

“BLACK RACISM SCARES ME - AS MUCH AS WHITE”

By

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assistant to New York's
Governor Nelson Rockefeller**

■ I recently watched Adam Clayton Powell on television addressing his Abyssinian Baptist parishioners with one of his impassioned sermons. Suddenly, dramatically, he stopped speaking and pointed to a picture of Christ in the windowpane. “Take that white face down,” he cried. “Take that white face down.”

Adam Powell has been one of my favorite civil rights spokesmen over the years, but that's where he lost me completely. Sure, Christ doesn't necessarily have to be white; he could be black or yellow or green. But if you believe in God—as a preacher like Powell obviously should—then that skin color shouldn't really matter one way or another. Racism has no place in America, let alone the church.

And that is what's worrying me, this attitude of Adam's that a lot of blacks find so appealing. People have fought us just because they hated our skin color, and now we're turning around and doing the same thing to them. I say hatred is not the answer. And I say that just because a black man argues that something is so doesn't mean that it is so and that I must agree with him. Black racism is just as evil as white racism, and it scares the hell out of me.

I have worked for Gov. Nelson Rockefeller of New York—as special assistant in charge of community affairs, which in many cases brought me in contact with local ghetto neighborhoods. And one of

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the first problems I had to discuss with him concerned the built-in hostility of the local groups coming to discuss their problems. A delegation, say, from a local group would immediately sit down and tell us that if we didn't give them what they wanted—for example, the continued operation of an outdated hospital — they would cause lots of trouble in the neighborhood. And they would threaten me personally, calling me an Uncle Tom and more. Once a guy stood up talking pretty tough—I guess he was trying to intimidate me—and I told him, “Look, man, if I have to, I'll knock you right on your so-and-so.” I made up my mind a long time ago that I will not be intimidated—whether the source of the pressure is white, black, yellow, or whatever. One of my first recommendations to Governor Rockefeller was that we should judge issues by their merit alone and should never give in out of fear. If we do that, we don't have a secure society left.

Don't, however, mistake my sympathies. I understand—I am living with—the frustration of the blacks. How does white America answer for the 2600 lynchings of blacks from the late 1800s through 1959—when not one murderer has been brought to justice? How does white America answer to the deaths recently of those three black college students demonstrating on campus in Orangeburg, South Carolina—when the killers go free? How, indeed? So I understand when young blacks tell me they're willing to give up their lives in a black revolution because they're barely living anyway. I understand, but I can't condone the violence some of them seem to demand.

The youngsters tell me that nothing happens unless there's violence, that *after* the upheaval in Watts, *after* the fires and looting and shooting in Detroit, an awakened America reacted with plans and money for jobs and cultural activities. I see their point. It's true. White America seems to respond only to the throwing of the brick and to the sniper fire from rooftops. But violence is not the way. What would happen if all the blacks in the country armed themselves for the big revolution? We'd be wiped out, that's what. Because the whites would do the same—we'd probably be shooting

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popguns while they would be firing cannons—and what chance would we have when we're outnumbered nine or ten to one?

That's why I must oppose extremism, why I must argue with the young militants who refuse to acknowledge any of the progress we have made, who ignore the many successful Negroes and point only to the man in the street who hasn't made it. Of course, I can't respect the way Bobby Seale [a Black Panther leader on the West Coast] calls Supreme Court Justice Thurgood Marshall "an Uncle Tom, a bootlicker, a nigger pig, and a tonto" because Justice Marshall upholds the laws of the land against a member of his own race.

And I don't like the fact that a white man can't really start up a business in a black community today without receiving threats of all kinds. We want to get into the mainstream of society, and yet we deny the white man the opportunity to come into our area. I become angry when my people say we can't trust white America at all. Have we forgotten so soon about Branch Rickey — who braved the prejudices of baseball to bring me in as the first Negro player? Or on a local level, Frank Schiffman at the Apollo Theater in Harlem, who has always given his time and money to help uplift the community? And the many other whites who have helped to remove the racial barriers? On balance, white America has not been fair to us—there's been hating, and too many goodhearted people have just stood by on the sidelines—but I think that we have to look at each white person according to the contribution he makes.

Our problem is that we don't really respect ourselves as individuals. We don't have enough financial or emotional security to say no to dollars. Our militants, our so-called principled militants, are as bad as any of the less dogmatic. When someone offers them money, they'll sell their own people out. Look at the blacks during the last election running around urging our people not to vote, blacks doing this because they were paid to—even though it was in the best interests of blacks to show their voting strength. And how could my good friend Lionel Hampton go down to South Carolina and tell the people there what

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a good American segregationist Strom Thurmond is? And what can Sen. Ed Brooke be thinking when he supports a man, Richard Nixon, who has shown he has no understanding of black people? Senator Brooke may be thinking more about his Republican image than anything else.

We blacks are too easily divided, and the only way we're going to solve our problems is by working together when the issues are right—and not by just agreeing that black is always right.

We've got to unite within ourselves and use everybody we possibly can. I've been around to the colleges, talking to the black and white students, and I just don't understand all this yelling by some of these black students against white teachers coming to work in the black communities. These same black college students are being taught by whites, so how can they complain about their black brothers doing the same thing back home? We blacks are not going to catch up by segregation or by settling for inferior education.

Back in the neighborhoods, building up black pride is imperative. The black man has contributed to America; he can give much, much more. It is natural, then, for blacks to celebrate, to talk up their achievements—and to hunger for more of a stake in what's going on. We see the potential of America, and we want a piece of the action. Blacks will no longer settle for buying that hamburger. We want the plates, the stools, the store. Nothing makes a man feel more productive than running his own business, and both government and private business are helping some with loans. The aid is fine, but a great deal more is absolutely necessary.

Ministers in Brooklyn, New York, have been telling me what a vigorous job the Black Panthers there are doing to help the self-esteem of the people. When I went down there to see for myself, they told me they weren't interested in violence as a way to solve problems. Armed with a ten-point program, the Panthers have gone into the churches to follow through on aid to the young, the old, and the poor so that Negro citizens can live decent, dignified lives. This Panther group isn't interested in whether the whites want to come visiting, to be friends. I think all

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any Negro wants is to work together with his fellow citizen—black or white—so that every man can progress according to his own ability. “We’ve organized, too,” one young Panther told me, “because too many white cops have come down here and beat up our women, and we’re not going to stand for that.” The kids gave me examples, and you might not want to accept them, but then you have to acknowledge what happened last fall when those Panthers appeared in court and a mob of toughs—including men later identified as policemen — roughed them up. You can’t permit that kind of thing from law enforcement officers and then let them off free. How can you preach law and order after a flare-up like this?

Black America can’t forget this sort of incident. Nor can we feel very comfortable with men like Richard Nixon and Spiro Agnew as our leaders. Nixon has not given us any reason to believe that he’s going to do anything other than continue to work with Strom Thurmond and with those who are opposed to the kind of progress that was made under Johnson and Humphrey.

We have written off Agnew completely. The black man in Maryland, Agnew’s home state, hates him passionately. How could a supposed leader say, “If you’ve seen one ghetto, you’ve seen them all”? Such sensitivity. Baltimore, Detroit, Chicago, New York—each place is unique and requires different solutions. If someone of Agnew’s caliber were ever President, boy, what trouble we’d be in.

On the other hand, some of the moderate *Negro* leaders have failed to set a forceful and responsible example and have left a vacuum for the extremists. Take Roy Wilkins, head of the NAACP. He and his organization have lost their influence in the black community because he’s not speaking out and not expressing what’s bothering black Americans. He sounds so patient advising Negroes to give Richard Nixon a chance, but I am not so forgiving. I want to see action *now*. Now in the twilight of his career, Mr. Wilkins, I’m afraid, wants to go down in history as a great civil rights leader—in the eyes of the white community, not the blacks. And that is what’s happening.

The angry men—the Stokeley

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Carmichaels, Rap Browns, and Eldridge Cleavers — are vocal enough, all right, but they're reckless and irrational, too. These people like the spotlight and their authority, and the press likes to quote them and make them seem like spokesmen for all Negroes. They aren't. Most black people aren't about to give up the ideals of Martin Luther King Jr., and they don't believe in separatism.

I was visiting an integrated Midwestern college not too long ago, and I heard a young black woman stand up and deliver a rather moving speech aimed at black militants in the audience. "Let's not get into the same bag as the racists in this country who happen to be white," she said. Her voice of moderation, however, was drowned out by the uproar of shouts from a minority present. I sensed that the majority there agreed with her sensible approach, but it was a silent majority—mute through lack of dynamic leadership. And this is the problem today. Right now it's difficult to find young moderates who are stepping out front to show the way so the majority won't be drowned out, but I do feel that more and more blacks will be doing so shortly because they don't want to be off in the small corner—separated—the way the militants seem to want it.

There is a certain irony in the position of the moderate leaders of *my* generation. I spoke out in support of the black athletes who boycotted the track meet last winter sponsored by the New York Athletic Club, an organization I'm convinced is discriminatory. Also, several others and I worked through the American Committee on Africa to make sure that South Africa—a nation organized along apartheid lines—did not get reinstated for participation in the Olympic Games.

We did what we could; we let the young Negro athletes know where we stood and that we wanted to help, and then we didn't hear from them. I guess they felt the generation gap can't be bridged and therefore they would do things their own way.

These fellows who call themselves militants are no more militant than I am in terms of pride in being black, of speaking out, of getting things done. But it's difficult to get involved simply because the youngsters seemingly don't

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respond to our approach, and it's frustrating to hear some unknown black person get up and scream and find out the next day that the news media have made him an instant spokesman for us.

My idea of a man who's with the times is Whitney Young of the Urban League. Whitney has developed a sense of what must be done; he is demanding that Richard Nixon show Negroes right now that he is for a progressive, just society, that Strom Thurmond and the Old South won't be calling the shots. Black people feel that we have made progress. We can see the light at the end of the tunnel. But President Nixon and the white power structure must realize that we cannot turn the clock back now. We cannot let white racists obstruct the forward march—and take the chance of creating more and more black racists. Because if we do, if we set up extreme versus extreme, then I predict that America will be in for its worst holocaust ever. ■■

—as told to Dave Sendler

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