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Gerald A. McWorter
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Dear Professor McWorter,

On behalf of the Friday Forum Committee of the YMCA and YWCA of the University of Illinois, I want to express our deep appreciation to you for speaking at the forum this spring. Your talk, "If You're Black, Get Back!" was both dynamic and challenging. Several of the regular attenders told me afterwards that they thought it was a most appropriate closing to our spring series because it left us considering "...Who Gets What in the 80's" with a very important perspective.

You are one of a long list of distinguished speakers who have helped to make the Friday Forum a vital part of the University of Illinois community for over fifty years. We thank you for your contribution to our proud history.

Sincerely,

Meredith J. Donaldson

Meredith J. Donaldson
Program Director, YWCA
for the Friday Forum Committee

MJD:lsm

IF YOU'RE BLACK, GET BACK....!

(An Informal Talk)

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(Presented to the Friday Forum of University of Illinois
YMCA and YWCA Spring Series on "Slicing the American
Pie: Who Gets What in the 80s?" April 9, 1982)

The current situation in the United States is one that demands straight talk, and a full hearing of at least the assumptions and values inherent in different social and political philosophies. We are in a period of change unlike anything the majority of American living today have experienced before. We are in a systemic crisis with a deep structural basis, and we face a traumatic systemic cure proposed by President Reagan, though, I suspect this cure has the hope of healing the patient only by killing it. In general, the great period of Pax Americana, of the United States as king of the mountain, of Uncle Sam as the 20th century personification of the holy crusader--all of this is over.

Natural resources are not as readily available to us anymore, either because of disregard for the principles and practices of conservation in the U.S. and abroad, or because of the changing world situation and the realignment of political forces particularly in the Third World, past policy decisions of the private and public sector are catching up meaning no longer is it possible to rob Peter to pay Paul, and the country is still smarting from the embarrassment of Nixon and Watergate and the disgrace of the Viet Nam war—disgrace not only by those who considered the war immoral, but increasingly,

by those militarists who regret that we lost it rather than won. This is part of the popular move to legitimate the Department of Defense gearing up its war machine including the great potential that U.S. troops will be fighting another war in the 1980s, certainly abroad and possibly at home as well.

This talk is part of the series "Slicing the American Pie: Who Gets What in the 1980s", and my specific focus is an answer to the question what will be the impact of the political program of President Ronald Reagan on the lives of Black people in the United States. It is in response to this question that I chose the title for my talk, If You're Black, Get Back. This is a familiar phrase in the sense that it's general meaning is historically rooted in the American color dialectic where biological color was a proxy for white favoritism meaning the lighter you were the closer to white people you were and that meant that you were likely to receive their favor and pleasure. This is not the way I meant it. Obviously, this color dialectic is one of the great mystifications of historical reality, and remains to be fully analyzed. The way I meant this was rather in relationship to the historical and sociological fact of being part of the Black community, rooted in its experiences of class and culture, sharing its life chances given the obstacles of class exploitation and societal racism. Of course, President

Reagan provides a key context for this as we examine what's likely to occur in the 1980s. My position is clear. I believe that the current thrust of public policy is to push down Black people such that their standard of living and their belief in the future is being negated and set back to conditions not seen in the last 40 years.

I guess if I were to further characterize what I'd like to talk about one could chose between two different titles: (A) The declining significance of race or Reaganomics as the rise of a new racism or (B) Is capitalism without racism possible? I suspect that probably I have promised more than I can deliver in this short time, but at least, I hope to raise a few questions.

What are the main aspects of Reaganomics? In general code words (such as Reaganomics) are filled with symbolic connotation while often obscuring any denotation, that is, nobody knows what is meant by them, but everybody can fill in their own meaning. What after all is Reaganomics, or supply side economics, or the new federalism? In sum, President Regan believes that the role of the government far exceeds the role he feels comfortable with, and therefore has targeted (nonminally) government as the source (or perhaps, I should say the reflections of the problems) faced by the American people. Reagan sees changing it in three ways.

First target, the size of the government. This he attacks on two fronts.

First, the cutback of federal spending, then second, reduce the overall size of the federal bureaucracy. And, of course, he has done neither! The federal budget has increased, with the main result of his program being the transfer of funds from the social program side to the defense side of the budget, and, as it turns out, the federal bureaucracy has continued to grow, including the bureaucracy of the federal executive.

The second aspect of his plan focuses on the role of the government.

Here, President Reagan is moving two different ways at the same time. Both to decrease regulation of government and business when it comes to commodities and services rendered, but to increase regulations when it comes to the police forces and the population as a whole, particularly Blacks and the poor working class.

The third aspect is governmental finance. Here, the two great pillars of Reagan's program are cutting taxes and limiting the supply of money.

However, what's clear is that the main target was not the defacto tax policy that has been in force over the past period because people in the higher income brackets could pay less taxes based on legislated loopholes, but the de jure tax policy which seemed (on paper) to place the government on the "side" of

the poor. In any case, now instead, Reagan's notion is that more money in the hands of the rich and in the hands of corporations will result in greater productive investment and that in turn, will produce jobs, and jobs after all will put America back to work and economic problems will be solved.

Now clearly this is quite a far reaching and broadside attack on the current state of , not to mention its 19th century fairy tale assumptions about the rich. In fact, Reagan is quite well aware of the historic role that he has chosen for himself. On Reagan quote will suffice: "Reversing the trends of the past is not an easy task, I never thought or said it would be. The damage that has been inflicted on our economy was done by imprudent and inappropriate policies over a period of many years: We cannot realistically expect to undo it all in a few short months." Given what's happening in the country today with the unfolding of Reagan's policies, one wonders what period of time he believes these imprudent and inappropriate policies have been developed. In fact, one might suggest that he means the past 120 years or so of course, would place us back into slavery. From the Black point of view, his trickle down theory is another version of the antebellum slaveholders noblesse oblige vision of grandeur or our indigenous version of the white man's burden.

For us, the economic crisis of the 1970's usefully serves as the backdrop for Reaganomics. Look at what happened to Black people: From 1975 to 1980, over a quarter of million Black families fell below the poverty line. This is a little less than the total number of white families that fell below the poverty line for the same time period, although, Blacks were only 12% of the total population. Further, the unemployment of Blacks showed a rapid increase such that today we no longer have the average statistic for unemployment Blacks averaging twice that of whites, although this has been so since the late 40s. It now approximates more like 3 to 1 for adults, with Black teenagers being unemployed at a rate of over 40%. Of course, there is another side to the picture because while in 1977 only 9 percent of Black families earned over \$25,000 a year (compared to 24% for white families) this increased to 12 percent by the end of the decade. They are comparable socio-economic statistics that demonstrate that Blacks have been going two different directions at the same time. A small number have increasingly been cut into more of the American pie, while more and more have had to share less and less. Middle class Black families have fewer children, have greater educational opportunities increasingly on par with whites, job entry along with similar income payoff for the same years of educational attainment with

whites, etc. On the other hand, for the majority of Black people, families are larger, there is greater illness, life span is shorter, jobs are poorly paid and unemployment is a plague. In fact, it is this bi-polar condition that led sociologist William Wilson to argue that there has been a decline in the significance of race. He contended that there was a developing equity between middle class Blacks and whites, while the majority of Blacks increasingly constituted an underclass that was suffering from this deep and structural crisis facing U.S. capitalist society. Of course, one of the very interesting things is that Reagan's program is not simply a vicious and cold-blooded attack against the majority of Black people, but rather, and this of course is what makes it very interesting, it is a whole scale attack on the Black middle class as well.

Keeping in mind this bipolar socio-economic reality facing blacks, we can examine the significance of Reagan's policies from the prospective of the black community. The Budget Reconciliation Act of 1981 passed by Congress cut non-defense spending by \$35 billion for the first year and approximately \$130 billion cut over the next 3 years. Overwhelmingly these cuts were aimed at social welfare type governmental programs. AFDC was cut by 1.2 billion, food stamp program was to be cut by 1.6 billion, CETA was cut by 4 billion, unemployment benefits were restricted to 26 weeks and billions were taken from areas of education particularly ominous have been those areas such as the school lunch programs, special counseling and services for children of special needs, bilingual education programs, as well on the other hand as support monies for the poor and minorities to attend college and graduate school.

Of course the 1983 budget package continues along these lines adding to the sum \$13 billion dollars in further cuts in AFDC, food stamps, Medicaid, job training, public housing subsidy, etc. Virtually every area in which the federal government has committed resources to stabilize poor and working class minority communities, and where the federal government provides public support for mechanisms of social mobility, as well as protecting the human and civil rights of people, are the very programs that have been most severely cut back.

It's not difficult to sum this up. On the one hand the margin of existence that has supported a quite substantial sector of the black community has been taken away and thereby people are forced to survive with a much lower standard of living. Further, the mechanisms by which people who escaped poverty are being dismantled - whether for reasons of overt discriminatory practices by employers (and boundary maintenance officials in personnel offices of one sort or another) or by limiting access to education by which the ranks of the black middle class have been expanded. With regard to the black middle class, Reagan's plan to cutback on government employment is critical because some 50% of black professionals are employed by some level of government as well as slightly over 50% of all black college graduates.

Overall, the bottom line is that Reagan's policies are (1) eliminating many of the jobs the black middle class has cherished for decades, (2) cutting back on education viewed by the black middle class is the most viable mechanism for its social mobility, and (3) is pulling back the social support programs that have been the margin of relief in the standard of living of the masses of poor working black people as well as the black unemployed and people on welfare.

Now given this general view of the impact of Reaganomics on blacks the key question to deal with is the search for what appears to be new in all of this. Of course this can only be accomplished with the broadest historical sweep so I'd like

to make 3 points here. First, Reagan's program brings the new deal and the rebirth of state's rights. The new deal of course is the name adopted for President Franklin D. Roosevelt's plan to use centralized planning, program development, and regulations of the federal government for recovery from the great depression. What was the new deal? Perhaps a brief quote from monthly review best sums it up

"the real new deal, that is the new deal as an historic turn to the left, came later and reached its peak in Roosevelt's landslide electoral victory of 1936. The emphasis shifted to reforms benefiting working people, the unemployed, tenant farmers, racial minorities, in a word the great majority of American people. It was far from a revolution of course, but measures like unemployment insurance, social security, the Wagner Act (giving substance to the right to organize), the Works Progress Administration (WPA), the Citizens Conservation Corps (CCC), etc, were addressed, to an extent unprecedented in U.S. History, to the basic needs of the masses.

Obviously these are all pro-black social programs but it's important to clarify here the basis on which these new deal programs emerged, because, unfortunately, much of this is discussed as personality politics where a presidential personality is somehow ascribed supernatural powers consequently in such a discussion it is often FDR the man versus Ronald Reagan the man. But, this, of course, is not true.

Let us continue the quote from the montly review "it was not however because... a well to do aristocrat in the White House was incapable of standing by idly and witnessing misery and unfairness that these far reaching changes were introduced. It was because the masses had begun to stir-in unemployed counsels, new industrial unions, even in armed resistance to sheriffs sales-sending out an increasingly clear message that the old order of unabashed exploitation and neglect would no longer be tolerated. It was FDR's genius to read this message accurately and to place himself at the head of the reform movement rather than fighting against it. And, in so doing, he saved capitalism in this country.

Further it was the mass struggles of the 1960's that continued this process. Led by the Black Liberation Movement, and joined by virtually every sector of society, the government from Kennedy through Johnson through Carter read the mood of the masses and continued to deepen the original and overall plan of the new

deal. One might add that with Roosevelt black people used to say, "Jesus leads us, but Roosevelt feeds us."

But by the time of Jimmy Carter the president had actually taken on the initials of leader as well.

Now of course the other side of dismantling the new deal is reestablishing a new form of state's rights policy. That is, in areas which are left for government, much of this will be shifted to the states in the form of block grants. Of course for black people this represents an ominous loss of power and creates great fears that things are returning to the not so good old days. In other words still virtually half of the black community resides in southern states. The states are not only politically the most backward, but economically are the most impoverished. So, combining these basic facts, the loss of federal standards will lead to a rapid intensification of hard times. The majority of black people outside the south are overwhelmingly located in central cities, and therefore block grant programs place blacks outside the south in the battle between big city Democrats and downstate or upstate Republicans. Of course all this again is based upon the assumption that the corporate sector is

benevolent and out of a rational recognition of its vested interest will do what is right and just, and in so doing will solve the problems facing American society. Of course without making too many sweeping ideological statements, let me simply say this has not been the experience of black people. While the majority of black people somehow fit between Ralph Nader and Karl Marx, in any case, they stand quite opposed to Ronald Reagan and Thomas Sowell (his black apologist).

The second thing that appears to be new in general is the rise of militarism in God and government. Out of the 1960's one of the great impacts of the Civil Rights Movement was the assertion of a new moral conscience by the religious leadership of the civil rights community, particularly as personified in Martin Luther King. Indeed King was a man of peace. He won the Nobel Peace Prize and generally brought the non-violent passive resistance peaceful movement of Mahatma Ghandi to the west. Further, although every president has by necessity been a religious person, the moninal moral positions taken by Jimmy Carter on-human rights seems to stand out as the public policy extension of the Civil Rights Movement. In this regard no small importance should be attached to the appointment of Andrew Young, former aid to Martin Luther King, to U.N. Ambassadorship by President Carter.

The last part of this scenario is that foreign policy for the developing

world was a liberal neocolonialism by which federal monies were channeled to the progressive independence forces, the moderate coalition of forces fighting against repressive regimes to establish liberal democracies. The Carter-Young notion was simply don't fight the large broadly based movements but rather fund them, so with U.S. backing they will constitute a democratic basis for the continued economic plunder of their country by U.S. corporations.

Of course, what has happened is that the moral edge for the liberals created by the Civil Rights Movement has been replaced by the (likewise media created) moral majority movement which is inherently militaristic and in opposition to the changes in American lifestyle that deviate from the type of era we associate with Ronald Reagan. The good old days, a rather manachian view of the universe in which all of life is a dramatic morality play, good versus evil, and what even looks wrong indeed is always wrong because it is after

all a world of Black and white. Further, the liberal neo-colonialist policy has been replaced. Human rights is no longer referred to and now we have a discussion of active military preparation, an open discussion of the possibility of nuclear war and open flirtation with every form of fascist dictatorship found on the globe.

This of course, is quite problematic for Black people in several ways. First, Black people have always found war to have a positive aspect because it provides jobs; again, a form of government employment. Indeed, one of the problems for ruling circles created by a volunteer army has been the extent to which it was becoming Black, and that of course was reviewed as being dangerous since many of the hot spots in the world are after all in Asia, Africa and Latin America (setting aside for a moment Harlem, the south side of Chicago, Newark and Detroit). One key question here has to do with the policy of Reagan toward Africa. Reagan has openly courted the white fascist, racist regime of South Africa, has added support to the enemies of newly established governments of liberation in Southern Africa and generally has demonstrated that he would like to return to the good old days of U.S. white supremacist world dominance.

The third point regarding what is new is that Ronald Reagan's

administration represents the rebirth of societal racism. Now what this means is that racist beliefs and practices by individuals in the United States have historically been conditioned in the social institutions and cultural predispositions characteristic of growing up in America. Since the World War II period, social movements have led to such reforms as Fair Employment Practice and the integration of the Armed Services, through the integration of schools with the 1954 Supreme Court decision, to the Civil Rights Acts

of the 1960's. U.S. society in general shifted to a liberal anti-racist posture giving rise to the concept of institutional racism whereby defacto racial exclusion was identified institution by institution. This reflected a view that it was thus manageable and eventually not only were policies of equal opportunity developed, but, further, a policy of affirmative action including quotas and timetables. This meant that a quantative program of incremental change was viewed as sufficient reform that would ultimately culminate in an integrated and democratic American society. That is incremental change institution by institution.

Now we have a new situation whereby the central institutions of government (and other forms of legitimacy in the society) no longer pronounce strong political moral and social positions on the side of a clear anti-racist policy, but rather openly proclaim support for racist practices. It is not insignificant that the President openly supported Bob Jones University which excludes blacks as a matter of principle and defends their right to do so, but also it is in this period that we have brutal murders committed on television with videotape from the actual scene resulting in an acquittal of those guilty, and many more cases too numerous to mention. The point here is that Ronald Reagan personifies the reemergence of the most vicious form of racism, frankly speaking characteristic of the 19th and early

20th centuries.

Overall we can conclude that Ronald Reagan represents the possibility that we have ended a 40 year period of give and take around the new deal begun under FDR and entered the possibility of the 2 polar opposites of facism or socialism or somewhere in between. If Reagan has anything to do with it I suspect it's more towards facism. If the masses of people have something to do with it I suspect it will be more towards socialism. This brings me to my last major question.

What will the response be of the masses of people to this end of the new deal to this program of Ronald Reagan and its impact upon them? There are at least 5 major responses that appear to me likely to characterize the 1980's. First the black community cross all class lines generally believes that things have basically gone back to the way they were prior to the 1960's. Racism is rampant and black people are forced to resort to the old techniques of survival. Of course not all

of these turn out to be pro-Black techniques of survival, however, in general, it seems that there will be and there is now the search for a new broadly based Black unity. The Civil Rights Movement represented such a broad based unity because racial segregation was categorical and restricted the public movement of every member of the Black community. Therefore, the rising middle class led this movement against categorical racial exclusion and restriction. Now with the re-emergence of racism, with the re-emergence of a revised form of the categorical restriction of Black people, it appears that a new diverse Black unity is being struck across socio-economic lines. There is the development of a national Black united front, a national Black independent political party, a re-emergence of the old southern Civil rights coalitions in mobilization to support the Civil Rights Voting Act, and other indications of mass resistance seem to suggest that a militant Black unity is developing. It appears that for radicals and progressives, the Black Liberation Movement again might be well posturing itself to make a rather substantial and vanguard contribution to the struggles of the American people overall.

The second point, and flowing from this vanguard role for the Black liberation movement, is the radicalization of the campus. For example: in response to the development of Reagan's program of educational cutbacks, the

United States Student's Association called a national day for students to come to Washington, have a conference and lobby congressional legislators against this.

They planned 1,000 students and over 7,000 showed up. This of course included a higher percentage of Black and other minority students than ever before in

such an event. One might also cite the recent struggles in the state of

Illinois of students at the University of Illinois, Northern Illinois and

Illinois State University, fighting against symbolic attacks on Blacks, while

in essence being concerned about the elimination of Black programs and

student support services and reversal of admissions policy and financial

support for Blacks to enter and receive a college/graduate school

education. Another point here is regarding the draft and the development of war: clearly the response of young people, students included, to the draft efforts has been a major setback for the administration because they've had to slow down this aspect of the overall military preparations. Again, here my crystal ball suggests that black students will provide the catalyst for the overall process for the re-radicalization of the campus.

The third response is the mobilization and swelling of ranks of middle class reformers. The middle class is under attack by President Reagan's programs and therefore is likely to respond. Many of the middle class reform movements will not involve or include many blacks. This will be one of the interesting and important problems facing any middle class movement for social reform. In American politics there appears in general to be only one or two positions, and while one may not hold either at any given point and time, the motion of the movement is either towards support for racist exclusionary practices (that is to say a disregard for the interest of national minorities or black people in particular) or on the other hand to include the demands and interests of poor and minority workers and people of the black community in general at the heart of their program.

The fourth response is that there will be a stirring of the working class,

the traditional working class both as found in industrial production as well as service workers in urban areas, post office, bus drivers, clerical workers, etc.

The point here is that with a tremendous decline in union membership with a crisis

of leadership the gains made by the trade union movement over the last 40 years are being negotiated away in exchange for the continued holding of jobs, although, with the lowering of the standard of living and social insurance. Here it is clear that in the working class in many sectors minority workers are increasingly becoming dominant. There's no doubt that in many of the basic steel and basic auto plants the dirty and dangerous jobs are overwhelmingly held by Black and other minority workers. Again, these have been the good jobs. These were the jobs that people had, that enabled Blacks to lead what they considered decent American lives with a reasonable standard of living. All this is now in jeopardy. These people are not likely to accept the typical pattern of exclusion by the democratic party and by the trade unions.

The fifth and last point is that of World War and possibly Civil War.

The job of an army is to fight and with this intense buildup of the U.S. war machine with this propaganda about the possibility and willingness of the United States to engage in a nuclear war there can be no doubt that the potential for a World War is virtually upon us, but at the same time we should consider the fact that given the intensification of class exploitation and racial oppression the possibility exist that this World War will have the domestic manifestation of Civil War, that is to say, where deep divisions

in the American population will result in open armed conflict. Now at this point there's a certain political and ideological sloganeering in mentioning the two phrases World War and Civil War together. I do so because it is the only sensible language that serves as a counterpart to the outrageous war-mongering of President Reagan, Secretary Hague and the gang they hang out with in Washington and the fortune 500 corporation board rooms.

In sum, what have I argued. First, Reagan has a message for Black people: "If You're Black, Get Back!" and second, Blacks are likely to respond "If you push us around, we're likely to knock you down, and change the whole system around." The critical factor is what will white people say?