

# NOT 100 YEARS OF FREEDOM

by James Baldwin

I myself do not feel that the nation has anything to celebrate this year - certainly not one hundred years of Negro freedom. Rather, I feel that we should use this year, which so harshly illuminates our failure either to end the Civil War or to recognize the Negro as a human being, as an opportunity to take a delicate and arduous inventory. Let us, for once, leave in the filing cabinet all those pathetic statistics proving Negro gains and changes - statistics, which, however reassuring many white Americans may find them, prove nothing about the reality of the Negro situation. They are not intended to; they are intended to reassure white people. This reliance on statistics, though, tells us a great deal about how mechanical the American view of life has become, and also suggests the reason for the very striking diminution of the moral energy of the country: fear. We talk endlessly about progress and chatter about the future because we are afraid to pay the price of change in the present.

The present is certainly harsh and trying enough. But I don't think the nation recognizes its real potential - its power to deal with, and alter this present - any more than it recognizes its real dangers. I gather, from the shrill evidence, that we imagine the danger to be mainly without. I think the danger is mainly within. Any human being who is struggling to become mature is forced to recognize that there is a devil in himself and a devil in the world, and that his destruction can be accomplished when these two kings of darkness meet. Or, more concretely, a Negro recognizes, knows all too well, how little he is valued or respected by the majority of white people; but he can only be destroyed as a human being by accepting this general judgment and inflicting it on himself. Thus, I conclude that a person is able to control, modify, or change the world exactly to the extent that he is able to control, modify, or change himself. If this is true for men, then it must be true for nations. And the price of this maturity, for nations as for men, is an unceasing effort at self knowledge.

It seems very clear to me that our dangers do not exist mainly in the area of the Cold War. It is the irresolution with which we confront the political, social, and moral chaos of this country which is dangerous. There are so many things we do not want to know about America that we have great

difficulty in understanding what is going on in the world. There is, for example, an awful connection between the fact of Cuba and the fact of Mississippi which no one appears to recognize, least of all those whom the nation has elected to represent it - and who do, I am afraid, represent it very well.

The real position the Negro occupies in the minds and hearts of most white Americans is very chillingly revealed, I think, in the President's speech to Mississippi on the night that James Meredith, under cover of darkness, was brought to the Ole Miss campus. I hope it does not seem unfair to say that, at the moment, in Mississippi, Meredith appears to be the only man who loves the State enough to be willing to strike a blow for its liberation. The President did not, however, address his speech to Meredith, nor to any other black man in the State, or in the nation, or in the world. He appealed instead to Mississippi honor exactly as though he did not know that Mississippi's concept of its honor, at least since the Reconstruction, has been a simple matter of keeping the Negro in his place. Nor did it occur to him, apparently, that an appeal to law was scarcely likely to be heeded when addressed to the most lawless section of a

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LCA Chairman Dan Watts and James Baldwin discussing the coming issues of the LIBERATOR.



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lawless country. Furthermore, it is morally indefensible, and especially at this stage of our history, to say, in effect, to the most rabid racists among us, "I understand how you feel, boys, and I know it's going to be hard on you. But the law is the law, and you know the spot I'm in, so be nice." The speech did not convince the white Mississippians - I trust that no one is surprised - and it bitterly disappointed and alienated Negroes. One is weary of hearing Washington say that desegregation is legal - I always seem to hear a sotto voce alas! - and that the law must be obeyed. Negroes, who are risking their lives and their sanity in this appalling struggle, which has as its goal the liberation of the nation, deserve far more from the nation than that. Is it too radical to hope that a statement can come from the White House saying, flatly, that desegregation is right and that ignorance, violence, and bloodshed are wrong? Is it really impossible to change a mental and moral climate which tacitly assumes that it is the Negro who is making the

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trouble and that everything would be taken care of in good time if the Negro would only stop pushing? We ought to dare to raise the question which is so obliquely and unconsciously hinted at whenever Bobby Kennedy asks the students for a "cooling off" period so that we will not be embarrassed before the Russians. It is not only the Russians who are listening to us and watching what we do. Millions of people all over the world are doing so. I have no wish to rattle sabers, but it seems not to have occurred to white Americans that the American Negro identifies himself with the struggle of the subjugated peoples all over the world and is finding it increasingly difficult to answer the questions put to him by Asians, Africans, and Cubans as to what his future is in his country and what role he is to play in the world.