

ROBERT PENN WARREN CARL ROWAN MAY 14 TAPE # 1

RPW: This a conversation with Mr. Carl Rowan, May 14. The other day, Mr. Rowan, I was talking with Adam Clayton Powell. He said that the old-line leaders - organization leaders like NAACP, CORE, and the rest are dead - they're finished - their role is over. How does that strike you?

Mr. Rowan: I don't think this is true at all. I think this is an overstatement of the sort of which we have too many today. In our kind of society, where every man's rights, whether he be white, Negro, green or what, are based certainly on some fundamental principles of law, there always will have to be an organization whose role is to look out for the legal end of man's civil rights. Now, let's take for example the white man in this country. He has been for a long time where the Negro is trying to go. Even under those circumstances he had to have an American Civil Liberties Union. He's had to have a great many other organizations designed to protect those rights guaranteed under our Bill of Rights. And I think that there will be a very important role for the NAACP to play for a long time. Now, let's carry it beyond that. Another old-line organization, I suppose, would be called the Urban League. There is not enough street demonstrations that you can arrange that will take over one of the functions that the NAACP has played over the years and continues to play, and that is to help many a Negro get over this transition of moving from a rural area to a city, and moving into the industry in a position where he can more or less work on his own and with some degree of

self-assurance. The fact is that just too much has to be done for the Negro in this area for anybody to assume that the Urban League has lost its usefulness.

RPW: Do you see the point - another point that he insists on in conversation, that there are two revolutions or two movements going on simultaneously. The southern one is primarily middle-upper class - a civil rights movement, primarily, and for votes. The other being a mass movement in the north - in the big urban centers in the north. It's quite a different order, and it's not ^{wh} related to civil rights but it's economic opportunity. And it is charged by another kind of frustration entirely - two different kinds of movements, one is a mass movement, the northern one, and the other a middle class, upper class Negro movement. Is there a distinction?

CR: Well, I find it very difficult to make any real distinction between the two movements. I think they both flow out of a very, very deep and growing feeling of resentment about second class citizenship, however it's manifested. Whether or not it's the indignity of an individual walking into a registration place in Mississippi and being given some long ridiculous test and then denied the right to vote on the grounds that he's not qualified, or walking into a real estate office in a suburb of New York or Minnesota and being given the runaround and told he can't buy a house. These are all indignities that flow out of these passions over race, and these stupidities that exist in this field of race. And I find it very difficult to make any distinction as between the movement in the south and the movement in the north,

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and indeed I find it difficult to draw any great lines as between the class of Negroes who are interested in the movement in one place or another.

RPW: That is, you feel that the old notion that the split between the mass of Negroes and the middle-upper class - it no longer holds, or it no longer holds to the same degree?

CR: Oh, I don't want to pretend that there aren't some differences between the mass the so-called upper class of Negroes. These differences do exist. There would be a difference in approach, for example. You would probably find more of the so-called lower class Negroes participating in the street demonstrations. For example, there would simply be a lot more Negroes in the upper classes who have less time and less opportunity to be out there - teachers and doctors and lawyers and government officials have some commitments that don't leave them all the time that some other categories may have for getting in the streets and protesting.

RPW: May I interrupt now to see how we're doing on the tape? Let's cut over to article of some months ago in Commentary - did you happen to read that?

CR: No, I didn't - no.

RPW: Well, his point - his basic point is this, that there's no solution to the problem of race except assimilation.

CR: Well, I certainly would not be in this country, and I don't think there's any solution except as a large number of American whites are carried along in the conviction that assimilation -

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RPW: He means blood assimilation.

CR: Oh, I -

RPW: Not cultural assimilation but blood assimilation.

CR: This may - if you carry this business of prejudice to its ultimate conclusion, obviously you can reach that conclusion. But I just happen to think that it is possible to create a bi-racial or a multi-racial society in which there is genuine equality of opportunity and mutuality of respect. And if you don't believe that, then you've got to believe that this world of ours is heading toward one of the ugliest explosions on this business of race that it - that man has ever known. I just don't believe man is so much an animal, and so addicted to his ignorances at this stage of civilization that he can't find some accommodations for what looks a little bit different from what he is.

RPW: How would you state the way the class economic problem on one side and the race problem on the other intersect in our present situation? How would you state that relationship?

CR: Well, they do intersect in a great many ways. You find, for example, that much of the racial problem in a great many areas has a large degree of economic base, that is, the conflict over jobs so you get conflict between, let's say, the lower classes of whites and the lower classes of Negroes on the one hand. You get a degree of disinterest on the part of the Negro upper class as against the Negro lower class, and this can become unfortunate. You get a degree of snobbery on the part of the white upper class which likes to base its disinterest or its disinclination to move with any boldness, on the

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imperfections it sees within the Negro lower class. For example, you get a white middle class or upper class individual who will look at a Negro living under conditions of squalor and come to sometimes the stated conclusion but more often the unstated conclusion that somehow this Negro must want to live this way, otherwise why would he be living there, and that since he is there and apparently wants it, this justifies the system that produced it.

R PW: In _____ new book, "The Crisis in Black and White," he makes a good deal of a distinction. The Negro, he says, interprets a situation almost purely as race - almost purely as a matter of race. The white man tends to emphasize the other aspects of it. The Negro sees elements - frequently sees elements that are economic or have other social aspects, as merely a matter of race.

CR: Well, I think - this is one of those over-generalizations where you would have to say which Negro. I would say that the majority of Negroes would be inclined to see - let's say, discrimination in employment, mostly as a matter of race. Whereas certainly anyone who has served in government, for example, in the kind of jobs I've had the last three years - begins to talk about what we call the circle of gossip. We see that the good jobs are passed out because of their circle of gossip. A man in an important position goes to a cocktail party with other men in important positions and he mentions, I need so-and-so to fill a really important job. And maybe at that cocktail party somebody mentions to him somebody who can fill that job. Well, if there's nobody at that cocktail party who knows any Negroes or who

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knows any well enough to feel that he can recommend them for that job, the Negro doesn't have a ghost of a chance of getting that job. Now, this is a social factor that's involved in discrimination. And one of the things I've pointed out is that Negroes have to break through this circle of gossip and get some people inside the circle who know some Negroes and who have become accustomed to recognizing Negroes for good jobs, and until this happens the Negro is going to be discriminated against in employment for a considerable amount of time. Now, there may be other social factors, many other economic factors that go into this thing, and they lead to what you can call discrimination by individuals who don't have the remotest thought that they're discriminating in any racial way.

RPW: ~~Relating to that, there is a notion we encounter sometimes that the successful Negro - any form of success tends to be - the form is under suspicion from the unsuccessful Negro, from the masses, from the lower classes. They feel immediately there's been some possibility of a sellout loss of continuity. Now, much is made of this by a good many Negro writers and a good many white sociologists too. But the suspicion is there. Do you feel this?~~

CR: Oh, there's no doubt about it. The suspicion exists beyond any doubt. Now, let me say that there's nothing unique about this, in so far as Negroes are concerned. I was talking with my predecessor, Ed Murrow, yesterday, and I talked to my other colleagues who were formerly newspaper men. We find, for example, that when a newspaper man moves into government there is an absolute rising of suspicion among

newspapermen that somehow or the other there must have been some degree of sellout, some degree of compromise of principle involved here. The same thing exists in the Negro community. Now, one of the problems in the Negro community is that the demagogues - and it should be clear that there are demagogues who are interested in self-glorification among Negroes too - they tend to use this argument against anybody who happens to disagree with them or their particular tactic. It's common, for example, on the part of the demagogues, that if a Negro says - a Negro leader or somebody in a position of prominence says this is wrong, it should not be done this way, the quickest way to shut him up is to call him an Uncle Tom. And it's a rather contemptible tactic, but fortunately we've got more Negroes of success who feel themselves in positions that are secure enough that they don't feel they have to run with the demagogues, and I think when we have more of them we'll find that the Negro as a whole is better off.

RPW: That is, you think that - if I read you aright - hear you aright - that people are in peripheral situations outside of formal leadership - that they do a great service to change the image of the Negro in the public mind. Is that the idea. Just the fact that their image of men of power and competence and success is a value in itself?

CR: Oh, absolutely. Now, as I pointed out - I forget with whom I was talking in Finland - oh, I guess it was a Time Magazine reporter - I pointed out to him that every Negro in a position of responsibility who does his job well, or especially one who does his job excellently,

is aiding immeasurably in the civil rights struggle because he is carrying along with him a segment of public opinion in this country - of white public opinion. Now, one of the things that distresses me about some of these people who style themselves as the new militants who are replacing the NAACP and the Urban League and so forth, is that they would have you believe that somehow or the other by their militancy alone they can force a solution to this business. Well, it just isn't feasible in a society where the Negro represents a ten percent minority.

RPW: That is, you assume that a solution can only come by some cooperation with a white society and not by mere militancy isolated from other elements?

CR: That's right. Well, for example, I think you have to have many approaches. First of all, you've got to work on the white man's conscience, and that's what urban leagues and NAACP's were doing all these years when they tried to arouse the conscience of the church people of the nation. You've got to work on the white man's concern about his economic posture and you've got - that is, you make him understand how much it's taking out of his pocketbook to pursue these policies of discrimination. You've got to work on the American concerned about this country's position in the world, and that's why there's been all this talk about the role of race in international affairs, and you've got to work on the public opinion media in this country, and move them over to a position of greater concern and greater militancy. All this has to go along with the street demonstrations or the

street demonstrations produce nothing but rancor and violence and blood shed and bitterness. But not very much in the way of progress that's beneficial either to the Negro or the white man.

RPW: You get people like Lauren Miller saying that the liberal is over - goodbye white liberal, you see, in quotes - or James Baldwin saying that the white liberal is an affliction and cannot be endured longer, and Adam Clayton Powell saying there's no place for him except to take orders - that whole line is very very strongly marked - quite different types of Negroes - not just one type.

CR: Well, they would be one type generally in the sense that they are afflicted with a great deal more frustration and a great deal more bitterness in some cases than would be so among another group that would certainly call itself Negro leadership.

RPW: Is this element in it true, that the Negro movement or Negro revolution or whatever we choose to call it, is the first time that there has been massive self determination among Negroes - it is necessary then for the Negroes to control their own - quotes - movement - whatever this is, you see.

CR: Yes, well, now let me say that in saying what I've just said I don't want to indicate that I believe it's wrong to say that the Negro should speak for himself, because I do. I don't particularly relish the fact, for example, that in our Senate today, trying to decide what will be the rights of twenty million American Negroes, a hundred white men are making all the decisions. I don't think that's good for the Negro, and I don't think ~~it's~~ good for this country. I do believe, for

example, that the recent militancy has caused the Negro to have a new realization of the possibility of making decisions that decide your own fate. But I don't think that's the most important thing about the militancy at all, and in saying that I want to make it clear that I have supported the sit-ins and the various other demonstrations. I think the important thing is that they serve to raise to the surface what has been a latent sense of decency on the part of this white ninety percent majority in the United States. I think that the peaceful demonstrations which were completely in keeping with the First Amendment to the Constitution, did serve to create a broader white understanding of the need for this nation to move and to move urgently to give the Negro some redress of the just grievances that he's had for all these years. But I think all this talk about Negroes wiping white people out of the picture is a great deal of sound and fury that some people are using to impress themselves as to their own importance, and it doesn't really have a great deal of bearing on what's going to happen in this country.

RPW: What about the argument that the Negro has had a very defective conception of himself, you know - he didn't have basically a strong ego, that he had been maimed by his experience on this continent, and that now for the first time he has a vision of himself which is different?

CR: Well, I must say that there is plenty of validity to that point because the whole system for lo these many years has been to crush the Negroes' pride, to crush his self-respect and make him believe that he

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was an inferior, to make him believe that this was the only lot in American life to which he was entitled, and moving away from that kind of brainwashing is a tremendously difficult process. But, the thing is that some people would have you believe that this so-called angry speech that somebody might give, or an angry article that somebody might write, or that violence in the street has pulled the Negro's ego and self-respect back up to where it ought to be, and I would maintain that this is an exercise in self-deception, that this may begin to move the Negro in the other direction, but that nothing is going to move that ego and that self-respect up to where it ought to be, until the Negro gets all the other things that make it possible for him to live with self assurance that he can compete with the American white man and that he can live beside him and make the best of whatever equality of opportunity that exists. Now, in this sense I am saying that a Negro youngster out on that street participating in a demonstration who is not doing anything in his school work and who knows it, who is gaining nothing in the way of a cultural background and who knows it, is going to go home that night and know that he is still just as much an outcast from American society as he was before he went out on that street and expressed his anger and his fire and his unhappiness over the situation. So the point I try to make in my speeches - and heaven knows, when people are talking militancy and even some are talking violence, you aren't necessarily the most popular man in the world when you say, all right, go on out and participate in that sit-in, but when you get through go home and do your

homework, because you can ram open the door to the table where the white man is feasting, but if you go in and sit down at that table and you are uncertain as to which fork to pick up, you're still going to feel like a man who's on the outside.

RPW: There is a very violent reaction against Dr. King's position, of course. Let me read you a passage from Dr. Kenneth Clark on this. You probably know the passage.

CR: Yes, I know - I know Dr. Clark quite well.

RPW: On the surface, King's philosophy appears to reflect health and stability, while Black Nationalism betrays pathology and instability. A deeper analysis, however, might reveal that there is also an unrealistic if not pathological basis in King's doctrine. The natural reactions to injustice and oppression are bitterness and resentment. The form which such bitterness takes need not be overtly violent but the corrosion of the spirit is inevitable. It would seem, therefore, that any demand that victims of oppression be required to love those who oppress them places an additional and intolerable burden upon these victims. That's a lot to hear at one time I know.

CR: Yes, well, let me say this - I would be inclined to agree with what Kenneth Clark says. I think that to ask the victims of oppression to love their oppressors may have some merit only from a propaganda point of view, from the point of view of affecting American public opinion. But I think that in terms of the reaction of the American Negro, that it's really wishful thinking to assume that for any - that in any really meaningful sense the Negro is going to love his oppressor.

I don't know of any group of people in human history who ever really loved their oppressors, and I don't think the Negro is such a super human that he's going to be able to do it either.

RPW: Well, Dr. King and others who have seen him in operation, say, in Birmingham and a few other places, bear witness to a real change of temper in certain moments of crisis under his -

CR: Well now let me say this, because of one man's personality, or because of one man's ability as an orator to appeal to the people he's leading, he may indeed be able to prevent them from resorting to violence under the greatest provocation at a given time. But this does not mean that he has induced those people to love their oppressors. They may be filled - their hearts may be filled with bitterness and the utmost of contempt, but at the same time under the spell of leadership of this particular man they may simply have been induced not to let this contempt manifest itself in overt physical aggression.

RPW: As you see the nonviolence primarily as tactical then, is that right? And precautionary?

CR: Well, I think that its validity would be more tactical than real in any spiritual sense of the word.

RPW: Taking the whole Negro movement now - it's called a revolution. Is that word properly applied - revolution - properly applied. In what sense can we say it 's a revolution?

CR: Well, I think it is a revolution in that it is a rapid and dramatic change in the Negro's outlook upon the means he wants to apply in moving toward the status of a first class human being. But actually, what the

Chinese to Negro
Negro to Protestants
Negro to Negro

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American Negro is doing today is, as I see it, a part of a much broader thing that's happening the world today. I regard it as part of a whole worldwide movement against colonialism and against racism. I think these things play on each other, and that what's happening in Asia and Africa the last few years has had a very definite effect on what the Negro masses are doing in this particular country.

RPW: Would you relate that in itself to something even broader, a conception of the individual which was not functional in the world before - oh, the last hundred and fifty years.

CR: Oh, yes, very definitely, and I would say - I would relate it also to some of the lessons man has learned in the 1930's, particularly during World War II, and lessons he's been more willing to face as a result of the threat of atomic extinction.

RPW: In all revolutionary situations of history tells us about, there is a drive for centralization of leadership - various leaders have knocked off along the way - you move toward the central leadership - usually toward one man. Have you seen any tendency of that sort in the Negro movement the last, say, seven or eight years?

CR: Oh, I've seen signs of one man increasing his prestige and his role as a leader, yes, but I don't think that in terms of the Negro civil rights movement we have moved anywhere close to a position where you could say there is a single leader, and I don't think there will be in the foreseeable future.

RPW: There clearly isn't one now. It's a question of what the tendency is.

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CR: Oh, I don't see any real tendency in this direction.

RPW: There is always the process of overreaching in promises and overreaching in appeals in any situation like this, and how much of this overreaching process in the bid for power or the bid to define policy?

CR: Well, I would say that there is a very definite element of overreaching on the part of some of the leaders of the really more militant groups of Negroes, particularly young groups. When a leader, and particularly some who ought to know better, would lead these groups to believe that by militancy alone they're going to reach the Negro's goals, then I call this overreaching, and overreaching in a very sad way because it can only lead to further frustration and bitterness on the part of people who already have a great deal.

RPW: Do you see, given the general idea of nonviolent demonstration, given that in general, but under that head a distinction between illegitimate and legitimate demonstrations?

CR: Oh, I do, indeed.

RPW: How would you approach that question?

CR: Well, now, let me - I probably ought to read for you a section of a speech I gave before the American Civil Liberties Union just last week.

RPW: Do you have a copy of it?

CR: Yes, I do, and I'll be happy to -

RPW: Well, if I can get that, then, we won't take the time to read it now on the tape - we'll just put that on the record and I'll go at it - .

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Would you have classified, given your distinction -

CR: That's all right. Go right ahead. This is Mr. Savage, our director -

RPW: Oh, yes, you called my house this morning. How do you do?

CR: And a copy of my speech before the American Civil Liberties Union.

RPW: End of Tape #1 of a conversation with Mr. Rowan. Proceed to Tape #2.

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