

INTERVIEWEE: JAMES FARMER (Tape #2)

INTERVIEWER: PAIGE MULHOLLAN

July 20, 1971

M: I can refresh your memory fairly quickly, I think. I've talked to Mr. Baker, and he's quite sorry that he was not able to come back this time because he enjoyed meeting you before. You all had finished talking about your career and your relationship with Mr. Johnson up through the middle of 1964. You had talked about the passage of the Civil Rights Act that year, and what Mr. Johnson had asked you to do to help him. I think you had called some Republican congressmen and things of this nature in behalf of that bill.

As it finally turned out, as it was passed, when it came down to the compromising and getting it finally through, was Mr. Johnson as tough on that bill as you and your associates wanted him to be?

F: In getting it through?

M: Yes.

F: Yes, I think we could not make any legitimate complaint against President Johnson on that score. He certainly fought for the bill, and he fought to get it through without emasculation. I think there's no question at all about that.

M: He didn't give away anything that you all thought was--?

F: No, he didn't. As a matter of fact, in one conversation I had with Mr. Johnson he indicated that he'd have an easy time getting it through if he would give up the public accommodations section, but he felt that was the guts of the matter, and he could not give it up. So he fought for it, there's no question about that.

M: After it passed, in the summer of 1964 there was the story, published anyway, that Mr. Johnson asked you and other civil rights leaders to try to have your people sort of cool it during the campaign period. Did he have such a conversation with you?

F: No. He did not have such a conversation with me, not directly, that is. But a meeting was called--I would have to check my records to get the exact date of it--prior to the election of '64. The meeting was called by Roy Wilkins of the NAACP, and present at that meeting were Mr. Wilkins, Whitney Young, Martin Luther King, A. Philip Randolph, Bayard Rustin, John Lewis from SNIC, and myself. And at that meeting, Mr. Wilkins and Rustin asked everyone to have a moratorium on demonstrations. I assumed then that this was at the request of the White House.

M: They didn't say it was?

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F: They did not say it was, but the implication was very clear in what they did say, that it was at the President's request, the feeling being that further demonstrations might generate more backlash and help to elect Goldwater. This is the way it was put.

Well, my reaction to the request was a negative one. I did not go along with it.

M: Why was that? Did you just believe that it wouldn't have the effect that they feared?

F: Well, certainly I did not think it was going to elect Goldwater. The backlash had been there all along, and it was not going to get any worse. The people who were on our side remained on our side, and those who had been against us, but non-vocal about it, had simply become vocal. That had been my philosophy of the backlash--that minds had not changed.

M: Did anybody else feel the same way as you did at that meeting?

F: John Lewis agreed with me and backed it up. He was a SNIC man. The others argued strongly for a curtailment or a broad moratorium on demonstrations. We had a vote and John Lewis and I were the only ones who voted against it. I felt, first of all, that it was wrong for us to do that. We had had too much experience with flip-flop party lines, with the Communists in the '40's when the political situation changed, and they changed their tactics so drastically. In fact, those of us who were trade unionists, and I grew out of the trade union movement, sang songs about them--you know,

"I knows it, Browder,  
I knows it, Browder,  
Our line's been changed again!"

So I didn't think that we ought to get--

M: Most historians think that that block in the Communists' tactics in the '40's was what killed the American Communist party.

F: It was. I think it was. And I felt that this would do the same for the civil rights movement.

Second, I thought that it would be a disaster if we issued a public statement saying, "We're going to stop demonstrations," and the demonstrations continued, as they were bound to do. We did not have the power to stop them.

M: That's an important consideration.

F: To say that we could stop them, or to give that implication, was to ask for ridicule,

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because the demonstrations would go on.

M: Which also wouldn't do the movement any good.

F: It wouldn't do the movement any good. It would show that the alleged leaders could not control it. And for Wilkins, Young, King, Farmer, Lewis, and Randolph to say, "Stop the demonstrations," the kids in the street who were demonstrating would laugh at us.

M: That's probably true.

F: So those are the two reasons that I opposed it.

M: Did you ever talk to Mr. Johnson about that later?

F: No, I never talked with him about it. But I must say that at that very point the President's attitude toward me changed.

M: Oh? How did you notice this?

F: Well, prior to that I could reach him by phone. He would urge me, "Call me any time," you know. But from that point on, I could not reach him by phone. I would reach Mr. White--was that his name?--who was a special assistant.

M: Lee White.

F: Yes, Lee White. I would write to the President or send a wire. I no longer got the personal response, which I'd received before.

M: It was that action right there that did it!

F: Yes. From that point on, I received a form letter from an assistant to the assistant.

M: That's very interesting.

F: Also, by the way, at a meeting at the White House where the President had been signing a bill--I guess it was the Civil Rights Act of '65, or was it the Voting Rights Act. When was the Voting Rights Act?

M: The Voting Rights Act was in '65.

F: '65, yes. I think it was then, at that signing, I found the President very cold.

M: Very cold?

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- F: Yes. And, as we went to another place from the White House where the President was passing out pens to everyone, he passed over me several times.
- M: That could hardly be an accident.
- F: It wasn't an accident--looking right at me and passing over me. All the while, Mr. Wilkins was saying, "Mr. President! Farmer! Mr. President!" But the President didn't hear him, and kept passing over me. I finally got the pen, however, when I just walked up and practically took one out of his hand!
- M: Did that change of attitude have anything to do also with your activities with the Mississippi Freedom Democratic party that same summer of '64?
- F: That, I believe, was just before the--no, it was just after the moratorium request.
- M: Right in the same general period, right.
- F: Same general period. And I'm sure that was a part of the President's feeling.
- M: Did you have any contact with him, or his immediate associates, about that?
- F: No, none at all, none whatsoever. Lee White was there on the scene just observing what was going on, but I had no contact with the President at all.
- M: This was the evening at the convention? You didn't negotiate with his immediate people, like Marvin Watson or somebody?
- F: No, I did not. The persons who were speaking for the point of view which the administration adhered to were Joe Rauh, Walter Reuther--Reuther more indirectly, he was speaking largely through Rauh.
- M: I've interviewed Rauh on this project.
- F: And Rustin, of course, was aboard on that same general position. I felt that the thing had been stupidly handled--
- M: By which side?
- F: By the Democratic party. I'm not a Republican, understand, I'm an Independent.
- M: All recent appearances to the contrary!
- F: That's right. In New York, I was a registered member of the Liberal party, and now I'm a

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registered Independent. But I felt that for the Democrats to make an offer to the Mississippi Freedom Democratic party was fine, but the offer that they'd made suggesting that they would be glad to seat Aaron Henry and a young white fellow, Ed King, representatives of Mississippi Freedom Democratic party--what that smacked of was an attempt to pick the leaders. If they had said to the Mississippi Freedom Democratic party, "Pick two of your members and we will seat them," but to say, "We will be glad to seat these two, was bound to go down the wrong way.

M: I see. And those two would not have been the ones the--

F: Those two might well have been the same ones--I think they would have been. But it was the principle of their selecting.

M: I see. But Mr. Johnson's immediate lieutenants stayed out of that--

F: His immediate lieutenants stayed out of it, to my knowledge.

M: Was Senator Humphrey closely involved with this?

F: Humphrey, yes. Humphrey was involved in it, and Rauh, and Walter Reuther. But they made a very grave tactical error, and my feeling was that the MFDP could not possibly accept it because of that.

M: Because of the way they went about it.

F: Yes, because there had been too much of a tradition of the establishment picking our leaders, and saying, "We'll pat this one on the head and oppose this one."

M: Bless one, and not this one, right.

F: Exactly.

M: What happened in early '65? That's the year of the Voting Rights Act.

F: Yes.

M: Was it necessary to put a considerable amount of pressure on the administration to get them to come in with that--

F: The Voting Rights Act?

M: Yes. The Selma march preceded it, I think you participated in that.

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- F: Yes, I participated in the Selma march. Let me think, I'm just refreshing my memory. I think the pressure on the administration on voting rights had been ongoing for a period of two years or more. And it was culminating in the Selma march, and then other things, because this was the time, you'll remember, when we were having people killed in Mississippi. I forget the exact date of [Michael] Schwerner, [Andrew] Goodman, and [James] Chaney, it was around there, and this sprung from voter activities because it was the church that had been burned down where they had held voter registration meetings and so on in Neshoba County--Philadelphia. So the pressure had been built up and we, through correspondence--through letters and telegrams to the President had been urging action on voter rights. I say "we," I mean all of the heads of civil rights organizations.
- M: He had resisted coming in with the bill up until that time?
- F: He hadn't commented on it, he hadn't commented on it, but had not opposed it.
- M: How did the administration react to the Selma activity? Were they closely in touch with what was going on?
- F: To my knowledge, only through the Community Relations--is that the Community Relations Division of the Justice Department now? I think that's what that's called.
- M: That's the one that would be the natural--
- F: Yes. That was the agency which was represented on the spot at the time and was serving as an intermediary--a mediator.
- M: They didn't try to discourage your Selma--?
- F: No, they made no effort to discourage. I'm sure that they were sophisticated enough to know that that could not succeed. That would have made the group more determined to go ahead with it.
- M: Did you ever have any contact with Mr. Johnson about that '65 Voting Rights Act?
- F: Let me see. No, understand that I was out of contact with Mr. Johnson at this point.
- M: He did invite you to the signing ceremony?
- F: Because he invited all of the heads of civil rights organizations. He was not a man who would say, "Well, leave this one out and invite the others." Because the others--at that point we had a unity among the civil rights organizations, and had he left anyone out and that person notified the others, all of the others would have screamed or not gone. We had that kind of unity then.

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M: So he didn't have the choice of leaving out Jim Farmer?

F: He had no control on that one.

M: It was that same summer at the annual convention of CORE that they tried to pass a resolution condemning our Viet Nam policy.

F: That's right, yes.

M: I think you were on record as opposing that.

F: Well, yes, I was not present at the session where the action was taken. I had not known that the action was going to come up. One of my friends--staff members--came up and notified me that the action had just been taken, almost a unanimous vote, as a matter of fact, to call for immediate withdrawal from Viet Nam.

[interruption]

F: What were we talking about?

M: The resolution that surprised you regarding the withdrawal of our troops from Viet Nam.

F: Oh yes. And this was then and not now. Now, such a resolution would be supported by everybody:

M: That's right.

F: But at that point I felt that the civil rights movement should not get involved in this. I felt that for a number of reasons. One reason being that it would provide too easy a cop-out for some of our chapters who were trying to tackle complex Northern issues, and were trying to figure out what to do. You know, "Is a sit-in relevant? Is a picket line relevant, and a march relevant when you're talking about housing, when you're talking about jobs, when you're talking about the quality of education," and so on. And they were puzzled and were looking for some easy answer.

One easy answer would be to demonstrate on Viet Nam.

M: Which has nothing to do with--

F: Has nothing to do with those issues, and this would be an out if we attempted that. That was one of the reasons. Another reason being, I felt it would simply confuse the issue. I felt then at that time that these were separate issues, and ought not be confused in the minds of the public and CORE supporters.

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The third reason being that CORE had always had a problem of attempts at Communist infiltration. And for us to pass that resolution at this time would tend to open the door.

M: And it would particularly make critics make-believe that such an attempt--

F: Yes, it would give that impression. But the attempts were going on. Some of our members, while they were certainly non-Communists or even anti-Communists, were not sophisticated in the methods of the Communists, and I felt they would be sitting ducks to infiltration. People would come, just as anti-Viet Nam folk, but not as Communists. CORE's anti-Viet Nam--

M: That's right, you find out later on.

F: So I then went down and asked for permission to speak. Well, the chair to that issue had passed on. Then someone who had voted for the resolution then stood and asked for reconsideration, which was the proper method of going about it. And the reconsideration was adopted easily. I spoke, we went to another vote, and we won two-to-one.

M: Did anyone from the White House ever contact you about that?

F: Nope.

M: I'm surprised that didn't open your communications back up again. He was looking for friends on Viet Nam about that time.

F: Well, it didn't. It did not at all. No, my communications never again became good with the President, all of which culminated in late '65 and early '66 in the literacy project. I don't know if you're familiar with that.

M: Yes, I am. This is when you resigned from CORE and--

F: Yes, but before that I had discussed the literacy program with President Johnson shortly after the assassination of Kennedy.

M: Yes, that's on the first tape, right.

F: Right. And I discussed it with him several times later, two or three times, in the presence of the heads of the other civil rights organizations. They were all backing it, of course; the President was backing it 100 percent and urged me to proceed. I had sent him a couple of memos on it.

So I had set up an agency for this purpose, and had learned through sources at the



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White House the way to do it would be to go to the OEO. I had, and I thought we had a firm commitment for funding; in fact, OEO wanted to fund it right away. And I said, "Wait, I'm not ready yet. We've got to wait a few months."

M: Who did you talk to there?

F: Shriver. Shriver himself. I had also talked with Humphrey as Vice President. Shriver said, "Fine. This is great." And they'd like to fund it right away. I said, "Wait, because I've got to set up a line of succession in CORE, so there'll be orderly succession and not warfare." Power struggles.

Presumably the President was backing it at this point. But on Christmas Day--

M: This would be 1965?

F: '65, Christmas Day, there was a leak. A story appeared in the Washington Post, front page, "Government to Give Millions to Farmer on Literacy Plan"--I forget the headline, but that's the story. And essentially it was accurate--the story was accurate--not millions, it was \$890,000.

M: When you get that high up, it's kind of marginal.

F: Yes. Essentially the story was accurate, it had most of the details, that I planned to resign from CORE and head up this agency and all of that. Well I certainly wasn't ready for that kind of an announcement; the announcement was not to be made in that way. It was information which could only come from OEO sources, or my sources. It did not come from my sources, of that I can rest assured, so it was a deliberate leak. As a matter of fact, the story gave credit to the President for pulling this off.

M: It turned out to be his idea!

F: Well, it was then that stuff started happening. Shriver, who had heretofore wanted to fund it right away--immediately--began backing off. I couldn't reach him. I'd call him, and he wasn't in--he was at a meeting, he was in conference, the secretary would have him call back, and he'd never call back. Sent him a wire--no response. No action. The thing had been approved in OEO all the way up, approved by the lawyers, by the fiscal people, by the program people, and it was on Shriver's desk for signature. This went on for weeks and weeks. And my contact in OEO would tell me, "It's on his desk now. This is the day (Tuesday, I think) that he signs, and we're certain he's going to sign it, there's just no reason why it shouldn't be." Everything else was signed. That was not. And this went on.

M: When you get Tuesday after Tuesday--

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F: Tuesday after Tuesday. I couldn't reach the President. A. Philip Randolph, however, spoke to the President about it at a meeting of civil rights people, and said, "What's happening to the Farmer proposal?" I wasn't there.

M: You were not regularly invited to meetings of civil rights people at that time?

F: Not that one. "What's happening to Farmer's proposal?" Randolph said, "We are concerned about it because in the first place we think it's a good, sound proposal, and in the second place Jim's a friend."

Randolph reports that the President says, "Oh, I'm in favor of it a thousand percent, just like I told Jim when he talked to me about it a year or more ago. I'm all for it. But talk with the chairman."

"What chairman?"

"Chairman Powell of the Education and Labor Committee." That was Adam Powell.

Randolph asked then, "What does Powell have to do with it?"

"Well, he's chairman of that committee."

So Randolph, after that, tried to reach Powell unsuccessfully. Powell did not return his calls.

I asked Martin King to call Adam, since Powell was not returning my calls either at this point. Powell had, by the way, held a press conference at which he had said) among other things, "You know, the question of literacy--I don't think we need a new agency to handle that. I think it ought to be done by the OE (the Office of Education)--they're the ones who are skilled in education and literacy." Well, my feeling on that, and Adam's feeling, would have been on an issue like this normally, would be putting the fox in charge of the hen house. They're the ones who had failed all along!

But Martin reached Powell and called me and says, "I spoke to Adam, and Adam said, 'I have nothing against Farmer's proposal, I think it's a good proposal.' But 'the President asked me to axe it'"--so Adam said. And Martin says, "I asked him why, why should he?"

"Well, he asked me to do it."

"But why would you do it? What is he going to give you for it?"

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Adams says, "Well, he's going to give me something that I need very much."

Martin asked him what it was, and he declined to say.

M: Did you ever find out what it was?

F: Well, I got rumors. One black reporter, who was very close to persons on Adam's staff, informed me that that there was a quid pro quo. And the quid pro quo (this would sound fantastic in history--I have no way of knowing whether it's true or not) obviously, it may be pure fantasy) was to get Adam off the hook in the libel suit. You know, when he called this woman the "bag woman" in Harlem and he was sued for a hundred-and-something thousand. There had been this judgment of a hundred and sixty thousand against him, and then the President was going to get him off the hook on that.

I laughed and said, "Now, look, sell me the Brooklyn Bridge, but don't sell me that!"

But I was interested, however, a week or two later to turn on the radio and hear that the judge had reduced the judgment from \$160,000 to \$40,000.

M: It could be coincidence!

F: It could be coincidence. The story, according to this black reporter, was that the only person who could get Adam off the hook on that was the judge, and the only person who could get the judge to do it was the person who had appointed the judge--Bob Wagner. And the only person who could get Bob Wagner to do it was "Big Daddy," the President.

M: Leave that to your imagination who "Big Daddy" was.

F: Right.

M: To continue that on then, what happened to your proposal?

F: Nothing. I never had heard from Shriver. Shriver took off for Africa on a safari--actually lion hunting--and stayed there for a month or more at this point. When he came back, I still couldn't reach him. I couldn't get any word or anything.

Now, a reporter friend of mine--another reporter, a white reporter--who worked for the Evening Star, took a leave of absence to try to find out what happened with a reporter's nose. After six weeks he wrote an article, which was a full page--I think it was in the Evening Star.

M: It's pretty essentially accurate as far as--

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F: As far as I know. He came up with the story of what he thinks happened, and he claims to have the evidence. He says that the meeting was called at the White House by the President, and present at the meeting, in addition to the President, were Powell and a congressman from Florida--what is his name, who's on the Labor Education Committee?

M: Pepper?

F: No. He's on the Labor and Education Committee, one who attacked Powell later on.

M: Oh, yes, I can't call his name.

F: He was there. And Schultze, who was director of the Budget Bureau, was there. According to this article the meeting was held not in the office at the White House, but upstairs in the apartment--private, off-the-record supposedly. And at the meeting the President allegedly said, "I understand that if we fund the Farmer proposal we'll lose forty-six or forty-eight votes on the anti-poverty program. What about it, gentlemen?"

And then there's a disagreement as to who said what. Adam says he says--Adam agrees that such a meeting did take place, by the way. He says that he said, "Mr. President, this is your decision." And others say that Adam took a negative position on funding. Adam denies that.

But the decision was made by the President, according to this article, to not fund it. And the decision was probably communicated to Shriver. So Shriver was on the spot then, couldn't say, according to this article, couldn't say yes because he had orders, and was scared to say no for fear of political repercussions to his future. So he kept silent and was unavailable. Couldn't reach him.

M: During this period when you were out of touch with the President, could you reach anybody in the White House?

F: Lee White.

M: Only one?

F: Lee White was the only one.

M: Did they have a man regularly assigned for civil rights matters?

F: Lee White.

M: He was the one?

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F: Lee White was the one.

M: Did you get a sympathetic hearing from him?

F: Lee White would just listen and say, "Well, I'll call around and see what I can find out and what I can do," but nothing came out of that at all.

The decision had been made. Now this article says that one reason for the decision was that some of the big city mayors had called the White House, and lists two in particular--Yorty and Daley--saying, "Don't fund it because Farmer is not interested in literacy. He's a political animal, and he's trying to build himself a political base, and he's going to pick my city as one of his ten pilots. So don't fund it."

So I don't know.

M: This has never been explained to you by anybody in the White House?

F: Nobody in the White House has ever explained that, so that was the story.

M: Coming up to 1966 when the White House Conference on Civil Rights was called and took place, did you participate in that?

F: Yes, I participated in the White House Conference on Civil Rights at the request of the guy who was organizing it, Cliff Alexander, by the way.

M: He was on the staff by then.

F: Yes. And I participated in that. I had left CORE by then, however.

M: That was generally looked up, by the press at least, as being a failure. What happened?

F: I think it was a failure. For one thing, there was an attempt made to structure it.

M: By the White House?

F: Well, I assume so, by the staff of the White House. And at that point in history, it was just not possible to structure a conference on civil rights, and give them a predigested statement. It was quite clear that there were certain statements that were supposed to come out of each session, and this was not the kind of mood to accept a predigested statement. They wanted to get their points on.

Also, remember this was just as black power was developing.

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M: That's right.

F: When there was confusion in the ranks of the civil rights organizations as to just where they stood, and who was who.

M: Did the administration have any ideas at this point, or were they just out of ideas?

F: I think they were out of ideas. I don't think the administration knew what was going on in the civil rights movement at that point.

M: You mentioned earlier that there had been a common front.

F: There had been, but this had broken by then. So many things happened that it's difficult--the historians later will have to fit the pieces together and tell what led to what, what was cause and what was effect and so on. This was at a time when I had left CORE. My leaving was voluntary, in spite of any rumors to the contrary. It was strictly voluntary, and I picked my successor. I fought for McKissick, I asked him to run. Indeed, his opponent in the race was George Wiley, now of the Welfare Rights Organization. George was my associate director at CORE, but I decided for multiple reasons not to back him and to back McKissick. George would have won easily, had I even remained neutral, but McKissick won. The election to the National Action Council, McKissick was an old friend of mine, I had brought him into CORE.

But this was at a point when SNIC had had turnover that was not voluntary, when John Lewis and a group of his friends were thrown out and Stokely--what SNIC people considered the Howard group--came in at that time. So black power was being talked about, and civil rights organizations for the first time were confronted with arguments on goals and objectives. Before there had been disagreement on tactics, but now apparent disagreements on goals and objectives. And so the movement was reeling. They didn't know where they were going or what to do at that point.

M: So it's not hard to understand why the administration had been confused the organizations themselves were confused.

F: Yes, organizations were confused, and I'm sure that the administration was listening to NAACP and the Urban League. These were the people logically that they would listen to, and, frankly, neither of those organizations understood what was happening.

M: I see. And the administration was not listening to CORE and SNIC?

F: No. They haven't listened to CORE or SNIC since the decision not to support a moratorium.

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M: People like Floyd McKissick and Stokley Carmichael never had any hearing at the White House--

F: Never! No, quite to the contrary. One meeting at the White House was called--I would have to search my memory at greater length to remember what the meeting was about--and the White House didn't know how to reach McKissick and called me, I believe it was, and I told them how to reach him. They invited him there and McKissick insisted on taking a couple of his staff members with him, and when he got there to the gate they wouldn't let them in--you know, their names weren't on it, so they stood there for a long period of time and demanded to talk to somebody in the White House. Here was CORE, outside of the gate!

M: That was a comedy of errors, wasn't it!

F: Oh, it was.

M: Was the White House Conference on Civil Rights really kind of a cosmetic operation--they wanted to give the appearance of doing something!

F: I felt so. I felt at this point that the White House Conference was an attempt to tell people to be quiet, and cut out this nonsense. Now, I don't blame President Johnson for this. The same was true of the Kennedys. They sought to stop movement. As a matter of fact, on the freedom rides, it was Bobby who called from the Attorney General's office, or sent a wire, I believe, saying, "Have a cooling off period. Stop."

M: Every administration wants a cooling off period.

F: Everyone wants tranquility in their period. In fact, Bobby Kennedy suggested to representatives of CORE and SNIC that if they would stop demonstrating, sitting-in, and freedom riding, and concentrate on something like voter registration, that they might be able to get tax exemption.

At that meeting, which was while I was in jail in Mississippi, I had staff members there who tell me that the SNIC guy--and the SNIC people had shorter fuses than CORE people, they are a little younger--the SNIC guy and the Attorney General were standing forehead-to-forehead, pointing fingers and shouting. They had to separate them.

M: So this wasn't just--

F: No, this wasn't just Johnson. Every administration, "just try to keep it cool." And one could understand it. If we were the administration, we'd want to keep it cool.

M: I guess that's right. How did the administration respond when the riots occurred from,

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say, Watts on? Did you ever get involved with any of their response to those activities?

F: Let me see. Let me think. '64 was Harlem. Watts '65.

M: Right. And I guess Detroit '67, and there was something in between in '66.

F: No, I had no contact with the administration on that, I can recall. Let's see, the riot in Watts was in '65, the summer of '65, wasn't it?

M: Yes.

F: I don't think there was any contact.

M: Any at the time of Detroit?

F: No, Detroit would have been in '67.

M: I think you were called in, were you not, after Martin Luther King was shot?

F: No. I was not. That, too, was sort of a comedy of errors. The White House called me. And I of course was still very much upset when I'd heard of the assassination of King. A fellow with an Italian on the staff called me.

M: Valenti?

F: It may have been Valenti, I'm not sure who it was now. He called me and left word for me) I was not there. I had not gotten home from a lecture tour where I was at the time I heard the news of the assassination. He called and asked me to return his call, he did not tell my wife what it was about. He said no matter what time I got in, twelve, or one or two--it was night, midnight, early hours of the morning. I returned the call and did not reach him, but I was kept on the line about five minutes. And finally Mrs. Johnson came to the phone, and said, "Mr. Farmer, I'm awfully sorry. That call to you was put through in error."

M: And that's all?

F: That's all.

M: No further explanation?

F: No further explanation. So I assumed, to give them the benefit of the doubt, that they were simply calling the heads of civil rights organizations, and the man who had made the calls had looked at an old list and had called me as the head of CORE. And when she



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looked over the list of those who had been called, "You know, he'd not head of CORE anymore," that's what I assume.

M: Did McKissick get called then?

F: McKissick did get a call, he was in a hotel in the Midwest--in Cleveland, I think it was at the time. And he called me up, he got called and said that he was going.

M: So the head of CORE wasn't left out, it was you who was left out.

F: I was left out. I assume that was the meaning of it.

M: Did you take part in any way in the 1968 campaign, election, nomination?

F: No, I did not. You know, I was running for office in Brooklyn then on the liberal party ticket and got Republican backing, without any chance of winning, you know. You know, whoever gets the Democratic nod in that community wins nine-to-one without campaigning--can go on vacation. But this time they didn't go on vacation. They campaigned and raised money and won two-to-one, so we did all right.

But at any rate, I was campaigning. I endorsed Humphrey in the closing days of the campaign. I knew that was probably going to hurt my campaign, it would further confuse my unsophisticated voters, but I felt I had to do it. I felt that Humphrey's election then was more important than mine. I never supported Nixon, and he knew that.

M: Did you have anything to do with the 1968 Civil Rights Act--the Open Housing law?

F: No, only in the sense of supporting it and calling people in Congress.

M: But not at the request of the President.

F: No, not at the request of the President.

M: Your relations didn't improve even after he got Cliff Alexander and people like that on the staff?

F: No, they didn't improve at all. My impression of that, strictly impressionistic, was that the President was still mad. "You didn't go along with the moratorium."

M: You never did get an offer of a job from the Johnson Administration like you did from the Nixon Administration?

F: Funny thing, there was an offer. I don't think it came from the administration per se, but it

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was at the time right after I had withdrawn my proposal from OEO, which I finally did publicly. I picked a logical place to do it, at the CORE convention in the summer of '66. This would be the ideal place to publicly blast Shriver. I blasted Shriver because it was his signature I wanted. And I did not know of any possible presidential involvement at that point, right after. So I blasted him and withdrew publicly, and we had quite a go-around in the press on it. What were we talking about?

M: Job offers.

F: Oh yes. It was shortly after that I got a call from somebody at HEW, some lower echelon bureaucrat. "Mr. Farmer, we have an opening here, a good job. It's a 13 or maybe a 14." That was it.

I said, "Well, what is this job?"

"Well, we want somebody to be the director of the Office of Equal Health Opportunity."

I said, "Office of equal who!" I had never heard of that office.

M: That had never been heard of before, or since, huh?

F: I've never heard of it before or since. That wasn't the exact name, or maybe the name has been changed now. And it turned out that this lower echelon bureaucrat was calling to offer me the job as his boss. In other words, he was to work under me, I'd be his boss. My God, really! I told them that I certainly was not interested; would not under any conceivable circumstances be interested. "I'm not looking for a job." My income tripled when I left CORE just lecturing. So although I was unemployed functionally, I was not worried about money. I told him I did not need the job, was not looking for a job, and even if I were, I certainly wouldn't be interested in that. However, if there was an opening, I would make some recommendations to him. I then recommended Harlan Randolph, who is now president of Federal City College, and Harlan went and interviewed and he got the job.

M: He took it?

F: Yes, he took it.

M: Were there other occasions on which you helped the administration recruit, particularly blacks?

F: No, that was the only one I can recall. But he got the job. So I was amused to be offered this kind of a job.

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M: Of course you got involved in an active way with the Nixon Administration in HEW.

F: Yes, but here at the request of Bob Finch. Finch, before he was confirmed, this was right after he had been named by Nixon, called me and asked me if I would be on his advisory committee. I said, "What do you want advice about, and what are we going to advise on?"

He said, "Well, in the first place, you'll come down for three days to Washington where I'm to be briefed by the present staff of HEW on their operations, and I'd like for you and other members of the advisory committee to sit in on that, and then to write a report recommending to me what changes ought to be made in terms of personnel and in terms of program." And I agreed to do it.

At the end of the three days, I sent in my report, and Finch then asked me to have breakfast with him, at which time he asked me to come down and offered me three jobs--one of three, take your choice. I picked that one.

M: As an Assistant Secretary for Administration.

F: For Administration, right. I picked that one.

M: Did you know enough about what the HEW Department was doing under Johnson to be able to compare the way it operated under Johnson with the way it operated under Nixon?

F: No, I don't think so. Except some of the people who were there under Johnson I have great admiration and respect for, certainly [John] Gardner. I think he's a great guy. And Doc [Harold Howe] Howell, who was Commissioner of Education, for awhile there, I thought was tremendous. They're both good friends of mine, and were at that time.

M: So you individually--

F: Individually, they were on the side of the angels. But understand, a department like HEW doesn't change drastically with a change of administration because the same career men are in the key career spots, and they're the ones who run the organization. They look at the new Secretary and the new administration and say, "This too will pass." Whether it's Johnson or Nixon.

M: And it does.

F: It does go on. It does pass.

M: As you look back on it, the civil rights movement came probably to its most successful period under Johnson, and then it fragmented and became confused under Johnson, as

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well. What kind of overall evaluation of his long-term contribution to the civil rights movement would you make? That's kind of a tough question.

F: That is a tough question, but I think it's an important one. I think in the period from November '63 when Johnson went in after Kennedy's assassination until early '65 Johnson's record on civil rights was excellent--the best of any President so far. There's just no question about that at all. He battled it through--I have grave questions that Kennedy could have gotten the civil rights act through intact. But Johnson did, and he fought to get it through. In fact, I, in that period, was sitting there in his office talking with him, he was on the telephone part of the time, I suspected that part of that was to impress me with what he was doing--that's legitimate too! But he was on the phone, on the bill, and was cracking the whip. He was cajoling, he was threatening, everything else--whatever tactic was required with that certain individual, he was using. He got it through. And other things through.

I had the feeling, the very distinct feeling, that he is the first Southern President since another Johnson--Andrew Johnson, I guess--who felt that he wanted to go down in history as a person who really accomplished something in civil rights for blacks, and that would secure his place in history. I felt that, and I also felt that he personally meant it, that he did feel it, that his voting record prior to that time, when he was in Congress--in the Senate--was political expediency.

M: It was Texas then.

F: Yes, it was Texas, and he wanted to be there. Just as Fulbright once said to me when I asked him about his--this was just three summers ago, I guess--I asked him about his votes on civil rights, and supporting the Southern Manifesto, and all that. He said, "Well, I figure that I can make some contribution so long as I am in the Senate, so I have to be there."

M: I've lived in Arkansas for the last four years, I have some feel of his knowledge there, and he's probably right.

F: So that didn't worry me too much. I thought Johnson really meant it, that he felt very deeply on it, and was going to do something about it.

I did feel, though, that for a complex of reasons, which I don't pretend to understand all of them, about '65 the President changed not his feelings, but his priorities. And I now think that one basic cause of that was that agonizing decision to send troops into Viet Nam, and that began to take the front burner while other things were pushed to the back burner.

To illustrate that, it was about at that point when the White House called--the

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President didn't call himself, Lee White called. Said: "The President wants you to know that he's going to change the assignment that he has given to the Vice President"--to Humphrey. Up until that time, Humphrey had been the czar of civil rights, all of the agencies in the federal government that were dealing with civil rights, and he was coordinating them. He was changing him to foreign affairs, or some aspect of foreign affairs--international relations. "The President wants you to know that this in no way indicates downgrading of civil rights at all." He went on in that vein about five minutes. "It's just to better organize things here." I felt that he protested too much after he raised the question. He indicated priorities were changing.

But I think it did then in '65. And the President wanted things especially cooled domestically because he had problems abroad.

M: It wasn't so much his anger at what the civil rights groups were doing, the way they were moving, as it was his concern with an entirely different--

F: I think it was his concern, and failure to understand what was happening there. My impression of Johnson was that with all of the goodwill that he had, that he did not have an in-depth understanding of the mood of black America. He was much better able to understand the black leaders whose orientation tended to be more to the middle-class and to being polite and courteous and being white, in other words. And I say that not in a bad sense at all, being white.

M: I understand that.

F: So he was talking to himself when he talked with some of them. He was much better able to understand that than he could understand the angry young blacks who would tell it like it is, and call him an MF. This he couldn't understand, it was out of the pail.

M: Was this partly because the civil rights movement became more concerned with urban problems, that he didn't understand it? Originally, it was the Southern rural problems that they were concerned with, and he of course knew about those firsthand.

F: I believe that probably was a part of it. I think another part of it is that the President's background, coming from the South as he did, there was still an element of paternalism which he had not been able to get over. And paternalism doesn't jive very well with angry young black militants. They're in a different element.

M: That's right. They'd rather have hostility.

F: That's right. They'd rather have hostility. Paternalism means you're dealing with a child. When a child says, "I'm a man, don't talk to me like a child," there's no contact--no communication.

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M: Was there ever any harassment of you by the administration in such ways as wire-tapping or surveillance, this type of thing?

F: I think that my wire was tapped pretty constantly. Home and office. In fact, I sent wires to the White House, the FBI, the Department of Justice, the FCC, and everybody else, including the telephone company in New York, charging the line was tapped. Some responded. The Department of Justice didn't respond right away. An FBI regional man came by or called and asked, "Why do you think your phone is tapped?" I told him, strange noises, etc., etc., etc. And, "That doesn't prove anything. We doubt that it's tapped, we'll do what we can to check and let you know." He called back later, "There's no evidence your phone is tapped." I screamed at some friends of mine in the Bureau of FBI down here, you know, "Take that blankety-blank tap off the phone." "What makes you think your phone's tapped? We have only eighty-one taps, and you ain't one of them! Who do you think you are!"

M: "Think you're important enough to be tapped?"

F: But I'm convinced that it was tapped.

M: They never though directly confronted you with anything that they had picked up on your tap, or did they?

F: They never confronted me with anything really. I wasn't directly confronted with anything.

M: Did they use information gained that way to put the pressure on civil rights leaders? Of course, the story is on Martin Luther King--

F: On King, well, I got involved in that one. I heard those rumors, and the rumor we got in New York--I got in New York--from black and white press sources were that the FBI was peddling this story. They were mad at King because he had attacked Hoover. Then Hoover called him a notorious liar at that point, "the most notorious liar in America." Then the word we got was that they were peddling this story, and that if any reporter or columnist who picked it up used it he got sued. Hoover was prepared to testify and, if necessary, to leave his job--he was so determined to get him. This is the story we got from different sources.

I then called King, because I got this persistent rumor, and one reporter who reported that Fulton Lewis, Jr. was about to take the story, he thought, and break it. So I called King and talked to him. He was in Chicago, and I asked when he was coming to New York. He was coming through New York that night, going to Connecticut, so I met him at the airport. We sat down and talked in the VIP lounge. I asked him about this, he, of course, denied it. He could not remember any such incidence that the FBI claimed to

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have, and so on. I said, "I'll forget it." And he said, "Don't forget it. No, let's do what we can to stop it. If something like this comes out, even if it isn't true, it will damage all of us in the whole movement."

I set up a meeting with a person in the FBI, a private meeting, and went down and talked to him about it. The party in the FBI I talked with says, "You know what you're talking about, and it's true. The story is true. The only thing that's not true is that we are pushing it. We're not the ones who are trying to sell it. Dr. King has a lot of enemies."

M: Did he tell you who they were?

F: No. I was too sleepy--I had been up all night, and was not very sharp. I should have asked who were his enemies. He said, "He has a lot of problems anyway, but it's not the bureau who's pushing it and trying to sell this story." And so I let it go at that.

By the way, when we finished the conversation, he said, "I can assure you that the FBI files will not be used in this kind of a smear. Our files will not be used."

Then I learned that King was having an on-the-record meeting at that very moment with Hoover. He had called Hoover after talking with me and had set up a meeting. That was the meeting when they came out after the meeting and met the press, and things were amiable.

But at this meeting, the FBI man I had talked with had informed me that one of CORE's staff members, who was a part-time staff member of CORE, was a card-carrying member of the Communist party. I had not known that, had not even suspected it. But he had been on such-and-such dates, and "still is."

M: Do you know of anybody for certain who has ever heard the alleged tapes that the FBI has?

F: I know of only one who has evidently heard them, and he's dead--Whitney Young.

M: Everybody seems to know about them, and yet nobody seems to have actually heard them. How would Whitney Young have gotten that privilege?

F: He sought it. I tried to take some action to stop this thing from coming out, because I thought all of us would be damaged. Certain persons, by the way, urged me to blow the whistle on King.

M: Governmental person, or civil rights people?

F: Partly governmental.

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M: What does that mean?

F: That means consultant to certain high officials. And the reasoning he gave was that, "Look, you've got to blow the whistle on him. This son-of-a-bitch is just no good. You've got to blast him because if this thing does come out and everybody will know, it will be made known that you knew about it and didn't do anything, didn't say anything, covered it up. So you were a co-conspirator." I told him to go to hell!

Whitney allegedly, according to this person by the way--I can't name him--went down to the White House and asked the President if it was true. He said, "Yes, it's true." Whitney said he'd like to see the pictures and hear the tapes. They had some pictures of the hotel allegedly. He was sent some place for a showing and a hearing. He heard the tapes and saw the pictures, and told the President afterwards that this was just terrible and said to the President: "You've got to do something. What are you going to do about it?"

And the President allegedly said, "Well, what are you going to do about it? You're the civil rights leader!"

M: The President always kept his lines open to Whitney Young and Roy Wilkins.

F: And Roy Wilkins. They're both good men--Whitney was a good man, and Roy is. Roy is a dear friend of mine. We were from different elements, and we had our clashes, but I respected both of them very much.

M: But the President wasn't going to intervene to put the quiet on this evidence against King.

F: No, apparently not.

M: That's a very involved story.

F: It is a very involved story, and it was coming just at a time of the Nobel Peace Prize. And the word we got from the press was that they were going to try to destroy him before Oslo, before he had been over there to receive it. But as I say, no one has said anything to me about any tapes, any recordings they have of me, any taps of telephones.

M: They've never said, "If you don't do this, we're going to--"

F: No, nobody ever did that. There was no implication, no suggestion of it at all.

M: You've been very helpful this morning. Are there any subjects we haven't talked about that you'd like to get on the record here? I don't want to cut you off by my not knowing what to mention to you.



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F: No, I can't think of anything that's of importance that we haven't touched on. I was very pleased to get an invitation to go down to the Library thing--

M: Oh, did you?

F: Yes, I got an invitation.

M: Did you go?

F: No, I did not go because I had a couple of lectures in that period. I'm free-lancing so I didn't feel that I could cancel those lectures to go down there.

M: Did you think that was an implication that maybe Mr. Johnson was willing to let bygones be bygones?

F: I assume that was the case, and I read some columnist's story that the selection of people to be invited was political. I mean, the President indicated which were Kosher and which weren't Kosher, as far as he was concerned.

M: You should have gone. It was a nice party.

F: Probably he doesn't even remember what happened in that period. The reason I say this, the thing seems very immediate to me and very big and very important, I was involved in it. But he had many things, and this was small potatoes on some back burner.

This struck me at a party for the President--after he had announced he wasn't running, there was a party in New York--I don't know if this was after the election in '68, whenever it was--the Krims set it up.

M: It was after the election, I think.

F: I met Whitney Young and Mrs. Krim, she was on his board, on the plane going to New York, and she invited me, she said, "Would you be willing to come?"

"I'd be glad to, if I had an invitation."

She said, "You'll get an invitation!" So my wife and I were invited. I dusted off my black tux, tried to see if I could get into it, and I went. I shook hands with the President, Farmer. James Farmer." He looked and there was a kind of far-away look, and the impression I got was it was not concern or anything else, but he was trying to say, "What is it, what do I remember! What is it I remember? What happened? We used to get along, but then we didn't. Why?" And couldn't quite remember what it was all about then. It was important to me, but at that time wasn't important to him.

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M: Right.

F: And then I assume that he remembered that it had something to do with education, because when he made his remarks--just a few remarks, and he was very casual and very relaxed, more relaxed than I'd ever seen him, by the way, he was enjoying himself--he spoke about education. What we've got to do with education, kept looking over there at me!

M: He has got you in a compartment by then.

F: But I'm sure he didn't remember anything about literacy or OEO or anything else.

M: You've been very helpful and we certainly appreciate your willingness to take time out in the middle of your morning here and talk to us.

F: It has been a pleasure.

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By James Farmer

to the

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LYNDON BAINES JOHNSON LIBRARY  
ORAL HISTORY COLLECTION

Narrator: James Farmer

Biographical information: Civil rights official

b. Marshall, Texas, Jan. 12, 1920. B.S., Wiley Coll., Marshall, 1938; B.D. Howard U., 1941; Founder, Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), 1942, nat. chmn., 1942-44, 50, nat. dir., 1961-66; race relations sec. Fellowship of Reconciliation, 1941-45; lectr. race and labor problems, 1948-50; student field sec. League Indsl. Democracy, 1950-54; internat. rep. State, County and Municipal Employees Union, 1954-59; program dir. NAACP, 1959-61; leader CORE Freedom Ride, 1961; pres. Center for Community Action Edn, 1965--; asst. sec. for administration, US Dept. Health, Edn & Welfare, 1969-70; Nat. exec. bd. Am. Com. on Africa, 1959-64; Chmn. Council United Civil Rights Leadership, 1963--.

General topic of interview: Farmer's career as a civil rights leader, his relationship with Lyndon B. Johnson and Johnson's push for civil rights legislation.