



James Baldwin v. William F. Buckley Debate

Group Discussion Guide

Dive into this month's *Conscious Conversation* with these questions about the James Baldwin v. William F. Buckley Jr. debate.

ABOUT THIS GUIDE

The questions and discussion topics that follow are designed to enhance your group's conversation.

ABOUT THIS DEBATE

In 1965 at the University of Cambridge, two of the foremost American intellectuals were challenged with the question: 'Has the American Dream been achieved at the expense of the American Negro?' From William F Buckley's highly stylized posturing and pointing, to James Baldwin's melodious rhetorical flourishes and memorable scowls, what's become known as the 'Baldwin-Buckley Debate' now stands as one of the archetypal articulations of the dividing line between US progressives and conservatives on questions of race, justice and history. Baldwin, the famed African-American writer, whose reputation as a progressive social critic and visionary Civil Rights activist has only risen in the intervening decades, argues that the very foundation of US society is built on the dehumanization of its African-American population. Meanwhile, Buckley, the leading US conservative intellectual of the period, argues that African Americans would be best served by exploiting their country's many freedoms and opportunities, rather than pointing a collective finger at discriminatory structures and institutions. In both cases, their positions presage contemporary divisive debates in the US, though one wonders whether such an event could happen in today's political environment.



DEBATE RECORDING

James Baldwin vs William F Buckley: A legendary debate from 1965

The legendary debate that laid down US political lines on race, justice and history.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5Tek9h3a5wQ>



James Baldwin v. William F. Buckley Debate Discussion Questions

1. What was your initial reaction after watching the Baldwin v. Buckley debate?
2. How is the debate topic “the American dream is at the expense of the American Negro” still relevant today?
3. Were you familiar with the Baldwin v. Buckley debate before this conversation? If not, what was most surprising about the event?
4. Do any of Baldwin and Buckley’s points apply to what Black Americans are facing today? Why or why not?
5. Baldwin describes how Black Americans feel betrayed by and have distrust towards American politicians. How does this relate to what is seen in today’s civic engagement and voter turnout among Black Americans?
6. Buckley suggests that part of the problem isn’t lack of opportunity, but that Black Americans lack “that particular energy” to uplift themselves. How has this stereotype towards Black Americans impacted racism throughout history and today?

AFTER YOUR CONVERSATION

We would love to hear about your conversation. If you would like to share any of your discussion notes, comments or photos with Legacy Foundation, please send them to mfishback@legacyfdn.org