

RPW: This is Tape #4 of a conversation with Miss Ruth Turner, Cleveland, May 7. Back to Muirdahl and his plan for an ideal reconstruction of the south after the Civil War, you said you would not accept even a guaranteed success of the plan, the compensation of the slave holders for the emancipation or to land holders for expropriated land. Is that right?

RT: I said, as I recall it, that it was a painful decision to make, and of course by token of my experience here in the movement, such assurances when delivered by certain people mean little. But given the question as put, I guess I would painfully make the decision to compensate. In other words, there are certain times when I will compromise with an ideal for the sake of another.

RPW: Isn't this a little bit like saying, I will compromise my ideal for the sake of achieving my ideal?

RT: Um-hm. It's a real contradiction. In fact, involvement in the movement itself presents many such contradictions.

RPW: Could you explain that, please.

RT: Yes. I believe we talked about it briefly before, the fact that in the recent school demonstrations at the sites, we were put in the position of saying that - well, it's not an exact parallel now, but there is a compromise in ideal by saying that you're ready to sacrifice human life for the sake of preserving human life. And that was in a sense what we had said at the outset, and it's exactly what happened. That is a kind of contradiction which you find yourself,

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that the immediate sacrifice is going to bring about something that goes beyond the immediate. But in the process you are giving up something valuable.

RPW: Some people I have put this Muirdahl question to have felt actually insulted by it. Did you feel insulted by it?

RT: No, not insulted by it. I think it raises some very basic questions, the kinds of questions that we grapple with really daily in the movement. Because this is not a cut and dried black and white, it's a matter of constant adjustment and readjustment, a matter of feeling at home with contradictions. And not too many people do that easily. I don't.

RPW: Let me change the topic a little bit. Going back to the question of leadership, in all historical situations of mass movements or revolutionary tendencies, there is a kind of tendency to overreaching. Do you see this process now going on in the problem of Negro leadership - an overreaching process in these bids for power or for policy?

RT: In a sense yes. I note in particular someone like Malcolm X, who, well, actually, not really saying anything so very basically different from what we are - he's adding the dimension of the use of violence if all else fails, and in a sense of course has an appeal to an audience which is beset with frustrations, as Negroes are.

RPW: You were saying that Malcolm X is an example of the overreaching process.

RT: Well, let me say that the solutions he spells out are attractive

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solutions. They are solutions to which I respond in moments of real depression.

RPW: Excuse me. This includes the racial separation as part of the policy - his policy you approve?

RT: No, I'm talking about the solution that he spelled out in Cleveland not too long ago, which was ballots versus bullets, or the ballot or the bullet, making the point that if the ballot didn't work pretty soon that the bullet would follow.

RPW: Will the bullet work?

RT: Well, let me say that those of us who are involved in organizing a community - at least I feel a heavy responsibility to that community and I feel that any time I organize around the bullet phase I'm asking for something that can approach mass extermination and therefore is a much too risky business for me to try to organize anybody around - I think that it is courting disaster.

RPW: This is one of those wild sort of speculative questions - if you could by an act of will without having to watch the consequences - no pain - exterminate all white citizens of the U.S.A., would you do it?

RT: No, I am - I pride myself on being a humanitarian. I would not want to resort to the methods that inhumane people use.

RPW: This wouldn't be inhumane. They would die like that, without ever knowing it, simultaneously.

RT: Well, you still have human problems left. I don't think that

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there is any "like that" solution to the problem of living on earth with people of different kinds of temperaments and what have you.

RPW: Suppose you could get rid of - another hypothetical question - like you stipulated, all be gone like that - quick - with a finger. Would you do it?

RT: No. Because they will have existed, and you can't wipe the memory or the fact that they had existed out of a lot of people's minds. You would have to cope with that for the rest of your life, and I think that would present as I think Germany is in the process of discovering, some very basic and real questions and problems to exterminating a people or a group of people doesn't solve it. It doesn't solve the basic human problem of man having to live with man, and in fact the very fact that you use that kind of method complicates the problem of living together.

RPW: Do you see Mr. Bronson as an example of the overreach in the power bid or the policy bid.

RT: That Bronson who was involved in the stall-ins? I think - getting back to a point we raised before, any effective and - I hate to use the word responsible because it's so mis-used, but any effective leader, any committed and dedicated leader has got to have his foot with the community at the same time he's making a step ahead of them. And if you are not making and taking pains to keep in touch with the community every step along the way, I think you're overreaching them.

RPW: What about the kind of touch with the white community. What

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relation is that - do you really have to that? Is there some problem here too?

RT: You mean in terms of keeping in touch with them? Yes. Clearly there is a problem with that. But the fact is that we do have a community to which we respond and which responds to us. We can't expect to bring the whole community along at the same time, because we're all at different levels of awareness and different experience development. So that as long as we are in touch with a community I feel as though we're still fulfilling our obligations as leaders. If we reach the point where we no longer speak to any or speak for any or with any, then I think we are no longer leaders that I would like to call myself.

RPW: Do you distinguish between two kinds of demonstrations, say, those of general dissatisfaction and those with specific targets or objectives?

RT: Yes, I imagine there are different - yes, there are probably those two different kinds of demonstrations.

RPW: Would you say one is legitimate and the other isn't?

RT: No, I would never make that distinction. I think we'd have to evaluate each demonstration on its own face.

RPW: The random expression of feeling is potentially as useful as the channelized piloted demonstration - is that it?

RT: Let me say in terms of bringing about change, clearly the constructive and targeted and channeled demonstration aims at something,

is perhaps more useful. The random demonstration of feeling, however, may convince in those communities where the power structure of the leaders are not convinced, the intensity of the feeling in the general community about these problems.

RPW: What do you think of Abraham Lincoln, Miss Turner?

RT: I believe - I have always wanted to study the history of and the life of Abraham Lincoln because I believe that unfortunately much of that is passed on about him is not true. I in fact have some evidence to that effect, but Lincoln shared in many ways the same prejudices and feelings that his counterparts did.

RPW: If he did, how does that affect your feeling about him and about the March on Washington and the ceremony at his monument?

RT: Well, it means to me that - I take a rather different view of such heroes, so-called. I feel that American history has vastly distorted their position, although I think that he was the man of the time to commit a very important historical act, it's not really that relevant. How I feel about him personally nevertheless, because I am aware of the distortion that has taken place in the American history books generally, I am sensitive to an overrating of any individual.

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RPW: What do you think of William Lloyd Garrison?

RT: He's a man who also performed an important historical function, and I have to evaluate him in terms of the function he performed. I have no feelings about him as a man except that he did a job and he did it well.

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RPW: What view did he take of the Negro after the Civil War, do you know that?

RT: The Negro after the Civil War? I think in terms of what happened during Reconstruction, the fact that many of them attempted at least to begin to take their part in the community, were elected to legislature and some cases -

RPW: I'm sorry - I meant Garrison's behavior after the Civil War.

RT: Oh, I'm not qualified to comment on that, Mr. Warren.

RPW: What about Robert E. Lee. How do you view him? What kind of an estimate of character would you give us on that?

RT: As I said, I'm not really concerned about my own feelings about a personal man and his personal abilities and qualities. I am concerned about the historical role that he played. Lee's role was one that I do not respect.

RPW: How do you see his role that you don't respect?

RT: I think he was a leader in an action which was devious and destructive. I think that his role as a general of the Confederate Army did not work in the best interests of history, and I have evaluated it as such.

RPW: You'd like a bad man on the right side of history rather than a good man on the wrong side, is that it?

RT: No, I'm not going to say that.

RPW: Well, actually you just said it.

RT: Well, in this particular case -

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RPW: Make it general now. Let's don't creep out of it.

RT: O.K. I will say that a bad man who performs an important historical function has to be judged on the basis of the function he performed.

RPW: A homicidal maniac in a good cause is more to be admired than a decent idealist who's backing the wrong horse historically, is that it?

RT: I would say that I'm being not really a historian but not being a novelist or someone concerned with personalities, I would have to look at it in that way.

RPW: Not being concerned with personalities? Well, that means not being concerned with moral values, doesn't it?

RT: Well, I don't - you know, you make a distinction here and I'm not going to go along with it, making a distinction between a personality and the role he performs. I think that the personality has an effect on the role he performs. In other words, if it had been a bad man who was in Lincoln's position he couldn't have performed the role that Lincoln did. The two are very much connected.

RPW: Why couldn't he have signed a declaration - the emancipation proclamation as a war measure? Many bad men went along with it.

RT: Well, let me put it this way. If a Hitler had been sitting in Lincoln's seat, Hitler with his own particular and peculiar psychological makeup, even in view of the fact that that was the need of the time, Hitler may not have signed it.

RPW: He might not - no. But let's assume that he would have. There's

a reasonable and effective war measure.

RT: Then I'd also have to evaluate the other things that Hitler did. I'm not only talking about a man as he exhibits himself in one particular act. I mean, his time on earth is going to be - he's going to do a lot of things wrong, you see. But I am judging the important acts in terms of their effect on history.

RPW: What about Thomas Jefferson. How do you feel about him? He was a slave holders.

RT: He was, but he also performed a very important historical function. I think Thomas Jefferson was a wise man. Again, like Lincoln, he shared many of the prejudices and attitudes of his time. I am concerned primarily at this point, though, with his historical function and the effect he had on the process, realizing that he was one of many who shared the same attitudes.

RPW: If he were abandoning moral absolutes and going into matters of historical relativity, aren't we?

RT: Yes, in a sense we are. Although I'm still not leaving out the role of goodness and badness as it relates to the way a man carries out his historical function.

RPW: Most revolutions - well, all revolutions I guess in the past have been directed toward the liquidation of a class or regime, haven't they?

RT: Yes, I think that's right.

RPW: If the Negro revolution is a revolution, what's it liquidating?

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RT: I think it's liquidating something quite different, and I think that's why this is a quite different kind of revolution. It's liquidating injustices. I don't think those injustices are carried necessarily by a particular class of people in this country. I think, although it is quite true that the wealthy are in control, I don't think the problems to be solved are in liquidating the wealthy, but I may say the class of people who are now in a position of power. We're talking here about basic and fundamental changes that have to take place throughout the fabric of our society. That goes beyond class.

RPW: It's sometimes said that hate and hope are the great motive powers of social change. What about that in relation to the present situation?

RT: Hate and hope? I would say that in the particular movement in which I am involved, hate doesn't have much function. Hope does. Despair does. If you're acting on despair with hope - acting on frustration with hope. None of us really have time to hate. It's too all-consuming. Similarly, we don't have time to love, not in any intense personal kind of way.

RPW: Do you mean in the ordinary sense of personal affections?

RT: That's right. Except as they develop through a working relationship. We're talking about another level here - perhaps, using the Christian phrase - talking about something that really isn't as intense as hate and love as we usually use those words.

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RPW: How far do you follow Dr. King - Martin Luther King's view of the philosophy of non-violence?

RT: I'm not a committed pacifist, nor do I adopt non-violence as a philosophy of life. I will not carry it no matter what. I feel that I - adopt non-violence presently as a tactical necessary philosophy, but I will not take it as an ultimate and an absolute.

RPW: Do you think Dr. King's influence in the north is now waning?

RT: I do. I do because I do not feel he addresses himself to the problems, the basic problems that northerners in a sense are in a better position to grapple with than southerners.

RPW: Do you feel King is socially retarded, is that it?

RT: No, I just think he is not politically aware and sensitive.

RPW: Would this fact bring the result of living in a more primitive social order - is that the point?

RT: No, this fact being the result of having to cope with such basic problems as the more important general implications of that problems escape you. Not being able to see the forest for the trees. Also, the certain personality makeup - I don't think he's a politician, nor do I think he thinks like one. I think you have to, because we are playing in a sense a game of power, and we have to understand the dimensions and the implications of it.

RPW: What kind of power does a Negro have to negotiate from? Will you explain that to me please?

RT: I think he has certain amount of political power to use in a balance of power kind of way. I think he has a great amount of econo-

But she has been interviewed?

mic power, - the power of withdrawal, for example - not in a sense of building an empire, but withdrawing trade from those agencies that don't cooperate. He has a great moral power, because the Negro is the only group which is raising the real moral questions of our time.

RPW: Well, now we are back to the element of the struggle which Dr. King places his emphasis on, aren't we? The moral power is the same as his theory, isn't it?

RT: Yes, except that I'm looking at it in a different kind of way. I'm not saying that the Negro should be a suffering servant for an American conscience.

RPW: Does King say that?

RT: I feel that he does. I feel that we have to also be aware of the fact that the American conscience has become quite deadened by insensitivity and by luxury in many instances. And we have to be prepared to use other methods to reach the American -

RPW: Where in the world do you find the conscience, in what country or group, of the kind you admire?

RT: Nowhere that I know of. I think perhaps in certain of the socialist countries, like Sweden, there's something more - something of a better awareness of the general wellbeing; that may be true in England - I don't know - I haven't been there. It's not true in Germany. I don't know if there's any place in the world, but I don't really make my decisions or implement any ideals on the basis of who else does it.

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RPW: Some people do, of course. They create a Never-Never land, say it's some Country X or Y or something. One more question. The tendency of any mass movement or revolutionary movement is to concentrate leadership finally in the man, the one, the leader. Do you see that movement going on now, in the movement toward a concentration of leadership, a concentration of power or the possibility of that?

RT: No. On the contrary, I see a proliferation of power and leadership, and I think that is the real - one of the healthiest signs of this movement, that they are people all over the place who are emerging as leaders and I think as long as that's the case then we have something very creative and positive here. I really would dread to see the day when that power and that leadership is located in one person.

RPW: Take the opposite situation, where it's totally diffused. Where is that - well, to use a hideous word, responsibility - located?

RT: Well, I think that we can't have that situation either, and I think every man is a leader, and I think that we have to have leaders in constituencies. I'm saying that we need a lot of constituencies or we need more than one spokesman for a community. Responsibility lies in accountability to a constituency. It lies in having somebody to whom you return with your decisions.

RPW: How does responsibility relate to some vision of

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society?

RT: How does it relate to vision of society?

RPW: A vision of what can be had - your ideal city?

RT: Well, it seems to me that I can best make the example of politics as I'd like to see them. This ideal of responsibility as I just outlined it, accountability to a group of people, it seems to me that many of the problems of our politics today is that the leaders are not responsible and do not feel responsible to anyone beside themselves and their own interest. I would like to see the kind of society where those who are chosen for leadership are responsible for those who have chosen them and feel responsible to their needs, and I feel that only by doing this do we have anything that approaches a democracy. Only by eliminating that personal selfish motive that creeps into so many leaders do we establish the kind of society that I think I'll feel happy and secure in.

RPW: This is the end of the conversation with Miss Ruth Turner - end - end - end - no more.

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