

JESSE JACKSON in PLAYBOY — 1969

from Bernabe

PLAYBOY

that the recipient be hungry. If the Panthers can serve breakfast to 3000 children a week in Chicago or 1500 in San Francisco, with their lack of resources, what could those cities' governments be doing if they had the same interest?

**PLAYBOY:** If you were the mayor of a major American city, what would you do?  
**JACKSON:** I would declare the poor communities in a state of emergency and deal with the unemployment rate, the high mortality rate and the high t.b. rate. I would set up medicine tents on the streets, and embarrass the Federal and state governments into opening up their food storehouses. I would declare war on disease and hunger. I would enlarge all the city departments that feed and heal people. The welfare of all the people would be attended to before any new golf courses or monuments or stadiums were built. I would force the Government to call out the National Guard to deal with the existing injustices, which make the ghetto a permanent disaster area. There's no reason why the Army couldn't be coming down the street with bayonets, looking for slum landlords. The Army would force trade unions to allow the minority groups in. And those who did not pick up the garbage would themselves be picked up. An Army like that wouldn't have any trouble getting volunteer soldiers because it would be engaged in a relevant war.

**PLAYBOY:** Is that statement a reference to Vietnam?

**JACKSON:** Let me just say that Vietnam is not a relevant war. It is a war in which the black poor are paying with their lives to protect the investments of a small, rich elite whose Asian investments are threatened by Hanoi.

**PLAYBOY:** Whatever interests are being served in Vietnam, do you think that you, as a citizen, have the right to pick the wars in which you will fight and those in which you won't?

**JACKSON:** Of course I have that right. I must reserve the right to decide which wars are just. And I would not fight in a war that I thought was unjust. Nor would I approve of anyone else doing so.

**PLAYBOY:** Would you encourage drafted blacks to refuse to go to Vietnam, even if it means jail for them?

**JACKSON:** Yes. And whites, too. Fighting in Vietnam is a step back into slavery for blacks, and into barbarism for whites. The road to jail has often been the road to freedom. Many men—Gandhi, Jomo Kenyatta, Dr. King—have learned that.

**PLAYBOY:** Although a disproportionate number of blacks have died in Vietnam, there have been few blacks active in the peace movement. Why?

**JACKSON:** To blacks, the peace movement is a luxury that presupposes you have the time to save somebody aside from yourself. Blacks are just too occupied with their own survival. They have not even been sophisticated enough to know

that they can oppose murder. A black man can be easily seduced; it's a revolution for him to go from one meal a day to three. Sometimes I think that blacks are so locked away from information that we could be duped into fighting in South Africa for apartheid, if America told us to do it. We certainly were down there shooting our Dominican brothers. I saw televised scenes of Dominicans lined up against a wall while black GIs held guns on them. But this is not because of ignorance but because of cultural suffocation and improper education.

**PLAYBOY:** Malcolm X once proposed that the UN send observers into the American black community to determine if blacks were being treated humanely. Do you think that's a practical idea?

**JACKSON:** Only for symbolic purposes; the UN doesn't have any power and is subject to the American veto.

**PLAYBOY:** Wouldn't exercising the veto prove so embarrassing to the U.S. that it would refrain from doing so?

**JACKSON:** I doubt it. And the countries that one might expect to pressure America into dealing humanely with its black minority—the countries of Africa—are themselves too dependent on America's trade and financial aid to wish to antagonize her. It is not in the enlightened self-interest of those countries to rise up in indignation when we're shot up in Detroit or Watts, because we don't affect their essential relationship with—the world markets or the World Bank.

**PLAYBOY:** Both Malcolm and Dr. King worked to mobilize a world-wide conscience against racism before they were struck down. Do you share the view of some that both murders were part of a plan to deprive blacks of their leaders?

**JACKSON:** Not a single elaborate conspiracy, but it's clear that as we have moved closer to America's nerve center, closer to a position where we could vote men out of office, the killings have increased. And I don't think America has done anything to indicate that she is on the side of Dr. King rather than of his killers.

**PLAYBOY:** You used the plural. Don't you think that James Earl Ray acted alone?

**JACKSON:** I would be surprised if it wasn't a conspiracy involving many others.

**PLAYBOY:** Do you have any evidence to support that belief?

**JACKSON:** I think the circumstances were very suspicious. As you know, I was with Dr. King when the assassin's bullet was fired. We were talking with Operation Breadbasket's music director, Ben Branch, about songs for the next day's rally. Dr. Abernathy, Andy Young, James Bevel and Bernard Lee were very near. When Dr. King was shot, I hit the ground, along with the others. We scrambled toward the steps where he was and I looked back over my shoulder, because I was afraid that more shots were going to be fired. I saw so many police coming from the direction of the shot that I actually threw up

my hands, thinking that the shot had come from one of them and that I was going to be killed, too. There were hundreds of police in the area, some jumping from the hill where the shot had come from. I tried to tell them that the bullet came from that way.

Now, the hotel that Ray was in—if Ray was the killer—is next door to the fire department. With the shot having been fired and all those police in the area, the usual thing during an emergency in a Southern town would be for a siren to go off that stops the lights and traffic on Main Street, where the hotel is. It was six o'clock in the afternoon, the busiest time for traffic, and it all could have been brought to a halt. But no siren went off, traffic wasn't stopped and Ray escaped through downtown Memphis. The distance he subsequently traveled indicates to me that he didn't do it by himself and that he may have had some very highly placed help. But, of course, finding Dr. King's killers is secondary to getting at the roots of America's violent atmosphere—an atmosphere in which you conform or are broken, in which you take your subordinate place in the industrial hierarchy or are destroyed.

**PLAYBOY:** What do you think Dr. King would be doing if he were alive today?

**JACKSON:** Dr. King would still be dealing with the problem of finding a job for everybody; he would still be raising the questions of medical care for everybody, of a full-employment economy. He would still be on the basic issues, still be pointing out the stupidity of the war. He would be in general conflict with Nixon. He would still, as we say, be on the case.

**PLAYBOY:** Will there ever be another black leader as important as Dr. King?

**JACKSON:** I don't think so, though, of course, no man can say. But it was Dr. King who crossed the frontier, who made a permanent break with the past. I grew up in the period from 1955 to 1965, and that time was dominated by his courage and strength, as opposed to the previous mass docility of black men. Dr. King was a surprise for a lot of whites who had conned themselves into believing that Negroes were really inferior. He was intelligent, moral, eloquent and courageous. The contrast of his eloquence with the lack of it in those whites he was forced to deal with gave us a rallying point. Even more important was the way he stood up to white military power in the South. Dr. King wasn't afraid of the cop's billy stick, guns or dogs. He overcame the stigma of jail cells; in fact, he dignified the jail cell and wrote great words from it. He was willing to die for black people, and finally did die, not on some lofty mountainside or in the company of ambassadors but kissing garbage men, trying to set them free.

**PLAYBOY:** In the weeks before he died, did Dr. King express any particular

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