

ROBERT PENN WARREN    CARL ROWAN    TAPE #2

RPW: This is Tape #2 of a conversation with Mr. Carl Rowan - continue. You know the notion first put forth, I guess, by duBoise - appearing in many forms since - of the split in the psyche of the American Negro - on one hand the pull toward the African tradition, or even toward the American Negro tradition, toward some mystique of blood and culture; on the other hand, the pull toward identification with the Judeo-Christian tradition, the Western European tradition. First, do you feel this - any such division of impulse?

CR: Yes, I see many manifestations of this dichotomy, really, of the Negro's thinking, and -

RPW: Do you feel it yourself?

CR: Oh, I don't think I particularly feel it myself, because I made the intellectual conviction a long time ago that as an American and as one who believes color to be of incidental importance, I'm going to put my stake on first-class citizenship in this country as an American and enjoying all the rights that pertain to Americans. But I have had many acquaintances, for example - well, I've run into a Negro who would say, I want - who would, for example, complain about racial discrimination and then turn around and criticize another Negro for moving into a white neighborhood on the grounds that that Negro was showing a lack of pride in his own race to move among white people. Now, this is the psyche split that I see manifested on a very practical matter.

RPW: Some Negroes I know say that they feel a real sense of loss or

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vague anxiety if they think of the total absorption of, say, Negro blood into an American race, the disappearance of Negro identity - as a blood identity. Do you feel anything about that one way or the other?

CR: No, I've never had any moments of anxiety over that, particular probability.

RPW: For some people it's real.

CR: Yes, I'm sure it must be, just as for a great many whites, this is the all-consuming fear, and I find a lot more things to worry about and I haven't gotten around to spending any time worrying about that one.

RPW: Let me approach the question of the notion of cultural identity and therefore personal identity through the Southern white situation.

Is this tenable as a proposition, that the Southern white man feels that to be himself, to have identity, he must buy a whole tradition that he would call - in quotes - Southern? One of the things in that is a certain attitude toward race, that even a man who does not feel individually or personally the racial necessity - the impulse for racial discrimination, feels somewhere he must participate to maintain his cultural identity, that once he could see that this is not necessary for his cultural identity he would be freed of the whole thing.

Does that make any sense?

CR: Well, I think that's tenable as a proposition, but I think there's a lot more to this business of feeling the part of a white Southerner.

RPW: Let's have the rest of it then.

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CR: Well, for example, let's talk about how people respond to feelings of persecution. I would say that millions of American whites feel that they and the South have been persecuted. Now, some will carry it all the way back to the days before the Civil War, to what happened in the Civil War, to what was done in the Reconstruction Period, et cetera, et cetera. Others will bring it right down to today where they will swear that magazine X, for example, is always writing about the fault of the South and never about the fault of the North, or that the press of this nation is trying - has long tried to say that racial discrimination is a Southern problem and not a Northern problem. Well, the fact is that this feeling of regional persecution tends to make a man defensive and to feel more Southern than he may really feel on racial terms alone.

RPW: So far that's about the same thing I was bunglingly trying to say.

CR: Yes, well, that I think is a real factor.

RPW: It's a very unfortunate factor to stake your identity on that, isn't it?

CR: Yes, it is, indeed. Now you get the other factor, of course, of having - of, say, just reading casually from time to time statistics showing, for example, that the number of white Southerners rejected in the draft is considerably higher than the number of white Northerners rejected in the draft. You get the economic, cultural, other indicators, of a lower level of society in the South than in the North.

Now, people who read this are naturally inclined to look for things to

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bolster their prestige, and therefore a man in New Orleans, for example, may get a subtle or a subconscious boost to his ego by going to a hotel where he knows Ralph Bunch can't stay the night, or where he knows the highest Negroes in Government couldn't get a hotel room.

RPW: Now we have a parallel then between the white Southerner situation vis-a-vis the North, and the Negro situation vis-a-vis the white man, don't we?

CR: Yes, that's right.

RPW: That is, the white Southerner feels defensive - he has objective standards - lower literacy rates, lower this, lower that - in the same way the Negro has vis-a-vis the white society.

CR: That's right.

RPW: So we have a very strange parallel here, don't we, - a psychological parallel and cultural parallel?

CR: That's right. And you will see it reflected to a degree in the fact that a great many Negroes will react almost automatically with suspicion to a white man with a Southern drawl.

RPW: They do indeed, I can tell you.

CR: Yes (laughter). And it's only after a considerable amount of experience and a considerable - the attaining of a considerable degree of intellectual sophistication that a Negro is really, honestly able to say that he doesn't judge white men by where they come from.

RPW: Or white men by the color of their skin - to carry it further along.

CR: Yes, that's true.

RPW: In other words, you would say with this paranoia that is shared by both the Southern white man and the American Negro.

CR: There being one significant difference that I think we ought to recognize, that in the case of the Negro it is not nearly as often a paranoia or a false feeling of being persecuted as it is in the case of the white Southerner. Any Negro alive can recall from recent memory enough real incidents of persecution and discrimination to give him his feelings, whereas in the case of the white Southerner these feelings may be no more than an attitude passed on by another generation.

RPW: Right. I'm talking about the way it works psychologically and not the relevance in terms of background.

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

RPW: The problem in different degrees where it's a real problem for both of these groups.

CR: Absolutely - absolutely. And this of course is a big factor in this revolution that we're talking about. The - some Negroes would have you believe - and this could be particularly true of the demagog who likes to throw around the word Uncle Tom - he would want to have you believe that the difference in attitude is the extent to which one Negro has been bought out by a white man and the other one has not. But actually what one man does as against what another Negro does may indeed be merely a measurement of the degree to which he's afflicted by this thing we describe as paranoia.

RPW: You see also occasionally the same contempt the modern city man

has for the modern rural citizen reflected among Negroes - Northern Negroes against Southern Negroes. I've seen that myself occasionally, even with, say, Northern Negroes who came to Mississippi to work in civil rights - occasionally.

CR : Oh, yes, you see these - these are the things that help to confirm your belief that people everywhere are fundamentally the same whatever their race, because you can see these bits of snobbery operating among Negroes too, and you know then that they are capable of just about the same degree of decency and the same degree of indecency as are white citizens.

RPW: James Baldwin says in his last book that the Southern mob does not represent the will of the Southern majority. What, if any, sense does that make to you?

CR: Oh, I think this is true. I think from my own observations in the South as a journalist and otherwise -

RPW: And you were born there too.

CR: Yes, I lived there the first eighteen years of my life.

RPW: Tennessee, wasn't it?

CR: That's right - that the vast majority of Southern white people would like nothing better than to get out from under this burden of supposedly being a different breed of Americans. There is - whether we will it so or not - a certain kind of stigma attached to being a white Southerner, just as there is a stigma attached to being a Negro.

And -

RPW: The moral is, don't lose a war.

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CR: Well, yes - that's right. But I think a lot of Southerners for example - deep inside themselves they're bothered by a statement, for example, that the practice of racial discrimination is hurting this country abroad, it 's hurting the United States in its struggle with the Communist world. Now, they'd like to find some cheap easy way to get away from a situation where somebody is saying that what they are doing is damaging the United States and damaging the cause of democracy. Therefore, they do not like what the mobs do, they do not want to be a part of some of the more brutal denials of civil rights in these recent years. But the truth of it is they also happen to live in times when men are more inclined to hate trouble more than they hate injustice, and therefore they find silence the better part of wisdom.

RPW: Some people actually engaged at the peril of their lives in the movement in Mississippi and in other parts of the South, have told me - including Charles Evers - that they were optimistic about a reasonable settlement in the South before very long - before you would get it elsewhere. Mr. Evers says that the Mississippi segregationist is raised to respect courage at least - raw courage. He sees the Negro showing it - he's not going to like it but he's convinced of something. This man crosses a line and he can be trusted then in a certain way. Is he dreaming?

CR: Well, I think he may be dreaming about the extent to which this respect for courage is going to operate, but I don't think he's dreaming in terms of the fact that a reasonable settlement is coming. I don't think there's even a half educated person in Mississippi who

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doesn't know that this thing is coming because it's got to come. And I think every one of them knows that it's going to come a lot sooner than he wants it. And I think with the right kind of political leadership and with the right kind of leadership from the press, it would have been accepted a long time ago.

RPW: Do you mean the local Southern press or the outside press?

CR: Well, the local Southern press primarily. I note that -

R PW: There in Mississippi -

CR: Well, I know there is -

RPW: The Free Press of Jackson - it's a Negro paper.

CR: Yes, I know -

RPW: The ~~Tuscalululu~~ paper - the Tuscalululu paper stood out against it.

CR: Well, you see, I look at this whole picture of what's happened in the South, and I note that the greatest degree of accommodation and the greatest transition on a peaceful basis has come about in those communities where there is a reasonably responsible press, and a reasonably responsible political leadership. But where you've got poor political leadership and a press that moves with the passions of the area, of the times, you get trouble. It's as simple as that.

RPW: It's a simple matter of courage then for the people who should be leaders, isn't it? The responsibility of leadership - it boils down to that, doesn't it?

CR: Oh, absolutely. This is crucial to the future of this country.

RPW: What's happened to leadership in parts of the South?

CR: Well, I go back -



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RPW: There is none in Mississippi, except Silver - James Silver.

CR: Yes, that's right. But let's go beyond that to the power structure, you see. You talk about your power companies, your gas companies, your big merchants, your big manufacturers. A lot of them with some Northern control, for example. These are the people who have abdicated responsibility. These are the people who are sending this nation down the road to far more costly conflict than any of us may comprehend today, simply because they refuse to use the great powers that they have.

RPW: Like the steel industry in Birmingham.

CR: That's right - absolutely. And with a nod from this part of the power structure you'd get a lot more press responsibility in the first place, and you'd get a lot of more political responsibility in the second place.

RPW: Talking about the South, do you remember Muirdahl's scheme - what would have been, he thinks, a reasonable reconstruction - first the compensation of the slaveholder for the emancipation, second, expropriation of land for freedmen but with compensation - not the giving of land to the freedmen but a long term sale, you see - a price, but - you see - and various other things, including some shifting of population. Do you find resistance to any of those stipulations that he lays down?

CR: Well, let me say first of all that I'm really the furthest thing from an expert on the Reconstruction Period. My knowledge of what actually took place during Reconstruction is considerably limited. But

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in terms of these particular things you've spelled out, I don't see any fundamental objection to them.

RPW: You know many people would simply explode at the thought - both Northerners and Negroes -

CR: Of what?

RPW: Of the notion of compensating the slaveholders after the Civil War for the emancipated slaves, and the notion of compensating for the expropriation of land - it's compounding a felony - it becomes a moral affront.

CR: Well, that's why I say you have to dig into a lot of specific circumstances that pertain to that particular time to decide whether or not some small measurement of morality may lie on the side of compensation.

RPW: The point I'm getting at - is really a theoretical question through this - is an abstract moral issue as opposed to the fact that moral issues may be imbedded in the economic and other issues - so deep that they have to be treated less than abstract.

CR: Yes, well, on the strictly abstract moral terms, yes, I would object to that. I would not say that you ought to reward a man for ceasing to do what's immoral, and I do believe slavery was and is immoral, and I would see no reason to compensate a man for ceasing immoral actions. Now, the question - there may however be a question of whether or not the rest of society played a role in leading that man or sustaining that man in an immoral operation, and to some extent encouraged him to invest in that immoral operation. Then, of course,

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to cut that immoral operation off may leave you with some obligation. Now, I'm not saying this pertains. All I'm saying is that these abstract moral issues are generally not very abstract, and -

RPW: There is also the possibility - possibility at least, that if this had been done you might have avoided the serious consequences we have had in the South in the Reconstruction and after.

CR: That's possible, but I would doubt very much, however, that these changes that Muir Dahl spoke of - or that this kind of settlement would have changed very much the fundamental problem that exists here, and that is the fundamental problem of people having a need to feel superior to somebody, having a clearly distinguishable minority group to pick as the inferior group to use as the scapegoat for whatever disabilities and inadequacies the area of the South might have continued to have. I just doubt that any kind of arrangement would have wiped out this rather deeply imbedded notion that the white man was meant to rule and the Negro was meant to be the slave.

RPW: What do you think of Lincoln?

CR: Well, I must say that I think Lincoln was a great president and that his attitudes were way ahead of his time.

RPW: The fact that he held certain strong racist views doesn't make you modify that?

CR: Well, I've read some statements that would tend to be considered racist views on the part of Lincoln, but I read - for example, I quoted Lincoln in a speech last week, and it's in this copy of the speech that I gave you. This is a statement that shows a brilliant understanding

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of this business of human freedom, the foundation on which liberty is based. And it's the furthest thing from a racist statement, and I much prefer to think that this statement was the voice of the true Lincoln, and not some of the things I've heard quoted that have racist -

RPW: After the Emancipation he - he was waited on by a committee of three Negroes from Washington and environs, and said I must tell you you can never hope to enjoy equality with the white man.

CR: Yes, that's so - yes.

RPW: What about Thomas Jefferson and the question of race and slavery? How does that strike you? Do you feel any ironies at that fact?

CR: Well, now, let me say that even the most enlightened man tends to be to some degree a slave of the circumstances that pertain. And if you go back a hundred years, I would think that even as enlightened a man as a Lincoln, or back further, even as enlightened a man as a Jefferson, might have found it difficult to conceive of the day when the Negro could move far enough away from the chains of bondage that pertained to him to really walk at the level of the American white man.

RPW: That is, you want to modify or at least put against the notion abstract moral definition historical relativism and the question of context?

CR: That's exactly right. I think that in abstract terms Lincoln was not a racist, and in terms of his own personal ideology, his own personal philosophy; the same thing with Jefferson - he was a Democrat, but in terms of historical relevance, and in terms of the situation

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that existed in his time, many statements were made about what seemed to be possible that would look a little foolish today in terms of what has happened.

RPW: That was the point I was getting at.

CR: Yes, that's exactly right.

RPW: Of course that - your view is not universally held.

CR: Oh, I know - there are some people of course who find it convenient to hold to the view that Lincoln and Jefferson were racists because this puts them in distinguished company, you see.

RPW: It's also held by certain Negroes another strike against the white man.

CR: Yes, well, I -

RPW: This can be used both ways.

CR: Yes, that's true.

RPW: Both ways - you find the citizens' council quoting Jefferson - I mean, pointing to Jefferson and Lincoln, and you find certain Negroes pointing to them with a finger of scorn. It can be used either way.

CR: Yes, I find myself fortunate not to be in either of those groups.

RPW: One more thing on this tape. Let me read a quotation about Negro history. The whole tendency of the Negro history movement, not as history but as propaganda, is to encourage the average Negro to escape the realities. The actual achievements and the actual failures of the present. Although the movement consciously tends to breed race pride, it may also cause Negroes unconsciously to recognize that group

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pride is built partly on delusion and therefore may result in devaluation of themselves for being forced to resort to such self deception. That's by Arnold Rose - Muirdahl's collaborator.

CR: Yes, I know Arnold Rose personally.

RPW: From Minnesota?

CR: Yes, that's right. Well, I - let me say that of course there is a conscious effort on the part of those who deal in Negro history to use it as a means of bolstering group pride. I think there is some validity to this approach, simply from the practical point of view that so many Negroes have no knowledge of Negro history, no experience that they've had in our public schools was designed to teach them much about their past history. But I would say that group pride is not necessarily based on self deception. I would say that pride - and I would encourage the Negro to work on individual pride, rather than race pride, myself - let me say this - but that it's really based more on the achievements and the status of today than it is on what somebody did at Bunker Hill.

RPW: I must say that I have seen so many of the bad effects of the use of history in the South that I am suspicious of all such uses of history.

CR: Well, I am simply suspicious of any efforts to create deep feelings that are based simply on the fact that you are of this racial group, or you are of this social group, or you are of this religious group, or you are of this cultural group, - because they all lead to a narrowness of mind and a narrowness of heart that it seems to me has

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never brought human beings anything but grief in the long run.

RPW: You're just fearful of the Shovanism that's involved there?

CR: That's exactly right.

RPW: Let me take you off the hook. This is the end of Tape #2 of the conversation with Carl Rowan. Proceed on Tape #3.

(end of tape)