

INTERVIEW WITH JAMES BALDWIN

By Karen Wald

LIBERATION News Service

[Editor's Note. The following interview with James Baldwin was done soon after his recent visit to Huey Newton, minister of defense of the Black Panther Party in prison. Huey is serving a 2-15 year sentence for manslaughter -- the state was unsuccessful in framing him up with a first degree murder charge for the killing of a policeman.]

YOU WERE JUST DOWN AT THE CALIFORNIA MEN'S COLONY IN SAN LUIS OBISPO VISITING HUEY NEWTON. CAN YOU TELL US WHAT THIS TRIP WAS ABOUT?

Huey is one of the most important people to have been produced by the American chaos. His fate is very important. And not one person in white America, if they read the mass media, knows anything about Huey, what produced him or what produced the Black Panther Party.

Black people have always played, in this country, a tormented role in the white man's imagination. They prefer to believe him to be King Kong, or whatever it is white Americans take black people to be. It's inconceivable to them, because it says too much about the republic, I think, that the Black Panther Party was originally called the Black Panther Party for Self Defense. And that it was produced as a reaction to, and I'm a witness to this because I was born in the ghetto, to the tremendous irresponsibility of the police force. It didn't come out of nothing, it didn't come about because Huey and his cohorts are some kind of weird anti-social monsters. It came out of the very real necessity to invest the black community with a certain kind of morale, which cannot be found in any American institution.

HAVE YOU SEEN CHANGES IN HUEY SINCE YOU FIRST MET HIM?

In much the same way that the events of the last two years have caused everybody to re-think the situation, Huey has gone through some changes himself. I think that oppressors always make the same mistake. They think that they're going to break you by the degree and the nature of your punishment. But they always miscalculate, because you may be able to break ten people but there's always one person or two people or three people on whom it

doesn't work who use it to find out something and to become in a sense more dangerous than they were before. More dangerous than if you'd left them alone -- more dangerous that is to the status quo. I think Huey is changing that way.

WOULD YOU BE WILLING TO COMMENT ABOUT SOME OF THE CHANGES YOU, YOURSELF HAVE BEEN GOING THROUGH IN THE LAST TWO YEARS?

I think that no one any longer can be fooled about the intentions of the American government because they've made it perfectly clear. And that may be the most healthy thing that has happened in this time. Nobody after all can say anything for the present administration. It represents the American illusion that it's a white country, that it's a white world and that they can make it a white universe -- the moon is our first colony.

ELDRIDGE ONCE SAID THAT THERE WERE BASIC DIFFERENCES CONCERNING THE ATTITUDE YOU HAD TOWARD DEALING WITH THE VIOLENCE OF THE WHITE OPPRESSOR. DO YOU SEE ANY CHANGES IN THE WAY YOU FEEL ABOUT THIS?

My enormous concern has been, and still is, that I don't want to see a generation go out into the streets and die. On the other hand, I was also forced to realize that it wasn't up to me. Nobody can answer for a generation except that generation itself. We don't have the helicopters we don't have the tanks, the weight against us is tremendous -- which demands of the people in the situation that they find a way to respond.

Some very respectable people in this country, respectable in the ordinary sense, are aware of what is happening. This has made very peculiar bedfellows -- the position of Justice Douglass is not that different after all from the position of Huey Newton. Some of the people are beginning to see what has happened to the civilization what has happened here, as a result of the fantastic greed of the corporate system.

One of the reasons for the Nixon Agnew business about the silent majority and the whole claim that people who are against the war are really murdering American boys, is in the hope that somehow they can unite the whole country around a series of really bloody contradictions. Which is not possible.

They can't put thirty million black people in jail in secret, and in any case there are many more than thirty million -- black people aren't the only dissenters here. What this country does not really understand is something very simple. That Huey is right when he says that as long as there are black people, there will be Black Panthers. Malcolm was right when he was asked about the numerical strength of the Black Muslims -- anyone who knows won't tell you and anyone who claims to is a fool. The truth is: any black person in this country at the time when the Muslim movement was at its height, was a Black Muslim. Any black person in this country at this hour is in some way a Black Panther.

And even if he weren't, the fact is that the cop isn't going to ask me my name and address before he shoots me, and the only difference between me and any other black cat in this country is that if they shoot me my name would be in the papers. We all know many people have died, none of us knows how many, but I know that for every one of me there would be twenty people dead, here in my own generation. But they don't understand about the Viet Cong. My brother puts it this way -- we are the first Viet Cong.

Shooting people in their apartments in the middle of the night creates exactly what they would like not to happen. This does something to people who ostensibly don't care, wouldn't care -- something begins happening to the American consciousness -- it's not just happening to black people, it's also happening to me. When society becomes that anarchic, it's not only black people that are menaced, it's everybody else. So they create a resistance that wasn't there before.

WHAT ABOUT THE PANTHER 21 CASES IN NEW YORK OR THE SUPPOSED MURDER IN NEW HAVEN, WHAT ARE YOUR FEELINGS ABOUT THOSE CASES?

I see all those cases as harassment, as intimidation. Even if I were a very different person than the person that I am, there is no way for me to believe what the police or what the government says. Unless I am really in a position to check it out myself. I've seen too much. I don't care what the white press says about the exaggerations of police brutality. I've lived with it all my life. I know,

whether the New York Times wants to believe it or not. I was there and the New York Times was not.

DO YOU HAVE ANY DOUBTS THAT THE NEW YORK AND NEW HAVEN CASES ARE FRAME UPS?

Until it is proven beyond a shadow of a doubt preferably in the halls of the U.N. that it is not a frame-up. I will believe that it is a frame up, because I am part of a people who have been historically framed up.

WHAT WOULD YOU SAY ABOUT THE CONSPIRACY TRIAL?

I think that is simply too obscene to be discussed.

WHY DO YOU THINK THEY INCLUDED BOBBY SEALE, WHO HAD ABSOLUTELY NOTHING TO DO WITH THE DEMONSTRATIONS, IN THE CONSPIRACY?

Quite apart from all the illegality involved, Bobby is a bad nigger. Same reason Mohammed Ali, formerly Cassius Clay, was stripped of his title. Same reason Malcolm is dead. One of the historical facts about this nation is that you always take a bad nigger and hang him publicly, as an example to all others who would be bad niggers.

HAVE YOU OUTSIDE OF THE YOUNG BLACK AND WHITE MILITANTS YOU'VE TALKED TO, A STRONG REACTION TO THE MURDER OF FRED HAMPTON AND MARK CLARK IN CHICAGO?

I don't know how to answer that. You put it the wrong way -- Hampton and Clark are only the latest examples. The show has become monotonous.

WASN'T THAT SO MUCH MORE OBVIOUS?

It's amazing to me how difficult it is for people to see when they don't want to see. Black people see, but how many parents of white children see it, that's another question. The difference between my experience and that of white America, even the very best of white America, is that they have difficulty believing that the country can act this way. And that is not my problem at all. I've always known it could, it always has in my experience and I'm no longer young.

WHY IS IT THAT GROUPS LIKE SCLC, NAACP, URBAN LEAGUE, AND GROUPS LIKE THEM ARE JUST BEGINNING TO COME OUT IN SUPPORT OF THE PANTHERS?

The whole black situation in this country from the start has been very complicated. The battle between W.E.B. DuBois and Booker T. Washington was almost the battle in microcosm. There's always been

something very closely resembling a hoax, the very heart of the American dream. And it applied to black people in great force, because for a while it was very useful to what is called the power structure to have certain niggers in the window. To prove to Americans that they were really what they said they were, and to prove to black people that they were what they said they were. And the nature of the bargain was that the nigger in the window could wrest some concessions from the status quo, in return for the tranquility of the natives.

But the table on which these people operate has vanished. Once Martin Luther King was shot, though some people think it was so long before that, it was perfectly clear that there was no way to be a good nigger. And that's not even pejorative because Uncle Tom played a very important role historically. But the role that he played is no longer possible to play. The defenders of the status quo have in effect given as much as they can give. And now even the most respectable black cat is very much, whether or not he likes it or whether or not he wants to admit it, no matter what his age -- he is also part of the target, no matter how famous or how rich he is.

We are all the Viet Cong, none of us can really be trusted from the point of view of the defenders of the American power. Not even the most agile Uncle Tom can hope to have any meaningful discussion or dialogue with Attorney General John Mitchell.

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