

ROBERT PENN WARREN - REV. J.M. LAWSON 3/17/64 Tape 3

Warren: This is tape 3 with J. M. Lawson, continued.

When I heard Dr. King in Bridgeport last week, he put great emphasis on the philosophy of personal responsibility of the negro to do whatever his job was well, you see. He said, "Streetsweeper, be a streetsweeper and you will abide with the angels", this line. This, as far as I know, is relatively new in his treatment of these matters, isn't it?

Lawson: No, actually it's not.

Warren: Well, I'd like to - it's not - isn't it part of his whole - all the way through - on previous occasions it hadn't appeared. On previous occasions I'd heard him speak.

Lawson: Yes, right. Well, now, he has generally emphasized this line in his college speaking.

Warren: I haven't heard that.

Lawson: Yes, right - because in going to colleges and universities this has been the line that he has taken - of the need for the Negro to press forward - to see to it that he was qualified, to have the motive to do the best job possible, to seize the opportunities of the new day that was approaching.

Warren: And, to seek competition.

Lawson; Right.

Warren: Rather than to avoid competition. The reason I'm asking this particular question is this: the old split between the Niagra movement and the N. A. A. C. P. in its early days, and

the whole tradition of Tuskegee, where's it's a question of self-improvement and to do the <sup>job</sup> well, as opposed to an aggressive action towards civil rights and surrounding matters. Now, there's still, as far as I can make out, some real resistance to even mentioning, say, do the job well. I could say it to certain Negroes - as a white man saying it - this is taken as an insult. And I ask as a question, you see, as a question. Of course, if it's being said by a Dr. King, that's a little different - they're bound to feel different, but still from some Negroes, it's still taken by other Negroes as an affront. As far as I can make out - this is reported to me as such. This split of between say, on one hand, the activism and the Civil Rights approach and the question of personal career, personal achievement - that split - how real is that in terms of feeling, or resentments, or philosophy?

Lawson: Now, I resented this coming from those Negroes who are motivated primarily to see this as an alternative to the need for action, and this may be where the antagonism occurs. I know there are a lot of us, as an example, who resent certain educators who are always emphasizing this, but they emphasize it as being the way that contradicts <sup>the</sup> merging non-violence approach, whereas we in the non-violent approach are not trying to, you know, to therefore fill out the need for our being able to participate and compete in a total economy. But, what we're saying

is that instead, that no matter how well qualified we are, we've got to change the attitude and the structures of our society in order to permit this moving in competition into an open society.

Warren: That is, you accept that there's no such thing as a mystique, or magic of Civil Rights, or anything else. Is that it?

Lawson: Right.

Warren: That responsibility increases, and doesn't decrease.

Lawson: Exactly, and therefore, for example, we know from both practical experience and from our overall concern that there are far too many opportunities now that are available that the educational pattern have not prepared Negro young people - say, we've had this comment - time after time here in certain situations here in Memphis. Now, still these principles, and just recently they did this, throw back at us, well, we've got to encourage a student to make the best - well, they're not making the best of themselves now. I mean, and the school is not helping them to. I get students all the time for counseling, who tell me they have been advised in the school system to move down one channel because the doors are closed to them in the channel in which they are interested in. Well, that kind of thinking has got to be eliminated.

Warren: Have you read the controversy between Irving Howe and Ralph Ellison? It involves something of this - Irving Howe

in Descent last Fall and two long articles by Ralph Ellison in the New Leader, the last one being February 4.

Lawson: No, I've not seen those.

Warren: It's on the same general point. Ralph takes it's being attacked, whatever cult, he's not on picket lines - he's writing novels, as a trailer therefore it's not like Richard Wright, not like, you see, others. And it revolves around the question of the personal role, the personal vocation. And, it's a very eloquent piece by Ralph - or piece - wonderful piece of - he finally says as an aside that Irving Howe is like Bilbo. He's trying to put him in his place, but he, Irving Howe, has already assigned him to his place. Do you think that enough thought has been given to the actual vision of what society would be, given we pass the civil Rights bill, given the mechanics tidied up? What vision do you have of that as a society, if you have accomplished the mechanisms, you see, of civil Rights and a few things like that. Obvious legal matters. What remains to be done? What kind of vision beyond that could be dealt with?

Lawson: Well, in the first instance - we have not given enough time to defining what it is that we want, and then dispell this definition out in terms of the actual kinds of program that are possible to achieve it. I think that most of us in - particularly in the merging non-violent movement, recognize this failure. It's

not a failure of lack of interest, rather, - as much as it is, rather a failure in the - in time, too involved at this moment in the growth of the movement to really get involved in the kind, some of the study that is necessary to working out this vision. Now, even if, though, we get the machinery that is necessary, most of us have another stage in terms of the non-violent approach, and that's the stage that we call the follow-up. It will be necessary, then, for many groups and for many of us even in the movement, in the non-violent movement itself, to program follow-up - to make certain then that the machinery gets into high gear and then, that some of the problems that <sup>will</sup> come as that machinery gets to operating, that some of these problems are going to be met openly. Now, we are already talking about what can be done to make certain that once the Civil Rights bill has been passed, that that is going to be carried out. In fact, this weekend, there was a fair amount of conversation on follow-up campaigns, to the Civil Rights bill.

Warren: That's implementation.

Lawson: Implementation, yes.

Warren: I'm thinking beyond implementation. I'm assuming that it can be enforced, you know, by all legal - what about your attitude toward quote "the white liberal" - close quote. This is involved somehow in that long-range question - has the

white man more or less good will, you know.

Lawson: Right. Well, I would think it's all according to what happens to the liberal over the next decade. We've gotten into many situations in which some of us feel, at least, that the white liberal simply has not kept up with the times - the moral imperatives of the times.

Warren: In what sense, now?

Lawson: Well, a - just - a quick - a good example of this is the Chancellor of Vanderbilt University has long been known as a fine moderate, and not only that, he certainly has done a major job -

Warren: Blanscom

Lawson: Blanscom - at the point of Vanderbilt University, in terms of seeing to it that it would become a top-notch university, and working in this direction he was known as a liberal and not a - but - he was a liberal in a sense - on his own terms. And, the coming in of the non-violent movement, in spite of the warning from Montgomery and Martin Luther King, back in 1955, you see, left him way behind.

Warren: What about something else. Not say, failures like that, of the white man, who happens to be, say, a retarded liberal, but the notion that it shouldn't be a white man's job at all to mix into these things, you see; the repudiation of the liberal, which is widespread, you know. It can be everything from the

attacks on Jack Greenberg to the attacks - we want no white man to mix into this.

Lawson: Well, this is why - this is widespread.

Warren: Heavy documentation on this, of course.

Lawson: This is widespread, primarily among northern negro, let's say, radical elements, using the term radical in the sense of being further away from, say, an N. A. A. C. P. position, or the non-violent movement. Those of us in the non-violent movement recognize that in order to achieve the kind of society we want, we must have allies - the negro is only ten per cent of America. We have got to have people from labor, we've got to have people from the political structures of America and we've got to have people from all categories of life - from the churches, who are going to want to have an America that means a larger, purer kind of Democratic society. This cannot be done by the negro - we all have to do it together. And, so, those of us in the non-violent movement repudiate any effort to say that the white liberal, and the white man, has no role to play. On the contrary, many of us work assiduously in order to help white people assume their rightful role and assume the kind of role they can play better than anyone else can play in many instances.

Warren: There's another question - leave this matter for the future. We know the old problem, mentioned as far as I know first by DuBoise and many times since, of the split in the negro

psyche. On the one hand the pull toward a negro tradition, a Negro culture, a negro world - the black Mistique - all of this. On the other hand, the pull toward a complete integration with the Western European cultural history and the Judaic-Christian philosophy and religion. Now, of course, to some people this is not a problem, but to some people it is a problem. How do you react to that question - do you feel it's a real question, a real option? A real split?

Lawson: Well, I think it's a real question and very clearly, well documented from the whole - from the effort of sociology over the last fifty, seventy-five years in the United States. Now, the point is, though, whether or not, it is an issue that gains emphasis primarily because of our American society at large being a rejecting society and a hostile society towards the negro.

Warren: You mean if segregation were formally abolished and civil rights literally enforced, this issue would cease to be an issue in the sense it is now an issue - is that it?

Lawson: It would cease to be an issue as it now is. It would still be an issue in the sense that you will - there will be still a need to continue to work on it, but what I mean is that once the invitation is extended to the Negro that you are an American - be an American - then you'll find that with all these happenings, you see, that this is much less of a problem for the Negro - in one



respect, in fact, you can say that there has been no dualism in the negro at certain points. For an example - in terms of loyalty to the United States, there has been no dualism. In terms of the idea - the idea that we have maintained ourselves that we are Americans and know nothing else about America, there's been no dualism. And, this is one reason why your black nationalism groups have never had any, you know, large sway or meaning in the United States, simply because the negro<sup>in America</sup> has felt himself to be an American - and has had a basic loyalty to our country. But the dual - the second culture, or the sub-culture that he has developed has been primarily because the major culture has constantly sought to reject him, or keep him away from it.

Warren: I've heard one white man say this - a man who is sincere and honest and decent. He said, "I feel now, after certain reading and certain contacts that I am rejected in my efforts to be honest, rejected by a large segment of even negroes he does not know, you see, and drawn back about this. I'm - I'm not going to try to please any more - I'm going to try to be on my conscience. Of course, how can you please ten different people at -? Of course, what he's - he's speaking for a segment, a white segment he's speaking for?"

Lawson: Um, hum. I have noticed among some of my own friends and in traveling, a growing frustration among white people at this

point. Now, I think that a part of this is, of course, because the negro is increasingly losing his pretension about himself and about the problem he faces.

Warren: What kind of pretension?

Lawson: Well, for far too long - the best example of this would be - the meeting I just came from was a meeting on school drop-outs and it's gone on since 9:30 this morning. There is at least one negro sociologist in the group of the major panel, and yet all morning long we've talked about the school drop-out program, without the whole question of the relationship of this to segregation and/or the relationship of this to the negro in this whole problem. This was not mentioned this morning at all. Now, some of us in Memphis recognize that we've had a lot of inter-racial contacts going on in Memphis, but without the negro speaking the truth in love - about the serious way that he feels personally, and also in the way he feels about the need for a changing city. Now, this point - increasingly negroes, however, are losing this pretension and he's beginning more and more present it, so that you can say that for the first time there are larger liberals who are hearing the real thoughts of Negroes. Now, I happen to think this -

Warren: That's wonderful. That's part of it clearly. That's clearly part of it.

Lawson: Yes, I think this is wonderful in the sense that there's

a need for us to be honest, before we come to the place of genuine understanding, so that I think that this frustration in part comes out of the changing form of communication that is going on. The changing form - which, of course, I relish and glory in because I think it's necessary. So that - I, now, the only other thing that needs to be said is that the white liberal has in the past been able to give the mainline leadership for the Civil Rights movement - I mean the whole pattern of legal - using the ordinary procedures of our society, comes from of course, in a sense, the middle class idea that we've got a problem - <sup>we go</sup> to the channels where the problem can be solved. Now, we're being confronted with a thesis that says that these channels cannot really be challenged from within. They have to be challenged from without. In other words, -

Warren: An anomaly of the extra-legalistic approach.

Lawson: Yes, right. The non-violent approach, which says, just for an example, the issue is not a legal issue. It's a moral issue, therefore it has to be faced on moral ground. Well, this means then, that the discussions of, you know, prior to ten years ago, are taking on another dimension which we've not been used to having in our discussion. And this, undoubtedly, is causing frustration. Now, may I point this out though - that's - it's not simply causing frustration among white liberals. It's causing tremendous frustrations among

Negro liberal - liberals - or negro Civil Rights leaders. In other words, that this crisis that we find ourselves in, is a crisis of leadership, a crisis of the past way in which we have conducted this whole problem. It is a judgment of the ways in which negro leaders and white leaders <sup>have</sup> acted together. It is also -

Warren: Is it also a desert on the fact of a lack of political leadership for Negroes - a contempt of political leadership itself - some backlash from that?

Lawson: If this is true, in the sense that - and an example, Chicago, political leadership for the Negro was selected by the white political machinery -

Warren: It was non-functional.

Lawson: Yes. It was not leadership that grew out of the vote, let us say, out of the will of the Negro people. I think you see this crisis very clearly in the Chicago scene.

Warren: Yes, you could say that.

Lawson: It's all over the place, in fact, right now. Where the political leadership of the Negro is that belonging to the machinery.

Warren: Stop, stop, stop. This is the end of tape -

This is the end of the interview with Reverend J. M. Lawson.  
no more on this tape.