

RPW: This is Tape #3 of the conversation with Carl Rowan - proceed. Let me cut back to another topic that we almost approached yesterday - the question of white and black symbolisms in Western culture. Some Negroes see society as impregnated with such symbolisms. I have a friend in Nashville who says he has trained himself to reverse these symbolisms.

CR: What - do they mention these symbolisms, for example?

RPW: Values - good equals white - bright light equals truth - darkness equals ignorance - the texture of light and dark symbolism.

CR: White is pure.

RPW: White is pure - black is impure - good and evil. The question how this is a subtle assault through these symbols on the integrity of the Negro. How serious do you think this is a problem?

CR: Well, certainly - now, in my very first book, as I recall, I wrote a section on this very subject and it's true that this is indeed a factor. Not only is it a factor in the white mind, but it becomes a factor in the mind of the ordinary Negro, including the Negro child, and it is an extremely subtle transition into this whole question of group behavior and attitudes in one group toward another group. But it's a factor nevertheless. I doubt very much that any campaign is going to reverse those symbols.

RPW: Now, here's a point that is curious - some of these symbolisms antedate the contact between the races. That is, in Africa itself the light-dark, some anthropologists have pointed out that white-black symbolisms

Carl Rowan - Tape #3 - p. 2

are used there - in dances of good and evil, say - ritual dances - the good will be attired in white feathers and white marks, the evil character, the symbol of evil, will have black feathers and black robes. Or - this is true in many other - in Asia too, where you have the white and black and light and dark as a natural symbolism without reference to race - where there's no racial contact with the white race.

CR: Oh, I'm sure that this flows out of something that has nothing whatsoever to do with race. For example, I would suspect that you could carry it back to the time when man feared the dark, for example, and he much preferred daylight.

RPW: The wolves weren't out in the daylight.

CR: That's exactly right. So I don't think that these symbols in themselves flow out of any racial feeling.

RPW: Though some Negroes do claim that they have been exploited deliberately by the white man.

CR: Oh, I don't think this is any great problem in that sense. Long after all our racial problems were solved I expect that brides will still be wearing white as a symbol of their pristine pureness, and men would still prefer - some of them, that is - the daylight to the darkness.

RPW: Here you have, then, an intersection of natural symbolism with a social symbolism. In other words, it's an insoluble symbolism.

CR: Yes, that's right. The symbolisms will be there, no matter what.
Yes.

Carl Rowan - Tape #3 - p. 3

RPW: How much is the question of race used as an alibi by Negroes for ordinary failures that should be accounted for on other grounds?

CR: Well, that's hard to say. It was used I should think a lot more in times past than is the case today. But I would say that in many instances when it's used today it's used often without the Negro who's using it as an alibi being aware that he's doing so.

RPW: In other words, it's even more destructive when it's unconscious?

CR: Yes, I think so. You run into a slight here or a slight there, and it gets to be part of the pattern, and it almost becomes a part of your natural response to assume that somebody is discriminating against you. I've known many instances where people have assumed that discrimination was involved when nothing even remotely akin to it was involved.

RPW: We hear the debt to the Negro - the question of preferential treatment and the - Whitney Young 's Marshall Plan - now, clearly there are - clearly they are necessary actions to be taken in terms of remedy. How would you distinguish between the debt to the Negro and - well, first, how would you interpret the debt to the Negro?

CR: Well, let me say that I - well, I would support the government's undertaking the kind of actions Whitney Young spelled out, I would support it on a basis far bigger than a debt to the Negro. I view it as the country's debt to itself in a sense. You've got a tenth of the population which is not contributing all that it should or could to the economy, to our society, to everything that we're trying to do. And obviously the only way to make that ten percent able to make a

Carl Rowan - Tape #3 - p. 4

full contribution is to help it to make up this gap - educational gap, cultural gap, economic gap - that has been imposed because of discriminations of the past. Now, you've got to get the Negro out of this vicious circle somehow in which - that's the circle in which he is unable to move in certain areas because he's not had the background or the experience, and he's unable to get the experience because of the present condition he's in. And I think of course the federal government does have an obligation to make some dramatic moves in that particular direction.

RPW: Now, how would you distinguish such moves toward remedying the Negro's situation and a move toward attacking the problem of lack of education and lack of privilege in general?

CR: Oh, I definitely think that ought to be done. That's why I'm such an advocate of the president's war on poverty program.

RPW: That is, the question of the Negro would be, then - it would be something ^{subsumed under} ~~subsuminal~~ to the general topic of the attack on the loss of human resources in America in general?

CR: That's right - that's right. It's merely an extension of what I think the nation ought to be doing for any of its people who are underprivileged and who lack opportunities because of the injustices of the past. For example, I have written many articles about the state of the American Indian and what I think we ought to be doing to remedy that situation.

RPW: That is, the general proposition of the use of human resources takes precedence in your mind then over the question of mere rate of

Carl Rowan - Tape #3 - p. 5

application in terms of race?

CR: Yes, I would put it on a far broader basis than the simple question of race.

RPW: Let me read a little passage here on the danger of slogans - let's see how you react to this statement. There is a danger in the new-found militancy. Negroes may become the victims of their own rhetoric. Some Negro leaders have already shown a tendency to react to labels rather than to substance. Once a proposal has been called moderate or solved, they are obliged to attack it automatically without regard to the merits of the case. In '63 most Negro leaders attacked Kennedy for opposing the strong - in quotes - and supporting the weak version of the C.R. Bill before the House Judiciary Committee. Yet the strong version is in some ways weaker. For example, it omitted the creation of federal registrars to insure Negro voting rights. The label "weak" had been taken by the Negro leaders for this bill.

CR: Oh, I agree with that observation completely, and one of my points is that Negro leaders have got to fight this business where a man gets up and calls something moderate or pussyfooting or calls somebody an Uncle Tom, and immediately - or some proposal Uncle Tom-ish or a compromise, and that willy-nilly you're supposed to be against it. This is anti-intellectualism and it's a reactionary viewpoint in itself, and I think that one of the worst things that could happen would be for Negroes to fall further victim to this slogan area.

RPW: Let me read you another quotation. The color question is a social problem, and as such is not essentially different from any other

social problem. By reason of this fact, it is part of these same processes of adjustment, social problems by their very nature do not lend themselves to immediate or absolute solutions. This is by Professor Gordon Hancock, who is a Negro.

CR: Yes, I know. Well, in the most general sense of course that's true. Certainly no social problem of any magnitude lends itself to an absolute solution, and I doubt very much that it's feasible to talk on this race problem in terms of an absolute solution. Now, the other part of it, whether or not a social problem will lend itself to immediate action or immediate solution, well, once you've said that there's no absolute solution there's no question in my mind as to whether you can then talk about an immediate solution. But if you assume that there can be a partial solution but not an absolute one, I say that many social problems do lend themselves to immediate solutions if you don't mean by "immediate" the next five minutes, or -

RPW: How do you relate this to the slogan "Freedom Now"?

CR: Well, this is just a case of another one of those slogans which illustrates or articulates a feeling or an attitude of frustration. But certainly has no relationship to what's possible.

RPW: It's a poetic statement then?

CR: That's right - that's right. But it has no relationship whatsoever to the possibilities and realities of the world in which any of us live.

RPW: Now, a sophisticated person knows that there is always a lag

Carl Rowan - Tape #3 - p. 7

between the emotional statement of urgency and the possibility of achievement - we all know that - knows his history or even just the facts of life. But there are a lot of people who don't have that kind of sophistication.

CR: Well, now let me say that Freedom Now is a slogan - sure - but it balances off another slogan that the Negro has heard for many generations. We can't solve this problem over night. Now, that's a slogan and it's also a truism. But the Negro has said, no, looking at it in a realistic, intellectual way, obviously we won't solve it over night. But the demand is that we work as though we want to solve it over night. And it's somewhere between those two slogans that the area of realism lies.

RPW: That is, you would see this as one more example of a necessary polarity in all human action, between the urgency for immediate - for action, and the fruits of action in reality?

CR: That's exactly right.

RPW: Do you remember - did you read Faulkner's "Intruder in the Dust"?

CR: Yes, I did.

RPW: Do you remember the passage on homogeneity, toward the end - the South - and homogeneity - Negro and white - somehow as opposed to some values outside in the South - do you remember that? - it's a very vague passage, you see.

CR: Yes, I remember it vaguely, but not very well.

RPW: Well, if you don't remember it, you know, with any sharpness -
(talking together)

Carl Rowan - Tape #3 - p. 8

CR: ... I don't remember it with any sharpness.

RPW: There's something related to it, though, of some interest. A good many historians say that the Negro in America is much more like the old American than like the modern American.

CR: In what way?

RPW: In the sense like the old - sort of old - old Southerner. Than like the new modern urban, type of mixed ethnic origin.

CR: Well, I don't see much that would enable me to support that contention. There are a lot of kinds of Negroes in this country, and I know several kinds of them.

RPW: That is, you would attack it on the grounds of just the pluralisms in the general category of Negro, then?

CR: Well, on that ground specifically, but secondly on the ground that I just don't think I've observed anything that would allow me to make that judgment.

RPW: One way they go at it is by saying that the essential - well, religiosity of the Negro which corresponds to the religiosity, you see, of the older groups like the Southern society, back country New England?

CR: I'm inclined to think that the Negro, like the rest of the American population, has tended to move a bit away from this religiosity in the last several years.

RPW: On that basis, then, you could see that the - that Dr. King's philosophy would apply perhaps to the South but not in the North, not in the big urban centers?

Carl Rowan - Tape #3 - p. 9

CR: Not to - certainly not to the extent that it applies in the South.

RPW: He is trapped in a way by thinking that what applies in Atlanta and in Birmingham could apply in New York or Detroit?

CR: It would apply in some areas of New York and Detroit, because there are sections of these big metropolitan centers that are really little more than extensions of the South. So many of the residents having so very recently come out of the Southern setting. But certainly the dominant element of the Negro community in these areas would be quite unlike this Negro of the South who is devoted to great religiosity.

RPW: Let's read another quote. The self image of the Negro middle class is one of ability and militancy. The middle class Negro is not obsessed with status pretensions as is the upper class Negro, nor does he suffer the abject despair of the Negro masses. As a result, he seldom displays the kind of insecurity that needs and the need for ancestral - sorry - he seldom displays the kind of insecurity characteristic, you see, of the other two classes - the bottom and the top. This is Eric Lincoln.

CR: I wonder who he's referring to as the Negro middle class - that would be my first question. Secondly, I would say, based on what I assume he's referring to as the Negro middle class, that the concern for status symbols is just as great as it is in any other segment of the Negro population, just as great as it is in the white middle class, and I would say that this contention goes against what a great many surveyors have found - for example, people who do marketing

Carl Rowan - Tape #3 - p. 10

surveys. The Ebony Magazine marketing survey people and others who have generally found that this Negro middle class man will tend to buy a higher class product than the white middle class man in some respects. This is in itself a status symbol in the sense that it's an ego builder, it's a self-image builder.

RPW: That's the conspicuous consumption which is said to be characteristic of the prosperous Negro.

CR: But as I say it depends on whom he refers to as middle class. But certainly when you talk about frustrations, I would say that the middle class Negro may have more frustrations than the lower class masses in the sense that he is at a point where he begins to think more about his position in society, and he begins to think more about his inability to go certain places and do certain things.

RPW: To say it back and see that I understand you - that is, he has achieved professionally, intellectually and economically. There should be no barrier between him and his opposite number, as it were, in the white race? Now he finds the mystic bar rather than the economic and objective bars -

CR: That's right. And it's this bar that can be more frustrating in terms of a man's emotions and his mind and his heart than some of these other barriers.

RPW: Because other barriers are at least supported by matters of specific objective differences that are not merely skin color?

CR: That's exactly right.

RPW: Now, what about the idea of some hidden resistance on the part

of upper class or upper middle class Negroes or however you choose to define such a bracket, against integration because it means a devaluation of their position. That is, within the Negro society they are secure, they have their prestige. In an integrated society they would encounter a kind of devaluation.

CR: Well, now this has always been an important factor economically - school teachers, school principals, the owner of a Negro theater in an all-Negro town, the owner of - well, I heard just recently, for example, of one motel owner who built a motel in the South largely because he knew the baseball teams would be training - going through spring training - and Negroes in the Northern community made such a fuss over their team having segregated facilities in the South that they forced the team to go to a hotel that would admit all the players, and this man who built the Negro motel lost his customers and so forth. But here was an obvious case of a man who found desegregation to be a financial burden on him. Now, this has always been true. I would say that the other factor is not nearly as great as some people think it might be, the resistance because of the prestige factor. Because that man's prestige would be no less among Negroes for the mere fact that integration had come, unless, of course, integration affected him adversely in some other way, such as economically or costing him his job as a principal of a school or something.

RPW: We see it working in white communities the same way - a person who is, say, the social leader of a town of ten thousand has no position in a town of a hundred thousand - say, a lady who is a social

leader in a town of ten thousand doesn't want to go to the big city because she then loses her position - her relative position. Now, the position - the situation being that if you have an integrated society, that is, immediately there's a devaluation of many Negroes who feel themselves - are, you see - important in the Negro community and are demoted in a world community, immediately. Instinctively - white people feel constantly about - in parallel situations.

CR: Well, I would say that there is something that's more important than this factor in terms of the subtle or sometimes even subconscious running away from integration on the part of the Negro, and that is, that rather than fear of being demoted in this society at large, there is a feeling of insecurity and inability to play a proper role in this society at large. Now, you take a Negro woman - maybe she's a college graduate, but the extent of her social activities has been in the Negro group - Negro bridge clubs et cetera - where almost no social contact with whites. It's almost natural that there's going to be a really great fear of being thrust into this white social world. and it comes down to very specific things, like worrying about what to wear at a function where the majority of the people are going to be white, or worrying about whether or not you're going to pick up the right fork, or worrying about whether or not you can discuss intelligently whatever it is that you think the white people are going to be discussing at the social function. And people generally tend to fear what's new and what they don't know, and whether - and this is a factor that's got nothing to do with race, so you will find a lot of

Carl Rowan - Tape #3 - p. 13

Negroes shying away from the integrated setting for that reason.

RPW: The same thing that afflicts all situations of social mobility, though, irrespective of race.

CR: That's right.

RPW: Though race may accentuate it.

CR: That's right - yes - exactly.

RPW: We hear the phrase over and over again - who wants to integrate with a burning house? I think Lorraine Hansbury first gave, and Baldwin has, you know, circulated it. In other words, the repudiation on the part of at least a certain kind of Negro intellectual and perhaps the unsophisticated Negro, of middle class American standard values. How much of that do you believe is true? How much impulse to repudiate these values, to try to find something more fundamental?

CR: Oh, I doubt that there's much of that. I mean, part of this is an expression of personal anger, personal bitterness, and so forth. But I see no signs of any real movement within the Negro community to repudiate American values, middle class, upper class, or what have you. I think these are fundamentally the only values the great majority of Negroes know, and I think what you may find is a desire to have a bigger role in determining what the values are and in shaping them, but I view this as different from the negative factor of repudiating what exists.

RPW: That's intellectual formulation, then.

CR: Yes, I would suppose so, yes.

RPW: We all know something about the white man's stereotypes of the

Carl Rowan - Tape #3 - p. 14

Negro. Now, the Negro has certain stereotypes for the white man. How would you describe those stereotypes? They often are self-contradictory of course.

CR: Well, stereotypes usually are when you get enough of them. Well, let me see if I can think of a few of them.

RPW: One is, the white man can't tell the truth.

CR: Oh, I don't know how widely held that particular one is. But I tell you -

RPW: You can't trust the white man - that one - you can't trust the white man - put it that way.

CR: Oh, yes, this would be a widely held one, that you can't trust him, that secondly he's never going to give up any more than you can take from him; thirdly, that white man has an insecurity he can't control where women are concerned - that is, that all of his fears go back to - all of his emotions go back to the fear that the Negro is going to try to take over the white woman -

RPW: This is sexual insecurity on the part of the white man - that stereotype.

CR: Yes, that's a stereotype.

RPW: The cold heart is another one.

CR: I don't hear that one expressed much. There's one that I've heard going around recently that everything he can see he controls.

RPW: To what extent, assuming these and other stereotypes of the white man by the Negro - to what extent can the Negro be entrapped by his stereotypes of the white man so that he can't deal with them realistically?

Carl Rowan - Tape #3 - p. 15

CR: Well, let's go back to what I have said has to be the solution in the kind of society we live in. If we're going to form the kind of society that will permit Negroes and whites to live in peace, it has to be based on mutuality of respect and admiration. Now, if the Negro is on the one hand trying to wipe out those stereotypes that make it difficult for the white to respect the Negro -

R PW: The white man's stereotypes of the Negro?

CR: That's right - he's trying to wipe those out in order to enhance his own position in society. But at the same time he cannot build up a stereotypes that make it impossible for him to respect the white man, because you start out with the assumption that there has to be a mutuality of respect or there is no respect of any consequence. And this is a really serious thing.

RPW: It's a real problem then in your mind?

CR: Oh, yes, it - and a great many groups - the Negro leadership groups in past years have worked against it.

RPW: This is the end of Tape #3 of the conversation with Carl Rowan. Proceed on Tape #4 - I hope.

CR: Yes, I've got about -

(end of tape)