

# The American Dream



Debater Baldwin at Cambridge: "Does one civilization have a right to subjugate—in fact, to destroy—another?"

*In a setting modeled after England's House of Commons, the Cambridge Union Society of Cambridge University meets to debate great issues of the day. A "finishing school" for future British politicians, prelates and jurists (past presidents include the Lords Keynes, Butler, Caradon), the society has argued motions on subjects ranging from the Corn Laws to the Common Market, from the Irish Question to whether, on the eve of the U.S. Civil War, "this House sees no cause for regret in the probable separation of the United States" (the motion carried).*

*On the anniversary of its founding 150 years ago last month, the society invited two U.S. visitors to join two undergraduates in debating the motion: "The American Dream is at the expense of the American Negro." Speaking for the proposition was novelist and essayist James Baldwin; opposing it was William F. Buckley Jr., editor of *The National Review*. More than 700 students crowded the high-ceilinged debating chamber and 500 others packed the bar, the library and other rooms to watch over closed-circuit TV. A transcript, slightly condensed, of the Baldwin-Buckley arguments follows.*

## James Baldwin:

I FIND myself, not for the first time, in the position of a kind of Jeremiah. It would seem to me that the question before the house is a proposition horribly loaded, that one's response to that question depends on where you find yourself in the world, what your sense of reality is. That is, it depends on assumptions

we hold so deeply as to be scarcely aware of them.

The white South African or Mississippi sharecropper or Alabama sheriff has at bottom a system of reality which compels them really to believe when they face the Negro that this woman, this man, this child must be insane to attack the system to which he owes his entire identity. For such a person, the proposition which we

are trying to discuss here does not exist.

On the other hand, I have to speak as one of the people who have been most attacked by the Western system of reality. It comes from Europe. That is how it got to America. It raises the question of whether or not civilizations can be considered equal, or whether one civilization has a right to subjugate—in fact, to destroy—another.

Now, leaving aside all the physical factors one can quote—leaving aside the rape or murder, leaving aside the bloody catalogue of oppression which we are too familiar with anyway—what the system does to the subjugated is to destroy his sense of reality. It destroys his father's authority over him. His father can no longer tell him anything because his past has disappeared.

In the case of the American Negro, from the moment you are born every stick and stone, every face, is white. Since you have not yet seen a mirror, you suppose you are, too. It comes as a great shock around the age of 5, 6 or 7 to discover that the flag to which

you have pledged allegiance, along with everybody else, has not pledged allegiance to you. It comes as a great shock to see Gary Cooper killing off the Indians and, although you are rooting for Gary Cooper, that the Indians are you.

It comes as a great shock to discover that the country which is your birthplace and to which you owe your life and identity has not, in its whole system of reality, evolved any place for you. The disaffection and the gap between people, only on the basis of their skins, begins there and accelerates throughout your whole lifetime. You realize that you are 30 and you are having a terrible time. You have been through a certain kind of mill and the most serious effect is again not the catalogue of disaster—the policeman, the taxi driver, the waiters, the landlady, the banks, the insurance companies, the millions of details 24 hours of every day which spell out to you that you are a worthless human being. It is not that. By that time you have begun to see it happening in your daughter, your son or your niece or your nephew. You are 30 by

# and the American Negro



Debater Buckley: "In no other civilization is the minority a subject of as much dramatic concern as in the U.S."

now and nothing you have done has helped you to escape the trap. But what is worse is that nothing you have done, and as far as you can tell nothing you *can* do, will save your son or your daughter from having the same disaster and from coming to the same end.

**W**E speak about expense. There are several ways of addressing oneself to some attempt to find out what that word means here. From a very literal point of view, the harbors and the ports and the railroads of the country—the economy, especially in the South—could not conceivably be what they are if it had not been (and this is still so) for cheap labor. I am speaking very seriously, and this is not an overstatement: I picked cotton, I carried it to the market, I built the railroads under someone else's whip for nothing. For nothing.

The Southern oligarchy which has still today so very much power in Washington, and therefore some power in the world, was created by my labor and my sweat and the violation of my women and the murder of my children. This in the land of the free,

the home of the brave. None can challenge that statement. It is a matter of historical record.

In the Deep South you are dealing with a sheriff or a landlord or a landlady or the girl at the Western Union desk. She doesn't know quite whom she is dealing with—by which I mean, if you are not part of a town and if you are a Northern nigger, it shows in millions of ways. She simply knows that it is an unknown quantity and she wants to have nothing to do with it. You have to wait a while to get your telegram. We have all been through it. By the time you get to be a man it is fairly easy to deal with.

But what happens to the poor white man's, the poor white woman's, mind? It is this: they have been raised to believe, and by now they helplessly believe, that no matter how terrible some of their lives may be and no matter what disaster overtakes them, there is one consolation like a heavenly revelation—at least they are not black. I suggest that of all the terrible things that could happen to a human being that is one of the worst. I suggest that what

has happened to the white Southerner is in some ways much worse than what has happened to the Negroes there.

Sheriff Clark in Selma, Ala., cannot be dismissed as a total monster; I am sure he loves his wife and children and likes to get drunk. One has to assume that he is a man like me. But he does not know what drives him to use the club, to menace with the gun and to use the cattle prod. Something awful must have happened to a human being to be able to put a cattle prod against a woman's breasts. What happens to the woman is ghastly. What happens to the man who does it is in some ways much, much worse. Their moral lives have been destroyed by the plague called color.

This is not being done 100 years ago, but in 1965 and in a country which is pleased with what we call prosperity, with a certain amount of social coherence, which calls itself a civilized nation and which espouses the notion of freedom in the world. If it were white people being murdered, the Government would find some way of doing something about it. We have a civil rights bill now.

We had the 15th Amendment nearly 100 years ago. If it was not honored then, I have no reason to believe that the civil rights bill will be honored now.

The American soil is full of the corpses of my ancestors, through 400 years and at least three wars. Why is my freedom, my citizenship, in question now? What one begs the American people to do, for all our sakes, is simply to accept our history.

**I**T seems to me when I watch Americans in Europe that what they don't know about Europeans is what they don't know about me. They were not trying to be nasty to the French girl, rude to the French waiter. They did not know that they hurt their feelings; they didn't have any sense that this particular man and woman were human beings. They walked over them with the same sort of bland ignorance and condescension, the charm and cheerfulness, with which they had patted me on the head and which made them upset when I was upset.

When I was brought up I was taught in *(Continued on Page 87)*

## The American Dream

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American history books that Africa had no history and that neither had I. I was a savage about whom the least said the better, who had been saved by Europe and who had been brought to America. Of course, I believed it. I didn't have much choice. These were the only books there were. Everyone else seemed to agree. If you went out of Harlem the whole world agreed. What you saw was much bigger, whiter, cleaner, safer. The garbage was collected, the children were happy. You would go back home and it would seem, of course, that this was an act of God. You belonged where white people put you.

It is only since World War II that there has been a counter-image in the world. That image has not come about because of any legislation by any American Government, but because Africa was suddenly on the stage of the world and Africans

had to be dealt with in a way they had never been dealt with before. This gave the American Negro, for the first time, a sense of himself not as a savage. It has created and will create a great many conundrums.

ONE of the things the white world does not know, but I think I know, is that black people are just like everybody else. We are also mercenaries, dictators, murderers, liars. We are human, too. Unless we can establish some kind of dialogue between those people who enjoy the American dream and those other people who have not achieved it, we will be in terrible trouble. This is what concerns me most. We are sitting in this room and we are all civilized; we can talk to each other, at least on certain levels, so that we can walk out of here assuming that the measure of our politeness has some effect on the world.



Sheriff Jim Clark grabs a civil-rights demonstrator in Selma, Ala. Baldwin says: "What happens is ghastly. What happens to the man who does it is much, much worse."

I remember when the ex-Attorney General, Mr. Robert Kennedy, said it was conceivable that in 40 years in Amer-

ica we might have a Negro President. That sounded like a very emancipated statement to white people. They were not

in Harlem when this statement was first heard. They did not hear the laughter and bitterness and scorn with which this statement was greeted. From the point of view of the man in the Harlem barber shop, Bobby Kennedy only got here yesterday and now he is already on his way to the Presidency. We were here for 400 years and now he tells us that maybe in 40 years, if you are good, we may let you become President.

Perhaps I can be reasoned with, but I don't know—neither does Martin Luther King—none of us knows how to deal with people whom the white world has so long ignored, who don't believe anything the white world says and don't entirely believe anything I or Martin say. You can't blame them.

It seems to me that the City of New York has had, for example, Negroes in it for a very long time. The City of New York was able in the last 15 years to reconstruct itself, to tear down buildings and raise great new ones and has done

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(Continued from Preceding Page) nothing whatever except build housing projects, mainly in the ghettos, for the Negroes. And of course the Negroes hate it. The children can't bear it. They want to move out of the ghettos. If American pretensions were based on more honest assessments of life, it would not mean for Negroes that when someone says "urban renewal" some Negroes are going to be thrown out into the streets, which is what it means now.

It is a terrible thing for an entire people to surrender to the notion that one-ninth of its population is beneath them. Until the moment comes when we, the Americans, are able to accept the fact that my ancestors are both black and white, that on that continent we are trying to forge a new identity, that we need each other, that I am not a ward of America, I am not an object of missionary charity, I am one of the people who built the country—until this moment comes there is scarcely any hope for the American dream. If the people are denied participation in it, by their very presence they will wreck it. And if that happens it is a very grave moment for the West.

### William Buckley:

IT seems to me that of all the indictments Mr. Baldwin has made of America here tonight, and in his copious literature of protest, the one that is most striking involves, in effect, the refusal of the American community to treat him other than as a Negro. The American community has refused to do this. The American community, almost everywhere he goes, treats him with the kind of unctious, with the kind of satisfaction that a posturing hero gets for his flagellations of our civilization, so that he quite properly commands the contempt he so eloquently showers upon us.

It is quite impossible in my judgment to deal with the indictments of Mr. Baldwin unless one is prepared to deal

with him as a white man, unless one is prepared to say to him that the fact that your skin is black is utterly irrelevant to the arguments you raise. The fact that you sit here, carrying the entire weight of the Negro ordeal on your own shoulders, is irrelevant to the argument we are here to discuss.

I am treating you as a fellow American, as a man whose indictments of our civilization are unjustified, as an American who—if his counsels were listened to—would be cursed by all his grandchildren's grandchildren.

About 125 years ago this house was bitterly divided over the question of whether or not some people in England who practiced the faith of Erasmus, your most distinguished lecturer, should be allowed to vote. By a slim margin it was decided that they ought to be allowed to do so. We know that there was more blood shed trying to emancipate the Irish here in the British Isles than has been shed by 10 times the number of people who have been lynched as a result of the delirium of race consciousness, race supremacy, in the United States. Shall we devote the night to these luridities? Shall we devote the evening to examining the sociological facts of human nature? Shall we discuss these class antagonisms in terms of race, in terms of economic standing? Shall we discuss the existential dilemma of humankind?

It is a fact that the position in America is as it is, that the situation in Africa is as it is. The question before the house is not whether we should have purchased slaves generations ago, or ought the blacks to have sold us those slaves. The question, rather, is this: Is there anything in the American dream which intrinsically argues against some kind of deliverance from the system that we all recognize as evil? What shall we do about it? What shall we in America do to eliminate these psychic humiliations which I join Mr. Baldwin in believing are the



Whites take part with Negroes in the 1963 March on Washington. "The fundamental trend in the U.S. is to decency," says Buckley.

very worst aspects of this discrimination?

It is the case that seven-tenths of the average white's income in the United States is equal to the entire income of the average Negro. But my great-grandparents worked hard. I do not know of anything which has ever been created without the expense of something. We have a dastardly situation. But I am going to ask you not to make politics as the crow flies.

What is it that we Americans ought to do? I wonder. What is it we should do, for instance, to avoid the humiliations mentioned by Mr. Baldwin as having been part of his own experiences? At the age of 12 he trespassed outside the ghetto of Harlem and was taken by the scruff of his neck by a policeman on 42d Street and Madison Avenue and told, "Here, you nigger, go back to where you belong." Fifteen to 20 years later he asks for a Scotch whisky in Chicago and is told by the white barman that he is obviously under age and under the circumstances cannot be served. I know from your faces that you share with me a feeling of compassion and a feeling of outrage that this kind of thing should have happened. How are we going to avoid the kind of humiliations which are visited perpetually upon members of the minority race?

**O**BVIOUSLY, the first element is concern. We have got to care that it happens. We have got to do what we can to change the warp and woof of moral feelings and society to make it happen less and less.

The proposition before us tonight as elaborated by Mr. Baldwin is that we ought precisely to recognize that the American civilization, and indeed the Western civilization,

has failed him and his people, that we ought to throw it over. He tells us that our civilization rests on the rantings of the Hebrew, sunbaked fanatic called Jesus—not, says he, truly the founder of the Christian religion. The founder of the Christian religion was actually Paul, whom he describes as a merciless fanatic. And as a result of these teachings of Jesus and Paul, we have Dachau.

If we assume that Dachau was the natural consequence of the teachings of St. Paul and Jesus, what shall we do with the library around here? Shall we descend on it and uproot all the literature that depends in any way on the teachings of Plato and Aristotle because they justified slavery? The primary question before the house is whether or not our civilization has shown itself so flawed as the result of the failure of its response to the Negro problem of the United States that it ought to be jettisoned.

Now I suggest that anyone who argued that English civilization ought to have been jettisoned because Catholics were not allowed to vote in England as late as 1829 and Jews not until 1832 should consider the other possibility. Precisely the reason they *did* get the vote was because English civilization was not jettisoned. The whole point of our philosophical concern ought never to make that terrible fault made so frequently by the positivists, that we should rush forward and overthrow our civilization because we don't live up to our high ideals.

**I**T may be that there has been some sort of sunburst of moral enlightenment that has hit this community so as to make it predictable that if you were the governors of the United States the situation

would change overnight. The engines of concern in the United States are working. The presence of Mr. Baldwin here is, in part, a reflection of that concern.

You cannot go to any university in the United States in which practically every other problem of public policy is not pre-empted by the primary concern for the Negro. I challenge you to name me another civilization in the history of the world in which the problems of the minority, which have been showing considerable material and political advancement, are as much a subject of dramatic concern as in the United States.

Americans are not willing, as a result of Mr. Baldwin's aspirations, to say that the whole American proposition was an unfortunate experiment. They are not willing to say that because we have not accelerated Negro progress faster, we are going to desert the constitutional system, the idea of the rule of law, the idea of individual rights of the American citizen, that we are going to burn all the Bibles, burn our books, that we want to reject our entire Judaeo-Christian civilization because of the continued persistence of the kind of evil that has been so eloquently described by Mr. Baldwin.

There is no instant cure for the race problem in America. Anyone who tells you that there is a quick solution is a charlatan and ultimately a boring man—a boring man because he is then speaking in the kind of abstractions which do not relate to human experience. The Negro problem is a very complicated one. I urge those of you who have an actual interest in the problem to read "Beyond the Melting Pot," by Nathan Glazer and Daniel Moynihan. They say that in 1900 there were 3,500 Negro doctors in America. In 1960 there were 3,900, an increase of 400. Is this because there were no opportunities? No, they say. There are a great many medical schools which by no means practice discrimination. It is because the Negro's particular energy is not directed toward that goal.

What should James Baldwin be doing other than telling us to renounce our civilization? He should be addressing his own people and urging them to take advantage of those opportunities which do exist. And urging us to make those opportunities wider.

Where Negroes are concerned, the danger, as far as I can see at this moment, is that they will seek to reach out for some sort of radical solutions, on the basis of which the true problem is obscured. They have done a great deal to focus on the facts of white discrimination against Negroes. They have done a great deal to agitate a moral concern. But

where in fact do they go now? They seem to be slipping into some sort of Procrustean formulation which ends up by urging the advancement of the Negro less than the regression of white people.

[Interjection from an American undergraduate: "Mr. Buckley, one thing you can do is to let them vote in Mississippi."]

[Buckley: "I agree. Except, lest I appear too ingratiating, I think actually what is wrong in Mississippi is not that not enough Negroes have the vote but that too many white people are voting."]

**W**HAT we need is a considerable amount of frankness that acknowledges there are two sets of difficulties. We must recognize the difficulty that brown people, white people, black people have all over the world to protect their own vested interests. They suffer from a kind of racial narcissism which tends always to convert every contingency in such a way as to maximize their own power. We must acknowledge that problem, but we must also reach through to the Negro people and tell them that their best chances are in a mobile society and the most mobile society in the world today is in the United States.

It is precisely that mobility which can give opportunities to the Negroes, which they must be encouraged to take. But they must not be encouraged to adopt the kind of cynicism, the kind of despair, the kind of iconoclasm that is urged by Mr. Baldwin.

For one thing I believe—that the fundamental trend in the United States is to the good nature, the generosity and good wishes, the decency that do lie in the spirit of the American people. These qualities must not be laughed at, and under no circumstances must America be told that the only alternative is the overthrow of that civilization which we consider to be the faith of our fathers, the faith of your fathers.

If it finally does come to a confrontation between giving up the best features of the American way of life and fighting for them, then we will fight the issue. We will fight the issue not only in the Cambridge Union, but we will fight as you were once asked to fight—on the beaches, in the hills, in the mountains. And just as you waged war to save civilization, you also waged war for the benefit of the Germans, your enemies. We, too, are convinced that if it should ever come to that kind of confrontation, then our determination will be to wage war not only for the whites, but also for the Negroes.

[The motion supported by Mr. Baldwin was carried overwhelmingly. The vote: 544 for the motion, 164 against.]