

# Negro Digest

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## THE REAL MEANING OF THE BLACK REVOLUTION

*By Lerone Bennett Jr.*

*Racism at a  
Great University*

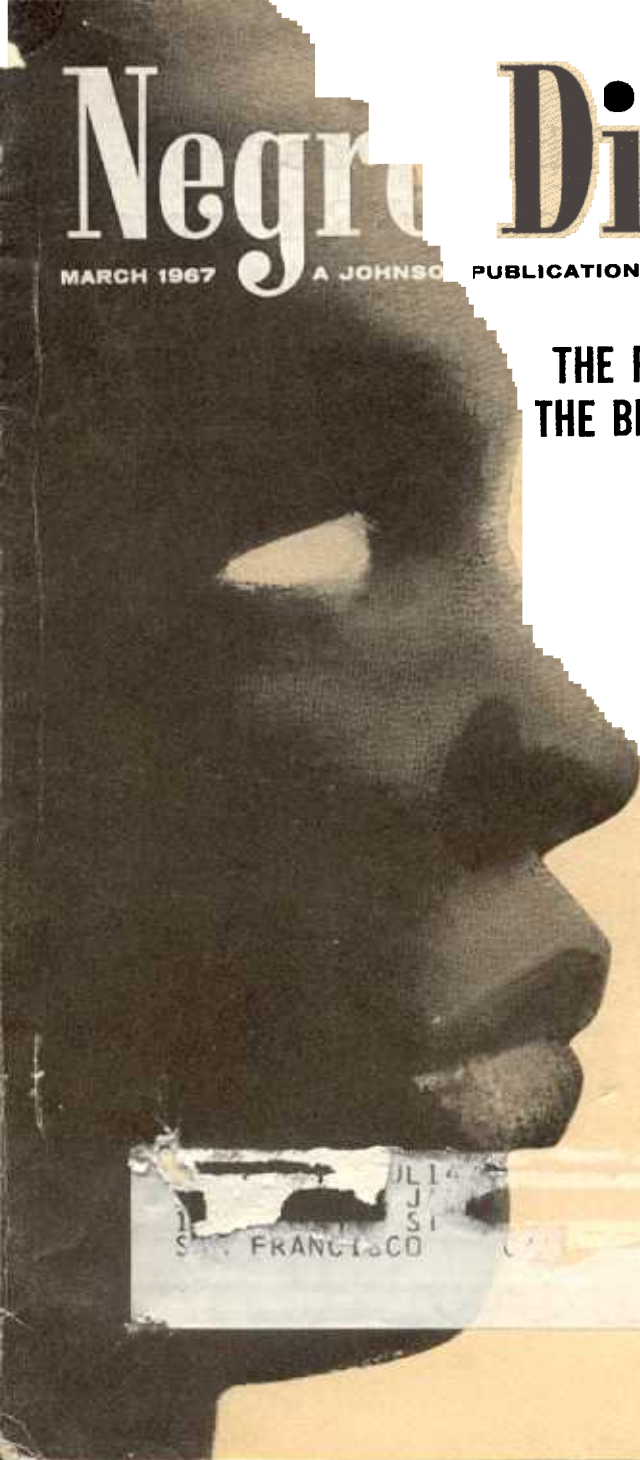
## THE AGONY and the RAGE

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## PROTEST OF AN AMERICAN RADICAL



munists, of four-letter words, sex, fluoridation—we are afraid, in a word, of ourselves.

Because we fear ourselves and others, because we are dominated by machines and things, because we are not in control of our destiny, we are neither happy nor free.

"If one probes beneath the chrome-plated surface," Senator J. W. Fulbright says, "he comes inescapably to the conclusion that the American people by and large are not happy. . . . I believe . . . that America's trouble is basically one of aimlessness at home and frustration abroad."

As you have probably guessed by now, I believe America's trouble is at a deeper level. The problem, in my opinion, is structural, that is, institutional. We have not created a single community here. We have not even created a single community for white people. Men tell me that white people ought to love black people. But it is clear to me that white people don't love each other, not to speak of the fact that an incredibly large number of white Americans don't love themselves.

Racism in America is a reflection of this structural problem. As I have said elsewhere, we misunderstand racism completely if we do not see it as a confused and alienated protest against a suffocating reality. On the level of power, racism is used by men to effect magical solutions of the unresolved social problems in the white community. On a personal level, particularly among lower-income and middle-income whites, racism is an avenue of flight, a cry for help from desperate men stifling in the prisons of their skins. Viewed in this perspective, racism is a flight from freedom, a flight from the self, a flight from the intolerable burdens of being a man in a mechanized world.

There is considerable evidence that America's stress on possessive individualism induces exaggerated anxieties which are displaced onto the area of race relations. The fear of failure, the fear of competitors, the fear of losing status, of not living in the right neighborhood, of not having the right friends or the right gadgets: these fears weigh heavily on the minds of millions of Americans and lead to a search for avenues on the escape. And so the factory worker or the poor farmer who finds himself at a dead end with a nagging wife, a problem child and a past-due bill uses the black man as a screen to hide himself from himself and from an intolerable reality.

To adapt the perceptive words of Richard Wright, social discontent assumes many guises, and the social commentator who focuses on the police blotter misses the real clues to contemporary reality. By this I mean that it is possible to know, *before it happens*, that certain forms of violence will occur. It can be known, *before it happens*, that a native-

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*Racism at a Great University*

## THE AGONY and the RAGE

BY J. HERMAN BLAKE

*"... Perhaps the brothers in all the ghettos will one day realize that we should not just have cheered Watts, we should have joined them..."*

*"The view from the top of the hill is not the same as that from the bottom of the hill. Nor are most viewers at either end of the hill, even certain that, in fact, there is any other place from which they look. Looking down usually eliminates the possibility of understanding what it must be like to look up."*

—LeRoi Jones

WHILE returning from a trip to Washington recently, I took my family to visit Shasta Dam.

I was doubtful that the visit would provide anything of interest, but the view from the top of the dam was impressive. Looking down, the appearance of the men and machines testified to the unlimited ability of American technology. In the distance the men appeared to be midgets, and pipes were like strands of rope. Then we toured the dam and eventually reached the bottom. Looking up, I

was amazed at how little the view from the top told me about the dam. What seemed small from the top appeared to be overwhelming from the bottom. The pipes were not like strands of rope, they were large enough for a Greyhound bus to pass through. From the top the bottom looked far away, but rather easily reached (one could always fall). From the bottom the top looked even further away and impossible to reach. I know now that I can never visit another dam and fully appreciate it unless I see it from the top *and* the bottom, for



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anything less only provides a distorted impression of the structure.

Education at Cal (the University of California at Berkeley) has brought me into contact with many wonderful people I would have never met had my life stopped with the menial job I thought was going to be my future. Many of these people feel—looking down from the top—that the problems facing the Negro are minute when compared with all of American progress. Having lived the experience of the Negro, I know that the problems are fantastically huge, huge beyond one's ability to translate into mere words. I find myself filled with an intense desire to tell people what is really happening, but these efforts usually end in failure because the people have neither looked up from the bottom, nor have they ever been on the bottom to see what the overall situation actually looks like.

The racism of America becomes apparent in this process of growing awareness. America's hypocrisy becomes even more real. We are taught the values, the beliefs, the words which are supposed to characterize America long before we have reached the age of mature criticism. And when we come to an understanding of America it is not in terms of these beliefs, but in terms of the practices, and their implications are apparent even in the liberal confines of the University of California.

Two of the areas where I had

painful experiences with the hypocrisy and racism of America were in contact with students and administrators. As a teaching assistant I spent many hours in my office talking with students. They would tell me much, and sometimes too much, for their remarks would leave me in a rage against all that they represent. A sorority member asked for a special appointment so we could discuss the term paper which she was writing. In the course of our conversation she began talking about her attitude toward the girls going through rush, and her basis for voting against some of them. She was in the sorority for one reason: it was a way to gain prestige. Anyone who could not add to the prestige of her sorority was going to be refused membership. A Negro has no prestige in America, so any Negro girl who came to her house during rush season would be refused. It was as simple as that. During the conversation she referred to the International House (the residence of many foreign students) as the "Zoo."

Other students tell me about the schemes they use to avoid the draft. Graduate school, letters from relatives who are also doctors, faking hearing defects, and the like. I think of the high proportion of Negroes in Vietnam, the high proportion of Negro dead and wounded in Vietnam, and I realize that these people still need the Negro to do their dirty work so that they can continue to lead their lives of jaded comfort.

Cal has had good administrators, but far too few of them. In the spring of 1961 when I was president of the Campus NAACP we asked permission to invite Malcolm X to speak. Our application went in to the Dean, permission was granted, and Pauley Ballroom was reserved for the occasion. In the meantime, we protested to the Chancellor about an employer coming to interview in the Campus Placement Center because we had evidence that this employer had systematically discriminated against Negroes for certain positions. We got no reply from the Chancellor so, on the morning of the employer's visit, a small group picketed the Placement Center. That afternoon, I received a call saying that permission for Malcolm X to speak had been rescinded because he was a religious speaker and Campus facilities could not be used by such persons.



The next day the Daily California announced Bishop Pike was to speak in Wheeler Auditorium. In an attempt to salvage our program I went to the Chancellor's office and spoke to one of his top aides. This man told me that he had issued the order to cancel Malcolm's appearance and he alone was responsible for the decision. When I protested about Bishop Pike I was told that Pike was a theologian, but

Malcolm was a "religious speaker." It occurred to me that the man to whom I was speaking was not responsible for student affairs, yet he had made the decision about student affairs. I then told him I considered this to be an arbitrary decision made against us because we were Negroes. He turned red, protesting that "some of his best friends were Negroes" (he actually said it), and went on to tell me about the Negro who always came to his home and played with his son.

I believe now and I have always believed that the cancellation of Malcolm X as a speaker was a step taken to punish us for picketing the Placement Center. When the ASUC invited Malcolm X to the campus in the fall of 1961 (Malcolm refused of course), I was further convinced of the wholly punitive nature of the earlier action—that is unless I was ready to accept the idea that in this period of time Malcolm became a theologian and not a "religious speaker."

This was my first real encounter with that monolith called the "power structure," and I was badly stung. You look at them with their cold blue eyes and their hard faces and you realize that they have the power and you have the skin. Since that time I have come to a fuller understanding of how much the power structure is a replica of the racism in America—not so much in its pronouncements as in its practices. Throughout the univer-



sity you find evidence of it, Negroes speak openly of it, but the whites are blind to it because they have never stood at the bottom of the hill and do not know how much they reflect this racism.

You remember the key examples: the Negro secretary who was fired because she struck a white worker who called her a "nigger;" the food services worker who was fired because he ostensibly refused to bring a note from his doctor explaining his absence from work (the papers explaining his dismissal make no mention of the fact that he belonged to a religious group which did not believe in going to doctors); the Negro administrator who was dismissed as "incompatible" because he openly objected to his supervisor's racial slurs (another supervisor had complained that he was not submissive enough); the Golden Bear Restaurant which has never "sullied" its appearance with a Negro waitress (and of course they claim that no Negroes apply). Negro girls admit they do not want to go through the pain of applying when they know they will not be hired. We know that the personnel staff there have a practice of hiring from a waiting list of names suggested by other waitresses so it is a closed system of whites only.

Most enraging of all the practices of the power structure are the attempts to get more Negro athletes into Cal. For years I have talked with alumni and administrators

who were interested in getting more Negro athletes into Cal but who expressed no interest in the Negroes who were only interested in Cal's academic offerings. These men feel that if they could draw more heavily on the Negro athletes in the state then Cal might once again rise to prominence in sports. But the view from the bottom of the hill indicates that Negroes need more educated people much more than we need athletes. When these people come and express interest in the Negro you soon become aware that they are not at all interested in Negroes; they are interested in Cal sports; and if they can use Negroes to get to the top they will do so, without offering the athletes very much (anyone heard of John Erby lately?). My reaction to these men has always been similar to my reaction to the draft-dodger. One young Negro expressed it this way to me one afternoon in the Bear's Lair: "All these cats are saying to us is to go out and find them some strong niggers." That was how he felt about it then; that is how I have always felt about it.

Similar experiences take place in the classrooms. You study and learn about America, and in the process you learn how to analyze the situation and come to a fuller understanding of all the dimensions of America's treatment of the Negro. You learn how Negro children are taught to dream "the American Dream" at such early age and so effectively that by the time they

come to the awareness that this dream does not include them they are unable to carry that awareness to its logical conclusion and destroy both the dream and its teacher (we are even taught that this conclusion is irrational, but the situation of the black man in this country is so irrational that only irrational acts will save us). You learn—in your objective search for truth—that white America accrues gains from racism and discrimination. Although people use you as an example of what the Negro can do, you acquire objective evidence that the overwhelming majority of Negroes see little change in their life conditions. For example: the sociologist from the University of Texas who analyzed the rates at which Negroes were overtaking whites in their struggle for equal treatment, and then extrapolated these rates to see how long from 1960 it would take the Negro to reach full equality. The answer: at the 1950-60 rates of change it would take 60 years in education, 93 years in occupation, 219 years in income of persons, and 805 years in family income. And you get angry.

Other professors, even in their attempts to be kind and helpful, reflect the hypocrisy and insidious racism of this country: the professors who gave their time and ability to the analysis of public school history textbooks and found that they were remiss in their treatment of the Negro and other mi-

norities, yet they do not find it possible to inaugurate a course in the history of American minorities which would help to correct a very bad situation; The professor who writes an introduction to a paperback version of a classic study of the Negro family but includes (twice) a subtle but vicious insult to Negroes. And you ask yourself, how deep does this go? Can it ever end? And you get angrier.

My experience as a Negro at Cal has been one of moving through an intellectual microcosm of America. The experience has been pregnant with promise, but the promise is dimmed by the actualities you see all around you.

The agonizing thing about it is that they want you to adjust to this system and become a part of it. You know that both the draft-dodger and the football rooter are building their comfort and ease on the shoulders of the black man, shoulders which have boosted this country since 1619, but after a goal is reached they always stick a knife into the heart of the burden-bearer (the Negro soldier who died in Vietnam but who could not be buried in the cemetery in his hometown). They want you to adjust to this and help them to avoid the draft, help them to find Negro athletes, and you know if you do this you will only perpetuate their exploitation of the people of your birth and heritage. So you protest, you tell them that it isn't fair and they must be much more equitable

in their dealings with you—either serve with the black man or get the black man out of Vietnam just as they keep themselves out of Vietnam; either forget about black athletes or seek black scholars as diligently as they seek black athletes. And they look at you with a dumb look. You aren't the Negro they know. You don't smile at them. You don't scratch your head and shuffle your feet. You don't come to their dinners at the faculty club, smoke their big cigars, and help them develop ways to continue their exploitation of the Negro. Not knowing how to deal with an un-submissive Negro, they cancel your speakers, have you dismissed from your job; they make it plain that either you play their game and do so the way they want it played or you will suffer.



This is the agony, the wretchedness of the black man who stands at the top of the hill and looks down, remembering how it was to look up and knowing what it is like down there. If you adjust to their evil system you will enjoy some of its fruits, but they are bitter fruits for they are based on the practice of keeping other blacks at the bottom of the hill. If you fight their evil system they will use their power to silence you. Either path is an agonizing one, but if you re-

member the shining example of Brother Malcolm ("he was not afraid to die because he loved us so") the choice is easy.

Knowing that you will always be considered an ingrate, the agony turns to rage. I cheered the FSM (Free Student Movement) but did not join because I have sworn to myself that if *any* policeman ever lays his hands on me then either he or I *must* die *right there*. I have found that there were times when I longed, not for more blacks on the UC football team, but that the team would lose more games. I remember sitting before the TV set last year and cheering each time a building in Watts erupted into flames. All this in an attempt to avoid the insanity that comes from adjusting to, and thereby accepting, America's exploitation of the black man, and the UC version of that exploitation. All this to avoid the insanity that comes from thinking that one has really made it as a Negro, when all around you are friends, relatives and others, the "folk" who will not be permitted to make it *because* they are Negro.

The view from the top is so distorting and the view from the bottom so overwhelming that I wonder if America will ever conceive and undertake the steps necessary to bring full justice to the Negro. The more I study the more I realize how unlikely this will be, so I long for even more drastic steps. Perhaps someday we blacks will become fully cognizant of the situation. Per-

haps the brothers in Vietnam will one day realize that they have been shooting at the wrong enemy and turn those weapons toward their true enemies. Perhaps the brothers in all the ghettos will one day realize that we should not just have cheered Watts, we should have joined them at the same time in

our own cities (there wouldn't be enough National Guard to handle that one). Then the power structure will move again and we will be utterly crushed, but it is more palatable than this living death. BROTHERS—let us remember Malcolm—it is better to die on your feet than live on your knees.



**J. Herman Blake**, author of "The Agony and the Rage," is an acting assistant professor at Cowell College, a branch of the University of California at Santa Cruz. The article originally was commissioned by the California Monthly, Mr. Blake says, but was rejected "on the grounds that the editors did not agree with the views expressed and publication would have serious consequences for the editors." The California Monthly is the alumni publication of the University of California at Berkeley.