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EDITORIAL

THE REAGAN DANGER

We start with a strong presumption against returning President Jimmy Carter to office and a fundamental suspicion that although the differences between the parties will be magnified as Election Day approaches, in fact they share the fundamental values and political assumptions that have led to the present predicament.

Nevertheless, because we believe that a Ronald Reagan victory increases the chances for nuclear war, we urge our readers to vote to stop Reagan. In most states that means a vote for Carter. In a few states, such as Nevada, where Reagan holds a substantial polling lead, or Georgia, where Carter is a sure thing, we urge a vote for Barry Commoner (others may prefer David McReynolds or to cast a symbolic vote of no-confidence by leaving their Presidential choice blank).

We are as distressed as anyone with the major parties (to the extent that they still exist), which this year lurch more than ever toward Tweedledom. As we make plain in every issue, our sympathies are engaged by a nondoctrinaire democratic socialism. We aim to explore workable decentralized alternatives to the present system, and to face up to the implications of "our life as an empire," to borrow William Appleman Williams's phrase (see page 445). Obviously, the Democratic Party, with its deeply flawed incumbent President, a man who has abandoned even the mildly populist promises he made in 1976, has not earned our support.

And yet, survival in the nuclear age is now more perilous than it has been in many years. This fact makes our choice particularly hard this year because the true candidates of peace have no chance of winning, while the liberal off-again-on-again-born-again cold warrior who occupies the Oval Office seems quite capable of

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ELECTION SPECIAL



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CARTER THIS TIME

NOTES ON THE HOUSE OF BONDAGE

JAMES BALDWIN

Gabriel's trumpet is a complex metaphor. Poor Gabriel is not only responsible for *when we dead awaken*—heavy enough—but he must also blow that trumpet to *wake the children sleeping*.

The children are always ours, every single one of them, all over the globe; and I am beginning to suspect that whoever is incapable of recognizing this may be incapable of morality. Or, I am saying, in other words, that we, the elders, are the only models children have. What we see in the children is what they have seen in us—or, more accurately perhaps, what they *see* in us.

I, too, find that a rather chilling formulation, but I can find no way around it. How am I, for example, to explain to any of my tribe of nieces and nephews and great-nieces and great-nephews how it happens that in a nation so boastfully autonomous as the United States we are reduced to the present Presidential candidates? I certainly do not want them to believe that Carter or Reagan—or Anderson—are the best people this country can produce. That despair would force me onto the road taken by the late, Guyana-based Jim Jones. But there they are, the pea-nut farmer and the third-rate, failed, ex-Warner Brothers contract player, both as sturdy and winning as Wheaties, and as well equipped to run the world as I am to run a post office.

There they are. And there is, also, the question, *Who you going to vote for, Uncle Jimmy?*

It can be said, of course—and let me say it before you do—that I am speaking as a black American. My testimony can, therefore, be dismissed out of hand by reason of my understand-able (thank you) but quite unreasonable bitterness.

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ship of Kissinger, whose appointment as Secretary of State in the Reagan Cabinet is now being seriously discussed.

Beyond the remarkable possibility of a Reagan Presidency, however, the social costs of renewed militarization are clear. Whoever is elected next week, the defense budget will continue its inexorable rise, draining the domestic economy of productive investment and undermining the budget for social welfare. The regional wars which now decide the fate of our cities will sharpen, as the great urban centers compete ever more desperately for the last investment dollars and Federal aid programs. Energy-scarce regions with high unemployment, like the Northeast, will continue their slow decline, gaining only a modicum of jobs from the new Pentagon contracts while facing further erosion of their traditional industrial base. Public education will continue to deteriorate. Working people will be ever more severely pressed. At all levels of American life, the costs of military ventures abroad will compound the inequalities at home. Whoever wins the Presidency, most of America will lose. □

Notes

(Continued From Front Cover)

Well, I have had my bitter moments, certainly, days and ways, but I do not think that I can usefully be described as a bitter man. I would not be trying to write this if I were, for the bitter do not, mainly, speak: they, suddenly and quite unpredictably, act. The bitter can be masters, too, at telling you what you want to hear because they *know* what you want to hear. And how do they know that?

Well, some of them know it because they must raise their children and bring them to a place, somehow, where the American guile and cowardice cannot destroy them. No black citizen (!) of what is left of Harlem supposes that either Carter, or Reagan, or Anderson has any concern for them at all, except as voters—that is, to put it brutally, except as instruments, or dupes—and, while one hates to say that the black citizens are right, one certainly cannot say that they are wrong.

One has merely to look up and down the streets of Harlem; walk through the streets and into what is left of the houses; consider the meaning of this willed, inhuman and criminal devastation, and look into the faces of the children. *Who you going to vote for, Uncle Jimmy?*

John Brown, I have sometimes been known to say, but that flippant rage is, of course, no answer.

But, if we're to change our children's lives and help them to liberate themselves from the jails and hovels—the mortal danger—in which our countrymen have placed us, the vote does not appear to be the answer, either. It has certainly not been the answer until now.

Here one finds oneself on treacherous ground indeed. I

James Baldwin, a member of The Nation's Editorial Board, is the author of the newly released Just Above My Head (The Dial Press).

am, legally anyway, an adult, a somewhat battered survivor of this hard place, and have never expected my power to vote to have any effect whatever on my life, and it hasn't. On the other hand, I have been active in voter registration drives in the South because the acquisition of the vote, there and then, and even if only for local aims, was too crucial and profound a necessity even to be argued. Nor can it be denied that the sheer tenacity of the black people in the South, their grace under pressure (to put it far too mildly) and the simple fact of their presence in the voting booth profoundly challenged, if it did not expose, the obscene Southern mythology.

Thus, though there is certainly no New South yet, the old one has no future, and neither does the "old" North. The situation of the black American is a direct (and deliberate) result of the collusion between the North and South and the Federal Government. A black man in this country does not live under a two-party system but a four-party system. There is the Republican Party in the South, and there is the Republican Party in the North; there is the Democratic Party in the North and the Democratic Party in the South. These entities are Tweedledum and Tweedledee as concerns the ways they have been able, historically, to manipulate the black presence, the black need. At the same time, both parties were (are) protected from the deepest urgencies of black need by the stance of the Federal Government, which could (can) always justify both parties, and itself, by use of the doctrine of "States' rights."

In the South, then, the Republican Party was the *nigra's* friend, and, in the North, it was the Democrats who lovingly dried our tears. But, however liberal Northern Democrats might seem to be, nothing was allowed to menace the party unity—certainly not niggers—with the result that the presumed or potential power of the black vote in the North was canceled out by the smirk on the faces of the candidates in the South. The party had won—was in—and we were out. What it came to was that, as long as blacks in the South could not vote, blacks in the North could have nothing to vote for. A very clever trap, which only now, and largely because of the black vote in the South, may be beginning to be sprung.

The American institutions are all bankrupt in that they are unable to deal with the present—resembling nothing so much as Lot's wife. When Americans look out on the world, they see nothing but dark and menacing strangers who appear to have no sense of rhythm at all, nor any respect or affection for white people; and white Americans really do not know what to make of all this, except to increase the defense budget.

This panic-stricken saber rattling is also for the benefit of the domestic darker brother. The real impulse of the bulk of the American people toward their former slave is lethal: if he cannot be used, he should be made to disappear. When the American people, Nixon's no-longer-silent majority, revile the Haitian, Cuban, Turk, Palestinian, Iranian, they are really cursing the nigger, and the nigger had better know it.

The vote does not work for a black American the way it works for a white one, for the despairingly obvious reason

that whites, in general, are welcomed to America, and blacks, in general, are not. Yet, risking a seeming contradiction, one may go further and point out that America's egalitarian image is very important to American self-esteem. Therefore, blacks from the West Indies, say, or Africa, who arrive with no social or political quarrels with the United States, who have already been formed by the island, or village community, and who bring their mercantile skills with them, are likely to fare much better here than Sambo does—for a brief and melancholy season. Since the entire country is bizarre beyond belief, the black immigrant does not quarrel with its customs, considering that these customs have nothing to do with him. He sticks to his kith and kin, and saves his pennies, and is the apple of the white American eye, for he proves that the Yankee-Puritan virtues are all that one needs to prosper in this brave new world.

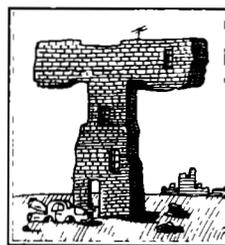
This euphoria lasts, at most, a generation. In my youth, the West Indians, who assured American blacks that *they*, the West Indians, had never been slaves, ran their stores, saved their pennies, went bankrupt and, as a community, disappeared—or, rather, became a part of the larger black community. Later on, the Puerto Ricans were hurled into this fire and, after the brief, melancholy and somewhat violent season, we began to compare notes, and share languages, and now here come, among others, the Haitians, and the beginning of the end of the doctrine of divide-and-rule, at least as concerns the dark people of the West.

The white person of the West is quite another matter. His presence in America, in spite of vile attacks on "the foreign-born," poses no real problem. Within a generation, at most two, he is at home in his new country and climbing that ladder. If there is trouble in the Irish, Italian or Polish ward, say, the trouble can be contained and eliminated because the demands of these white people do not threaten the fabric of American society. This proved to be true during even the bloodiest of the worker-industrial clashes: white workers opted for being white first and workers second—and, in the land of the free and the home of the brave, who said that they had to remain workers? It was easy enough to turn the white worker against the black worker by threatening to put the black man in the white man's job, at a lower salary. Once the white worker had fallen into this trap, the rest was child's play: the black was locked out of the unions, the unions and big business got in bed together and, whenever there was trouble in the ghetto, white America, as one man, cried, *What does the Negro want?* Billy clubs, tear gas, guns and cold-blooded murder imposed a sullen order, and a grateful Republic went back to sleep.

This has been the American pattern for all of the years that I have been on earth, and, of course, for generations before that, and I have absolutely no reason to believe that this leopard has changed his spots. Nixon was elected, after all, received his "mandate," by means of the Omnibus Crime Bill and the "Safe Streets Act" ("safe streets" meaning *keep the nigger in his place*) and his crony, the late and much lamented Gov. Nelson Rockefeller, who was responsible for the Attica slaughter, passed the Hitlerian "No-Knock Stop and Frisk Law," which brought every black

person in New York a little closer to the madhouse and the grave. The Nixon career was stopped by Watergate, God be praised, and by the intervention of a black man, thank our ancestors; but Attorney General John Mitchell had already corralled several thousands of us, black and white, in a ballpark.

The United States is full of ballparks. My black vote, which has not yet purchased my autonomy, may yet, if I choose to use it, keep me out of the ballpark long enough to figure out some other move. Or for the children to make a move. Or for aid to come from somewhere. My vote will probably not get me a job or a home or help me through school or prevent another Vietnam or a third World War, but it may keep me here long enough for me to see, and use, the turning of the tide—for the tide has got to turn. And, since I am not the only black man to think this way, if Carter is re-elected, it will be by means of the black vote, and it will not be a vote for Carter. It will be a coldly calculated risk, a means of buying time. Perhaps only black people realize this, but we are dying, here, out of all proportion to our numbers, and with no respect to age, dying in the streets, in the madhouse, in the tenement, on the roof, in jail and in the Army. This is not by chance, and it is not an act of God. It is a result of the action of the American institutions, all of which are racist: it is revelatory of the real and helpless impulse of most white Americans toward black people



herefore, in a couple of days, blacks may be using the vote to outwit the Final Solution. Yes. The Final Solution. No black person can afford to forget that the history of this country is genocidal, from where the buffalo once roamed to where our ancestors were slaughtered (from New Orleans to New York, from Birmingham to Boston) and to the Caribbean to Hiroshima and Nagasaki to Saigon. Oh, yes, let freedom ring.

Why are you voting for Carter, Uncle Jimmy? Well, don't, first of all, take this as an endorsement. It's meant to be a hard look at the options, which, however, may no longer exist by the time you read this, may no longer exist as I write.

I lived in California when Ronald Reagan was Governor, and that was a very ugly time—the time of the Black Panther harassment, the beginning (and the end) of the Soledad Brothers, the persecution, and trial, of Angela Davis. That, all that, and much more, but what I really found unspeakable about the man was his contempt, his brutal contempt, for the poor.

Perhaps because he is a Southerner, there lives in Carter still—I think—an ability to be tormented. This does not necessarily mean much, so many people preferring torment to action, or responsibility, and it is, furthermore, a very real question (for some; some would say that it's not a question at all) as to how much of Carter belongs to Carter. But if he can still be tormented, he can be made to pause—the

machinery can be made to pause—and we will have to find a way to use that pause.

It is terror that informs the American political and social scene—the terror of leaving the house of bondage. It isn't a terror of seeing *black* people leave the house of bondage, for white people think that they *know* that this cannot *really* happen, not even to Leontyne Price, or Mohammad Ali, who are, after all, "exceptions," with white blood, and mortal. No, white people had a much better time in the house of bondage than we did, and God bless their souls, they're going to miss it—all that adulation, adoration, ease, with nothing to do but fornicate, kill Indians, breed slaves and make money. Oh, there were rough times, too, as *Shane*, *True Grit* and *Rocky* inform us, but the rules of the game were clear, and the rewards demanded nothing more complex than stamina. God was a businessman, like all "real" Americans, and understood that "business was business." The American innocence was unassailable, fixed forever, for it was not a crime to kill a black or a red or a yellow man. On the contrary, it might be, and was most often so considered, a duty. It was not a crime to rape a black or red or yellow woman—it was sport; besides, *niggers ought to be glad we pump some white blood into their kids every once in a while*. The lowest white man was more exalted than the most articulate or eminent black: an exceedingly useful article of faith both for the owners of the Southern fields and the bosses in the Northern sweatshops, who worked this exalted creature past senility to death.

Thus, what the house of bondage accomplished for what we will call the classic white American was the destruction of his moral sense, except in relation to whites. But it also destroyed his sense of reality and, therefore, his sense of white people had to be as compulsively one-dimensional as his vision of blacks. The result is that white Americans have been one another's jailers for generations, and the attempt at individual maturity is the loneliest and rarest of the American endeavors. (This may also be why a "boyish" look is a very decided advantage in the American political and social arena.)

Well, the planet is destroying the American fantasies; which does not give the Americans the right to destroy the planet. I don't know if it is possible to speak coherently concerning what my disturbed countrymen want, but I hazard that, although the Americans are certainly capable of

precipitating Armageddon, their most desperate desire is to make time stand still. If time stands still, it can neither judge nor accuse nor exact payment; and, indeed, this is precisely the bargain the black presence was expected to strike in the white Republic. It is why the black face had always to be a happy face.

Recently, the only two black shows on Broadway were minstrel shows. There was a marvelous current between the blacks on the stage and the blacks in the audience. Both knew why the white audience was there, and to watch white audiences being reassured by a minstrel show can be grotesque and sorrowful beyond belief. But the minstrel show is really no different from the TV screen which celebrates, night after night and year after year and decade after decade, the slaughter of the Native American and pretends (in spite of *Roots*, which demands a separate assessment) that the black enslavement never occurred.

Well. It did occur, and *is* occurring all up and down America, as I write, and is crossing borders and being exported to various "underdeveloped" portions of the globe. But this endeavor cannot succeed, with force or without it, because the center of the earth has shifted. The British Prime Minister, for example, is a grotesque anachronism, and the world is not holding its breath waiting to see what will happen in England; England's future will be determined by what is happening in the world.

I am speaking of the breakup—the end—of the so-overextended Western empire. I am thinking of the black and nonwhite peoples who are shattering, redefining and recreating history—making all things new—simply by declaring their presence, by delivering their testimony. The empire never intended that this testimony should be heard, but, *if I hold my peace, the very stones will cry out*.

One can speak, then, of the fall of an empire at that moment when, though all of the paraphernalia of power remain intact and visible and seem to function, neither the citizen-subject within the gates nor the indescribable hordes outside it believe in the morality or the reality of the kingdom anymore—when no one, any longer, anywhere, aspires to the empire's standards.

This is the charged, the dangerous, moment, when everything must be re-examined, must be made new; when nothing at all can be taken for granted. One looks again at the word "famine." At this hour of the world's history, famine must be considered a man-made phenomenon and one looks at who is starving. There is nothing even faintly ridiculous, or unfair, in these apprehensions, which are produced by nothing less than Western history. Our former guides and masters are among the most ruthless creatures in mankind's history, slaughtering and starving one another to death long before they discovered the blacks. If the British were willing to starve Ireland to death—which they did, in order to protect the profits of British merchants—why would the West be reluctant to starve Africa out of existence? Especially since the generation facing famine now is precisely that generation that will begin the real and final liberation of Africa from Europe. It is, in any case, perfectly clear that the earth's populations can be fed if—or, rather,

November 8 Issue—

BOOKS BOOKS BOOKS

Reviews by Peter Steinfelds (Ronald Steel's *Walter Lippmann*), Barbara Grizzuti Harrison (Studs Terkel's *American Dreams*), Phyllis Rose (Justin Kaplan's *Walt Whitman*), Morris Dickstein (Joe Klein's *Woody Guthrie*), Roger Rosenblatt (Jean Strouse's *Alice James*), Dan Wakefield (Hilma Wolitzer's *Hearts*) & more more more.

when—we alter our priorities. We can irrigate deserts and feed the entire earth for the price we are paying to build bombs that we will be able to use, in any event, only once; after which whoever is left will have to begin doing what I am suggesting now. It would be nice if we could, for once, make it easy on ourselves.

The elders, especially at this moment of our black-white history, are indispensable to the young, and vice versa. It is of the utmost importance, for example, that I, the elder, do not allow myself to be put on the defensive. The young, no matter how loud they get, have no real desire to humiliate their elders and, if and when they succeed in doing so, are lonely, crushed and miserable, as only the young can be.

Someone my age, for example, may be pleased and proud that Carter has blacks in his Cabinet. A younger person may wonder just what their function is in such a Cabinet. They will be keenly aware, too, that blacks called upon to repre-

sent the Republic are, very often, thereby prohibited from representing blacks. A man my age, schooled in adversity and skilled in compromise, may choose not to force the issue of defense spending versus the bleak and criminal misery of the black *and* white populations here, but a younger man may say, out loud, that he will not fight for a country that has *never* fought for him and, further, that the myth and menace of global war are nothing more and nothing less than a coward's means of distracting attention from the real crimes and concerns of this Republic. And I may have to visit him in prison, or suffer with him there—no matter. The irreducible miracle is that we have sustained each other a very long time, and come a long, long way together. We have come to the end of a language and are now about the business of forging a new one. For we have survived, children, the very last white country the world will ever see. □

EXCHANGE.

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tion was not especially democratic.

Besides, do we really learn much about our history in having the Civil War put in the same bag with the conquest of the Philippines, or having Lincoln's opposition to the spread of slavery linked to Harry Truman's containment of the Soviet Union? Are our historical understanding or our analytical tools sharpened by making Lincoln a precursor of George Kennan? Are not proper distinctions the beginning of clear thinking? (It seems to me that a more persuasively critical thing to say about Lincoln—though it will not make him an imperialist—is that he was quite willing to guarantee slavery forever in the South if the Southern states would agree never to extend slavery into the West. Or, as historian David Potter put it, Lincoln was willing to guarantee slavery where it was flourishing, but would forbid it in places where it had hardly begun.)

Nor is Lincoln the only statesman whose overt opposition to imperialism is made out to be devoid of significance. William Jennings Bryan campaigned for President against imperialism in 1900 and resigned as Secretary of State in 1915 in order to oppose Wilsonian interventionism abroad, but one would never learn that from Williams's essay. Bryan is painted the same pro-imperialist color as Wilson and T.R.

Where Americans are concerned, Williams is only too quick to label them imperialists. But where other nations are involved we do not need to look too closely. In Williams's view the respon-

sibility for the outbreak of the Korean War in 1950 is not something worth exploring; we need see it only as "one of those wars that anybody could have counted on to erupt sometime"! Couldn't we say the same thing about the Civil War, Bill?

My primary distress about Williams's essay is that it does a disservice to the discipline of history. Yet I cannot close without offering what I think a non-imperial America might look like if we built it on Williams's moralistic principles. It will be recalled that one of Lincoln's sins was that he acquiesced in the results of the war with Mexico; merely to have opposed the war did not demonstrate genuine opposition to imperialism. Taking this as the proper guide to morality, I conclude that in order to put the American house in good moral shape, the United States must return California, Texas and the rest of the Southwest to Mexico. And to undo the immoral conquest of the Confederacy, we should, by rights, let "the erring sisters go in peace," as Horace Greeley once suggested. Since one of the consequences of that conquest was the abolition of slavery, we ought to see what we could do to reinstitute slavery so that the South, as Williams put it, could have its chance "to go to hell in its own way." As for what we owe the Soviet Union for all those soldiers who died while the United States maliciously hesitated to mount a second front, it is hard to know how to compensate them. Presumably, though, the United States by then would be so truncated, so impoverished and so unthreatening to

anyone that the Soviet Union in its generosity toward a former ally would graciously forget about the matter.

Carl N. Degler
Stanford University

STUDY COMPLEXITY

Medford, Mass.

I was very interested to read Prof. William Appleman Williams's challenging essay "Empire As a Way of Life." But I was disappointed in the way your respondents handled its challenge. It seemed that most of them understood Williams as—in the words of the first of them—posing the question: empire or democracy? But the crux of his argument was that in America that alternative has always been unreal; it has always been empire *and* democracy; the latter always led on to the former, because it meant expansion. "America was born and bred of empire"; and Williams's comments on James Madison, Thomas Jefferson, Abraham Lincoln and so on, were all a demonstration of that thesis. The alternative Williams offered was not empire or democracy but empire or imagination. He said we have to imagine a radically new politics, something to which no such familiar cry as democracy would be a clue.

. . . I think Williams is right, for I have found empire covertly animating the whole glorious concept of "adventure," so important in British fiction and general British sensibility, in the nineteenth century. (For, of course, empire was dominant in British and

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