

Speech by James Baldwin (1963)

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The beginnings of this country have nothing whatever to do with the myths we have created about it.

The country did not come about because a handful of people in Europe said, "I want to be free" and promptly built a boat or raft and crossed the Atlantic Ocean. Not at all. Not at all.

The people who settled the country, the people who came here, came here for one reason – no matter how disguised – they came here because they thought it would be better here than where they were. That's why they came, and that's the only reason that they came. Anybody who was *making it* in England did not get on the Mayflower. [Laughter and applause.] This is important. It is important that one begin to recognize this because part of the dilemma of this country is that it has managed to believe the myths it has created about its own past.

Which is another way of saying that it entirely denies its past.

We did several things in order to conquer the country. There was, at the point we reached these shores, a group of people who had never heard of machines or as far as I know of money, and we promptly eliminated them. We killed them. I'm talking about the Indians.

I'll bet you as we say in Harlem, (?), that there are not many American children being taught American history who have any real sense of what that collision was like or what we really did, how we really achieved the extermination of the Indians, or what that meant. And it is interesting to consider that there are very few social critics, none to my knowledge but I say very few, who have begun to analyze the hidden reasons the cowboy/Indian legend is still one of the most popular legends in American life, so popular that it still in 1963 dominates the television screen.

And I suppose that all those cowboy/Indian stories are designed to reassure us that no crime was committed. We have made a legend out of a massacre.

Now slavery, like murder, is one of the oldest human institutions. So we cannot quarrel about the *fact* of slavery; that is to say we could, but that's another story. But we enslaved him because in order to conquer the country, we had to have cheap labor.

And the man who is now known as the American Negro, who is one of the oldest of American citizens, and the *only* one who never wanted to come here, [applause] did the dirty work.

Hoed the cotton. Do you hoe cotton? No? Chopped the cotton... whatever you do with cotton, picked cotton. [laughter] Lined track. Helped, in fact, I think it is not too strong for me to say; let me put it this way: without his presence, without that strong back, the American economy, the American nation would have had a vast amount of trouble creating its capital. If one did not have the captive toting the barge and lifting the bale as they put it, it would be a very different country, and it would certainly be much poorer.

But the people I am speaking of who settled the country had a fatal flaw. They could recognize a man when they saw one. They knew he wasn't, I mean, you can tell, they knew he wasn't anything else but a man. But since they were Christian, and since they had already decided that they came here to establish a free country, the only way to justify the role this chattel was playing in one's life was to say that he was not a man, because if he wasn't a man then no crime had been committed.

That lie is the basis of our present trouble. Because that is an extremely complex lie, if on the one hand one man cannot avoid recognizing another man, it is also true then, obviously, that the man, the black man who was in captivity and treated like an animal and told that he was one, knew that he was a man and knew that something was wrong. I prefer to believe that if this society is created by men, it can be remade by men. The price for this transformation is high.

Every white citizen of this country will have to accept the fact that he is not innocent. And that those dogs and those hoses, those crimes are being committed in your name.