

The New Negro

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THE OPEN MIND

NBC Television

Host: Richard D. Heffner

Guests: Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr.

Judge J. Waties Waring

Sunday, February 10, 1957

ANCHOR: THE OPEN MIND, free to examine, to question, to disagree. Our subject today, The New Negro. Your host on THE OPEN MIND is Richard D. Heffner, author and historian.

HEFFNER: I think it's safe to say that a lot of the Negroes in America throughout our history have deeply bothered the conscience of each and every one of us who deeply believes in traditional American principles of democracy and liberty and justice and freedom. I think this may be a little less true today than ever before, and yet for the larger part of American history I think we ought to realize that the Negro more or less was in slavery. I think the Negro was more likely to be a slave for the greater part of our history, than not. And quite naturally the attitude of the Negro toward the white, of the white toward the Negro, and of the Negro toward himself, has been conditioned and tempered and molded in very large part by the fact of a long history of slavery.

Besides, I think it's important to remember that slavery as an institution put a premium not upon self-assertiveness and the understanding of one's own human dignity, but upon self-assertiveness and the understanding of one's own human dignity, but upon acquiescence by the Negro slave.

And I think that one can fairly say that the acquiescence of the Negro slave was generally, well, to put it very bluntly, generally safer than the self-assertive Negro who is conscious of his own human dignity and of the democratic philosophy that is the American heritage.

As a matter of fact, I think we can admit that the whole myth that we have built up about the Old South, in which slavery existed, has been a myth in which we see the picture of the happy, acquiescent slave; the Negro who is a slave, the Negro who is acquiescent, is happy, the Negro who is happy is –by definition— acquiescent. Negroes are happy because they accept their life.

And think of the movies and the books and the plays and the novels that we read and see about slavery in the Old South. We see the Negro who is acquiescent, is happy. The Negro slave who is self-assertive, looks for his own rights, is considered a troublemaker. Even when slavery was brought to an end by the Civil War it was said that acquiescence and acceptance by the Negro of his lot, these were the greater part of wisdom. It was said that the Negro could gain even more by submerging his own sense of dignity than by asserting it, that the Negro would so antagonize others by demanding his own rights, that it was better for him to bide his time at each step along the way, wait for something to be given to him, rather than demand it as of his own right.

Well men of good will, I think both Negro and white, cannot deny that to some extent there is validity to this argument. But the degree of that extent, to what extent this is true, is a question that we must face today.

In recent years there have grownup leaders among both Negroes and whites, who feel that a just and a wise self-assertiveness is necessary on the part of the Negro. There has been emerging in our times a new Negro, a Negro who is aware of his own dignity and of the American tradition of liberty and justice.

We want to talk today about that new Negro, about who he is and what he is. And our guests are quite expert in the subject.

Our first guest is the Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr., of Montgomery, Alabama. Reverend King has been very much involved in the demand by the new Negro for his rights in the Negro bus boycott in Montgomery and in many other instances.

Our second guest is a jurist, Judge J. Waties Waring, formerly federal judge in South Carolina, a gentleman whose decision in the area of segregation paved the way in a very real sense for what became in 1954 the Supreme Court's decision that segregation in our public schools is unconstitutional.

Well, gentlemen, suppose we begin this discussion by first asking you, Dr. King, in your estimation, what and who is this new Negro?

REV. KING: I think I could best answer that question by saying first that the new Negro is a person with a new sense of dignity and destiny. With a new self-respect. Along with that is lack of fear, which once characterized the Negro. This willingness to stand up courageously for what he feels is just and what he feels he deserves on the basis of the laws of the land. I think also included would be this self-assertive attitude that you just mentioned.

5:00

And all of these factors come together to make what seems to me to be the new Negro.

I think also I would like to mention this growing honesty which characterizes the Negro today. There was a time that the Negro used duplicity, deception too, rather as a survival technique; although he didn't particularly like conditions — he said he liked them because he felt that the boss wanted to hear that. But now from the housetops, from the kitchens, from the classrooms and from the pulpit, the Negro says in no uncertain terms that he doesn't like the way he's being treated. So at long last the Negro is telling the truth. And I think this is also one of the basic characteristics of the new Negro.

HEFFNER: Judge Waring, does this sound like an adequate description of the Negro whom you know today?

JUDGE WARING: Mr. Heffner, I think it's excellent; it's an excellent summary. My observation of the Negro, and I'm speaking in generalities, of course, has been that up to recently he has been a half-man, or a part-man, and now he at last is waking up to the fact that he's a whole man, that he's an American citizen, and that he is entitled to rights, no more, no less, than just the ordinary run of the mill American citizen.

He's never had that before; he hasn't been allowed to have it. He's been under political domination; he's been oppressed; he had deprivation; he's been a servant, formerly a slave; and now suddenly I see the idea has come to him that he's really, truly a man that can stand up on his own hind legs and tell the truth, and say, "I want not any special privilege, I don't want any special handout; I don't want to be given anything, because the giving idea is all wrong. But I want a chance to become a full man and do my part, be it little or be it big, in the community of our country."

HEFFNER: Doesn't this raise the question of tactics, though? You say, you use the word honesty, you feel that honesty is important here too. But as a matter of securing for the Negro his rights, do you feel that this aggressiveness, this self-assertiveness will get him more in the long run than going along with contemporary opinion and biding his time, taking it step by step as he goes?

REV. KING: I think it's better to be aggressive at this point. It seems to me that it is both historically and socially true that privileged classes do not give up their privileges voluntarily. And they do not give them up without strong resistance. And all the gains that have been made, that we have received in the area of civil rights, have come about because the Negro stood up courageously for these rights, and he was willing to aggressively press on.

So I would think that it would be much better in the long run to stand up and be aggressive with understanding good will and a sense of discipline, yet thing like these should not be substituted for pressing on. And with this aggressive attitude I believe that we will bring the gains of civil rights much sooner than we would just standing idly by, waiting for these thing to be given voluntarily.

HEFFNER: What about the ill will that's generated by the aggressiveness? Certainly your own experience in Montgomery; you've been the target of strong attacks; you've been the target of verbal and other kinds of violence. How about the ill will that is generated by aggressiveness?

REV. KING: Well, I think that is a necessary phase of the transition. Whenever oppressed people stand up for their rights and rise up against the oppressors, so to speak, the initial response of the oppressor is bitterness. That's true in most cases, I think. And that is what we are now experiencing in the South, this initial response of bitterness, which I hope will be transformed into a more brotherly attitude. We hope that the need will be redemption and reconciliation, rather than division.

10:00

But this, it seems to me, a necessary phase of the transition from the old order of segregation and discrimination to the new order of freedom and justice. And this should not last forever it's just something that's natural right now, and as soon as we pass out the shock period into the more creative period of adjustment I think that bitterness and ill will will pass away.

HEFFNER: This sounds — if I may say this — in a sense to be a denial of the judicial process doesn't allow for the violent activity, the aggressiveness, and it means in a sense stepping outside of the judicial process, outside that slow, step by step process that has been going on in the courts. Do you think for instance, that the courts would have been moved to action that would have taken the place of your boycott in Montgomery, had you not acted? Do you think there could be a substitute for that kind of action?

REV. KING: I think not. I think it was necessary to do it. I think the time was ripe. And I don't think there could have been a substitute at that particular time.

HEFFNER: Do you think that the judicial structure —

JUDGE WARING: — I want to say something on that. I think undoubtedly the action that Mr. King and his friends took in Montgomery was fine, necessary and effective. Remember the courts don't go out as an executive branch of the government should and do things for you. The court declares what your rights are. And the court says to you, "you're an American citizen." Now of course if you're scared and hide in the park and don't exercise the rights of American citizens the courts can't turn around and say, "you've got to do it." The courts have declared the rights. And I think the Supreme Court decision of May 17, 1954 was the greatest thing that's happened in this country in many, many decades. And I think that it declared, it declared in effect that segregation, legal segregation, segregation by law if illegal and not a part of America. And all the people, the big people and the little people throughout this land have awakened to the fact that they have a right. Now remember this. It's not a matter of giving rights. Rights aren't given. The right to vote isn't given to you. It's yours and it belongs to you. And the Negro people are beginning to realize that they are ordinary human beings and American citizens and they have these rights. And the courts have told them so.

Now it's up to them to move out. They haven't got to go out with guns and bombs and gas, but they've got to go out with determination and courage and steadfastness like this man Luther King has done, and say, here am I, and I stand here on my rights.

And it's going to prevail. It's got to prevail. And it can't be beaten if we have enough of them who are steadfast enough. When they begin to compromise and sellout on principles, then they're gone. Now the matter of strategy is to keep a complete, solid front. There may be tactics as to whether you want to make bus cases first, or school cases or railroad cases or things of that kind, those are minor details. But the strategy is you must never surrender any of the rights you have gained and you must look forward to the attainment of full equality.

HEFFNER: Well, I know that's your strategy. What about future tactics. Where do you go from here?

REV. KING: Well, that's a pretty difficult question to answer at this point, since in Montgomery we have not worked out any future plans, that is, in any chronological order. We are certainly committed to work and press on until segregation is nonexistent in Montgomery and all over the south.

15:00

We are committed to full equality and doing away with injustice — wherever we find it. But as to the next move I don't have the answer for that because we have not worked that out at this point. We, I guess have been so involved in the bus situation so that we have not had the real time to sit down and think about next moves.

But in a general sense, we are committed to achieving first class citizenship in every area of life in Montgomery and throughout the southern community.

MR. HEFFNER: Well I wondered to what extent the judicial decision of May, 1954 stimulated a greater feeling of self-respect amongst Negroes and intensified in them a willingness to assert their demands.

REV. KING: I think it had a tremendous impact and influence on the Negro and bringing about this new self-respect. I think it certainly is one of the major factors, not the only—I think several other forces, and historical circumstances must be brought into the picture. The fact that circumstances made it necessary for the Negro to travel more, so that his rural, plantation background was gradually supplanted by a more urban, industrial life... illiteracy was gradually passing away and with the growth of the cultural life of the Negro, that brought about new self-respect. And economic growth, and also the tremendous impact of the world situation, with people all over the world seeking freedom from Colonial powers and imperialism, these things all came together, and then with the decision of May 17, 1954 we gained the culminating point.

That, it seems to me was the final point, which came to bring all of these things together. And that gave this new Negro a new self-respect, which we see all over the south and all over the nation today.

HEFFNER: Well, if this was a final point, in a sense, a culminating point, why do you ask now for another act on a national level, an act, let's say, on the part of the president, for a speech in the south? Why is this so important? Haven't enough steps been made up to this point to enable you to carry the ball from here on?

REV. KING: Well, I think it's necessary for all of the forces possible to be working to implement and enforce the decisions that are handed down by the courts. And so often in the area of civil rights it seems that the judicial branch of the government is fighting the battle alone. And we feel that the executive and legislative branches of the government have the basic responsibility. And at point these branches have been all too silent and all too stagnant in their moves to implement and enforce the decisions. With the popularity of the president and his tremendous power and influence, just a word from him could do a great deal to ease the situation, calm emotions and give southern white liberals something to stand on, if it is nothing but something to quote.

The southern white liberal stands in a pretty difficult position because he does not have anywhere to turn for emotional security similar to what hat groups, I mean the things that other groups have to turn to, the hate organizations, so to speak.

But with a word from the president of the United States, with his power and influence, it would give a little more courage and backbone to the white liberals in the south who are willing to be allies in the struggle of the Negro for first-class citizenship.

HEFFNER: To what extent — let me ask you this question. Judge Waring, are white southerners, willing to be allies in the battle of the new Negro?

JUDGE WARING: That's a very hard question to answer. There are very, very few that are willing to come out in the open and say so. There are a great many, in my opinion, who would be glad if they were made to do it.

20:00

I think that there are lots of people — I sometimes use the expression that the little boy with the dirty face won't go and wash it, but if you grab him by the neck and scrub his face he then boasts that he has the cleanest face in the land.

And I think there are many of the people in the south, and I saw many of them — my experience was that officially I was quite hated and condemned because I had expressed my views of what I thought the laws of the land were. And I got a lot of telephone messages and anonymous letters saying they agreed with me but they couldn't tell me why or how or who they were.

And those people want to be free, but no politician in the south is going to dare come out and take this position of his own volition. But if the president of the United States tells him to, he's going to fall in line.

And if we can get the top executive people to take action we'll get somewhere.

Remember this, now. The Supreme Court has laid down the law and said what's constitutional. Now that's important. That's most important. It's the biggest thing that's ever happened. But it's got to be activated, it's got to be worked out, and the executive department has got to manipulate and work it and enforce it. And the legislative department should give the executive department more power to work and enforce these laws.

HEFFNER: You feel that action has to be taken on this level?

REV. KING: Oh yes. Very definitely.

HEFFNER: Let me ask again, though, about the feelings of the southern whites. If you had to give a progress report, how would you evaluate the battle you've fought over this past year? In terms of southern feelings, in terms of northern white feelings, too?

REV. KING: Well I think we've been able to see mixed emotions at this point. For instance, from a national point of view, looking all over the nation, we have had tremendous response and real genuine sympathy from many, many white persons; and naturally we've had the sympathy of Negroes. But many, may white persons of good will all over the nation have given moral support and a great deal of encouragement, and that has been very encouraging to us in the struggle.

Now, in the south — I guess the lines are more closely drawn. You find on the one hand a group more determined now than ever before because it is a last-ditch struggle, to do anything. Even if it means using violence to block all of the intentions and the desires of the Negroes to achieve first-class citizenship. But there are also others who have expressed sympathy. There are white southerners, even in Montgomery, who have been quite sympathetic, as Judge Waring just said, sometimes these people because of fear, refuse to say anything about it. They stand back because of fear of economic, social and political reprisals. But there is a silent sympathy. And we have seen a great deal of that in Montgomery.

So, it's two sides. There's this side where you get the negative response, the other side where you have the positive response. And I have seen both. And I think as time goes on the negative side will get smaller and smaller.

And those who are willing to be open-minded and accept the trend of the ages will grow into a majority group rather than a minority.

HEFFNER: You don't feel that there will be any violent reaction the, over a long-range point of view, to the press that has been made?

REV. KING: No, I don't. I think the violence will be temporary. Maybe... I don't say it will end tomorrow. We will go through some more for the next few months or so, but I think once we are over the shock period, that shock will be absorbed and southerners will come to the point of seeing that the best thing to do is sit down and work out these problems and do it in a very Christian spirit. I think the violence that we are undergoing now is indicative of the fact that the die-hards realize that the system, is at its dying point. And that this is the last way to try to hold on to the old order.

25:00

JUDGE WARING: Mr. Heffner, all these reforms have periods of trouble. Ghandi was murdered, Jesus was crucified and you find that most great reforms have certain period of stress and distress. Now, just one last point I want to make. When we speak of the laws it is terribly important that they bring these cases and have a declaration of law and action by Congress and action by the executive. Because now, up to the time of the Supreme Court's decision, segregation was legal. And segregation, even people of good will themselves, said that the law says that we have to keep these people segregated.

For instance, it has been illegal for me to ride in a bus with Mr. King here. Now I don't want a law, which says I've got to ride with him, or he's got to ride with me. But I don't want a law, which says I can't sit in a seat with him. And we've broken that, and that's an enormous advance. And we've got to do it on every stage right down the line. The Congress of the United states, I believe—and I've been very cynical and skeptical about it — but I'm beginning to believe they're going to do a little something this time. And if they do a little something — they haven't done anything in 75 years — if they do a little something this time they'll do a little more next year, and the president of the United States and the officials in the administration will begin to see that if Congress is moving — it's good politics to move and that'll have a great motivating product on the national picture.

I think we're going forward, we're going forward inexorably. We've got to win. And it's a question of whether we're going to win in a short time or a long time. I'm for a short period.

HEFFNER: How do you project this into the immediate future?

REV. KING: Well I... when I think of the question of progress in the area of race relations I prefer to be realistic and when I say that I mean I try to look at it not from the pessimistic point of view or the optimistic, but rather from the realistic point of view... I think we've come a long, long way, but we have a long, long way to go. But it seems to me that if we will press on with determination, moral courage, and yet wise restraint and calm reasonableness, in a few years we will reach the goal. I have a great deal of faith in the future and the outcome. I am not despairing.

HEFFNER: And I'm sure as long as we have men like you, we can all have faith. Thank you Reverend King and Judge Waring.

4 Responses to "The New Negro"

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