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BLACK POWER AND THE DISROBING OF WHITE LIBERALITY

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From Atlanta to Chicago, from Los Angeles to New York City, the cry for black power is increasingly snuffing out all other cries from America's black citizens. Whether from the lips of a Stokely Carmichael with the intensity of deep passion or from the lips of a quiet, reserved professor, white America is hearing what it has struggled for so many decades to prevent — the cry for black power. The great majority of white people, a large segment of the American press, and even a goodly number of today's civil rights leaders would have us to believe that the cry for black power is not only irresponsible but also an incitement to violence. Therefore, they say, black power will be the defeat of the black man's common goal, which is acceptance by and integration into a society which is already his.

I, for one, challenge the validity and the accurateness of such assertions and assumptions. Before dealing with the question of black power itself and of white reaction I should state, however, very clearly the perspective out of which I speak. Obviously I speak as a white man, and what can I as a white say about black power, particularly where black power is the issuance of a passion and a desire formulated over years of denial and suppression. Being white I cannot totally identify with that passion or that desire, so it must be remembered that I speak about black power as a white to whites...indeed, as a white liberal to white liberals. I am not addressing the black man about black power. And if somehow my comments convey an attitude of objectivity and clarity, do not be deceived. Whatever objectivity and clarity might be noted in this address, it is not at all present in my feelings. Though my life began in an isolated coal town in West Virginia, it began all over again when the black man became a reality in my own conscience. Since that day, for me and others of my generation the black man has been THE issue around which most other issues of life have been considered, and to this day that issue is unresolved for me or the American culture. As long as some kind of resolution is not found by our individual or collective efforts, there can be no objectivity or clarity — only ambiguity.

In discussing The Negro Mood, a book by Lerone Bennett, senior editor of Ebony magazine, with a good Unitarian last week, I was quick to endorse his statement that whites as a group have served as a brake rather than an accelerator to the freedom movement. I was reminded that while that was true, the contrary was also true: that whites have sustained the freedom movement. Then my immediate reaction was that I could not see how both could be true. It was either one or the other.

My reflection since then is probably more accurate. Contrary assertions can be true, and this became utterly clear through the process of introspec-

tion. For if I as a white liberal am honest I must confront myself as a white person, and as a white I have been more than a mere innocent bystander while my white race has oppressed the black race. As a white I have sustained and nurtured that system which suppresses the black man. As a white liberal, I often exclude myself from those systems of oppression and suppression. I am, however, and will remain a white, a person who cannot eradicate all the myths about the black man that have been propagated by white America since the days of slavery. In my very gut there remains remnants of white America's hate and fear of black America; and yet I am a white liberal too, one who to some degree understands the plight, the passion and the pain of the black American in the midst of a hostile community. Though with distinguishable limits, his plight is my plight, his passion my passion, his pain my pain. Since that day when he became a reality for me I have learned from him. I spent two years in his own segregated school instructed and tutored by his professors. I have worked, worshipped, joked and drunk with him. I have known him in his home and in my home. Yet I am white and therefore I do not know him, his passion or his pain. There remains within me to this day an ambiguity and a fear of him. So two contraries can exist at the same time and both with considerable intensity. The perspective out of which I speak is not at all a clear perspective. It is plagued with contrary truths, with ambiguity, with guilt, and yet it is the perspective of a white who cautiously, cautiously seeks to enter into the real world of the black man, knowing that such an entrance will be forbidden because I am and will remain white.

Now to the question, what is black power? Before we can attempt to adequately answer the inquiry we first must distinguish between what some of us whites would like for black power to mean and what it means to the black man. Some whites would have us believe that black power is a racism in reverse and who, standing within the American tradition, black or white, will accept racism of any form? Even most of the racists of our day reject the notion that they are in fact racists. Clearly then, if black power is a racism, it is already or will be rejected by the American community. Others would have us believe that black power is the attempt and the desire to establish separate communities of black and white. Though there have been and are those, both black and white, who have sought separate communities as a resolution to the issue, they represented and represent now the extremist position. Recent political activity in this country has reaffirmed again the tradition that extremism has no place in American life. The Goldwaterites of 1964 are the moderates of 1966. Many of us would like to believe that black power is indeed and in fact a racism or a separatism, for as either of these we can easily reject it in the assurance that it will be rejected by the whole of our tradition. Methinks, however, that we wish too much.

For myself I can find no real evidence that the cry for black power is a cry emitting from racist emotions or separatistic desires. One can, I think, find an analogy between what so many would like for black power to mean and what so many Protestant Christians, and maybe even a few Unitarians, would like to have the cry "God is dead" to mean. There are many similarities between these two controversial issues. The selection of their particular emotionally loaded words to characterize their movements, for example, and the vehemence of the reaction by those with deeply vested interests. The majority of Protestants would have us believe --- and they probably do believe --- that the assertion of God's death is

really the assertion that morality is dead and that man is now turned loose to rape at will or that contemporary man is a hopeless and lost cause... only the worst of human beings believe that. But willing such meanings where they do not in fact exist is an attempt to dissuade people from further consideration, reflection or support.

To will such meaning to these kinds of utterances more often than not grows out of fear. "Fear of what?" is the question that few men dare to explore. The point is we ought to be very cautious in accepting at face value the meanings attached to black power by a white person, or for that matter by black men who represent the so-called Black Establishment. And incidentally, that Black Establishment is excellently treated by Bennett in The Negro Mood. But rather let us measure what we would wish or they would wish against the meaning attached to black power by its advocates. Is there any other honest evaluation? Stokely Carmichael, one of the leading proponents of black power, states its meaning quite simply. He says:

"Politically, black power means what it has always meant: the coming together of black people to elect representatives and to force those representatives to speak to their needs. We begin with politics because black Americans are a propertyless people in a country where property is valued above all. We work for power because this country does not function by morality, love and non-violence, but by power. Thus we determine to win economic effects. With power the masses can make or participate in those decisions and the making of decisions which govern their destinies, and thus create basic change in their day-to-day lives."

Myself, I fail to see how or why the issue of black power is purported to be so confusing. It seems rather simple. Here is a minority group in American history and life -- the black men -- that comprise over 10% of the total population. For their entire history in this country they have essentially had no voice, no representation, at those councils where their fate has been and is being decided. Though the struggle may be complex and difficult, the issue is simply the desire of the black man to make or participate in the decisions which govern his destiny. Does the white community really fail to grant the simplicity of this issue and desire, or does it singularly refuse to accept self-determination as applied to the black community of America?

It is no doubt true that black power has been the intent of the black man's struggle for all the preceding generations. Whether that struggle has taken place within the framework of the legal structure or an effort to end discrimination in education, employment and housing, or in the non-violent protest demonstrations, the end sought by all these struggles has been, in fact, the acquisition of black power...power which could be applied toward the black man's control of his own destiny.

In some sense, then, the cry for black power is neither new nor radical, and not just in the sense that no thing is ever new. There are many black men who maintain that this is what the whole business has been about anyway. Yet many of those who are aware of this continuity oppose, nonetheless, the cry for black power. Some call it, if you will pardon the expression,

yellow journalism, or more appropriately, white journalism. Black power, they say, used as a slogan is an attempt to incite fear and hysteria, that it is a badly appropriated phrase that threatens the security of already-made gains. Personally I find the phrase and its use both appropriate and useful. For too long in the American community we have sought and condoned the use of language which will not offend our sensitivities. We tolerate and even encourage a language which describes one thing while concealing the real thing. The pill seems to taste better if it can be coated with sugar. We have accepted such hokus-pokus from our politicians, our statesmen, our religious leaders and others in responsible positions. We have reached the point where language has little meaning these days.

We have our own particular way of dealing with those who would describe the issues of our time in clear, understandable and simple language. Such forthright speech is to risk the loss of respectability, and not many long survive that loss in today's world. Black power as an articulation of desire threatens the whole civil rights struggle with a loss of this respectability. But as a slogan or movement, black power, is, it seems to me, an honest statement...forthright, clear and simple. Even the black man's hesitation to tell the white man what he has really been after all these years and the white man's reluctance to hear it is something unique to this issue. It permeates the whole of our culture and must be shaken off if the significant issues of our day are to be anything more than garbled language.

There are those, however, who view the emergence of black power as essentially a new phase in the black man's struggle for his place in the sun. Previously, the argument goes, appeals were made to the white man's sense of justice, equality and love. Black power, to continue the analysis, is a new statement about the situation in that the black man now recognizes that the white community in America understands only one thing: power. There is, I am sure, some truth in this argument. We do understand power and we also fear it. Yet I am not at all convinced that the black man has ever been willing to rest his case on the white man's understanding of justice and love. Surely he has little if any evidence that we have any such understanding, particularly when it comes to our relations with him. Even Martin Luther King's appeal to the conscience of America was heard not so much because of the conscience of the white community but because of the power amassed by him in terms of the bodies he was able to put on the line. I prefer to think that power has always been the issue and not the quality of our understanding and commitments to justice or love. Thus black power may be the emergence of a new movement but if so, it is the movement from an illusionary ideal to the reality of our collective life which has its roots more in the display of power than it does in the noble concepts of justice or love. If this is so, then the language which conforms to reality is preferable over a language which camouflages that reality.

And now to consider the nature of white reaction to the cry for black power. There is little point in documenting the impact of the so-called white backlash in the various communities of this nation, whether Southern or Northern. The cry for black power has indeed resulted in the loss of support from the white community for the black man's struggle. There is little question about this. Black power no doubt had its role to play in Congress's refusal to pass the open housing bill, in the attempt of so many

communities to decrease welfare expenditures, wrongly believing that most of such expenditures go to the black man, and in the new resurgence of radical right propaganda which can now make a more convincing case for the Communist use of black shock troops. Incidentally, this despicable literature is now finding its way into the Schenectady community. Black power, we can be sure, will provide more receptive white ears to such trash. So there is little point in derying the backlash, little point in attempting to say that the cry for black power has made no substantial difference. It has made a difference and will continue to make a difference, increasing white resistance to the black man's demand for that which his country has long promised him and hastening that day when the depths of black and white feelings will openly confront each other.

While the white backlash in its more violent forms finds expression in lower middle and lower class whites, the middle class white liberal has also reacted. The measure of this kind of backlash is found in the withdrawal of liberal congressmen's support to the open housing bill and the withdrawal of the white liberal's money from the civil rights organizations, and the altering attitudes from "I'm with you" to "I was with 'em," an attitude which I have encountered so often during these last few months from the white liberals.

White liberal reaction, it seems to me, forms around two issues: power and violence. Regarding power, few white liberals are willing to consider the issue to be at its core the question of power. As someone has observed, this is the white liberal reflection simply because the white liberal is within the power structure. From this vantage point within, the issue is then one of justice. Erroneously founded on the supposition that the white community will eventually grant justice to the black man, the white liberal views black power as a basically misguided tactic lamenting the loss of support from the community, which does in fact have the power within the white community. And yet most white liberals, except for the most idealistic ones, are seemingly aware of the notion that all political community and justice are achieved by coercing the anarchy of collective self-interest into some kind of decent order by the most attainable balance of power and that there has never been a scheme of justice in history which did not have a balance of power at its foundation. This awareness extends into the white liberal's understanding of government, management-labor relations, and other areas of the social order. If this is so, and I believe it is, why does the white liberal believe that in America's racial question, power is not the issue? Why does he often believe that some semblance of justice will be attained without black power? Why does the white liberal rest his case on the conscience of the white community? The "why" of these questions is critical to the white liberal. Maybe the "why" lies not in the issue of power but in the real issue of black power.

The other issue in the white liberal's reaction to black power is that of violence. Again, I do not believe that there are many ideological pacifists among us. Therefore, any reaction on the grounds that power in the hands of the black masses and the implicit or explicit implications of violence cannot be categorically rejected by the non-pacifist white liberal. That is, it cannot be rejected with any integrity or honesty. America, white America, has never rejected violence as a means of either domestic or international power. Though it may be true that white America has never sought to obtain its goals with initial pleas to violence, it has never rejected

violence as an often useful and necessary means to obtain a particular end. Such a rejection was not present at the founding of this country and it is not present now. Can a community which has turned to violence so often in the past now seek to impose an ideological restraint on another community within its midst?

When I first began to prepare for this statement, I intended to say that if and when black power came to mean a call to violence, then of necessity it would have to be rejected. Deeper reflection again would cause me now to say that if the black man in his own oppressed life and desperate judgment can find no recourse but violence in the fight for self-determination, then I as a white liberal cannot reject him nor impose upon him the restraint of non-violence. To be sure, I can hope and work for a saner resolution to the conflict between black and white in this country but I cannot say that violence is not a live auction and possibly the only means available at this point to obtain the end of a higher degree of social justice.

In our own building of the systems of life we, the white community, have always kept open the alternative of violence. Up until this moment, anyway, I have endorsed non-violence as a tactic, more tactic than principle, a tactic which is operative in this country. It has seemed that non-violence would be most likely to secure results here, and yet for South Africa violence as a tactic, violence seems without any question in my mind about the only live alternative available there for the establishment of a social order. To be sure, in my own mind and will strained the possibility that the violent alternative may be the only alternative available for the black man in America. We all had hoped that the situation would not develop to this. We still hope, but our hope cannot counter the fact that we are not the black man in the midst of an oppressive white community. We are indeed the oppressor.

As in the issue of power, we object much less to violence than we do to black violence. All of this is to say that the white liberal's negative reaction to black power cannot be, lest we deceive ourselves, on the issues of power and violence. Rather our reaction is to the fact that it is a black power and a black violence. The core of this reaction is not a fear of power or dread of violence but a fear of black men who might gain power, and the dread of black men who might issue the kind of violence that has been historically reserved in this country for the white man.

This brings us finally to the crucial significance of black power for the white liberal's community, which is the disrobing of our own liberality. I believe it was in Martin Luther King's letter from a Birmingham jail that he set forth his rationale of the non-violent tactic. Essentially he was saying that the non-violent peaceful submission of a black body to the cruel blows of his enemy must reveal to the enemy, to him who dealt the blow, something of his own despicable character. This recognition is of necessity the first step toward any reconstruction. If hundreds of bodies can be submitted and if these bodies can be those of innocent children, the recognition is all the more complete. And as we all know, it was the tactic that was completely successful in the South and to some degree in the North. But the intervening years have hardened our sensitivity to this. Even worse, the white liberal,

you and I, have long since convinced ourselves that the seeds of fear and prejudice have been routed from our beings. Black power and the ensuing departure of the white liberal from the struggle, even from those levels where the white liberal can participate, allows us the opportunity to see ourselves as we really are, a condition so aptly described by Bennett.

He says the white liberal is fleeing the truth of his -- of our -- situation. He is seeking personal salvation, not justice. He is moved not only by a vision of the future but by a horror of the past, not by the Negro but by himself. What moves him is guilt. What the liberal seeks is his own lost innocence. What the liberal wants, paradoxically, is for the Negro to tell him that he is not as white and as cold as snow.

Such an assessment of the white liberal by the Negro is pathetic, particularly in light of the fact that the white liberal is about the best America can offer the black man at this time. What cuts even deeper is the awareness of the necessity for black power, an awareness that not only has the white liberal failed in his efforts to obtain some justice for the black man, but also that the black man does not trust even the white liberal, if indeed he ever did or could.

It could be that for the success of the black man's revolution for justice he will have to cut his ties with you and me. He may even have to sever his ties with the Black Establishment. Such moves will isolate the mass of black faces even further from those of the white. Such moves will heighten the tension and increase the possibility of violence between the races. But out of these risks and dangers, I am convinced, there will emerge a confrontation between black and white which will allow for a more just resolution than exists at the present time. One of the main ingredients of our failure today has been just this -- a lack of confrontation. Black power, I believe, will hasten that confrontation which will have to precede any resolution. Black power presents to the white liberal community another opportunity...let us hope not the last...to see ourselves as we really are. This consciousness hopefully will enable the white liberal to lead white America in the realization of her noblest dreams for an open and equitable society.