

Q: How can we get the black people to cool it?

James Baldwin: It is not for us to cool it.

Q: But aren't you the ones who are getting hurt the most?

James Baldwin: No, we are only the ones who are dying fastest.

Is it too late, now, to put out the fire this time?

Q: Can we still cool it?

BALDWIN: That depends on a great many factors. It's a very serious question in my mind whether or not the people of this country, the bulk of the population of this country, have enough sense of what is really happening to their black co-citizens to understand why they're in the streets. I know as of this moment they maybe don't know it, and this is proved by the reaction to the civil-disorders report. It came as no revelation to me or to any other black cat that white racism is at the bottom of the civil disorders. It came as a great shock apparently to a great many other people, including the President of the United States and the Vice-President. And now you ask me if we can cool it. I think the President goofed by not telling the nation what the civil-disorders report was all about. And I accuse him and the entire administration, in fact, of being largely responsible for this tremendous waste and damage. It was up to him and the Vice-President to interpret that report and tell the American people what it meant and what the American people should now begin to think of doing. *Now!* It is already very, very late even to begin to think of it. What causes the eruptions, the riots, the revolts—whatever you want to call them—is the despair of being in a static position, absolutely static, of watching your father, your brother, your uncle, or your cousin—no matter how old the black cat is or how young—who has no future. And when the summer comes, both fathers and sons are in the streets—they can't stay in the houses. I was born in those houses and I know. And it's not their fault.

Q: From a very short-range approach, what should the federal government do, right now, to cool it?

BALDWIN: What do you mean by the federal government? The federal government has come to be, in the eyes of all Negroes anyway, a myth. When you say the federal government, you're referring to Washington, and that means you're referring to a great many people. You're referring to Senator Eastland and many people in Washington who out of apathy, ignorance or fear have no intention of making any move at all. You're talking about the people who have the power, who intend to keep the power. And all that they can think of are things like swimming pools, you know, in the summertime, and sort of made up jobs simply to protect peace and

the public property. But they show no sign whatever of understanding what the root of the problem really is, what the dangers really are. They have made no attempt, whatever, any of them, as far as I know, really to explain to the American people that the black cat in the streets wants to protect his house, his wife and his children. And if he is going to be able to do this he has to be given his autonomy, his own schools, a revision of the police force in a very radical way. It means in short that if the American Negro, the American black man, is going to become a free person in this country, the people of this country have to give up something. If they don't give it up it will be taken from them.

Q: You say that existing jobs are just make-work jobs. What kind of job program should be adopted?

BALDWIN: It's very difficult to answer that question since the American Republic has created a surplus population. You know it's created not only people who are unemployable but who no longer wish to be employed in this system. A job program involves, first of all, I would think, a real attack on all American industries and on all American labor unions. For example, you're sitting in Hollywood. And there are not any Negroes, as far as I know, in any of the Hollywood craft unions: there is no Negro grip, no Negro crew member, no Negro works in Hollywood on that level or on any higher level either. There are some famous Negroes who work out here for a structure which keeps Negroes out of the unions. Now it's not an Act of God that there aren't any Negroes in the unions. It's not something that is handed down from some mountain; it's a deliberate act on the part of the American people. They don't want the unions broken, because they are afraid of the Negro as a source of competition in the economic market. Of course what they've made him is something much worse than that. You can't talk about job programs unless you're willing to talk about what is really holding the structure together. Eastman Kodak, General Motors, General Electric—all the people who really have the power in this country. It's up to them to open up *their* factories, *their* unions, to let us begin to work.

Q: They would have to begin, say, on-the-job training programs for those. . . .

BALDWIN: Yes, and by the way I know a whole lot of Negroes on the streets, baby, who are much brighter than a lot of cats dictating the policies of Pan American. You know what this country really means by on-the-job training programs is not that they're teaching Negroes skills, though there's that too; what they're afraid of is that when the Negro comes into the factory, into the union, when he comes, in fact, into the American institutions he will change these institutions because no Negro in this country really lives by the American middle-class standards. That's what they really mean by on-the-job training. That's why they pick up a half-dozen Negroes here and there, and polish them up, polish them off, and put them in some ass-hole college someplace, then expect those cats to be able to go back on the streets and cool the other cats. They can't. The price in this country to survive at all still is to become like a white man. More and more people are refusing to become like a white man. That's at the *bottom* of what they mean by on-the-job training. They mean they want to fit you in. And furthermore, let's tell it like it is. The American white man does not really want to have an autonomous Negro male anywhere *near* him.

Q: In on-the-job training programs, the white American structure wants a worker who is trained, who shows up regularly at eight-thirty in the morning and works till five in the afternoon.

BALDWIN: Yeah, well I know an awful lot of cats who did that for a long, long time. We haven't got to be trained to do that. We don't even have to be given an incentive to do that.

Q: Would you say, then, that many black people have been able to go nowhere, so they've lost any feeling that it's worth working regularly?

BALDWIN: That is part of what we're talking about. Though it goes deeper than that, I think. It's not only that. What is happening in this country among the young, and not only the black young, is an overwhelming suspicion that it's not worth it. You know that if you watched your father's life like I watched my father's life, as a kid much younger than I watches his father's life; his father *does* work from eight to five every day and ends up with nothing. He can't protect anything. He has nothing. As he goes to the grave, having worked his fingers to the bone for years and years and years, he still has nothing and the kid doesn't either. But what's worse than that is that one has begun to conclude from that fact that maybe in this Republic—judging now on the evidence of its own performance—maybe there isn't anything. It's easy to see on the other hand what happens to the white people who make it. And that's not a very attractive spectacle either. I mean I'm questioning the values on which this country thinks of itself as being based.

Q: What you are calling for, then, is a radical change in thinking by government and industry.

BALDWIN: Yes.

Q: And given the inertia plus . . .

BALDWIN: Fear.

Q: . . . fear and whatever else there may be, any such changes seem . . .

BALDWIN: . . . seem improbable.

Q: Certainly, they will come slow. A union will not throw open its doors and bring in several hundred people from the black community right away. Now my question is . . .

BALDWIN: You've answered your question.

Q: "Sweeper jobs," then, just won't work?

BALDWIN: No. I'll tell you what you will do. You will do what you did last summer and the summer before that. You'll pour some money into the ghetto and it will end up in the hands of various adventurers. In the first place, thirteen dollars and some change is not *meant* to do anything. And a couple of cats will make it, and the rest will be where they were.

Q: But can you buy time with this kind of program; enough time for the longer term changes?

BALDWIN: You could if you meant it. What's at issue is whether or not you mean it. Black people in this country conclude that you mean to destroy us.

Q: But if industry and government seriously planned job-training programs, and the unions opened up?

BALDWIN: Look, the labor movement in this country has always been based precisely on the division of black and white labor. That is no Act of God either. Labor unions along with the bosses created the Negro as a kind of threat to the white worker. There's never been any real labor movement in this country because there's never been any coalition between black and white. It's been prevented by the government and the industries and the unions.

Q: What would be the first steps a union could take to demonstrate that it seriously wants to correct such inequities? What should the leadership do?

BALDWIN: Educate their own rank and file. Declare themselves. And penalize any member of the union who is against it.

Q: What can industry do on a short-range basis?

BALDWIN: I'm not sure that you should be asking me these questions at all. But I'll do my best to answer them. What can industry do? Well you know, the same as the labor unions. The labor unions won't have Negroes in the unions above a certain level. And they can never rise out of that local, or do what they might be able to do if they weren't trapped in that local at a certain level. Industry is perfectly willing to hire me to dig a ditch or carry a shovel. It isn't going to hire me to build a city or to fly a plane. It is unable to look on me as just another worker. There are exceptions to this rule, obviously, to be found everywhere. But this is the way it works and the exceptions, in fact, prove the rule.

Q: Do you think it would help if industry were to get involved as co-sponsors of low-income housing?

BALDWIN: No. I think we've had far more, more than enough of low-income housing which simply becomes high-rise slums.

Q: Well, if they were not high-rise slums?

BALDWIN: I don't want any more projects built in Harlem, for example. I want someone to attack the real-estate lobby because that's the only way to destroy the ghetto.

Q: But what about building low-income housing out in the suburbs where factories are beginning to move?

BALDWIN: Well, that depends on the will of the American people, doesn't it? That's why they are in the suburbs—to get away from me.

Q: What about certain plans of industry to set up factories or businesses which would be owned by ghetto people? Would you see this as a positive step?

BALDWIN: What would be produced in those factories?

Q: Piecework, small items subcontracted by larger manufacturers.

BALDWIN: It's a perfectly valid idea except that in order to do that you have to eliminate the ghetto. Look, it is literally true that from a physical point of view those houses are unlivable. No one's going to build a factory in Harlem, not unless you intend, you know, *really* to liberate Harlem.

Q: Well, New York State, for example, plans to build a State office building in Harlem.

BALDWIN: In Harlem. I know exactly where they're going to build it, too. And at the risk of sounding paranoid, I think I know why. It's going to be where the Black Nationalist Bookstore is now, and one of the reasons for it, I am convinced, is simply because the Black Nationalist Bookstore is a very dangerous focal ground—125th Street and Seventh Avenue. You know, it's what in Africa would be called a palaver tree. It's where Negroes get together and talk. It's where all the discontent doesn't begin, exactly, but where it always focuses.

Q: Wouldn't you think that would be a very foolish idea, because you can always pick some other place to meet and talk?

BALDWIN: Yes, but the American white man has proved, if nothing else, he is absolutely, endlessly foolish when it comes to this problem.

Q: Let's talk about the average citizen, the white man who lives on Eighty-ninth Street and Riverside Drive, what should he be doing?

BALDWIN: It depends on what he feels. If he feels he wants to save this country, he should be talking to his neighbors and talking to his children. He shouldn't, by the way, be talking to me.

Q: What should he be telling his neighbors?

BALDWIN: That if I go under in this country, I, the black man, he goes too.

Q: Is there any action he can take? Pressure on the local government?

BALDWIN: Pressure on his landlord, pressure on the local government, pressure wherever he can exert pressure. Pressure, above all, on the real-estate lobby. Pressure on the educational system. Make them change textbooks so that his children and my children will be taught something of the truth about our history. It is run now for the profit motive, and nothing else.

Q: What about the white suburbanite who fled the city, while making sure the blacks stayed there? What does he have to do now?

BALDWIN: If he wants to save his city, perhaps he should consider

James Baldwin: Moses as a Black Cat

In 1961 James Baldwin wrote an article for *Esquire* (about Norman Mailer) in which he said, "Here I was, at thirty-two, finding my notoriety hard to bear.... I was beginning to realize, most unwillingly, all the things love could not do. It could not make me over, for example. It could not undo the journey which had made of me such a strange man and brought me to such a strange place."

That we are all in a strange place now is undeniable; that James Baldwin knows the terrain of the place and the path that brought us here is on record. He has journeyed from Harlem, where he was one of nine children, to an expatriate's life in Paris, where he lived for nearly ten years, back to the life of a successful writer in Manhattan, which is very different from Harlem. Along the way he has written *Go Tell It On the Mountain*, *Notes of a Native Son*, *Nobody Knows My Name*, *The Fire Next Time*, *Blues for Mister Charlie*, other plays, novels, short stories and essays, and a just-published novel, *Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone*.

Above all, his journey has been so near the heart of the civil-rights movement that Baldwin's voice has become the one to tell us most clearly where we are and how we came here.

When the first civil-rights legislation was passed, after World War II, most white Americans believed that inequality between the races could be eliminated through court decisions. But in 1955, only a year after the Supreme Court had ordered schools desegregated, Baldwin wrote (*Notes of a Native Son*), "To smash something is the ghetto's chronic need. Most of the time it is the members of the ghetto who smash each other, and themselves. But as long as the ghetto walls are standing there will always come a moment when these outlets do not work.... If ever, indeed, the violence which fills Harlem's churches, pool halls, and bars erupts outward in a more direct fashion, Harlem and its citizens are likely to vanish in an apocalyptic flood."

In 1962, at a time when most Americans were congratulating themselves on finally having done something right about race relations ("...in almost every aspect of American life it is possible to point to dramatic improvement in the status of the Negro over the last twenty or ten or even five years," said *The New York Times*), Baldwin published *The Fire Next Time*. "A bill is coming in," he warned us, "that I fear America is not prepared to pay... a vengeance that does not really depend on, and cannot really be... prevented by, any police force or army: historical vengeance, a cosmic vengeance..." The book drew attention because of Baldwin's distinction as a writer; what was not foreseen was how thoroughly—and how soon—its warning would be substantiated. In the Summer of 1964 the violence he had written about did erupt outward, into Watts, Newark, Detroit, Washington, Chicago and a hundred other cities. The bill *The Fire Next Time* had warned us of had been presented, and suddenly James Baldwin emerged as one of the most powerful and prophetic spokesmen of our era.

It is for this reason that *Esquire*, at a time of fresh tragedy, returns to him. A new bill has come in to us. Interviewed two days after the funeral of Dr. Martin Luther King, during a nightmare of riots, vengeance and martial law across the country, Baldwin tells us what it is we are paying for, and how much of the accounting is still due.

moving back. They're his cities too. Or just ask himself why he left. I know why he left. He's got a certain amount of money and a certain future, a car, two cars, you know, scrubbed children, a scrubbed wife, and he wants to preserve all that. And he doesn't understand that in his attempt to preserve it he's going to destroy it.

Q: What about the poverty program, does that offer any remedy?
BALDWIN: Are you joking? There has not been a war on poverty in this country yet. Not in my lifetime. The war on poverty is a dirty joke.

Q: How would you improve it?
BALDWIN: By beginning it.

Q: In what fashion?
BALDWIN: Look, there's no way in the world to do it without attacking the power of some people. It cannot be done unless you do that. The power of the steel companies, for example, which can both make and break a town. And they've done it, they're doing it. Everybody knows it. You can't have a war on poverty unless you are willing to attack those people and limit their profits.

Q: Is it a matter of limiting the profits of industries only, or is it also a matter of limiting the power of the politicians?
BALDWIN: But the politicians are not working for the people; they're working for exactly the people I say we have to attack. That is what has happened to politics in this country. That is why the political machinery now is so vast, and so complex no one seems to be able

to control it. It's completely unresponsive to the needs of the American community, completely unresponsive. I'm not talking only as a black man, I mean to the whole needs of the American people.

Q: You mean insofar as it responds to industry?
BALDWIN: It responds to what it considers its own survival.

Q: What would you say ought to be done to improve the relationship of the police with the black community?
BALDWIN: You would have to educate them. I really have no quarrel particularly with the policemen. I can even see the trouble they're in. They're hopelessly ignorant and terribly frightened. They believe everything they see on television, as most people in this country do. They are endlessly respectable, which means to say they are Saturday-night sinners. The country has got the police force it deserves and of course if a policeman sees a black cat in what he considers a strange place he's going to stop him; and you know of course the black cat is going to get angry. And then somebody may die. But it's one of the results of the cultivation in this country of ignorance. Those cats in the Harlem street, those white cops; they are scared to death and they *should* be scared to death. But that's how black boys die, because the police are scared. And it's not the policemen's fault; it's the country's fault.

Q: In the latest civil disorder, there seems to have been a more permissive attitude on the part of the police, much less reliance on firearms to stop looters as compared with last summer when there was such an orgy of shooting by the police and the National Guard.
BALDWIN: I'm sorry, the story isn't in yet, and furthermore, I don't believe what I read in the newspapers. I object to the term "looters" because I wonder who is looting whom, baby.

Q: How would you define somebody who smashes in the window of a television store and takes what he wants?
BALDWIN: Before I get to that, how would you define somebody who puts a cat where he is and takes all the money out of the ghetto where he makes it? Who is looting whom? Grabbing off the TV set? He doesn't really want the TV set. He's saying screw you. It's a judgment, by the way, on the value of the TV set. Everyone knows that's a crock of shit. He doesn't want the TV set. He doesn't want it. He wants to let you know he's there. The question I'm trying to raise is a very serious question. The mass media—television and all the major news agencies—endlessly use that word "looter." On television you always see black hands reaching in, you know. And so the American public concludes that these savages are trying to steal everything from us. And no one has seriously tried to get to where the trouble is. After all, you're accusing a captive population who has been robbed of *everything* of looting. I think it's obscene.

Q: Would you make a distinction between snipers, fire bombers and looters?
BALDWIN: I've heard a lot about snipers, baby, and then you look at the death toll.

Q: Very few white men, granted. But there have been a few.
BALDWIN: I know who dies in the riots.

Q: Well, several white people have died.
BALDWIN: Several, yeah, baby, but do you know how many Negroes have died?

Q: Many more. But that's why we're talking about cooling it.
BALDWIN: It is not the black people who have to cool it.

Q: But they're the ones....
BALDWIN: It is not the black people who have to cool it, because they won't.

Q: Aren't they the ones who are getting hurt the most, though?
BALDWIN: That would depend on the point of view. You know, I'm not at all sure that we are the ones who are being hurt the most. In fact I'm sure we are not. We are the ones who are *dying* fastest.

Q: The question posed, however, was whether snipers could be classified as true revolutionaries; fire bombers, as those overwhelmed with frustration and seeking to destroy the symbols of their discontent; looters, as victims of the acquisitive itch?
BALDWIN: I have to ask you a very impertinent question. How in the world can you possibly begin to categorize the people of a community whom you do not know at all? I disagree with your classifications altogether. Those people are all in the streets for the same reason.

Q: Does some of our problem come from our flaunting the so-called good life, with its swimming pools, cars, suburban living and so on, before a people whom society denies these things?

BALDWIN: No one has ever considered what happens to a woman or a man who spends his working life downtown and then has to go home uptown. It's too obvious even to go into. We are a nation within a nation, a captive nation within a nation. Yes, and you do flaunt it. You talk about us as though we were not there. The real pain, the real danger is that white people have always treated Negroes this way. You've always treated Sambo this way. We always were Sambo for you, you know, we had no feelings, we had no ears, no eyes. We've lied to you for more than a hundred years and you don't even know it yet. We've lied to you to survive. And we've begun to despise you. We don't hate you. We've begun to despise you. And it is because we can't afford to care what happens to us, and *you* don't care what happens to us. You don't even care what happens to your own children. Because we have to deal with your children too. We don't care what happens to you. It's up to you. To live or to die. Because you made our life that choice all these years.

Q: What about the role of some of the black institutions. Does the church have some meaning still in the black community insofar as the possibility of social progress is concerned?

BALDWIN: You must consider that the fact that we have a black church is, first of all, an indictment of a Christian nation. There shouldn't be a black church. And that's again what you did. We've used it. Martin Luther King used it most brilliantly, you know. That was his forum. It's always been our only forum. But it doesn't exist anywhere in the North anymore, as Martin Luther King himself discovered. It exists in the South, because the black community in the South is a different community. There's still a Negro family in the South, or there was. There is no Negro family essentially in the North, and once you have no family you have no church. And that means you have no forum. It cannot be used in Chicago and Detroit. It can be used in Atlanta and Montgomery and those places. And now since Martin is dead—not before, but certainly since he is dead—that forum is no longer useful because people are repudiating their Christian church in toto.

Q: Are they repudiating Christianity as well?

BALDWIN: No more intensely than you have.

Q: Then the black church is dead in the North?

BALDWIN: Let me rephrase it. It does not attract the young. Once that has happened to any organization, its social usefulness is at least debatable. Now that's one of the great understatements of the century.

Q: In that case, what is the role of Adam Clayton Powell?

BALDWIN: Adam Clayton Powell is not considered a pastor, he is considered a politician. He is considered, in fact, one more victim. People who can't stand Adam would never, never, *never* attack him now. Crimes which Adam is accused of—first of all, the people in Harlem know a great deal more about that than anybody who has written about it. That's one thing. And for another, as long as you don't impeach Senator Eastland, it's a bullshit tip and we know it. We're not fighting for him, we're fighting for us.

Q: What about some of the other leaders of the black community?

BALDWIN: The real leaders now in the black community you've never heard of. Roy's not a leader, Whitney's not a leader.

Q: Floyd McKissick?

BALDWIN: Floyd's not a leader either, but Floyd *is* closer to the tempo, to the pulse. First of all, leaders are rare. A man is not made a leader by the mass media of this country. Martin was a leader in spite of all the opposition he got, even from black people. Because that's what he was. And because he loved his people. He loved this country.

Q: Stokely Carmichael?

BALDWIN: Stokely in my view is perhaps a little too young. Look, I'm nearly twenty years older than Stokely. I can't answer that question. Stokely is a leader for a great many people. Stokely is even more than that, Stokely is a *symbol* for a great many people. A great many emasculated black boys turn to Stokely because he's fighting against their emasculation. I understand that, and they're right. I may have my own disagreements with Stokely from time to time but I'm on his side. What Stokely is saying essentially is true and that is why people are so uptight about Stokely. Because they can't deny what he is saying. And what he is trying to do is anathema to the white people of the United States because what he is saying is that we have no hope here. These white people are never going to do anything for us because they cannot. Also, as long as we are on the subject of Stokely, let me point out to you that Stokely has never said he hated white people. And I happen to know him and I know he doesn't. What he is insisting on is black autonomy,

and *that* puts everybody uptight. That's all he is saying. What he is suggesting that frightens the American white people is that the black people in this country are tied to all the oppressed and subjugated people everywhere in the world. Furthermore, he is saying very clearly, and it's true, that this country which began as a revolutionary nation has now spent god knows how many billions of dollars and how many thousands of lives fighting revolution everywhere else. And what he's saying is that black people in this country should not any longer turn to President Lyndon Johnson, who is after all at the very best (and this is an understatement; I'm speaking for myself now) a very untrustworthy big daddy. But to other black people, all the other people who are suffering under the same system that we are suffering from, that system is led by the last of the Western nations. It is perfectly conceivable, or would be if there were not so many black people here, that the Americans might decide to "liberate" South Africa. Isn't it? That is to say, to keep the horrors of communism away, all the freedom fighters in South Africa would turn South Africa into another Vietnam. No one is fooled about what you are doing in Vietnam. At least no black cat is fooled by it. You are not fighting for freedom. You don't care about those people. You don't care about my people and I know you don't care about theirs. You're fighting for what the Western world calls material self-interest. And that means my back. My stolen tin, my stolen diamonds, my stolen sugar. That's what it means; it means I should work for you forever.

And I won't.

But the idea is that people who are divided by so many miles of the globe, and by so many other things, should begin to consider themselves as a community, should begin to consider that they have something in common—this is what Stokely says. What they have in common is to get the man off their backs. It's a very dangerous and frightening idea for Americans, because it happens to be true.

Q: Do you feel that there's a conscious understanding of American imperialism by . . .

BALDWIN: The Americans are not imperialists. According to them, they're just nice guys. They're just folks.

Q: But we are talking about a form of imperialism . . .

BALDWIN: We're talking about the very last form of imperialism, you know—Western imperialism anyway—the world is going to see.

Q: But do you feel that the under class of black people, given an insufficient education, understands the specifics of this imperialism you describe?

BALDWIN: We understand very much better than you think we do, and we understand it from the letters we get from Vietnam.

Q: Is there any white man who can . . .

BALDWIN: White by the way is not a color, it's an attitude. You're as white as you think you are. It's your choice.

Q: Then black is a state of mind too?

BALDWIN: No, black is a condition.

Q: Who among the white community can talk to the black community and be accepted?

BALDWIN: Anybody, who doesn't think of himself as white.

Q: Among the Presidential candidates, whom do you feel would be accepted as speaking in good faith? Richard Nixon?

BALDWIN: You must be joking.

Q: Nelson Rockefeller?

BALDWIN: Maybe, that would depend very much on what he does now. I don't put him down.

Q: What about Robert Kennedy?

BALDWIN: What about Robert Kennedy indeed! Bobby's a very, very, very bright man. The best thing said about Bobby Kennedy, and I'm not trying to cop out on this, was said by Al Calloway in that rather curious issue about Soul that Esquire just did. Al said that if Soul could be studied and learned, he'd learn it. He'd study and learn, but it can't be studied and learned. I've had one very publicized thing with Bobby so that anything I say is suspect. He's very bright, and all the liberals will be on his bandwagon. He will probably be President. Almost surely he will be. And what can I say? I have to leave it open. I, myself, will not be on that bandwagon. I think he's very shrewd but I think he's absolutely cold. I think he may prove to be, well, very dangerous.

He's very attractive. He says all of the right things, you know, not always at the right time. And I can see the kind of appeal he'd have; after all, he is the brother of J.F.K. But I'm in another position. I have to be as clearheaded as I can be about it and look beyond the particular event or the particular man. I would not myself put my life in his hands.

Q: Do you know anything of Eugene McCarthy?

BALDWIN: Nothing at all. I can't discuss him. But I ought to say that it's been a very long time since I've had any respect for *any* politician. I have to say, too, that I'm looking through the political spectrum from the standpoint of my rather bitter forty-three years in this country. What I'm also saying is that if I endorse anybody, no matter what it means, I don't want to tell black people to vote for so-and-so or him or her because I don't want to be killed by those black people when they discover they've been betrayed.

Q: Hubert Humphrey?

BALDWIN: Forget it.

Q: Do you care to expand on that?

BALDWIN: No, just forget it. I point to his record since he became Vice-President. The flaming liberal.

Q: Do you think the riots can be considered in another light than simply an outburst against the system? Are they possibly also, consciously or unconsciously, a struggle to bring to a culture purification by blood?

BALDWIN: Well, that refers back to Thomas Jefferson, I think, who said, "I tremble for my country when I reflect that God is just."

Q: He also said that the tree of liberty should be watered with blood . . .

BALDWIN: The blood of tyrants. We call it riots, because they were black people. We wouldn't call it riots if they were white people.

Q: What does the death of Martin Luther King signify?

BALDWIN: The abyss over which this country hovers now. It's a very complicated question and the answer has to be very complicated too. What it means to the ghetto, what it means to the black people of this country, is that you could kill Martin, who was trying to save you, and you will face tremendous opposition from black people because you choose to consider, you know, the use of violence. If you can shoot Martin, you can shoot all of us. And there's nothing in your record to indicate you won't, or anything that would prevent you from doing it. That will be the beginning of the end, if you do, and that knowledge will be all that will hold your hand. Because one no longer believes, you see—I don't any longer believe, and not many black people in this country can afford to believe—any longer a word you say. I don't believe in the morality of this people at all. I don't believe you do the right thing because you think it's the right thing. I think you may be forced to do it because it will be the expedient thing. Which is good enough.

I don't think that the death of Martin Luther King means very much to any of those people in Washington. I don't think they understand what happened at all. People like Governor Wallace and Mister Maddox certainly don't. I would doubt very much if Ronald Reagan does. And that is of course where the problem lies, with people like that, with people we mentioned earlier, and with the institutions we mentioned earlier. But to the black people in this country it means that you have declared war. You have declared war. That you do intend to slaughter us, that you intend to put us in concentration camps. After all, Martin's assassination—whether it was done by one man or by a State Trooper, which is a possibility; or whether it was a conspiracy, which is also a possibility; after all I'm a fairly famous man too, and one doesn't travel around—Martin certainly didn't without the government being aware of every move he made—for this assassination I accuse the American people and all its representatives.

For me, it's been Medgar. Then Malcolm. Then Martin. And it's the same story. When Medgar was shot they arrested some lunatic in Mississippi, but I was in Mississippi, with Medgar, and you don't need a lunatic in Mississippi to shoot a cat like Medgar Evers, you know, and the cat whoever he was, Byron de la Beckwith, slipped out of the back door of a nursing home and no one's ever heard from him since. I won't even discuss what happened to Malcolm, or all the ramifications of that. And now Martin's dead. And every time, you know, including the time the President was murdered, everyone insisted it was the work of one lone madman; no one can face the fact that this madness has been created deliberately. Now Stokely will be shot presently. And whoever pulls that trigger will not have bought the bullet. It is the people and their representatives who are inciting to riot, not Stokely, not Martin, not Malcolm, not Medgar. And you will go on like this until you will find yourself in a place from which you can't turn back, where indeed you may be already. So, if Martin's death has reached the conscience of a nation, well then it's a great moral triumph in the history of mankind, but it's very unlikely that it has.

Q: Some people have said that the instant canonization by white America is the cop-out . . .

BALDWIN: It's the proof of their guilt, and the proof of their relief.

What they don't know is that for every Martin they shoot there will be ten others. You already miss Malcolm and wish he were here. Because Malcolm was the only person who could help those kids in the ghetto. The *only* person.

Q: I was just about to say, we white people . . .

BALDWIN: . . . wished that Malcolm were here? But you, the white people, no matter how it was done actually, technically, you created the climate which forced him to die.

Q: We have created a climate which has made political assassination acceptable . . .

BALDWIN: . . . which made inevitable that death, and Medgar's, and Martin's. And may make other deaths inevitable too, including mine. And all this in the name of freedom.

Q: Do you think "cooling it" means accepting a culture within a culture, a black culture as separate?

BALDWIN: You mean, white people cooling it?

Q: Yes.

BALDWIN: White people cooling it means a very simple thing. Black power frightens them. White power doesn't frighten them. Stokely is not, you know, bombing a country out of existence. Nor menacing your children. White power is doing that. White people have to accept their history and their actual circumstances, and they won't. Not without a miracle they won't. Goodwill won't do it. One's got to face the fact that we police the globe—we, the Americans, police the globe for a very good reason. We are protecting what we call the free world. You ought to be black, sitting in Harlem, listening to that phrase. We, like the South African black miners, know exactly what you're protecting when you talk about the free world.

Q: Are there some viable black institutions that . . .

BALDWIN: Why does a white country look to black institutions to save it?

Q: Well, to begin a dialogue, to find out what should be done . . .

BALDWIN: That is up to you.

Q: But doesn't white America need instruction from . . .

BALDWIN: . . . the streets of any ghetto.

Q: But on the streets of any ghetto can you learn . . .

BALDWIN: Ask any black junkie what turned him into a junkie.

Q: But what I'm after are programs that you can work with.

BALDWIN: What you mean by programs is a way of alleviating the distress without having it cost you anything.

Q: Well, even if we're willing to spend the money . . .

BALDWIN: I'm not talking about money.

Q: But if we are willing to change our point of view . . .

BALDWIN: Well, then, the person to talk to is first of all your own heart, your wife, your child. It's your country too. I've read a great deal about the good white people of this country since I came back to it in 1957. But it's the good white people of this country who forced the black people into the streets.

Q: Do you think it counts for anything having a mayor like John Lindsay walking the streets?

BALDWIN: I like John Lindsay. Just because he walks the streets, perhaps. Or for the same reasons I like J.F.K., you know, with enormous reservations. He's somewhere near the twentieth century at least.

Q: What kind of President should we have? Would a black President help?

BALDWIN: You're going to need somebody who is willing, first of all, to break the stranglehold of what they call the two-party system. John Lewis was right on the day of the March on Washington, when he said we can't join the Republican Party because look who that is made up of. We can't join the Democratic Party—look who's in *that* party. Where's *our* party? What we need is somebody who can coalesce the energies in this country, which are now both black and white, into another party which can respond to the needs of the people. The Democratic Party cannot do it. Not as long as Senator Eastland is in it. I name him, to name but one. I certainly will never vote for a Republican as long as Nixon is in that party. You need someone who believes in this country, again, to begin to change it. And by the way, while we're on this subject, one of the things we should do is cease protecting all those Texas oil millionaires who are one of the greatest menaces any civilization has ever seen. They have absolutely no brains, and a *fantastic* amount of money, *fantastic* amount of power, *incredible* power. And there's nothing more dangerous than that kind of power in the hands of such ignorant men. And this is done with the consent of (Continued on page 116)

learned that she had vowed never to appear with me again in public. It's really too bad, because I should like to resume a sort of dialogue with her. But she has no sense of humor whatever, none at all."

"I can't imagine what you'll write about me," Susan says. "I think I'll make an exception this time and read it."

The phone rings again. She crosses the room slowly. In the pale yellow

light her face looks shallow and tired.

"No, I'm sorry. I can't; not tonight. I have to work. I'll call you."

I meet her halfway and we move into the hall where we shake hands and then I go out, closing the door behind me. The wait for the elevator is long and inside I can hear the determined and relentless rhythm of the typewriter. Susan Sontag's *Dirty Little Secret* was that she wanted to be left alone. #

Q: HOW CAN WE GET THE BLACK PEOPLE TO COOL IT?

(Continued from page 53) the federal government. With the collusion of the federal government.

Q: Are there any natural allies for the black people?

BALDWIN: We're all under the same heel. I told you that before. We are all under the same heel. That's why everyone was so shocked when Fidel Castro went to Harlem. They think Negroes are fools, as Langston Hughes put it once. Second-class fools, at that.

Q: You feel that any people who are oppressed outside the United States are natural allies for the black American?

BALDWIN: Yes. From Cuba . . . to Angola. And don't think the American government doesn't know that. This government which is trying to free us is also determined we should never talk to each other.

Q: In *The Fire Next Time* you questioned whether the black people want to be integrated into a burning house. Do you still feel they do not have the same goals of materialism as the white man?

BALDWIN: I think Stokely's right when he says that integration is another word, you know, the latest kind of euphemism for white supremacy. No. I don't want to be integrated into this house or any other house, especially not this burning house. I don't want to become . . . like you. You, the white people. I'd rather die than become what most white people in this country have become. What one is after is something else, which is exactly what Martin was after, and this was community. You know, I just want you to leave me alone. Just l-e-a-v-e m-e a-l-o-n-e! And then we can take it from there. And above all, leave my child alone.

Q: Do you think that the local community control of schools is necessary?

BALDWIN: Schools and policemen.

Q: Why policemen?

BALDWIN: Look, we live in Harlem, let's say, or we live in Watts. The mother who comes down there with his cap and his gun in his holster, he doesn't know what my day is like. He doesn't know why I get drunk when I do. He doesn't know anything about me at all. He's scared *shitless* of me. Now, what—the fuck is he doing there? All he can do is shoot me. He's a hired concentration-camp keeper. I can police my own community far better than you ever will. Because you can't. It's not in you to do it. I know why somebody there is upset when he is upset. The cats were right when they were told by somebody, some cop, some leader, some mayor to go home. They said *you go home, we are home, baby*. We can take care of ourselves. This is the message we're trying to get across; we don't need you to take care of us. Good Lord, we can't afford to have you take care of us any longer! Look what you've done. To us. And to yourselves, in taking care of us. No. I think the black people in this country should run their own schools, and run

their own police force. Because you can't do it. All you can do is bring in tanks and tear gas . . . and call the National Guard when it gets too tight. And think you can fight a civil war and a global war at the same time.

Q: There used to be a New York City regulation that a policeman couldn't reside in the precinct to which he was assigned. You are saying that the regulation should require him to live there.

BALDWIN: Yeah, I'm telling you that.

Q: Do you have any hope for the future of this country?

BALDWIN: I have a vast amount of determination. I have a great deal of hope. I think the most hopeful thing to do is to look at the situation. People accuse me of being a doom-monger. I'm not a doom-monger. If you don't look at it, you can't change it. You've got to look at it. And at certain times it cannot be more grim. If we can look at it, we can change it. If we don't look at it, we won't. If we don't change it, we're going to die. We're going to perish, every single one of us. That's a tall order, a hard, hard bill to pay; but you have been accumulating it for a very long time. And now the bill is in. It is in for you and your children, and it is in all over the world. If you can't pay your bill, it's the end of you. And you created in this country a whole population which has nothing to lose. It's part of your bill. There's nothing more that you can do to me, nothing more at all. When you, in the person of your President, assure me that you will not tolerate any more violence, you may think that frightens me. People don't get frightened when they hear that, they get *mad*. And whereas you're afraid to die, I'm not.

Q: So the one thing that is fairly certain about cooling it is that the National Guard . . .

BALDWIN: I am not the one to be cooled.

Q: But it can be said that the National Guard, the police, tear gas, these methods are not the answer.

BALDWIN: I suggest that the mayor of every city and the President of this nation go on the air and address the white people for a change. Tell them to cool it.

Q: In the most recent disturbances, why have certain black leaders attempted to get other black people off the streets?

BALDWIN: To save their lives. Not as a favor to you. Nobody wants this generation to die. Except the American people.

Q: You would say, then, that we have a lot to answer for?

BALDWIN: I'm not trying to accuse you, you know. That's not the point. But you have an awful lot to face. I don't envy any white man in this century, because I wouldn't like to have to face what you have to face. If you don't face it, though, it's a matter of *your* life or death. Everyone's deluded if they think it's a matter of Sambo's life or death. It isn't a matter of Sambo's life or death, and it can't be, for

they have been slaughtering Sambos too long. It's a matter of whether or not you want to live. And you may think that my death, or my diminution, or my disappearance will save you, but it won't. It can't save you. All that can save you now is your confrontation with your own history . . . which is not your past, but your present. Nobody cares what happened in the past. One can't afford to care what happened in the past. But your history has led you to this moment, and you can only begin to change yourself and save yourself by looking at what you are doing in the name of your history, in the name of your gods, in the name of your language. And what has happened is as though I, having always been outside it—more outside it than victimized by it, really, in a sense; outside it surely, you know, slaughtered by it, victimized by it, but mainly *outside* it—can see it better than you can see it. Because I cannot afford to let you fool me. If I let you fool me, then I die. But I've fooled *you* for a long time. That's why you keep saying, what does the Negro want? It's a summation of your own delusions, the lies you've told yourself. You know *exactly* what I want!

Q: So that when we come to you with the question, How do we cool it?, all we're asking is that same old question, What does the Negro want?

IN THE BEGINNING, LEARY TURNED ON GINSBERG AND SAW THAT IT WAS GOOD. . . AND THEN LEARY AND GINSBERG DECIDED TO TURN ON THE WORLD

(Continued from page 86) about the foolishness of believing in hot and cold. It occurred to me that Allen and Peter were proving his point. The phone call continued and finally I walked back in and said, Hey, Allen, for the cost of this phone call we could pay his way up here by plane. Allen shot an apologetic look and then I heard him telling Jack, Okay, Jack, I have to go now, but you've got to take the mushrooms and let's settle this quarrel between Kennedy and Khrushchev. BUT NEEDED MY GLASSES—THOUGH HAD YELLED AT LEARY THAT HE DIDN'T NEED HIS EARPIECE TO HEAR THE REAL VIBRATIONS OF THE COSMOS. HE WENT ALONG WITH ME AGREEABLY.

Allen and Peter were sitting on the big couch in the living room and Allen was telling us about his visions, cosmic electronic networks, and how much it meant to him that I told him he was a great man and how this mushroom episode had opened the door to women and heterosexuality and how he could see new womanly body visions and family life ahead. BUT THEN I BEGAN BREATHING AND WANTING TO LIE DOWN AND REST. Peter's hand was moving back and forth on Allen's shoulder. It was the first time that Allen had stood up to Jack and he was sorry about the phone bill but wasn't it too bad that Khrushchev and Kennedy couldn't have been on the line and, hey, what about Norman Mailer in that psychiatric ward in Bellevue, shouldn't we call him.

I don't think they'd let a call go through to him, Allen. Well, it all depends on how we come on. I don't think coming on as Allen Ginsberg would help in that league. I don't think coming on as the Messiah would either. Well, you could come on as big psychologists and make big demanding noises about the patient. It was finally decided that it was too much trouble.

Still *curandero*, I asked if they wanted anything to eat or drink. Well, how about some hot milk. IF I ATE OR SHIT AGAIN I WOULD TURN BACK TO MERE NON-MESSIAH HUMAN. Allen and

BALDWIN: Yes. You're asking me to help you save it.

Q: Save ourselves?

BALDWIN: Yes. But *you* have to do that.

Q: Speaking strictly, from your point of view, how would you talk to an angry black man ready to tear up the town?

BALDWIN: I only know angry black men. You mean, how would I talk to someone twenty years younger than I?

Q: That's right.

BALDWIN: That would be very difficult to do. I've tried, and I try it, I try it all the time. All I can tell him, really, is I'm with you, whatever that means. I'll tell you what I *can't* tell him. I can't tell him to submit and let himself be slaughtered. I can't tell him that he should not arm, because the white people are armed. I can't tell him that he should let anybody rape his sister, or his wife, or his mother. Because that's where it's at. And what I try to tell him, too, is if you're ready to blow the cat's head off—because it could come to that—try not to hate him, for the sake of your soul's salvation and for no other reason. But let's try to be better, let's try—no matter what it costs us—to be better than they are. You haven't got to hate them, though we do have to be free. It's a waste of time to hate them. #

Peter went upstairs to put on robes and I put some cold milk in a pan and turned on the stove. Donald was still moving around softly with his hands behind his back. Thinking. Watching. He was too deep and Buddha for us to swing with and I later realized that I hadn't been a very attentive *curandero* for him and that there was a gulf between Allen and him never closed and that the geographic arrangement was too scattered to make a close loving session. Of course, both of them were old drug hands and ready to go off on their own private journeys and both wanted to make something deep and their own.

Anthro's role in all of this was never clear. He stood in the hallway watching curiously but for the most part we ignored him, treated him as an object just there but not involved and that, of course, was a mistake. Any time you treat someone as an object rest assured he'll do the same and that was the way that score was going to be tallied.

We ended up with a great scene in the kitchen. I bustled around pouring the hot milk into cups, and the poets sat around the table looking like Giotto martyrs in checkered robes. Lafcadio came down and we got him some food and he nodded yes when I asked him about ice cream and Allen started to talk about his visions and about the drug scene in New York and, becoming eloquent, wound up preaching with passion about the junkies, helpless, hooked, lost, thin, confused creatures, sick and the police and the informers. I SAW THE BEST MINDS OF MY GENERATION DESTROYED BY MADNESS, STARVING HYSTERICAL NAKED, DRAGGING THEMSELVES THROUGH THE NEGRO STREETS AT DAWN LOOKING FOR AN ANGRY FIX. And then we started planning the psychedelic revolution. Allen wanted everyone to have the mushrooms. Who has the right to keep them from someone else? And there should be freedom for all sorts of rituals, too. The doctors could have them and there should be *curanderos*, and all sorts of good new holy rituals that could be