

Student Non-Violent Coordinating
Committee

360 Nelson Street S.W.
Atlanta, Georgia

Speech by Stokely Carmichael at the University of Puerto Rico,

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Fredrick Douglass, who was born a slave and became one of the first black leaders in America, once said "the world belongs to the youth." I agree, and for this reason feel very strongly that it is the job of youth — our job — to work to save the world. Our generation was children during a terrible war; we grew up when six million people were sent to the ovens. We had no voice in that deed. We must have a voice now.

Somehow we must regain our humanity and create a new humanism in the world. As the great poet John Donne said, "The death of any man diminishes me, because I am involved in mankind. Therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls — it tolls for thee."

This is one reason why the fate of Latin America is of great importance to us. We know, of course, about the independence movement here in Puerto Rico. We know a little — though not enough — about the struggles in Guatemala and Brazil; we know a few names like that of Luis Turcios Lima of Guatemala and Hugo Blanco of Peru and your great leader, Don Pedro Albizu Campos. Our organization is at this very moment preparing to demonstrate in the United States against President-elect Arturo Costa e Silva of Brazil, who is now visiting there. We know that there will be more examples of suppression in Latin America, as in the Dominican Republic. There will be new Vietnams in Latin America. We are absolutely opposed to the military-industrial complex of the United States which is behind this suppression, which continues to wage war against non-white people either by direct military action, indirect political intervention, or economic exploitation. Whatever form that suppression takes, it is war.

One of the reasons why I chose to speak in Spanish here today, despite my brief contact with the language, is because I respect your language which is part of your cultural identity. Others from the United States who come here ought to do the same, and I promise you that the next time I come to Puerto Rico I hope to speak Spanish better. The question of cultural identity is a very important matter to Afro-Americans, because it has been consistently denied us. The society tells us in many ways that to be successful, to be intelligent, to be beautiful, one cannot be black. For example, when people in the United States talk about integration it is always in terms of black children being able to go to white schools, black parents being able to move into a white neighborhood. This amounts to saying that nothing black — nothing of our own — can be good. The society teaches our people to try and be as white as possible, and so they are ashamed of their features — they try to straighten their hair. Throughout the country, but especially in the South, black people are denied knowledge of their history and culture; they are taught that they are worthless. In a similar way, Puerto Ricans who come to the United States also experience pressure to accept the values of the dominant society in order to be successful.

The creation of what we call "black consciousness" — knowledge of and pride in, our identity as Afro-Americans — is therefore part of what we mean by black power.

Black power means for us liberation from oppression by the racist white power structure of the United States. It means that we will control our own Afro-American communities. That we will direct our affairs. That we will have power in the political and economic arenas. In the same way, independence for you means to direct and control your own lives and the wealth of your country, now controlled by a foreign power — the United States — and its Uncle Toms here. Our people are a colony within the United States; you are a colony outside the United States.

But our vision is not merely of a society in which black men have power to rule the lives of other black men. The society we seek to build among black people is not an oppressive or capitalistic society. It is a society in which the spirit of community and humanistic love will prevail. We do not want merely to see black money go into black pockets; we want to see it go into the communal pocket. We want to see the cooperative concept applied in business and banking and housing. In schools, we want the community to decide how the schools should be run — not a group of administrators who do not understand the problems of the community.

We seek, therefore to change the power bases of the world. The powerless should now begin to have power. This is one reason why we refuse to fight in the American Army against the Vietnamese people. The American Army takes advantage of the Afro-American masses. It uses them to fight our own brothers. It tells us that we are going to fight for a so-called 'democracy' but we know the hypocrisy of that claim. We know, in our flesh and in our blood, what "American democracy" means. For this reason we are absolutely opposed — I repeat absolutely — to the drafting of young people of any nationality who are oppressed like us. If we are to fight, we will fight, — but in our own country, to liberate our people. We have only one answer to the draft: Hell, no!

We, who stand with the poor of the earth, must unite. Brothers of Puerto Rico, let us unite to achieve our goals. The forces of oppression, although very powerful, are only a minority compared to the power which all the oppressed of the world can wield. We should remember these words: the poor shall never be crushed because they are too close to the earth.

I would like to conclude with these words of the Hebrew teacher and scholar, Hillel:

If I am not for myself, Who will be. If I am only for myself, Who am I? If not now, When? And if not you, Who?