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National Museum of African American History and Culture

James Baldwin Archive, Series 2: In Defense of Stokely Carmichael

Extracted on Jul-27-2024 09:26:47

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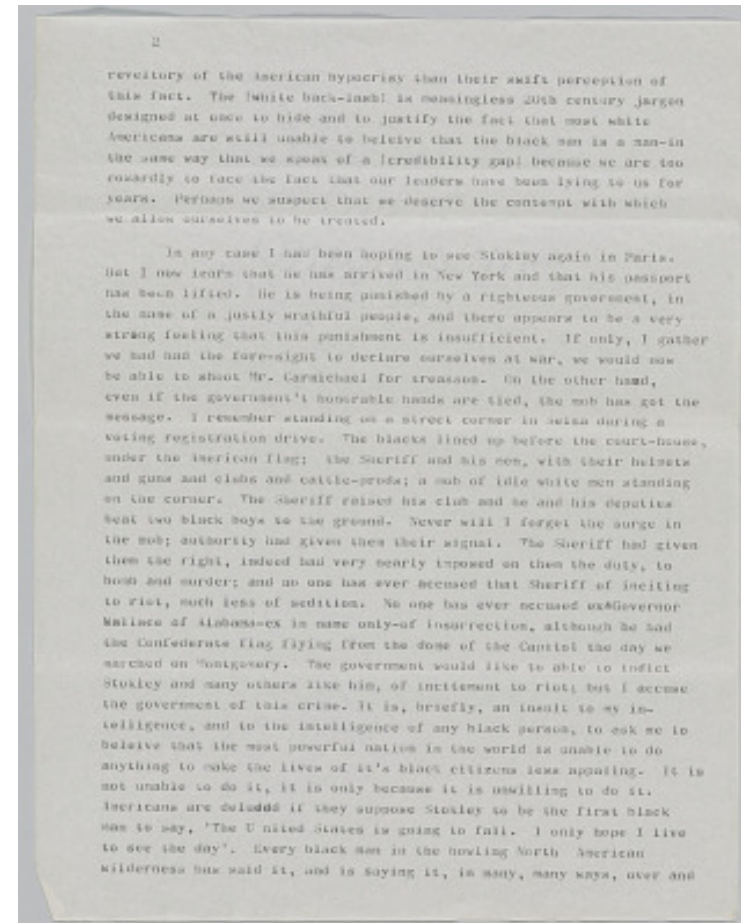
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revoltory of the American hypocrisy than their swift perception of this fact. The !white back-lash! is meaningless 20th century jargon designed at once to hide and to justify the fact that most white Americans are still unable to believe that the black man is a man-in the same way we speak of a !credibility gap! because we are too cowardly to face the fact that our leaders have been lying to us for years. Perhaps we suspect that we deserve the contempt with which we allow ourselves to be treated.

In any case I had been hoping to see Stokely again in Paris. I now learn that he has arrived in New York and that his passport has been lifted. He is being punished by a righteous government, in the name of a justly wrathful people, and there appears to be a very strong feeling that this punishment is insufficient. If only, I gather we had had the foresight to declare ourselves at war, we would now be able to shoot Mr. Carmichael for treason. On the other hand, even if the government's honorable hands are tied, the mob has got the message. I remember standing on a street corner in Selma during a voting registration drive. The blacks lined up before the court-house, under the American flag; the Sheriff and his men, with their helmets and guns and clubs and cattle-prods; a mob of idle white men standing on the corner. The Sheriff raised his club and he and his deputies beat two black boys to the ground. Never will I forget the surge in the mob; authority had given them their signal. The Sheriff had given them the right, indeed had very nearly imposed on them the duty, to bomb and murder; and no one has ever accused that Sheriff of inciting to riot, much less of sedition. No one has ever accused ex-Governor Wallace of Alabama-ex in name only- of insurrection, although he had the Confederate flag flying from the dome of the Capitol the day we marched on Montgomery. The government would like to be able to indict Stokely and many others like him, of incitement to riot; but I accuse the government of this crime. It is, briefly, an insult to my intelligence, and to the intelligence of any black person, to ask me to believe that the most powerful nation in the world is unable to do anything to make the lives of its black citizens less appalling. It is not unable to do it, it is only because it is unwilling to do it. Americans are deluded if they suppose Stokely to be the first black man to say, 'The United States is going to all. I only hope I live to see the day'. Every black man in the howling North American wilderness has said it, and is saying it, in many, many ways, over and



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