

Mr. WARREN: This is Tape #3 of a conversation with Wyatt T. Walker, Atlanta, March 18 - continue. Where were we?

Mr. WALKER: I don't recall. Let's see -

RPW: Well, let's start something - let's pull a card out of the deck. This is a quotation on 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 constantly tends to build race pride, it may also cause Negroes unconsciously to recognize that group pride is built partly on delusion and therefore may result in a devaluation of themselves or being forced to resort to self-deception. This is from Arnold Rose, Muirdahl's collaborator.

WW: Well, I see a couple of holes there. I think we must honestly face the fact that almost every page of history - I know that generalizations are bad - are romanticized to a degree. Now, what I am saying is that I would imagine that as the new move for Negro history is developed, and I am intimately involved in just such a project myself, that some of the Negro's history and his contributions and the establishment of his historical roots will be romanticized to a degree - maybe overdrawn. But this is nothing more than that which is natural. I think some of us say that it is a character of the human spirit that the further removed you become from an event, the more and more it becomes embellished, and I think this is something that is a part of our humanity rather than





the only thoroughly American music we have - the Negro spiritual and folk songs. Rather to me, despite the terrible experience slavery was, it was an ennobling experience for the Negro, because he has been - he has proven that he could rise above it, that he took the rigors that it produced and somehow kept his spirit and soul together. So - and I have become convinced that whatever efforts I have, that more people are reached through the written word than the spoken word in a sense, and so this new project is really fascinating to me, that if we can get into, say, two-fifths - two-tenths of the Negro church community, we can get in a tenth of the public school system or get in half of the libraries, get in a tenth of the civic and human relations groups with these volumes which will talk about the Negro and his contributions to medicine - which is a kind of neo-nationalism - in sports, in religious life, Negro womanhood, essay, literature - you know - the whole gamut of experiences that he has been able at best to develop within his own culture - this is really fascinating.

RPW: It is. Programmatic history can be the kind which was written by the South about the reconstruction.

WW: Yes - which guided their patterns for the next two generations.

RPW: That's right. It guided them - very unfortunately. Now we are finding a crop of Southern historians who are re-writing it - new researches.

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WW: It's been very shocking to some.

RPW: Very shocking - Van Woodward has re-written reconstruction history - he's a Southerner from Arkansas. Now, the question I'm getting at is, is it a danger - it's a program, isn't there? - the danger of the delusion -

WW: Yes - over-romanticizing it - building a deep nationalistic spirit - making black rather than white, you know - or developing the martyr complex.

RPW: Or even doing something else - over-promoting the great American vice - American history. You said something a moment ago which struck my ear in passing - it was this - before we come back to history - this bears on it - you said you regarded the slave experience as an ennobling one for the Negro. Now, in Faulkner's character of Dilsey in *The Sound and the Fury*, we have the only noble character in this novel - she is noble, understanding, powerful, enduring, pitiful - passionate, I mean, in that sense. For some Negroes this character is an affront, she is a character painted as being ennobled by history and by her condition. Now, when Faulkner, a white man, says that, this would cause resentment among certain Negroes, including James Baldwin. Now, you said it could in no sense cause a ~~mm~~ resentment. You were about to say that James Baldwin what - ?

WW: I was going to say that James Baldwin - I recognize James Baldwin mechanically and artistically as a great writer from my own judgment, but I cannot accept James Baldwin as the last word



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on Negro expression - what I feel. James Baldwin can speak for James Baldwin and what he feels, but that does not make him the architect of expression for the Negro community. I don't think there's any person who speaks for the Negro community - not even Martin Luther King, Jr. - I think he'd be the first one to say it. We are as individual as we are different, and we reflect a heterogeneity of attitudes and responses as does any group of people - white, black, yellow or brown. James Baldwin - you kind of intimated that he did not find any comfort in the character of Dilsey.

RPW: Southerners have an illusion - and they cling to it ~~and~~ desperately - and Dilsey is such an illusion that justifies the Southerner in saying, oh, everything is all right because she's so nice and she comforts me. I won't read the whole thing.

WW: I think a part of what he's saying may be true. Faulkner was a novelist - or maybe all together - he drew some of his characters from experiences that he had had. I am sure that these ennobling qualities that Dilsey had - and I'm not familiar with this particular book - I mean, I know the name but I've never read it - that she might have been the composite of qualities that a slave person could develop despite the slave experience, and this is what I am getting it.

RPW: That's what he's presenting -

WW: And I'm not saying that if I want to be a noble, make me a slave - that is not what I am saying. What I am saying is that in spite of, it developed in the Negro, which might have developed

otherwise and maybe at a more accelerated pace, but it did not kill his spirit, it only broadened his - the resiliency of the human spirit and it was by some accident or ~~fact~~ fortuitous circumstance that it happened - that it occurred in the Negro experience. In other words, it did a lot of bad things to him - to us, but it didn't desecrate us as did the Indian inflexibility, you see. In other words, if I had to choose between the two courses, I'd take the Negro's lot anyway and undergo the slave experience and survive, rather than be relegated to a reservation as has the Indian.

RPW: Yes. You were speaking of the heterogeneity among Negroes and among Negro leaders a moment ago - this is an interesting fact - most revolutions tend to move toward a single focus of leadership.

WW: Well, I have a little - maybe this explains it - I don't know - my attitude toward the revolution is that it has not quite gelled yet - it's finding its way, and I agree with you that any significant historical turn of events must move on the vehicle of personality - it does not move on idea alone - it must have substance, it must have personality, it must be substantive by a personality. I - my feeling is that the revolution is like a child who is taking its first few steps. A year ago I was saying we were just landing on the beach and digging in. I think Birmingham stood us up, and we're like a toddling child, because I think that when the revolution is full grown we're going to have such things as removing the prerequisite of literacy as a right to vote - and that's right



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around the corner - we're going to have a demand for an economic reorganization of our whole free enterprise system - to me that is the revolution full grown.

RPW: Now, to get back to leadership - is there a tendency toward not a single person now visible - even Dr. King who has become more the symbol than any other single person - but King does not dominate the whole impulse - there's a vast amount of energy in the movement - it is not - or even outside the movement there's random violence but he does not dominate - is there any logic in the situation which would lead toward the domination by a single personality? There always has been in a revolution. Or can you swing a revolution with a democratic control? Does that present a problem - the force of the -

WW: I would say no to the latter question, and say not necessarily to the former. Now, to be specific, what I am getting at is, I don't think there are rules for revolution, you know, that there is a possibility of a revolution occurring which doesn't conform to any of the other previous revolutions recorded in history. I think our span -

RPW: That's a good pragmatic view, anyway, isn't it?

WW: Yes. So I would not be dismayed if there does not emerge on the American scene in race relations one Negro leader who towers above all else.

RPW: It might be very dangerous, as a matter of fact.

WW: Yes. On the other hand, I think I might - I don't know - I

have a kind of reluctance to agree that Martin Luther King does not now dominate the scene more than any other single individual.

RPW: More than any other person, but not the whole scene. He doesn't dominate -

WW: Not the whole structure.

RPW: He doesn't dominate a great many factions and random feelings too.

WW: Well, let me ask you this - what do you think the Muslim following represents really?

RPW: Numerically?

WW: Yes.

RPW: I have no way of knowing. I read the papers and I read the books, the articles - it's all what I read - how do I know?

WW: Well, let us say, for instance, my feeling is that the Muslim movement and its so-called impact and its in race relations is almost nil. It's a spectre, a paper target that the white press has created. I say the white press because that's the only press that exists in a real sense. For instance, I have a serious question as to how strong they are with all of the fear that they strike in some people's hearts. I know in Birmingham they say they've had a temple there for ten years, and they have to scrounge around to get fifty people. Now, a movement that is no more vital than that in ten years, I have some question about. In Atlanta the same thing is true. The only place - the only place - and you can document it - the only place where Malcolm X can get a crowd is Harlem - that's - maybe Newark, because it's in the shadow of



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New York, but you get him anywhere else he's lost. Half - fifty percent of the Negroes don't even know what the Black Muslims are - they never heard of them - they don't know who Malcolm X is. But ninety percent of Negroes know who Martin Luther King, Jr. is.

RPW: Yes, I know that for a fact - I mean, that's beyond dispute. It's a question of what impulses are implicit in these appetites and angers, you see - an instinct for violence and revenge would be implicit - and have not dominated the idea.

WW: This is where I think a great many people have misjudged the real temper of the Negro. For instance, I would raise a question - who can best say what the temper of the grass roots Negro is - can Roy Wilkins say it? No. Jim Farmer? No. Whitney Young? Certainly not. Who is it that enjoys titular leadership of the Negro community, who really knows what the pulse of the central plain people are? The one man who has a following and who has the logical contact - even more than a man who moves at their level - who has any kind of programmatic thrust that ever touches them - and that's Martin Luther King, Jr.

RPW: Well, I should say that certainly in relative terms there's no denying that - that's clearly true. Speaking of any -

WW: What single man - let me press it - there is not a single Negro leader - not a single white leader, who touches as many people individually as does Martin Luther King, Jr. I took a six weeks' check, following - oh, I guess when we came out of Birmingham - in less than ten days' time, he personally - I mean, he saw hands

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and eyes and faces of nearly - of better than a quarter of a million people - there isn't anybody who commands the kind of response, individual physical response that he does. Now, I'm not even counting the compounded contacts that he makes when he's recorded his speeches and they play them over the radio, or if he's on television such as he was at the March on Washington. And I think this is unique in a man, something that goes by - it's so ordinary for us, that we are slow to detect it.

RPW: Do you remember this quotation from Mr. Wilkins? They - that is, SNIC, CORE, SCLC - furnish the noise, NAACP pays the bills for the bail and all the Negro advice and so forth, and of CORE and so forth - here today and gone tomorrow - there's only one organization that can handle a long-sustained fight.

WW: Do you just want my candid response?

RPW: Reaction - candid response - not your uncandid response.

WW: Off the record or on the record - I've got two -

RPW: Well, give me both of them and you have the script - you can - one background and one on the record - put them both here and we'll - you have the script anyway -

WW: Well, first I would say, I think Roy Wilkins - I know Roy personally, and I used to work under him for years until I got exiled to Siberia - let me go into the off the record response -

RPW: All right.

WW: The NAACP has become bureaucratic, or is bureaucratic - it has lost contact with the grass roots people - if it ever had it -



it has lost it. I worked within the structure of the NAACP ever since I was eleven years old, so I know it pretty well - I mean I'm not somebody on the outside looking in. I was branch president for five years in Virginia, reputedly one of the best branches in the nation per capita -

RPW: That's when you had a charge there - a pastorate -

WW: Yes, that's right. And I think I could pretty well document that whenever within the lines of the NAACP energetic and/or ambitious leadership begins to develop, you go to the guillotine. Why, I don't know, because it seems to me the life of any organization if it's going to exist in perpetuity, must have some transfer. But out of my own experience and what I - began to look around and see in other circumstances, I found it to be true. They have almost a kind of an organization of determinism and it's reflected in this statement - this is on the record, now - that the NAACP, because of its longevity, is the only organization. I cannot subscribe to that view. I think the discontent of the Negro takes many different forms. Here again I'm talking - this reflects the heterogeneity of the Negro - and the NAACP's program is not versatile enough to take within itself all of these different impulses. Now, the first thing I would say about Mr. Wilkins' statement in Arlington, Virginia, is that it was not factual. I remember specific instances when SNIC, to whom he refers, got involved in Mississippi, and the students go off sometimes without counting the cost. This is not because they are students,

it's the rebellious age of the human spirit. And in many instances, they have done things precipitatively which were good and in other instances they were ill-advised. But all of us make mistakes. In that instance in McCome, I don't remember, it was either \$20,000 bail or \$10,000 bail - whatever it was, Roy Wilkins called me personally and wanted to know could we help with the bail and they had appealed to us and we agreed on the phone that they would put up half and we would put up half.

RFW: You being SCLC?

WW: SCLC. This was back in 1961. In the Freedom Ride which he intimates, Roy is not completely honest at this point, in that he says NAACP and embraces a legal defense in education fund which is something altogether different. Even knowledgeable white people who are students of the revolution are not aware of this, and it was the legal defense in education fund that took up the cudgel of the freedom rides legally, and this is what they exist for. So they should have done it. Birmingham, which has been the biggest single confrontation to date that I know of, the NAACP does not exist in Alabama. I do not know of any single thing they did or paid save Mr. Wilkins' transportation from Tuskegee Institute over to Birmingham to speak, and back up to New York. Now, that is the only involvement I know of with them with Birmingham, and I know I can speak with authority because I'm the business head - I'm the man who handles the bills and O.K.'s the requisitions and this kind of thing. Any city he wants to name, there have been some instances where the NAACP branch has become involved or their



youth chapters have become involved with the assistance, openly or quietly, by SCLC or inspired by SNCC, goaded by SNCC, prodded by us, in which they have had some responsibility, but the job was being done under the aegis of the NAACP. And I think we should have to face the practical realities that in these civil rights organizations with the diversified attack now along the system, the one point at which there is sharp competition is fund-raising. Now, uniquely enough, even though we stay in the red, I think we have a broader outreach in fund-raising than any organization that exists, and this is because Martin Luther King is in it. He has a tremendous appeal.

RPW: I have seen it in operation in Bridgeport two weeks ago.

WW: Oh, yes. Well, then, you know exactly what I mean.

RPW: I have seen it elsewhere too, but that's -

WW: That was one evening's work, which was a rugged evening for him, when you consider his over-all schedule and the organizational responsibility he has. That was an \$8,000 night. Now, Roy Wilkins it would take - I don't know if he could ever get up a crowd that big to come hear him speak. He admits he's not colorful, he's not a symbol. This is the symbolism of Martin Luther King, Jr., and we practically translate it into meaningful support for his organization. There's a whole realm of untold stories about Martin Luther King, Jr., as far as his income - he has not accepted an honorarium, for instance, he raised in his appearances last year, raised better than four hundred thousand dollars for his organization, which was,

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oh, fifty percent of the budget or more, the budget expenditure, for which he got a dollar. He gets no personal income from this organization, but yet the stories persist, you know, about this man is making a mint, he's stashing it away - well, I think I know more about the personal finances of Martin Luther King, Jr., than any living person save his wife and secretary, and I know of more offers that come to him which are legitimate and which he has every right to accept, but because of his unique symbolism he is reluctant to do it. Many people do not know - and I don't know whether you want to hear it, but Martin Luther King, Jr., was born a wealthy man. He has no need, you know - no need exists.

RPW: I considered he was comfortable anyway - I didn't know -

WW: Well, I would say within the frame of reference of what the Negro community - our scale - you know, our scale is considerably lower, but with enough financial affluence not to ever have to hit a lick of work as long as he lived. Now, I could say that.

RPW: Going back to the matter of recent history -

WW: I want to be sure that I made clear that -

RPW: You made it perfectly clear.

WW: - first of all, Mr. Wilkins' statement was not accurate. It was said in a moment of evident pique when he - it looked like NAACP was being displaced by the new -

RPW: The same thing was said by the local president of the NAACP at Bridgeport while waiting for Dr. King's appearance, two weeks ago in Bridgeport.

WW: He said the same thing about Wilkins?



RPW: he wasn't there - I mean, the local president.

WW: And just to show you, if I may press this one point further - that same meeting Mrs. Anderson - I know her by name - because I - and this is a practice of Dr. King and of many of them - they can't get a crowd unless they use the name of the movement, and the fact is that King, Abernathy, Chelsworth and Walker are the principal names. I went to Bridgeport for an NAACP rally, for expenses only, to raise money for the NAACP. Dr. King is going to Las Vegas at the end of next month on a 60-40 basis to raise money - 60 percent for the NAACP. If they had Roy Wilkins out there they can't get \$25 or \$100 a plate for a dinner, but they can do it with Martin Luther King, Jr. He raises more money for other organizations than the people within the organizations themselves can possibly do. Now, we have a letter I believe - I haven't seen it but Dr. King remarked about it - the Gloucester Currant wrote to us, thanking Dr. King, that they had the largest membership that they ever had, and it was because of Birmingham - you know, the interest created. Jim Farmer of CORE said their income was strengthened - SNCC has benefited - any number of organizations. We were the only organization - the legal defense in education fund had one ad in the New York Times that cost \$110,000. We were the only organization who didn't send out a financial appeal on Birmingham, and you know why? because we were still over there doing a job - we just couldn't do it.

RPW: Some people say - people who are quite active and courageous

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in this movement, that Birmingham was a disaster.

WW: Well, without -

RPW: Charles Ellis, for one - I put it on tape.

WW: - first of all, he isn't knowledgeable about the Negro movement in the South. He's been away from Mississippi too long.

Secondly, you can't measure the results of a revolution altogether intangible results, and in the paper that I gave you - that it was a direction-turning event, not just for a single city but for the South and even the entire nation.

RPW: Was there a shock to your leadership in an outbreak of violence there?

WW: Not at all.

RPW: No shock? This is sometimes said, you know - even if the shock was great to your leadership there - after the bombing, when the mob broke, you know - I mean, after the bombing at the motel when the mob broke.

WW: You know what my shock was? I was on the scene in both instances.

RPW: I know you were.

WW: I was in the motel when it was bombed. My shock was that we were successful in containing it to what it was - that was my shock.

RPW: The containment?

WW: The containment. I really thought that city was going to blow itself off the map that night and the next day. There was enough provocation to warrant it. The other thing is - the reason why



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this assessment may come out - is, here again we're at the mercy of - and I don't think they'd do it with any malice - white press corps who interpret it - they can only see it through white eyes. They cannot distinguish even between Negro demonstrators and Negro spectators. All they know is Negroes, and most of the spectacular pictures printed in Life Magazine and in television clips, had the commentary Negro Demonstrators, when they were not Negro demonstrators at all. I could go through reams of pictures and identify for you pictures depicted as demonstrators and they were not demonstrators at all.

RFW: Spectators?

WW: Spectators. If I could share with a little intimacy off the record of what gave the movement - what built the Birmingham movement was something that was an accident that we parlayed into its most useful application. When we went to Birmingham, as - I don't know whether you know - five months ahead I had started in, at Dr. King's behest, preparing the community, organizing, mapping out the streets, et cetera. We had four hundred people when we came to town April the second who we knew were ready to go to jail for ten days apiece and we were going to stagger them through a period of time. On the second - on the first Sunday of the demonstration, which I believe was Palm Sunday, we had twenty-three people in the march, but you know how mass meetings are - they are, like, well, they last a little while, and we were about an hour behind schedule, and with the demonstrations that had begun that week, with 15 and 8 and 12 and 20 - the people who are free on Sunday - Negro

people in any Negro neighborhood - began to stand around and wait to see what was going to happen. Well, it swelled to about 1500 people - only twenty-two people marched - see - but they followed these twenty-two down the street and when the UPI took the pictures and reported it, they said 1500 demonstrators - twenty-two arrested. Well, the twenty-two or twenty-eight was all we had. So then we devised the technique. Well, this is the way we'll do it. We'll set the demonstration for one hour and delay it by two hours and let the crowd collect. Now, this is a little Machivellian, and I don't know whether I've ever discussed this with Dr. King - I doubt if I have - but, some people says I'm the Richelieu or something, you know - and it was the image of all of these people following just a handful and it was the spectators following upon whom the dogs were turned. It was only until three weeks later that the hoses were actually used on demonstrators per se, and that was only done one afternoon - isn't that interesting? But there were reports over and over again of -

RPW: The dogs, you mean - only one afternoon?

WW: No, no - the hoses -

RPW: One afternoon?

WW: One afternoon. After that, they saw that didn't stop them and they just started to use rented buses and pulled - buses of them and put them on buses. One afternoon - the Saturday before the truce, I remember particularly, out of which came some of the most graphic pictures - we decided, since they had been a little rock



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throwing on Friday, that we would not have any -

(end of tape)