or to pursue a private career - had you made up your mind on that point at that time?

VJ: Well, I was always torn - first I was torn between the ministry and the law, and I gave up on the ministry a long time ago - feeling myself quite unfit to preach the Gospel, as it were, feeling that my basic interest was people - more specifically Negroes.

RPW: Are you still a believer?

VJ: Oh, I am a believer now. The problem is whether or not I am a practitioner of that which I believe. But - well, I am a practitioner - it left a question - I guess this would depend largely upon who's doing the evaluating. But I did apply to seminary in Drew University, I think, and had some hopes that I would come to seminary - some people in DePauw thought that I should have gone into the ministry, but I did go to law school. And I went to law school out of some sense of mission. I went to the Howard Law School in particular because of its national reputation in civil rights, because of its professor there - Professor Jim Nebert, who initiated the - he's now president of the university - who gave the first course in civil rights and who taught me constitutional law, which is one of the

great privileges of my life. And after law schoool, I had considered staying in Washington in a government job, or going to Indianapolis where I felt that I would have a better opportunity in politics, but I married an Atlanta girl and I wanted to come home, and I came home out of some ~~xxxx~~ sense of mission, feeling that I had come back home, back South, I could do something about the problem.

RPW: Let me ask you a question at this point - what do you think of a person who in your position decides to follow some private mission, some private star, who wants to be a writer, a painter, a lawyer, a doctor - who sets himself off from public profession of the racial cause?

VJ: I think this is very - very well of this, and I think this for the reason that I think that oftentimes Negroes can make a greater contribution by becoming specialists in certain fields, and thereby become respected as an expert on farming, as an expert on some technical field, and I think that oftentimes, because of his expertise in a particular area, that he can draw people as a matter of respect for his knowledge in a particular area, and I think - I spoke once - and I'll never forget it - in Rochdale, Indiana, during the time I was in school, to a men's Presbyterian club, and I said to these men that all of you for the most part are interested in agriculture, and it might be well that~~m~~ rather than ask me to come here as a Negro to talk about and to relate my feelings about race relations, that you need to find a Negro farmer in Indiana who is trained in agriculture, who can really be of more benefit to you in what you are

basically interested in, and come here and talk to you about farming, and I'm not so sure that a Negro going to Rochdale, Indiana, as an expert in farming, would not have been more helpful in having these people to respect a Negro on the basis of something other than his color, that his expertise in the area of farming would have been the criterion, rather than some other superfluous matter such as color or what have you.

RPW: There is a lot of pressure on talented and energetic young Negroes to go into something that involves race relations rather than to follow some preference or personal talent. This is happening all the time. One thing, the pressure is used from white people - what do you make out of this - on the part of the Negro - does this make sense?

VJ: I think this is partly true. I think that the white people, when they see able Negroes, want to direct them into the area of betterment of their race. They think they ought to teach or work -

RPW: Like Mr. Fortuna. - You're back to Mr. Fortuna.

VJ: That's right - that's right. To take this education and become creative and making things better. Now, I'm not sure that I subscribe to this, because, number one, I think that every man must determine his own destiny, and I don't think that anybody can do this for him. If a Negro wants to choose the road of Metropolitan Opera, I think that he should do this unqualifiedly and unrestricted.

RPW: You don't think less of Ralph Ellison, then, for not being an organizer in Mississippi?

VJ: Precisely. Precisely. And I think that Leontine Price, who comes from Mississippi, has done far more for race relations from the stage, of the opera, all over the world, than she could have ever possibly have done as a voter registration worker in Mississippi. There might be persons who would disagree with that. One of the great tragedies comes out of a highly volatile racial change situation where I saw a little girl whom I thought had an excellent voice, an excellent potential, but she chose to demonstrate and to make her witness by really putting her body - offering her body as a sacrifice for freedom. I'm not so sure that that young lady should not have left the black belt county from which she came, and gone on to some person who could have cultivated her voice, and I'm not sure that her singing from the concert stages of the country or the world, that she might not have been able to do more for the cause than by staying where she was, doing - demonstrating and doing things like voter registration.

RPW: A few young Negroes whom I have known have suffered greatly over this point, though.

VJ: Oh, yes. I think that this is a great dilemma, really, for young Negroes who feel a sense of obligation, first to the race or to the cause, and they subjugate this obligation to their own personal desires, and I think that this takes ~~so~~ tremendous courage and fortitude. And I think that to some extent that they are caught up in the tempo of the times, and certainly caught up therein they are not necessarily the best judges of what they are to do. And then

who can say, in any given situation, what any person ought to do. And this becomes really an individual decision, and I'm not sure that these individual decisions are necessarily based on rationale. I think the movement is largely an emotional one, and some ~~black~~ people feel that in order to have a - peace of mind or a sense of obligation that they must forget about their personal ambitions.

RW: Let's take that as a starting point to something else - do you know what DuBoise pointed out many years ago, which is sometimes called the split in the Negro soul or the split in the Negro psyche - that two basic pulls, according to at least this diagnosis for the Negro in America. On the one hand, the pull for whoever the Negro is toward the African tradition - whatever that is, toward the American Negro tradition - that tradition which might be distinguished from the other, toward some sense of black blood, toward some sense of a mere biological continuities - all of these things on this side which lead to an extreme present-day statement to Black Muslim attitudes, as one manifestation of - not the only one, there are many variants - on the other hand, the impulse toward integration with, absorbing in - absorption of the Western European neo-Christian, American democratic world, at the price, perhaps, of total absorption, total loss of identity, of personal identity, of racial identity, of blood identity. Now, these are extreme positions, but for some people - for some Negroes - this tension is very acute and very real and a very real problem. Do you feel this is a problem?

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VJ: Well, let me say that I think that the Negro -

RPW: Let's talk about you - not the Negro - this hypothetical character -

VJ: Well, for me it's not a problem. It's not a problem because I personally can never lose my cultural identity. I still get a great joy and love to hear the Negro spirituals, and I think that during the Revolution the Negro spiritual means more to me now than it ever has, because I think that for example the spiritual "'Tis the Old Ship of Zion - Get On Board" is as applicable now as it was prior to emancipation, because I think that Negro leaders now as the Negro tenor did in slavery, is crying out to Negroes that 'tis the old ship of freedom - and the old ship of Zion was a sort of a symbolism.

RPW: Now, where is the ship of freedom going? Let's put it this way - this is a crying out about leaving something - leaving what? Leaving the Negro condition to move toward freedom. Now, what does the freedom mean? This means the loss of a Negro identity, to merge into a culture and a blood stream which is different - or does it mean something else? The ship of freedom - freedom is now - is a word. What does it mean, in terms of the analysis of feeling?

VJ: Well, I think it means that - I don't think - well, to me it does not mean that you cast off your cultural identity, but it does mean that you take advantage of all of the rights and privileges that are yours as a citizen, that if the buses become desegregated

or if the buses are not desegregated, that you exercise this right, and you exercise this as a matter of right that you have under the Constitution. But this is not to say that upon exercising that right, that while sitting next to the white man on the bus, this does not mean that you need feel any inhibitions about humming to yourself or thinking about the Negro spiritual.

RPW: I don't want to nag this question, but this morning I was talking with Mr. Young. Now, to him this problem is a very acute problem, you see, the question - this cultural - well, spiritual division. He says it's a very acute problem. He says it's so acute that he doesn't have a real way to formulate the problem to himself yet. Now, this is - over and over again this has been - very different response from different people, you see - it's very hard to sort this out - for me to sort it out. To some people it's very, very acute; to some people it is resolved like the bus as you resolve it, you see. Now, I have no moral to this story - this is very acute to some people. Now, Richard Wright, for instance, is divorcing from the Negroes situation in America and divorcing from American civilization, and goes to France and feels Africa is the answer - you will find the great truth in Africa - in identification with Africa. We know what happened there. He was an honest man, he wrote the Disastrous Encounter - which I won't read to you now, but I have it here. But - oh, this is a - Jews will say the same thing. Some Jews will say, well, an acute problem, you see, of a loss of identity if they are absorbed

into total integration with the American Gentile culture. Some feel - who are not Orthodox - feel this; others who feel - move into it. Now, open it - let's say that - one question, do you see a parallel between that situation - which you don't feel very acutely anyway - and the Southerner, who also belongs to a Southern culture, a defensive Southern culture, who is defending the identity over against the great modern industrial finance capitalistic set-up. He's also trying to join it, too, but - also he has a problem there. Do you see a parallel there?

VJ: Yes, but I think that, like myself, that the average white Southerner will retain - although he would take on certain aspects of the capitalistic, the on-going market society - I think he would take on some characteristics to this, and I think he has taken on these characteristics, to survive economically in this country. But I think that he will still maintain his uniqueness as a Southerner - that of courage, that of being a gentleman -

RPW: That's segregation to some people.

VJ: Well, I'm not - he's not going to be able to maintain this -

RPW: He thinks that this is a part of his identity, though.

VJ: I think this is a myth, and I think that -

RPW: He doesn't think so - at this point, now - this is his behavior - he thinks that to be himself he must maintain this system in the same way.

VJ: Well, I think that also that as a national impulse reaches a point that you have to recognize now this black man as a person, as a citizen, as an individual, that as to this, that he will feel some

gentleman-like responsibility, and it will be a matter ultimately of his ability to live up to this gentleman-like stand, and I think to lose this prestige of being a gentleman - to lose that would mean more to him than to lose the segregated system - if I make myself clear.

RPW: Yes, I see what you are driving at.

VJ: What I'm saying is that I think that though he's not going to like it, and though he's going to say let's integrate the school by three rather than by three hundred, that even about the three that he's going to be a gentleman, and try to operate a bad plan in good faith.

RPW: You mean after he's crossed a certain line.

VJ: After he has come so far. And he's going to have to come to a point, I think. But now, back to your point about Negroes being caught up in a crisis, of being completely emerged into the white culture - for me, it's no problem because right here in my own house, when I entertain inter-racial parties, there's no question, I suppose, that these people know that they're in Vernon Jordan's house, and not only is Vernon Jordan a good fellow but somehow it comes out that he's a Negro, he doesn't play the records that he's not accustomed to playing - by that I mean he's not playing Mozart and Beethoven exclusively because he has white guests, but he's playing the Blues by Ray Charles, not because - not to please his guests but because this is a part of him - he likes this.

RPW: I went to a meeting where Dr. King spoke a couple of weeks ago in Bridgeport. The music was - there was some of the white high school girls' choir with guitars played the spirituals. Then they had a - clearly a very accomplished trained and talented Negro singer - a man - singing the most ghastly songs I have ever heard in my life -

VJ: And I suspect that he should have been in the reverse -

RPW: Yes. It was embarrassing, I thought.

VJ: Yes. This is my personal opinion, and I'm not so sure that the Negro would not have been happier singing "Go Down, Moses."

RPW: I wish I were sure - as you seem to be - but I'm not sure and and I don't ~~am~~ know about it -

VJ: No - because I think it largely depends upon who he's trying to please.

RPW: Yes - that's exactly the point. Himself - who's responsible for this - this is ghastly - it's obscene - the language of these songs - this is something unbelievably awful. You couldn't believe how awful it was - it's not playing - it's not Mozart, it's not - it's terrible, terrible - it's sort of Tin Pan Alley gospel freedom - unbelievable - you want to vomit. And this man ~~mixin~~ of talent is singing this stuff to five thousand people.

VJ: And I think that Negroes can never - ought never get away - and I believe this - I believe that even that Negro who is for all practical purposes completely immersed into the white culture, I still believe that though he refrains from giving vent to his appre-

ciation of the rhythm of the Negro spiritual -

RPW: Why should he refrain?

VJ: Well, I think that many do because they're trying to please, but -

RPW: Please whom?

VJ: I'm not sure. But I think that there is a desire to be accepted on a common basis with their white peers. What I'm saying is, I think that even that Negro, who fails to vocalize or to evidence an appreciation, say, for the Negro spiritual - I really think that he's kind of unhappy not really being true to himself. It's just ~~know~~ like the hill-billy who becomes president of the Chase-Manhattan National Bank because he was smart - I think he will always like Hill-billy music - this is not to say that he would not begin to like Bach and Beethoven and what have you, but this is to say that he would never lose appreciation.

RPW: I'm not trying to say - just to make myself clear - that this man, this singer, should not do any music in the world -

VJ: That he would like to do.

RPW: - that he would like to do.

VJ: Yes. And this is not to say that he would do the spiritual better, either.

RPW: No, it's not to say that.

It's a question

of some defect of judgment that entered in here at the wrong level.

VJ: And I really think that ultimately it becomes a personal deci-

sion as to what A or B wants to do. Now, I think that in the revolution there has been a revival by Negroes of an interest in basic African music, which to the Twentieth Century Negro is to some extent foreign, but I think there's an effort now to re-identify the wearing of the hair ~~mmm~~ au naturel, so to speak - there's an effort to re-identify - and I'm not sure that this is not to some extent unrealistic, because oftentimes I think that history proves this - the Negro has to some extent rejected his African brother and his African heritage.

RPW: He had no choice for a long time, did he - the American Negro - he had no possibility of connecting with it, did he?

VJ: That's right.

RPW: He was snatched away from it.

VJ: And he was snatched away from it, and he was taken from his basic modus operandi and he was given this new Messiah called Jesus, he was given this new religion, he was given this completely new way of life, and there was no return to the tribal kind of African existence.

RPW: Well, ~~wasn't~~ there one tribe - there were many tribes in many actual physical types and many psychological types, weren't there?

VJ: I'm sure there were.

RPW: So we don't have a thing called The Africa.

VJ: That's right - that's right.

RPW: There may not be such a thing called The America - you have

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distinct and very competitive and even competitive cultures scattered - very different physical types, scattered over America.

VJ: And I think that the Negro spiritual is a very basic part of American culture - just as much as Stephen Foster. It's a very basic part of it, I think.

RPW: Now, on the question of the African relationship, there are some historians and some sociologists now who say that in the discovery of Africa, the American Negro has a great asset and a great risk. He takes on the burden of the advantage - let's put it that way. It's a double thing. That - This is the end of Tape #2 of conversation with Mr. Vernon Jordan - resume on Tape #3.

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