

Mr. WARREN: This is Tape #3 of interview with Mr. Vernon Jordan, Atlanta, Georgia, March 17th. You were talking about Richard Wright and his disillusion with Africa as belonging to ^{a certain} historical - how was that?

VJ: Yes - well, I think that the bitterness and the rejection that Mr. Wright expresses must be weighed as against the time that it was written. I'm not certain that if Mr. Wright were writing in 1964, that he would have expressed the same sentiments. As you have just indicated, that the generations change as much as five years - five years of a time span can cause great changes. I experienced this myself to some degree. I finished college in 1957 and in 1960 the sit-ins broke out. In 1957 - '55, '56, '57 - I was going forty miles to get my hair cut, and maybe rather than do that I should have done what the sit-inners did in 1960. But -

RPW: And last week in Indiana - or Illinois - I forget which.

VJ: That's right. Now, my problem is - I was of a different generation. Between '57 and '60 things had built up to such an intensity that now you have Negroes demonstrating. I also feel certain that if I had been a student in 1960 - a college student - that I too would have been involved, and I would have been amongst the first group from my particular school.

RPW: Let me ask - interrupt and ask you something - reading the papers the other day I discovered the sit-in demonstrators and other demonstrators - this barber shop somewhere over the Ohio River - were mostly white college students. Would any white

college students in DePauw several years ago have demonstrated on this matter of your hair cut?

VJ: Absolutely not. I think that there were those when I was there who were concerned, who thought it was a pretty terrible idea, but at the time that their hair was long, that they needed a crewcut to go to the dance or to take their favorite girl out, that this was not an issue. The issue was whether or not or how fast I could get a haircut. There was, however, a professor, Dr. Correll, the physics department, who very quietly, without any fanfare had his wife to cut his hair and he cut his boy's hair, and this was in a sense a silent protest against a situation in Green Castle. And he never communicated publicly to the students or to Negroes on the campus.

RPW: Well now what's happened - this was not many years - only six or seven years - what's happened? Now you have hundreds of college students demonstrating in front of a barber shop in some town - Ohio or Indiana - I forget which town it is - about the fact of segregated haircuts. What's happened now -

VJ: Well, I think, number one, the ridiculousness of it has been dramatized.

RPW: How was it dramatized?

VJ: I think that the sit-ins, beginning February 1, 1960, wherein four boys sit in in Greensburg, North Carolina, and for the first time white people begin to think that here are Negroes whose money is green, who pays the same price for a bar of soap in the ten cent

Vernon Jordan - Tape #3 - p. 3

store - ribbon for the little girl's hair, or the comb or what have you. And here they are spending the same amount of money, for the same articles, and merely because of the intensity of the blackness in their skin, they can not sit down to eat a hot dog, rather - I think the ridiculousness of it was dramatized with the beginning of the sit-ins, and if you really think about it, I think that many white people in the South - and certainly in the North - after the sit-ins began to think just how ridiculous it is.

RPW: Well, now, a long time ago in the '80's, a Charleston newspaper - I forget the name of the paper - said the same thing about the possibility of segregation. ^{nonsense} This goes on, this paper said - we'll even have two Bibles to kiss in court or two waiting rooms in railroad stations. This is all very ^{recent,} ~~recent~~ this sort of segregation. It's not an old story - it's a fairly new story - a 75 year old story.

VJ: Well - 'cause I'm not sure - I'm not so sure that the Charleston paper was not right - if things had continued on.

RPW: They couldn't believe it was going to happen - that segregation was going to happen - outburst of segregation - the modern Southern version of segregation - they couldn't believe it was going to happen. This is too preposterous to believe, they said. But it happened in five years -

VJ: And I believe that what has happened since 1960 is some sort of realization of the prophecy of the Charleston paper in the '80's.

Vernon Jordan - Tape #3 - p. 4

RPW: That's right. This is a very funny thing, though, how you have two generations who can condition a whole social system with the minority doing the conditioning. Nobody in the Civil War generation could conceive of modern segregation. Now, they had their vices, but that wasn't one of their vices.

VJ: Well, maybe the real tragedy stems from the Hayes-Tillman Compromise of 1876, when the deal was that the federal troops would withdraw, and here they left, and -

RPW: Well, now, let's go to that - that's an interesting question. What would have been a decent, reasonable, far-reaching reconstruction. Let's assume we start in 1865, and forget Lincoln's death one way or the other - say, just suppose good and wise men had run the reconstruction. What could have been done?

VJ: Well, that's hard to say.

RPW: It's hard to say, but there are some theories about it.

VJ: Well, number one, I guess I must profess some ignorance as to the theories. Certainly - I forget exactly what Lincoln's theory was, but I get the notion that it wasn't quite adequate - and certainly Johnson was a total incompetent to deal with the situation, and -

RPW: Lincoln would have been impeached, probably, within a year.

VJ: That's right. I also think that probably Charles and Thaddeus Stevens are to some extent alienated many of the moderate people by their very radical positions, but I think you have to take note of the fact that their radical positions cul-

Vernon Jordan - Tape #3 - p. 5

minated in the 13th, 14th, and 15th Amendments. I would hesitate to speculate on what the proper course of reconstruction would have been. I'm not certain that the Negroes getting extraordinary positions in government - though incompetent was the answer, certainly -

RPW: Let me read you what Muirdahl said would have been a reasonable though impossible reconstruction policy. One, federal remuneration for all slaves after the war - to pay them for emancipated - to pay the property value as some, you know, price for all emancipated slaves - the Muirdahl theory - that's one. Two, expropriation of plantation lands as far as necessary, but full federal payment for the land to the Southern planter - to the Confederate planter. Three, distribution of land to any who needed it, Negro or white, on a long range mortgage basis - not a gift, but a very long range mortgage basis -

VJ: Kind of an FHA loan -

RPW: Yes - a very indefinite thing, but carried by society - but a payment required, so there's no gift - a payment required - backed by a twenty year mortgage.

VJ: Thirty year mortgage?

R PW: Thirty - I've got a twenty-year - I've been wronged -

VJ: No, you just paid more down, you see.

RPW: Four, supervision of freedmen and property, plus vocational training and other training as, you know - some sort of skill.

Five, national taxation to pay costs - figure that being done. Six,

Vernon Jordan - Tape #3 - p. 6

encouragement of Negroes for migration to the West - this vast amount of free land - federal land - which was being given away to railroads - that was mighty fine land - millions of dollars were taken off that land with some kind of - you know - not just thrown to the Far West, but - you know - build communities - and so forth - you see that line. Just off-hand and emotionally, how would you respond to such a -

VJ: Well, I'll tell you, the first one - that of compensating the slaveholders for their slaves, I think is sort of an indirect sanction to pay them after the emancipation for those persons whom they held enslaved.

RPW: This is one thing - this is one of the several things I'm getting at. Do you feel an immediate moral revulsion, an emotional revulsion to that idea? To this proposes?

VJ: Oh, yes. I think, as you're saying, too, that this was really right but you lost the war but we'll pay you for this. I'm not sure that you can compensate a man for doing something that is legally and morally and by all standards wrong.

RPW: Not legally -

VJ: Well, legally it was not - not legally - you're right. Of course, you've got the Dred Scot decision and what have you. But -

RPW: You have the American Constitution too. Not only the Dred Scot decision.

VJ: Well, you've got grandfather clauses and what have you - the idea of compensating the slave owners - this is one of Lincoln's

Vernon Jordan - Tape #3 - p. 7

theories - that they ought to be compensated, as I remember vaguely. This nauseates me.

RPW: And probably it nauseated the Yankees on several counts - one, money; two - and less importantly - moral revulsion.

VJ: Well, of course, on the other hand, I'm not so sure that money in and of itself would have appeased the Southern plantation owner who was accustomed to services, and serfdom.

RPW: How many plantation owners were there - how many - the figure is very small of people who had over five slaves - we are dealing with a very small size.

VJ: Even so, if we were only dealing with one man, it seems to me that -

RPW: It's morally wrong.

VJ: - it does not justify paying a man for slaves. Because I think now this substantuates Dred Scott, that this man is not -

RPW: Let me ask you another kind of question, then. Suppose, by doing this one might have avoided reconstruction, segregation, and all the difficulties and degradations that have gone on for a hundred years since. Suppose that this - by having a settlement which a learned Sweden~~m~~ proposes - too late - of expropriated land paid for, remuneration for emancipated slaves, and a general educational system as far as literacy and supervised education in terms of land handling and other educations for the Negro and white - all this is one package - and western migration - and

Vernon Jordan - Tape #3 - p. 8

also I should have added, if I were called on, northern migration and training in perhaps industries, you see, to head off some of the European immigrants - exploited very brutally. I think this - trying to protect the immigration from the South. Let's take it as a possibility. Now, does that - would the moral nausea have been too great a price to pay for peace in 1890, and a reasonably integrated society?

VJ: Well, I think that this is purely speculative -

RPW: It's all speculative - I'm talking about your emotions about this rather than anything else.

VJ: I would still have great problems.

RPW: Even if you had peace by 1890 and a reasonable integration, in the South - at least a humane relationship and a public education/^{system} that would work for Negroes and whites - you would still have an emotional problem about accepting this?

VJ: I still have some - the emotional problem stems from the fact that I don't think that to pay for it would have done - reaped the thing that you are talking about by 1890.

RPW: Now listen - this isn't my question, sir - my question is, let's assume that his proposal would have been effective - of course, it wouldn't have been possible to begin with - you can't turn a Thaddeus Stevens loose in the world and have a settlement like this. Or Sumner. So we can say it wasn't possible. But it's not impossible to assume that this was possible - let's assume it had worked. You see, by 1890 or 1900 you'd have had a reasonably

balanced society with some -

VJ: I'd still have a problem with it. I'd still have a problem with it - yes.

RPW: You'd still have an emotional problem there?

VJ: I think so - yes.

RPW: Emotional resistance to it?

VJ: That 's right. I'd like to think about that a little more, but -

RPW: Well, this question I think - you can turn it around in many ways, and the emotional resistance is - would strike many a Yankee the same way - he could reverse propositions like this and find emotional resistances in Mississippi of a parallel order - it's a rational solution of things - do you see what I'm getting at? That is, we all have emotional resistance, whether it's right or wrong, to -

VJ: I think it boils down to really asking the emotional question, is it peace at any price? kind of question.

RPW: What is the price we'd have paid - we being all of us. Let's assume that Muirdahl's program would have worked - we couldn't accept it and it couldn't work - by 1900 we'd have been over the hump. Is that too big a price to pay?

VJ: I guess maybe not, if you operate on the assumption that it's going to work - that's the assumption - but even so, I still have a great deal of problem with that.

RPW: You'd rather have it the way it is now and no compensation

Vernon Jordan - Tape #3 - p. 10

for slaves or expropriated land?

VJ: I expect so.

RPW: You'd rather have it the way it is?

VJ: I expect so, and that's a kind of a of a thing to say.

RPW: Let's be honest.

VJ: I expect so.

R PW: Now, look - let's turn the thing around - if you were to take somebody to Mississippi right now, to pull down the temple, you would do anything to maintain the as purely an emotional attitude - it's totally irrational - to maintain segregation. It's against his interests - he knows that. It's against his interests - it's against his and his moral interests.

He feels the moral yet he is committed to it and some people -

VJ: Why don't you ask me that again - why don't you rephrase it?

RPW: All right. Now, you and I must ~~praise~~ praise you as an honest man - if I give you a chance - and you would rather have the actual settlement as it occurred - the reconstruction - which meant no compensation for the emancipated slaves to the Southern slave owner, with all the troubles that we have had then to now - and tomorrow and the day after tomorrow too - than to have had Muir Dahl's proposal, having it put in practice, with compensation for slavery, compensation for expropriated land and all the other things that we talked about -

Vernon Jordan - Tape #3 - p. 11

but you the compensation - moral nausea.

VJ: This is my great problem - and maybe if I could get over it I would have less problem with it. But as you say, I just have a real problem. Because I think that there is some justification in the compensation for what happened, and I don't think that this can ever be justified on any basis.

RPW: Is the question whether slavery is a moral good the real question here or not? Because slavery is morally indefensible and that's a real question.

VJ: I think that there is no defense for slavery - there's no excuse - there's no reason for it to be.

RPW: I'd like to explain my reason for asking the question.

Several years ago a play of Euripides was playing in a New York theater, and an eminent theater critic wrote, The Greeks are vastly over-rated as playwrights - in fact, they held slaves. What about Greek slavery - let's jump way back - or Egyptian slavery - how do we feel about their slavery - does this make Plato a fraud or Socrates a fake?

VJ: I think their real value to society, in terms of their real value to society - no. But I think that even so, it does not justify slavery in any stage of civilization.

RPW: How could - justification is a strange thing here - what - knocked slavery out? Of course, when we're talking about slavery we're not talking about the slavery of the Negroes - we're talking

Vernon Jordan - Tape #3 - p. 12

about slavery of anybody -

VJ: Yes - well, I think that historically the thing that caused the dissipation of slavery was that it was economically unfeasible.

RPW: What made it economically unfeasible?

VJ; Well, the machines -

RPW: Machines?

VJ: Sure - that's what I was about to get to - here you are, with a bunch of people who, because of their ignorance and their inability to do only that which - they have to do that which they are told - they are robots, in a sense -

RPW: That is, a slave is a human machine -

VJ: Sure - that's right. Now, when you get something that can do what that machine was doing, then the system - and I think that slavery even in America, prior to the invention of the cotton gin for example, had a effect on slavery - certainly - as you were getting -

RPW: If they had just invented a cotton picker instead of the cotton gin -

VJ: Things might have been different - things might be a little different - that's right. And I think that automation, the advances in technology and what have you, make the civil rights crisis extremely crucial at this very point.

RPW: What I am driving at is this - I was horsing around - just how a moral question is always in historical perspective - this

condition by historical perspective - do you see what I'm getting at there? I don't have any bill of goods to sell about this - it's just something that's awfully hard to say the Greeks shouldn't have held slaves - they were bad.

VJ: Well, this is what you get - you talk about justification - this is where you get into -

R PW: Just - I don't know what to say about this - here is the whole problem - historical perspective - let's take something else. If I read you a - this little passage - this is sort of a nasty way of doing things, really - reading you a passage - let's talk about that - but I don't have any other way to gauge such questions - I have some beautiful quotes from Lincoln, as you probably know. I will say that I am not nor ever have been in favor of bringing about in any way the social and political equality of the white and black race. And I won't go on with the rest

An interesting one is given after the Emancipation Proclamation to a group of free Negroes who called on the White House to thank Mr. Lincoln, the president. How does this affect you?

VJ: Well, no more than I believe about Lincoln that Lincoln was not necessarily a great advocate, as was indicated in your statement, of Negro equality and Negro rights. I think that Lincoln primarily acted to save the Union, and this was his real value. Now, to me, as a Negro a hundred years later, I'm not interested in the whys and the wherefores of what Lincoln did, because you see the

Vernon Jordan - Tape #3 - p. 14

only thing that I can see a hundred years later is that Lincoln signed the freedom paper - his name is on it - and in so far as I am concerned this is his only value.

RPW: A symbolic thing and not a personal value, then.

VJ: That's right. He put his name on the paper, and this to me is a great ~~triumph~~ triumph.

RPW: What do you think of Robert E. Lee - let's just sort of throw these things around a little bit - what about Robert E. Lee in this connection?

VJ: Well, I think Robert E. Lee has a reputation, and as I think about him, of being a Southern gentleman. He took the feet -

RPW: He was an emancipationist. He had slaves and he emancipated them very soon because he didn't think it was - he thought slavery was an evil.

VJ: By the same token, ~~his loyalty~~ he was loyal to his native Virginia.

RPW: His loyalty to what - now here's a good - his loyalty to what? What is the nature of this loyalty? He's a thorough emancipationist - he slavery - much more than Lincoln did - he horsed around for years and years about it - Lee just said it cost me money but - I can't participate in this.

Grant held slaves until after the Civil War.

VJ: Yes - I'm not sure that Lee could have fought against the people from the South, even though - what I am trying to say is that the cause of the South for Lee might have been greater than

Vernon Jordan - Tape #3 - p. 15

the cause of Lee. I just don't know, I just see Robert E. Lee as he's depicted pretty much in the Southern high school history books

-

RPW: Let's forget those.

VJ: Well - the only significance that I can attach to Lee is that after defeat he was a gentleman, and as you indicated he was an emancipationist and he freed the slaves - he did this kind of thing.

RPW: What was he loyal to - can we - I doubt that anybody knows necessarily, but what was he being loyal to - and how would you evaluate this loyalty?

VJ: Well, I think it 's really kind of a regional loyalty - that the South was more important to him than the Union, and maybe for some reason or other he did not see slavery as the key issue in the Civil War, as Lincoln did. And this is not to say that I know what he envisioned as the key issue, but if you move from the premise that it was - that he, you know, did not believe in slavery, then he saw something more important in the Civil War. He felt that - maybe it was economic where the South was concerned, or something like that. I'm just not certain.

RPW: I don't know that anybody is certain. I guess my point behind all this is that the world has changed very decisively, hasn't it. Issues seem clearer to us now than they did. It's time we judged the past in terms of our present vision of issues.

Vernon Jordan - Tape #3 - p. 16

VJ: Well, I think now the - I think that the past must look at Lee acting in 1965 -

RPW: What would he do now - in 1965?

VJ: I suspect that Lee in 1964 would be a Terry Sanford of North Carolina.

RPW: Do you think so?

VJ: Yes.

RPW: I think he would probably belong to the Southern Regional Council.

VJ: That's right. And I think that this largely depends on whether Lee was a politician -

RPW: a politician

VJ: - or whether or not he was a successful lawyer, as a part of a big firm, or a successful businessman. But I think that you are absolutely right, that Lee very probably would have been on the board or the executive committee of the Southern Regional Council. Had he lived - assuming that he was living now - but I think that you have to look at Lee in his time.

RPW: It's a very hard thing to do imaginatively, isn't it, without reading these things and making them sort of labels for our time, projected backward, and then - the reason I'm hammering at this is - in a rather unpleasant way, I guess, is because these things seem to have some reference to the way we behave now. - This is the end of Tape #3 of conversation with Vernon Jordan - see Tape #4.