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# A WHITE AMERICA IN A NON-WHITE WORLD

BY NOEL DAY

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A White America in a Non-white World

Editorial Note: This address followed immediately upon comments on the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee by Peggy Dammond, former staff person of SNCC. In introducing him, Robb Burlage, the moderator, commented upon the growing relationship between various movements, and pointed out that Noel Day was wearing a SANE button although his primary orientation was with civil rights.

I didn't sit down and prepare any sort of speech or do any real kind of research for today. I would like to begin by saying that as far as I'm concerned, this button I am wearing is not a SANE button. It's a button for peace, but I wear it in this direction, with the diagonal lines pointing down. I've also been told that different groups wear it in different directions, and the way in which you wear it is supposed to signify whether you're for unilateral disarmament, bilateral disarmament, or simply your whole approach and philosophy. I once saw a fellow who had two of them aimed at each other, on the cuff of his dungarees, and I wasn't quite sure what he was. But I wear it this way really because it has a significance to me this way. I saw on a scroll once, that this symbol is a medieval symbol for man, which seems to me to be the most important thing.

And today what I'm going to talk about generally is man. I'm just going to comment and jump around, and probably hit on a lot of things, including semantics, the world of nations, the United States, this thing we call the Negro problem, the individual, peace, growing up in Harlem, what James Baldwin called "the blues", what I call the blues of everybody, mental health and mental illness, opinion-making, Cuba, feelings and fears with regard to the student movement, and lots of other things. I hope that we end up with some sort of co-gency. I would say that the one unifying factor that will run through all of this is that they are all just my opinions, and my feelings about them.

I was very happy, for instance, when Peggy mentioned (and Peggy and Paul gave me all kinds of introductory leads, which were very nice) that as far as she is concerned, there is no North or South, that these are artificial boundaries and artificial limits that have been set within our society. I would like to take that a step further and say that as far as I'm concerned there is no United States as opposed to the rest of the world. And in speaking on the topic of a "white America and a non-white world", I would like to say that I feel that these are artificial boundaries as well.

Let's define some of our terms. It was Robb Burlage who said that Bob Moses in Mississippi had said that the Negroes don't think too much about Africa, they're too busy thinking about the sheriffs. In one sense this is true; in a very immediate sense. In the same sense that we go through every day thinking about our next class, or our date that evening, or what we are going to have for dinner, or whether we are going to get the salary increase. These are very definitely immediate concerns. And yet at the same time, and perhaps all too often, we are thinking, in an unrecognized sense, about other things. I think that the Negro can't avoid thinking about Africa, whether he articulates it as Africa, or whether he articulates it as something other than his immediate self and his immediate environment, or whether

he is capable of articulating it at all. He is still thinking about something which for now and for the purpose of our discussion we can call Africa.

It was very interesting, and I think that it demonstrates that even the people who make up SDS programs can fall into some of our familiar western traps, that the topic of this talk was titled "A White America in a Non-White World." Because I feel that here we have set up one of our familiar western dichotomies. We have East and West, capitalist and communist, white and non-white. It is because of this dichotomy, I feel, that every Negro thinks about Africa, and Asia, because this is not the Negro's dichotomy. This is a dichotomy which western society has imposed upon him, and infers or implies certain other things.

First of all, it implies that whiteness is a standard, against which all things are measured, because you have white and non-white and it implies that it is a standard which should be striven for. When you say white and non-white, it's set apart with a value judgement attached to it. It's the same thing in one sense as saying good and non-good. It does not say white, red, brown, yellow, black, blue, green, or anything else; it's just all white or non-white. In the western mind the Negro, the African, the Asian, and whatever else we lump into this non-white thing. I'm very confused myself by exactly what race is, since we have so many different conceptions of it and we seem to choose different ones from time to time for purposes of convenience more than anything else. If we have a new sociological or anthropological concept that we're working on, we also work out a new concept of race that supports it. But there is this kind of identification, of white and non-white, and this identification has been forced upon us. It has not been recognized for a long time by the white world. It has been recognized, I think, a little longer by the non-white world.

It had not really been articulated in any sense, I do not believe; in any really effective sense--effective in that it made the white world begin to notice it--until 1954, when several nations met in Colombo, Ceylon. Burma, Ceylon, India and Indonesia met at that time and came up with a statement as to their beliefs. Included in these statements was a statement supporting the seating of Red China in the United Nations, and an expression of the feeling that the Red Chinese were the proper heirs to the seat in the United Nations; a plea to the Geneva Conference with regard to stopping the war in Indo-China; and, interestingly enough, because here are four southern Asian nations, a statement on colonialism in Morocco and Tunisia, two African nations on the extreme northern section of Africa.

This identification, I think, bridged these things. This identification has been amplified, perhaps, by the fact that the lower end of our dichotomy, the non-white, have also been those people who have traditionally and historically been subject to the domination of colonial powers, and have been oppressed by the white world. The west, I feel, has sort of been betrayed by its own technological advance, particularly in the field of communication.

because as long as we could keep the people in India from knowing about the people in Tunisia, and the Negro in Albany, Georgia, from knowing about the man in Thailand or Ceylon, we were pretty safe.

In this discussion, I'm speaking as an American, because fortunately or unfortunately I have to identify as an American, since this is the only country I have, and I don't speak any foreign languages well enough to go any place else, as much as I might like to sometimes. As these people began to learn about each other, they also began to understand the community of their interests. In 1955, these same four nations, as a logical outgrowth of their meeting a year earlier, called together what has become known (infamously in the United States) as the Bandung Conference. And they asked a number of independent African nations, such as Egypt, Ethiopia, Liberia, Lybia, and some of the nations which were at that time still dependent, North and South Rhodesia, Nyasaland, the Gold Coast, and the Sudan, and eighteen Asian nations to attend this conference.

The stated purpose of the conference was to promote Asian and African good will and cooperation; to discuss Asian and African political, social, economic, and cultural problems; to discuss the comity of problems of racialism and colonialism; and to consider their possible contributions to world peace. As I'm sure all of you remember, the convening of this conference threw the western world into a panic. Some typical American newspaper comments are coupled as follows: "This could be the beginning of an upsurge of racial hatred." "The Bandung Conference is the gravest crisis in the destiny of the earth's population, for Kaiser Wilhelm, who popularized the phrase 'yellow peril', was right in foreseeing a crisis that now threatens in a more violent form than he envisaged." "An African-Asian combination turned by the communists against the west." Another newspaper intimated that there was a likelihood of a communist invasion, immediately after the Bandung Conference. Almost all of our newspapers with the exception of such papers like the Worker and the National Guardian and a few others, saw Bandung as a two-horned threat, one horn being communistic, the other horn being racialistic. The three-quarters of the earth's people that are non-white were going to rise up and smite us hip and thigh. And we were afraid.

Here again we are dealing with another of our little dichotomies. Bandung could not have any value in itself; its value was to be determined in Cold war terms, whether communistic or western dominated. There's no possibility that it can go anywhere between the two, like the little boy riding his tricycle in the cartoon which many of you may have seen -- the one where two men are opposed to each other, one "I'd rather be dead than Red," and the other "I'd rather be Red than dead". And the little boy on his tricycle, who's just cycled between them, with his little sign that says, "I'd rather be." Well, we are unwilling this kind of alternative to the Bandung Conference. We are unwilling today to offer this kind of alternative to the nations which we call "emerging nations." I have some objections to this term. Certainly they were formerly submerged, but they aren't emerging. We're just beginning to see them, that's all. You know, they're not sprouting out of nothing. They've been there. In many cases,

they've been contributing to the world since long before western civilization was making substantial contributions to the world. We're just beginning to look at them.

We're beginning to look at them in many ways, because we're afraid of them. And we're afraid, perhaps, that we might have to pay for some of our past sins. This is a good Christian context to put it in, and we are, after all, a very Christian people. I am reminded here of the applause, the spontaneous applause, which followed one statement of James Baldwin's in his recent speech at MIT. When James Baldwin said, "I do not support the Black Muslims because I can no more support black superiority, or ideas of black superiority, than I can ideas of white superiority", there was an immediate wave of spontaneous applause. I thought about this, and when I went home after the lecture, I made about five pages of notes on what he'd been saying, possibly for a future article on Baldwin. This was near the end of the lecture, and falls on about page four, about halfway down, on my notes. I was very tired, probably tired enough to begin to be honest, which is a very difficult thing to be in this world. (And it's even harder to be honest before groups like this, where people think like you do. Because it's frightening to see the feelings that are reflected in them at times. And they are your feelings, that you don't want to look at in yourself, but when they bounce off of someone else, you have to look at them.) As I made a little note on this, I jotted down in parentheses under it, "Is it possible that people applaud at this because they are afraid of the possibility of black superiority, and of the Negro, or the non-white, being in the position in the world that the white has held for so long?" I think that there is a lot of validity in this quote. I'm with Baldwin, however, in saying that I hope this doesn't happen.

It's not out of altruistic reasons that I hope it doesn't happen. I hope it doesn't happen because I would hate ever to be in the position that the white is in today. And I would hate to have to carry this load around within myself. As a Negro I suffer from certain forms of paranoia, which I feel most Negroes suffer from in this country. But I wouldn't have to suffer from the severe personality conflict that most whites suffer from: the adherence to the American creed on one hand, and the way in which we live on the other, and the constant strain that we're in between these in trying to pull things together in our lives. And the impossibility of doing so for most white Americans--actually, for most whites in this world.

I was at a seminar, a couple of nights ago, with a Finnish psychiatrist named Arn Seroa, who is writing a book called The Voice of Illness. At the meeting he said that he started his professional career soon after World War II, when he was assigned as a psychiatrist to work with former concentration camp victims. He had these people lined up: there were lines of prisoners; and there were lines of social workers and psychiatrists and psychologists, and so on, sitting behind long tables receiving these lines, interviewing them and filling out forms and so on. Seroa said that all of a sudden he looked up, and in the eyes of one man, he saw that this man was thinking, "These people are no different from the Germans. They've lined us up, they're interviewing us, and then they're going to categorize us and pigeonhole us, and decide who is capable of manual labor and who isn't and who should get this and who should get that, and so on. And this is really no different." Seroa then applied for, and received,

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permission to seek volunteers from among these victims, to set up a "concentration camp of health," in France, called L'Eau Vie. He did this, and the camp operated for about three years. It was constructed in every possible way to be the opposite from the concentration camp, physically as well as spiritually. Unfortunately, he cannot really talk about L'Eau Vie, because all of them took a pledge when the camp was disbanded not to speak of it or write of it.

And yet I'm sure his experiences there are reflected in his kind of thinking, and in his book. Basic to his thinking on mental illness is a belief that the illness of the individual reflects the illness of his society. That is, the person who is out in Mattapan tonight is a reflection of our sickness here. And here means all around Boston, and not only in this room. And I emphasize that "only." Seroa feels that only as we, the community of man, can begin to participate in the illness of the individual, and listen: sort of ream out our ears and our hearts, and listen to what these people are saying to us, only then are we going to begin to find some societal help.

Now, this pertains to a number of things. I think it certainly pertains, in a sense, to the peace movement, or what we call the peace movement, because sometimes it just doesn't move. Everyone who is involved in this movement, I'm sure, at some time or another, in some demonstration or another, has overheard the comments of passersby to the effect that we are sick. And I'm sure that you've heard this or read it in other sources. Either you're a bunch of communist intellectuals (which was one comment I overheard at the last demonstration on the Commons, and that was a very interesting sort of thing, too, that we might consider at some other time, to ourselves. You know, that in order to be a communist you must be an intellectual and in order to be an intellectual you must be a communist.) Or, you're malcontents, which, despite its negative loading in our language, is an appellation which we should certainly wear with pride. Or they're sick, or they're people who just couldn't make it, you know, like that guy there would have liked to have been president of AT&T, but he couldn't, so he joined the peace movement. In one sense perhaps only as our society can be brought to listen to our voice is there going to be any effective change. But at the same time we have to listen to theirs.

The people who were pictured on that SNCC newsletter (and jail cameras seem to have a different sort of lens than ordinary cameras, because they always make you look sort of desperate) have also been considered sick, I'm sure. Yet perhaps they are a voice we should begin to listen to. When I said that the Negro is a paranoid, I meant this: societies not only reflect their illnesses in individuals, but I feel they also tend to define the types of illness that occur. And so there are many of us walking around the streets who are possibly much more paranoid than the woman who feels that Krushchev is sending messages through her bedsprings, and thus is hospitalized. Paranoia just isn't as recognizable, and we don't talk about it as much, except with other Negroes. It's not as identifiable and it's not as visible. But I know that, as a Negro, I am always wondering (even here in the North, because I have never really been South) at what point am I going to meet this rebuff? In one sense, I feel it's much more insidious here in the North, because in the South certain ground rules are laid down. You know that if you do this, then you're going to have to face that. In the North you don't have these things. You know, everything is good and everybody is equal, and everything is open to everybody.

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If I can come back to this in a second, I'd like to refer to James Baldwin, who, in his speaking and in his writing, has often talked about how hard it was to grow up in Harlem. He's talking about it from a very special viewpoint. He is really saying, how hard it is for the uneducated lower class Negro to grow up in Harlem. This is no doubt the truth. And yet I have often considered whether it isn't even a little harder, in many ways, for the middle class Negro to grow up in Harlem. I grew up in Harlem. I really like Harlem. There are lots of good things about it. It's got perhaps more life than any community around Boston, more than any other community in New York with the exception of the East side and the lower East side. There's blood in Harlem, and there's blues and there's pain, but there's also music and love and joy, and it's all sort of undisguised, and therefore sort of beautiful. But the middle class Negro growing up in Harlem or in any place else is told in his family (and within the select small group, the small and safe group of people within which he moves, as well as in his schools and on the radio and TV and so on) that to be middle class is good: and he accepts this "American creed," and he accepts the American ideal.

So I was really an adult, about 20 or 21, before I first came up against prejudice, in a small town in upstate New York where I went to go skiing one weekend. Having only skis and boots and a knapsack, and no car, I took a Greyhound bus. After I'd arrived and checked into a hotel, I was told about two hours later by a state trooper who knocked on my door that I'd better be on the next bus, because they didn't want Negroes overnight in their town. I think it was more of a profound shock at twenty-one than at seven, or six, or five.

I'd say the most recent confrontation with this was in Harvard Square, at Elsie's restaurant. Elsie's has good sandwiches, and I was on my way to a meeting of the Friends Service Committee, and I stopped in Elsie's for lunch. They have a counter with stools, and they also have a shelf against the window for when the stools are filled. I got my sandwich and I was standing at the shelf, which was also crowded, but there was a small open space where I was eating my sandwich. I had asked the guy on one side for the mustard and was looking up and looking around, not really thinking of anything except how good the pastrami was, when a voice to my left said in a very deep Southern drawl, "I think you're standing just a little bit too close." I was sort of amazed, because there I was in Harvard Square, in Elsie's, eating pastrami, on a very ordinary day, and I didn't know for a minute what he said. I thought maybe I was standing on his foot or something. Then it came clear to me and I was hurt, and not being non-violent, my first impulse was to throw him through the window. Then I decided that I really didn't want to go to jail for that, that if I was going to go to jail sometime, I wanted to accomplish something more than just throwing a guy through the window. Because I could possibly go back to Harlem and get drunk and get in a fight, and do that and not be arrested. So I only said to him, "you know, well then, I suggest you move." Which gave me about five minutes of feeling superior, and then I went back to being angry because I hadn't thrown him through the window. I'm not sure why, I haven't analyzed all of that yet.

But it means that for the Negro, each day when he ventures out of his house, and out of his neighborhood, be it Harlem or Roxbury or wherever, he goes downtown for his daily confrontation with "the man." The man, in this sense, being the white man, whom he works with and under and for, and who he is surrounded by in a sense. He unconscious-

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ly pulls a little shield around himself and wonders "is it going to happen today, and how is it going to happen, and what's going to be said, and how am I going to react to it?" The only thing that he does know is that it's going to happen. It just always seems to happen just at that point when he has let down his guard a little. But it's going to happen.

And so we are paranoids, and in one sense we also have split personalities, because we have so many lives. The life which we live within ourselves, and the life which we live with other Negroes, and the life which we live with the world. Within the "life that we live with the world" there are also many other lives. There are the lives that we live with the world or with those individuals in the world who have almost won all of our trust. They never quite do, but almost win all of our trust. There are the lives with those individuals whom we're still testing. There are the lives with those individuals that we've just met, through all of the gradations through to relations with those individuals that we don't want to be with and who don't want to be with us.

This is an attempt to give you some personal insights. Now, what's happening here in this United States, and in the world? We're seeing the rise of a new group in this country, with an idea that has threatened the United States once before, with Marcus Garvey. But Garvey was pretty easily disposed of. He was just thrown in Federal Prison in Atlanta, I believe, on a fraud-by-mail charge, and his movement was effectively broken up. Today we're dealing with a group of people called the Black Muslims, and this country is frightened of them.

One very interesting thing about the people who are scared about the Muslims. They're the same people who are scared by the communists, and they're the same people who are scared about the peace movement, and they're the same people who are for armament, and for nuclear war, and they're the same people who are for so many causes that we call conservative, and against so many causes that we call progressive. They're the same people, and they're wearing a lot of different hats. Maybe it's about time we began wearing a lot of these different hats too, and have rows of buttons up and down us. And then the peace movement will begin to connect with the voter registration people, and with the sit ins, and then we'll pull all these things in together and understand that we have some common destiny, and that we can't work in one thing without being concerned about the other.

But our administration, and the other people I have mentioned, who are in this same coterie of people that are in the vanguard of all these conservative--if not extremely right--organizations which have these ideas, unfortunately also have a good part of the power in the country. Our administration and the people with power--because I am not sure how much power our administration has (I suspect that they have a lot less than we tend to feel that they have, or hope that they have on the basis of our constitution)--are scared about the Muslims. Scared to the extent that an FBI man came to my office about two weeks ago to ask my secretary why she had visited the Muslim temple on six different occasions. And to ask me why on several occasions I had been seen in the company of Louis X at such and such a place on such and such a day, and was it true that in the Muslim temple such and such happened. Or "you don't need to tell us that this is true because we know it, but who are the people involved and so on? And do you know that they are planning to overthrow the government and that they have guns hidden and that



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they've lots of stuff?" What he said wasn't as important as the fact that he came, and was scared about this, just as we were scared about the Bandung Conference.

We are caught in a fantastic conspiracy to defame the Muslim movement. Again, I'm not a Muslim, I couldn't be a Muslim because I disagree with so many of their conclusions. At the same time I do not dispute the truth of their statements or many of their facts, and at the same time I say that I think they're doing a pretty wonderful job in the Negro community. A job that no other organization has ever adequately done. When I say no other organization I mean churches or white organizations or white liberal organizations or Negro liberal and moderate organizations, etc. One thing that the Muslims have done for the Negro liberal organizations is to suddenly make the NAACP awfully respectable in the South, because the NAACP is now known as a moderate, whereas a few years ago they were the extreme radicals.

I think the Muslims have done good things. We're seeing a real campaign to defame them, to change facts, to hide facts, through most of our organs of mass communications--newspapers, TV, radio. The fourth estate seems to have a lot of power in our government now. I think newspapers influence policy. Not merely report it to us, but have a real influence on it, and that we are being consciously (it's frightening to say it, but consciously) made into a nation of unthinking, accepting, unquestioning, fearful people, who are ready to jump up and fight for our nation at any time. We're being propagandized, we're being brainwashed. It is always a joke to me whenever I come across a reference to Communist brainwashing in the newspapers and magazines. Because I think that as a nation we have been more effectively brainwashed than any other people in history, whether they've been hypnotized or put under sedation. It's happened to us so insidiously (I think this is the kind of thing Paul was talking about when he was talking about it not being a question of moral assumptions, it's a question of categories of thinking): we have been forced to think in certain ways.

Even those of us in this room have found it impossible to escape from certain values that have been implanted in us. The other night, in speaking to a group of Harvard students who are going to be volunteering at our agency, I raised a little hypothetical situation which required an interpretation of democracy in how the situation had to be handled. We went around the room, and the disparity between our definitions of democracy was amazing, even though we all supposedly live in it and breathe it and eat it and wear it and have had it since birth. We can't get out of some of the ruts that we're in. It's only with groups of people like those in Albany, Georgia, or McComb, Mississippi, that there is a chance that, by exerting a great deal of effort, by tearing ourselves apart, by killing ourselves in one sense (and I think that in Charlie Winfield's letter there was a possibility of physical death, but there was also a possibility of another kind of death), and only as we tear ourselves apart, and begin to uproot almost everything we've learned, everything we've been taught to think, every way in which we've been taught to think, that perhaps we can make some real progress.

I'd like to close, since I talked longer than I'd intended to, as I usually do. The one thing which frightens me terribly about the student movement is that it wants equality, and that it's going to stop when it gets equality, and that it essentially has what we might call bourgeois aspirations. When it gets equal with middle-class Americans and has everything that is available to middle-class Americans or will

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be available to middle-class white Americans, it will peter out like the labor movement did. And we'll still be lost.

I really feel in an enviable position now. Because as a Negro, I am convinced that I am a member of a group which, in a sense, has the salvation of America in its hands. And only as this is completely exploited, by both races, and by the rest of the world, and by all of the other non-white people of the world (because I feel that we share this identity), are we going to perhaps get the world that we want.

