

Project Title: James Farmer Lecture, Militant Resistance and the Harlem Riots
Speaker: James Farmer (JF)
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(class talking)

Voice off-camera: Go ahead.

JF: In the sixties, the Civil Rights Movement was essentially a nonviolent movement. They had Martin Luther King, who was a dedicated pacifist, who had accepted nonviolence not only as a tactic but as a philosophy of life—a way of life in principle. Then there were CORE [Congress of Racial Equality] and SNCC [Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee], who accepted it as a tactic which would unite pacifists and non-pacifists around acceptance of nonviolence as a workable tactic. Most of the people who were involved in the movement felt that violence was impossible as an alternative to nonviolence in solving the conflict situation of race relations in the United States.

There were other voices, however, that did not agree. There was the Nation of Islam, the so-called Black Muslims, led by Elijah Muhammad, and their chief spokesman—best-known spokesman, that is, was Malcolm X. Now, the Muslims did not preach violence per se, not aggressive violence, but they preached self-defense, and their rhetoric seemed to inspire violence. Malcolm thundered forth from platforms all over the country. “Attack no man, but if any man molests you, may Allah bless you.” And the packed auditoriums would thunder their approval back at him. Yet they did not attack, they did not use the guns which it was claimed they had gathered together.

There were others who were even more outspoken; there was Robert Williams down in North Carolina, who proposed violence as a solution to the problem of race. He was a collector of guns and he had many of them there in his home. His home was said to be an arsenal. I never

saw it. He was finally charged with kidnapping of a white couple; as the police were about to move in on him they were allegedly held as hostages. And after he had been so charged he left Monroe, North Carolina, and finally left the country by the way of Canada.

There were other voices, many less well known than those, who preached violence. Most of them, however, like Malcolm X and the Nation of Islam, preached only self-defense.

CORE—as I indicated earlier—was not a pacifist organization. We did not try to tell our members what to do when they were on their own, off of CORE demonstrations. They pledged themselves to the CORE discipline of non-retaliation and nonviolence while on CORE demonstrations. But if, let us say, a CORE member were walking down the street and were attacked by someone, there was nothing in the CORE discipline that spoke to what that individual ought to do in reply. That was left to him with his conscience and his God, what he did.

This came to a head down in Louisiana—Bogalusa—when some of the Black men informed me, as the head of CORE, that they were organizing to defend their homes. They were organizing a group they called the Deacons for Defense and Justice—deacons because they were all deacons in their church, their churches—and they were to defend themselves, they said, against the attacks of the Ku Klux Klan. The Klan had made it a practice in Bogalusa, as in many other towns in that and other Deep Southern states, of going on night rides. And those night rides involved having a caravan of cars loaded with Klansmen driving through the Black section of town and then firing their rifles and other guns into the Black homes. The Blacks, up until then, had not replied with violence. But the Deacons were pledged to return fire when the Klan fired. They told me that they were not asking for my permission, because it was not mine to grant them that permission. They were simply informing me, since CORE was very active in the town—as

in the whole state of Louisiana—and they wanted me to be aware of it. Well, my response was that when they were on CORE demonstrations they must pledge themselves to the usual CORE discipline and stick to it, but when they were off of CORE demonstrations, then they were on their own.

Well, the Deacons' self-defense ideology appeared to work. The Klan once rode through the Black community, firing into homes, and the newly organized Deacons for Defense and Justice members got their guns and returned fire, and the Klan drove rapidly out of that section and did not return. That ended the night ridings in Bogalusa, so far as I know. So the Deacons for Defense and Justice were organized, and there were other similar self-defense groups organized throughout Louisiana and other states.

Now, there was a mood of violence that was beginning to grow even as early as 1964 in the Black community. When I had to leave Plaquemine, Louisiana, in the back of a hearse—as I told you in a previous lecture—to escape from a lynch mob, riding in that hearse with me was a young CORE member, and at the end of the ride, as we arrived safely in New Orleans, he said to me, “Jim, we love you dearly, we’ll go with you through hell and high water, but if we ever have to go through a night like that again”—it was a night when the Black community had been terrorized by the mobs—“we will have hardware with us.” It was awfully hard to argue against that.

There were other defectors from the spirit of non-violence. Remember that Stokely Carmichael—who now has the name of Kwame Ture—had in the early sixties, been a dedicated nonviolent activist in SNCC, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee; so had H. Rapp Brown, who was his successor as national chairman of SNCC. Both of them worked in the Deep South and had gotten their heads cracked too many times by billy clubs and by mobs, and shed

too much blood, and finally came to the point where they rejected nonviolence and began calling for violence.

There were others of less articulateness, feeling the great frustration. Those were poor people in the streets, who were not members of the Civil Rights Movement, not acting in it, not members of any of the organizations. We must remember that the civil rights organizations, up until the March on Washington in August of 1963, were largely middle-class in membership. We recruited chiefly from churches, schools, fraternal and civic organizations, social clubs, and from friends of those who were already members. We did very little recruiting from the streets of the ghetto. The March on Washington was thus a middle-class demonstration. While it cut cleanly across racial lines—there were whites as well as Blacks in large numbers there. It cut across sectional lines; there were southerners and northerners, easterners and westerners there. It cut across religious lines; there were Protestants, Catholics, and Jews, and the spirit was a warm one, of friendliness and brotherhood. But I repeat: it was a middle-class demonstration, because the class makeup of the civil rights organizations, as opposed to the Black Nationalist organizations—the Nation of Islam's or Black Muslims' and a number of others—the civil rights organizations were basically middle-class. We realized that in CORE. We have been, throughout our history, from 1942 up until that time in '63, largely a group of means-oriented idealists, standing outside of the Black community, working on its behalf, working for it, to elevate, to solve the problems which afflicted it. But we were not really a part of it. We were not *in* that community. We realized that shortcoming.

It was Malcolm X and the Nation of Islam and other groups which were recruiting from the streets of the ghetto. They were recruiting from the prisons, they were recruiting from among dope addicts and prostitutes and others, and they were reclaiming these people. That was one of

the very positive things which they accomplished. They were making them strong family people and moral people. They were stressing what is known as the Protestant ethic: working hard and saving money and so forth. But they were recruiting from the streets; they were recruiting the poor, the untutored, the illiterate, and the functionally illiterate—the ones that most of the civil rights organizations had left out.

So I'm sure the other organizations recognized this, too. But I sent a directive out to the CORE chapters, urging all of our chapters—we had about, oh, 165 at our peak—urging them to establish their offices in the hearts of the ghetto: in the middle of Harlem, the middle of Watts, in the middle of the other ghettos of the large metropolitan areas, and to begin recruiting from the streets, from the young people there, from the poor, as well as from our traditional sources of members. And most of the chapters responded to that and began recruiting from the streets. Then the class content of our organization began to change. We found it becoming less middle-class, less dedicated to the means, the method. More dedicated to the end: that is, freedom at any cost, and freedom by any means necessary.

That tenet became a battle cry. It was therefore not surprising when, in the summer of 1964, the buildup of frustration among youngsters in the inner city led to an explosion of violence. First in Harlem, and then in successive summers and purposes: Watts, Hough—which is in Cleveland—Newark, New Jersey, and Detroit, and those riots were followed by riots of larger magnitude in the wake of the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

This was not a planned thing; I don't think any of those summer riots, of which you have no doubt read, were planned or organized by anyone. There was no strategy involved. No one sat down in a tent or a smoke-filled room and said, Now let's have a riot—this is the way to start. The frustration was there; the inner cities were powder kegs in the summer when it was hot and

people were out on the streets, especially since those youngsters were unemployed. There were no jobs. And they simply ate away at themselves in their bitter frustration, and the frustration turned easily into hatred. This was a powder keg waiting to be ignited. The spark that ignited it, in just about every case, was an incident of police action—real or alleged police brutality.

Let me tell you as briefly as I can of the Harlem riot. And I saw it firsthand—our national headquarters being in Harlem, in New York City, and so I lived in Harlem at the time of the riot. The spark was the shooting of a black youngster, a sixteen-year-old kid, by an off-duty white policeman. It was a group of youngsters who were teasing and playing with the so-called super, a superintendent of a building—really the janitor, or a maintenance man. He was watering what lawn there was there and he would squirt water at them, and they would run and yell. And finally one of them sneaked up behind him, jerked the hose from him, and squirted water at him. Then they dropped the hose and ran. An off-duty policeman, who some said had just come out of a bar—witnesses, eyewitnesses—who had his gun with him, as off-duty policemen often do. The off-duty policeman yelled, Hey! The youngster was running away, and he stopped and was shot—shot in the back. And the revolver was emptied into the kid. The kid was dead.

Eyewitness reports—which we got as affidavits, in CORE—say that the off-duty policeman then walked toward from the body and turned it over with his foot to be sure that the kid, whose name was Powell, was dead.

I called a press conference—really well-covered—and I said that I thought this off-duty policeman should be arrested and tried for murder. He thought I had called him a murderer. I'd come pretty close. I consulted with counsel before I'd made that statement. That was as close as I could come, legally. He sued me, but later withdrew his suit. His suit was worth something like a

million dollars, you know—write a check, maybe? (class laughs). Don't know whatever good it would do. But he withdrew the suit.

One night, while this was still in headlines—the Powell shooting—I got a call at two o'clock in the morning from the New York CORE office, which was located on 125th Street in Harlem. The call said, Jim, get up here fast. Harlem has gone wild. There's kids throwing bottles and bricks through plate glass windows, bottles and bricks are flying everywhere, and the cops are shooting like cowboys. I said, “Live bullets?” He repeated, “Live bullets.” Ricocheting off buildings.

So I went up there, and surely enough, there was the acrid smoke of guns in the air. And occasionally you would hear a bullet whining as it ricocheted off a building. The streets were fairly deserted, and I started up to the CORE office in Harlem—which was on the second floor, over a storefront—and I stopped and I saw a bunch of young Black men—oh, late teens, early twenties—walking down 125th Street in the direction of the CORE office; maybe fifty or more of them. Across the street from them, walking in same direction, were equally as many—perhaps more—city policemen, the so-called tactical police force of New York: the riot squad, with their battle helmets and large clubs, service revolvers and small firearms strapped to the ankles. They walked along, so this appeared to be two armies, eyeing each other as they walked along. One armed with real guns and live ammunition, the other armed with bottles and bricks.

I went up the stairs to the CORE office. The kids stopped—the kids were on the outside on the street—they stopped in front of the CORE office and the police stopped just across the street from them. I sent one of the young CORE members downstairs to mingle with the crowd of kids, to find out what they were talking about, what they were planning for their next move. He came back up very quickly. And you want to know what they talked about? They talked

about raiding the CORE office. Because, they said, You have white CORE members up here. And the slogan, in those terrible days, was “Get whitey.”

I'll stop for a second and say hate is contagious, and the hate that had been blazing on the headlines and the television screens of the Deep South—where heads had been bloodied, where fire hoses had been turned on women, rolling down the streets in the Birmingham demonstration, police dogs released on kids—this hate built up a counter-hate. And since the hate that they saw on the tube and read about in the paper, was white hate against Black, it produced in them a Black hate against white. They said, Get whitey! Get whitey! That became the slogan.

So he said they talked about raiding the CORE office. You've got white CORE members up here. Well, I called a quick meeting of the people there to decide what we're going to do. First of all, I said, we have to get the white women members of the Harlem chapter of CORE out of this CORE office. There's going to be a confrontation there. Everybody agreed to that, except the white women members (class laughs), who said, “We're members, too; we'll stay here.” But we overruled. But how to do that, with the kids out there at the front door?

We decided that what we should do is have me go out as a decoy (laughs). I went out to make a speech to the youngsters. And while their attention was drawn to me, then the women we got out with Black male escort to one of the CORE cars parked on the street, and taken home. The white men remained in the CORE office with the Black men and Black women.

I went down, elbowed my way into the middle of the crowd. The kids recognized me from the TV. They said, “You going to talk to us, Mr. Farmer? You going to talk to us?”

I said, “Yeah, I'm going to speak.”

They said, “Well, don't tell us about no nonviolence. We don't want to hear that blankety-blank! We don't want to hear that stuff! No non-violence!”

Well, I began to speak and they booed. Soon they booed very lustily. I spoke louder and the boos grew less loud. Then I began telling them what we were doing down South to fight segregation there—they booed even more. They didn't care about lunch counters down South, or restaurants there, or hotels; what did they care? That didn't put bread on their table or milk in the mouths of their baby sisters or baby brothers, or stop the roof from leaking, or the plumbing from being stopped up, or the rats from biting the babies. What did they care about what was happening in the South? So they booed. Ahhh! Boo!

Then I shifted and began talking about what we were doing in the North. The booing stopped, and they listened more. Then (snaps fingers) suddenly it occurred to me: why, we met yesterday—we had the committee meet with the [New York City] Deputy Mayor, Screvane—Paul Screvane. Mayor [Robert] Wagner was out of the country touring Europe, campaigning for reelection. So we met with Screvane. And then they listened. Their ears pricked up. “Then we made this demand, and this demand, and this demand, and that demand.” Then they began to applaud—at last I had them going along with me—and that we will not stop until we get an answer from Screvane. On that, yes, they applauded (claps hands). And I said, We will keep it up until we win.

Out of the corner of my eye, then, I saw the window of a car roll down and a microphone was stuck out. The next day, on the radio station, every hour, on the hour, they played that brief tape. CORE Director Farmer, addressing rioters in Harlem. We will keep at it until we win! (class laughs) Keep at it until we win.

Well, I said, there's only one thing you can do to help.

“What is it, Mr. Farmer, what can we do to help?”

I said, Get off the streets and go home.

They shouted in unison, “No! We'll go home when them storm troopers go home. They stay, we stay. They go, we go.”

Well, another plan came to me; that was a pied piper deal. Someone whispered the suggestion in my ear, and I said, (snaps fingers) Great. All right, line up behind me: let's march. My plan was to try to turn a disorderly riot into an orderly peaceful demonstration. Good trick if you can do it (class laughs). But it was a drastic attempt.

They lined up and said, “You going to lead us, Mr. Farmer? You going to lead us?”

I said, Yes! I'm going to lead you. Line up behind me. Line up in twos!

Then I sent a young CORE member across the street to tell the police what we were doing—tell the lieutenant what the plan was. We were going to walk until everybody should be tired and try again to disperse. Tell them, if we pass by your house, drop out and go home.

And we started marching. (claps hands to a beat) “We want justice, we want justice, we want justice.” They were watching. One fellow said, How many of you are out of step? Get back in step! (class laughs). We want justice. Whatever we did, it seemed to be working. When we turned up to go further north in Harlem, Amsterdam Avenue, several dropped out, went into those tenement slums, those walkups, those vast buildings. (claps hands) We continued to walk. And the police, the tactical force, came up behind us and began shooting guns. The marchers dropped to the ground, dashed behind cars for cover. I almost followed them—I was scared, too! Because bullets were coming off buildings and whining through the air. They were shooting at rooftops and windows.

I went to—walked up toward one—to the lieutenant. And four of these kids—kids, I say: nineteen or twenty—surrounded me. These were so called young punks: the underclass, who people say have no feeling, no compassion, no humanity at all, no remorse. They say they'd put a

knife in you as quickly as a butcher would in a side of beef. These four kids came up to me. One stood in front, one on each side, one behind. Shielding my body with their bodies. Covering my head with their hands, trying to protect my head from the flying bullets. Those kids have no feeling—no human feeling? That obviously was not true. They walked with me, this little rank of four around me, as we walked to the lieutenant.

I said, “Why did you start shooting?”

He said, “You tell those people to stop throwing bottles and bricks at us!”

“I didn't hear anybody throwing bottles and bricks until you started shooting.”

“You tell them to stop throwing bottles and bricks!”

There probably was—someone on a rooftop threw a bottle. Or a brick. And the tactical police force, not being as well-trained as they were supposed to have been, panicked and opened fire with their small firearms, emptied them, refilled, opened fire again.

Well, obviously there was no more I could do to stop the riot. I went to the CORE office and there we got out some CORE arm bands—orange armbands with C-O-R-E in blue—put them on CORE staff and CORE members, and sent them out on the street with stretchers to bring in wounded. And there were a lot of wounded. People lying in the gutters, on streets. Wounded from bullets and wounded from clubs—billy clubs. And if nurses couldn't bandage them up, they were sent to Harlem hospital.

Well, this went on for a couple of more nights, and then it was ended—it died down. I stood there in that room, looking out the window into the blackness, hating the hate which I saw, and the hate that had produced it.

One youngster who had been brought in on a stretcher, his head bloody, was put on the stretcher and one of the white CORE members went over to wash him off, to begin to begin the

process of bandaging him up. Finally he opened his eyes, looked at him, jumped up from the couch!

“Mr. Farmer! What you got this whitey here for? What's whitey doing here? I thought you trying to help us!”

I said, "I am. He's here to help you.”

“No whitey can help us!”

The kid, with the blood still streaming down his head, ran back down the steps.

Hate produces hate; it is contagious. Somewhere we have to stop that, it is certain. And that's what the movement was about, too. That's what King was about, and that was the importance of King, I guess. He preached a message of love.

The riots ran their course. People soon realized the stupidity of it: tearing down their own buildings and their own homes and creating a mess without resolving the conflict. But one message was clear, and that was that we would neglect and ignore the poor in our communities at our own peril. The movement then moved more forthrightly than ever before to bring into its midst those who were poor, even the illiterate. And hence the maximum feasible participation of them, of the anti-poverty program which came to be.

I think the movement's about to rise again. Frankly, I do. I've been encouraged by the demonstrations in front of the South African embassy, with the extent to which college students all over the country have involved themselves in, white and Black—well, you would expect the Black students, but white students have gone off here and gone to jail. Mary Washington students in jail. In front of the embassy. University students all over the country, they're involved in seeking to get their institutions to divest themselves of investments in South Africa.

Now we find more students volunteering to go down to Alabama and participate in attempts to get more Blacks registered and voting in the election, which is in process. Now, that is the duplication of Freedom Summer, 1964. So I would predict that before this decade of the eighties is over, there will be a rebirth of the movement, and a rebirth of the compassion exemplified by the era of Kennedy and King. Thank you.

(class applauds)

[end of recording]