INTERVIEWEE: BAYARD RUSTIN (Tape #1)

INTERVIEWER: T. H. BAKER

June 17, 1969

B: This is the interview with Bayard Rustin. Sir, to start pretty far back in time, did you have any knowledge of Mr. Johnson when he was in the Senate?

R: Yes, I did. Of course, I suppose everybody heard of Lyndon Johnson in the Senate. I at that period was not so much interested in legislative activities as I later became. But my impression of Lyndon Johnson in the Senate was that of a shrewd political figure who--from the time of Roosevelt, I remember hearing of him when I think he was in the House first.

B: Yes.

R: But my intimate knowledge of him was rather limited at that period, I must say.

B: Did you have him classified in regard to his attitude toward civil rights or the Negro?

R: Yes. I don't know why, because I don't have any specific thing at hand, but I got rather the impression that he was not particularly liberal on the race question.

B: Did his activity in the Civil Rights Bill of 1957 do anything to change this, or did you even consider that bill material to the cause?

R: Yes, I felt that that bill was very weak, but a very important bill, largely because it was the first really important bill. And while we had considerable questions about it, we all supported it on the

basis that this would establish a very important precedent. And, as I remember, Lyndon Johnson did work for that bill.

B: Yes, he did. Then what was your attitude toward the 1960 Democratic ticket of Mr. Kennedy and Mr. Johnson?

R: Quite frankly, I was very distressed when Mr. Johnson was picked because I felt that--well, I suppose in part it was prejudice. I was fearful of a Southerner even before I judged him on his own merit. Secondly, I felt that he did not have the kind of record that a number of other men had. Therefore, I had some apprehension. However, I decided and did support the ticket.

B: Actually, sir, you organized civil rights demonstrations at both national conventions that year.

R: Both national conventions. They were really both organized with the help of Dr. King. Mr. Randolph, however, was the key figure. We also got fought by Adam Clayton Powell, who didn't want us to have them.

B: I would like to go in, at an appropriate point, to your relationship with Dr. King and with Congressman Powell. I think there are some questions involved in there that are not answered, at least on the public record.

Did you see anything then of Mr. Johnson during the years that he was Vice President?

R: Yes, I saw him several times, I think a couple of times when delegations went to see him in regard to civil rights matters. Curiously enough, I can't remember just what they were.

B: Would this have been in connection with his work on the commission on Equal Employment Opportunities?

R: That's exactly what it was, yes.

B: This would have been, I assume, the first time you had met him personally?

R: Yes, that was the first time I met him personally. And I must say, I got quite a different impression then than I had had up until that time, because he did seem very amicable and very much and deeply concerned. But there's a statement that very often men who become President of the United States do not know that there are international questions until they become President. I presume that the same thing can be said for men who become Vice President and President, that very often the responsibility of office requires them to take an infinitely more liberal view on certain domestic questions than they may have taken.

B: When you were coming to this opinion of then Vice President Johnson, did you have any reason to question his sincerity? Was there any reason to suspect this was a kind of political opportunism?

R: You know, people who usually talk political opportunism in regard to political leaders somewhat astound me because I frankly must say that I presume every man who's going to govern the United States has to govern by balancing thousands of groups in the interests of that degree of national unity which is possible. Therefore I'm convinced that every act of a President cannot be a conscientious act. It is an act based on trying to maintain the highest possible degree of unity in the nation. So I try not to judge motives. I'm much more concerned with what he does than why he may or may not do it.

B: By these standards Mr. Johnson's work with the Equal Employment

Opportunity Commission in those days was beneficial to the cause of civil rights?

R: Oh, absolutely--tremendously beneficial. I think it was a good bit of the part of educating the nation along with the upheaval which was then beginning on the part of SNCC, SCLC, and other groups in the South.

B: Related to that, sir, you played a major part--perhaps the major part--in organizing the March on Washington in 1963.

R: Yes.

B: What sort of thinking went into deciding to have such a march?

R: The decision to have that march was based on the fact that Mr. Randolph foresaw that the coming problem was an economic one, that we were well on the way to getting the nation to face up to the moral question. Therefore that march was designed to bring economic pressure on the job question. It was called "The March for Jobs and Freedom."

However, while the march was being prepared, you will recall that the administration proposed a civil rights bill.

B: Then the planning for the march predated the civil rights proposal. The planning must have begun back in late '62.

R: That's right, it did. In fact, the idea was conceived in '61, but we were waiting for things to congeal so that we could get everybody that we wanted to participate. That took almost a year and a half to do that.

B: You mean labor groups and such?

R: Labor groups and some civil rights groups who weren't convinced in '61 when we first thought about it that it was the right thing to do.

B: Were you also waiting for the kind of climate that was created by the Southern Christian Leadership Conference's work in the South?

R: Well, we were waiting not only for SCLC but for SNCC, SCLC, the Voter project--a number of things. Then Mr. Randolph said, well, he felt the time had come, that we ought to do it in the summer of '63--late summer.

B: I hate to keep interrupting you, but I think a question is appropriate here, and I hope it doesn't sound rude or disrespectful. So far as the public sees, you and Mr. Randolph worked together in an awful lot of things like this. Is it really a partnership, or where is the dominance in the pair?

R: Mr. Randolph, like Dr. King, is an extraordinarily marvelous and great man. But neither Dr. King nor Mr. Randolph really has much organizational ability. They are great dreamers. I don't think Mr. Randolph could have organized the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters if he hadn't had certain key people around him who did the dotting of I's and crossing of T's. And, of course, a part of his extraordinary greatness is that nobody knows better than he does that he can't organize. Therefore what he has always done is to go out and work with someone who is deeply concerned about organizational detail. And I began working with Mr. Randolph in 1941 as the director of youth for the original March on Washington which did not have to take place. Therefore over the years he came to have faith in my ability to do this sort of thing. But he's the one who conceived the idea.

Another interesting thing. Mr. Randolph refuses to raise money. He always jokes and says, "Well, you can raise the money. Don't worry." Which means that we often left Roy Wilkins holding the bill.

I was going to say--

B: Yes, please carry on, sir.

R: When President Kennedy and the Administration introduced what became the Civil Rights Bill of '64, the urgency of that bill obscured the basic reason for the March.

B: You mean the economic reason?

R: Yes, economic reasons. And when the congressmen came down the steps at the March, the young people in the front began to scream, "Pass the bill. Pass the bill, pass the bill." And by that time the March had become a call for the passage of civil rights legislation, per se, as against what it had really conceived to do, which was to raise the economic question.

However, I don't think that that took anything from the March. I think it may, in fact, have helped it. But in this regard both the Vice President and President were very distressed and did not want the March to take place and in fact urged us not to have the March.

B: I understand there were conversations to that effect. Did you talk face-to-face with Mr. Kennedy and Mr. Johnson about this?

R: No, Mr. Randolph did. I did not. The decision was that a small group should go. Therefore since Mr. Randolph and I represented the same tendency, he went and I didn't.

B: The Administration appears to have feared that the march would get out of control; that there would be violence which was--

R: Yes, they did.

B: Right in your department as the chief organizer, did you ever fear that that could happen?

R: No, I didn't. Let me say that the very fact that we took some of the

steps we took indicated that we conceived of it as a theoretical possibility. And precisely because we thought it was theoretically possible, we did everything we could to see that it would not happen.

B: Did this involve screening the participants as much as you could, and having marshals and so forth?

R: No. When you have that many participants, you cannot screen them. What we did was to screen the signs which they carried. We did not permit anybody to carry any sign at all--only the signs we provided, and placards. We also used great numbers of Negro policemen from the major cities along the eastern coast all the way from Richmond to Boston, and had thousands of them there who knew a great deal about crowd control. We also sat with the government officials--every department of government--in Washington, and the federal government, and made certain that--.

It was our request that the liquor stores be closed; it was our request that the traffic be limited. We saw to it that there were very definite places for transportation. We sent out thousands and thousands of copies of two different little booklets telling people where to go, what to bring, etc. We set up our own welfare establishment in case anybody got lost or was in trouble. And with a quarter of a million people coming in, I think we spent less than $500 in emergencies, so that people were really very, very disciplined as a result of the fact that all of these things were done nationally. Then of course we had six different organizations working at the local level.

And people came with leaders. Every bus that came in had a particular leader, and he had certain very important things to do, and did them rather well.

B: After the March was over, a group of the leaders went to the White House to meet with Mr. Kennedy and others. Did you go?

R: No, I did not, because I had so many things to finish up.

B: Getting everybody out of town must have been a first-class job.

R: That's right. And they met really quite early. In fact, they didn't meet after the March. They met around 11:30--

B: Was it that early?

R: Yes.

B: I thought it was after the speeches.

R: No, before.

B: By that time I guess it was pretty obvious it was going to be a peaceful demonstration.

R: Well, yes. The only disorder that was attempted was attempted on the part of the American Nazis. The police simply surrounded them as they came across the bridge and sent them back.

B: Shortly after that, sir, comes the assassination of President Kennedy. On that occasion, in which Mr. Johnson becomes President, did you by any chance have any fear that there would be a let-up in civil rights?

R: Curiously enough, Johnson's behavior as Vice President caused me to write an article two days after Kennedy's assassination, in which I said that I didn't think people ought to be fearful; that Truman had a fairly atrocious record as a senator, but that in fact it was Truman who began to open up, with the commission he appointed, a real federal concern in the civil rights question; that under some pressure from Randolph he had integrated the Armed Forces; and that perhaps a Southerner would be able to do more than a Yankee, particularly with a Boston accent, to get some things done in Congress that no one else

had. And I'm happy to say that as far as I'm concerned I believe that President Johnson will go down in history as having done more for civil rights than any single President who ever lived--and more for civil rights, not only in terms of civil rights, but that his education bill, which has now made it possible for us to almost double the black students in colleges. We have more black students in colleges than we had anticipated would be there by 1975 as a result of President Johnson's educational bill. There are now 400,000 Negroes in colleges in the United States. So that I'm glad to say that the prediction I made at that time proved to be prophetic.

B: Were you one of the Negro leaders who was called by President Johnson shortly after the assassination?

R: Yes.

B: What did he say on that occasion?

R: He explained that he needed our help, essentially what the whole thing was about, that he hoped that we would trust him, that he was deeply concerned to deal with these matters. Essentially he wanted two things before he left office: one was that there would be world peace everywhere; and that all men in the United States would have the rights and privileges and the responsibilities of citizenship.

B: Was this a phone call, sir, or a meeting in the White House?

R: I believe, if I'm not mistaken, Cliff Alexander called about to people. It could have been a telegram, but I doubt it.

B: Did the President call on you for more direct help in getting what was now to be the Civil Rights Bill of '64 through Congress?

R: Yes. It was interesting. He urged us to keep up the pressure, and said that he would do his part of the job if we did ours. I said

we did.

B: Your part would have been pressure on individual congressmen from their districts?

R: Pressure on congressmen, pressure on the labor movement to put more people in, pressure on the churches for money for more lobbyists.

Incidentally, I think that the bill was really passed because the churches and the labor movement in states where there were no minority people really did go in and do an important job.

B: That's an interesting point. Then, sir, you were also involved in the Democratic convention of that year of '64. I've seen an indication that you and Dr. King and Mr. Foreman and Mr. Farmer had all met before the convention to discuss the plans for the Mississippi delegation seating.

R: Yes. That's right. Well, we met several times on that question. I think Dr. King and I anticipated a problem and tried to--well, we had two meetings before getting to Atlantic City, I think it was. That was that the SNCC people and some SCLC people who were working in Mississippi really didn't realize that they had come up to Atlantic City to begin an entry into the political process. They had been protesting and demonstrating to such an extent that they came up to Atlantic City to ask for something that they didn't think they would get. They did not think they were going to be offered any compromise, and when they were offered a compromise they couldn't accept it because they were still of the mood that their function was to protest. So we had had two meetings before we got to Atlantic City to try to hammer out the fact that they were now on the threshold of entering the real political arena.

B: May I ask, sir, where Mr. Foreman and Mr. Farmer stood about this time?

R: Whenever we had internal discussion, Mr. Farmer tended to wait to see what the major decision was going to be and then he came down that way. Mr. Foreman was irrational, really.

B: Even this early?

R: Oh, yes. We'd say to him, "Now, if you want to have a protest, then have it, and define the terms of that protest in a meaningful way. If you're trying to get some people in on the floor, then define at what point you are prepared to accept a compromise." And he would not come down anywhere, and kept the thing very much boiled up.

B: Incidentally, sir, these are the names that most people know from their publicity. Is there anyone who is influential in this kind of thing that does not get so well publicized?

R: You mean, in this particular discussion. Well, there were a number of other people in on that discussion. In fact, the more significant discussion took place at the Trademoor Hotel where Walter Reuther called me one morning and said that Hubert Humphrey wanted to see us about this matter. And the word had circulated--and I don't know if there was any truth to it--but the word had circulated that Hubert had been told that he had to keep this civil rights thing from blowing up into a real storm outside.

B: The assumption there is that he had been told by President Johnson.

R: That's the assumption. And therefore Bob Moses, who was the key figure along with Foreman at that point, did not want to meet with Humphrey. He said he wasn't going to pull Humphrey's chestnuts out of the fire

and help make him Vice President.

So Dr. King and I went over to see Bob Moses and said, first of all, we had no proof that this had happened. But even if it had happened, "what has that got to do with us", that our function was to try to get the people from Mississippi--some black people--in on that floor. And if Hubert had made some agreement, that was, again, his business; that we didn't have to go along with it for his reasons.

So Bob Moses did come over. Walter Reuther and Hubert Humphrey came, Dr. King and myself, Foreman, and Moses, and a few others from SNCC, and I think Andy Young and somebody else from SCLC. Anyway, the first thing Bob Moses did was to raise this question of Hubert, and Hubert said there was no truth to it and that he was interested in really trying to work it out.

Now one of the curious things in history is that Edith Green, who has now become very reactionary on a number of these questions, was in Atlantic City acting like the woman on a white charger telling SNCC people under no circumstances should they accept a compromise --this is really fantastic--and that it should be all or nothing.

Well, at any rate, at this meeting Dr. King and I said that we felt--in other words, what Hubert came there with was a package deal which was that two delegates from the group would be seated; that they would be able to have the microphone for addressing the convention; and that the rest would have a special section upstairs.

Dr. King and I then went over to the church and argued that we felt this was an opening wedge. It wasn't what we wanted, but at least it got somebody in on the--oh, yes, the third thing was that

committee would be set up that was finally set up, you know, to make certain that no lily-white delegation would ever be seated again.

Well, the fact that in '68 the Mississippi delegation did in fact get in--and part of the Georgia--I think vindicated that compromise. It ought to have been taken, and I think things would even have moved faster.

But in any event Dr. King and myself and some others were very vigorously attacked for having proposed they accept that compromise.

B: One would assume that the internal discussions within your group were even more vehement.

R: Oh yes, they were. However, we did take over the microphone outside in order to keep the group which wanted to have a disruption and a minor riot--we kept the microphone for several nights running, and kept an orderly protest going.

B: Was there any other contact with Mr. Johnson or any of his representatives, other than through Mr. Humphrey?

R: Yes, there was a committee that went to see Mr. Johnson, including Roy Wilkins and myself and others to raise some questions about the whole business of whether he really intended to carry on a vigorous effort.

B: Was there any doubt, sir?

R: No, but this is the kind of thing you just have to do, because you have to go back to your people and say, "We talked with the man, and this is what he said he was going to do." I don't think there was any question at this point.

B: And then, sir, you and Dr. King and I believe Mr. Randolph, too, all came out for the Johnson ticket.

R: Yes. This was unique for Mr. Randolph, because he had never voted. He had always voted for someone for President, but he had never let it be known for two reasons: one, he always argued that black people had sense enough to know how to vote in their own interests; and secondly, he had been a Socialist and had voted for Debs and Thomas, and he had sort of pledged himself that he would never publicly announce for anybody who wasn't Socialist. But he felt that it was time that he must.

B: Did you do any active campaigning, sir?

R: Dr. King and I--

B: I was going to ask if you traveled with Dr. King on that--

R: --made a trip all the way across the country. That was really one of the most remarkable trips. Of course, Dr. King, during that trip, never once told anybody to vote for Johnson, but he handled it in such a way that they knew what he meant. In other words, he continuously hammered away at Goldwater's records and statements. I was freer and could say what I wanted. I urged people to vote for Lyndon Johnson.

B: Did you find any difficulty among the more militant blacks at that time because of this stand?

R: There were a few who were beginning to take the view that as long as they're white there's no difference. That bloomed a little later.

B: It's associated publicly with the Meredith March in '66. What I was really asking was how early first signs of it began.

R: Oh, there were signs even then, yes.

B: Have you got time to continue for awhile?

R: Another ten minutes maybe.

B: I was going to depart from the chronology here a bit, and really particularly I guess from Mr. Johnson. Obviously, one of the important people of this time was Dr. King. Tragically of course we'll never be able to get his side of it, and you've been associated with him since the Montgomery Bus Boycott days.

R: That's right.

B: I've seen in print an indication that you, in fact, organized the Southern Christian Leadership Conference in the sense of the mechanics of the organization.

R: Well, the official history--a little pamphlet--of the SCLC states that Dr. King called on me to draw up the plans for the first organization of SCLC. In fact, he did. And it was a dramatic moment because if you'll remember what occurred was that after the boycott began in Montgomery, we then got boycotts in six or seven other places in the South. I had said to Dr. King that, "I don't think you can win in Montgomery unless these other places are better organized. And I think if you win in Montgomery, then these other places are going to cause the nation to do away with this thing everywhere, because they can't stand more and more of this kind of disruption of the transportation system."

So Dr. King said, "Well, what do you think we ought to do?"

I said, "I think there's only one thing to do, and that is to bring all these groups into a single organization."

So he said, "Well, why don't you work on the plans for that? I'm too busy."

Here again, Dr. King was very smart, like Mr. Randolph. He knew that he hated to do certain types of things like this, and that

he wouldn't do them particularly well.

So I drew up the plans, and it was an organization which was really designed around Dr. King's charisma, number one; and number two, around key churches in the country.

B: Sir, you say throughout the country, I think predominantly Southern would be--

R: Throughout the South. However, now, I brought key churches in the North in, because the key churches in the South didn't have the financial base in the early days to support it. So I got Reverend Kilgore involved, who was up at the Friendship Baptist Church in New York; Gardiner Taylor in Brooklyn; and others, so that this thing had some financial base. However, the money began to pour in from many other places.

But the SCLC was designed around Dr. King, and I shall be very surprised if it lasts very long without him.

B: You are perhaps doing yourself an injustice here. You're making yourself sound like just a nuts and bolts man. But your career indicates that you were studying the idea of Gandhian nonviolence before Dr. King.

R: Oh, quite a long time.

B: Were you perhaps in any kind of tutorial relationship to him in an intellectual sense?

R: I had gone out to India in addition to study what was happening there, and I had gone over to Africa to see how nonviolence was being applied there. I think it is fair to say that Dr. King's view of nonviolent tactics was almost nonexistent when the boycott began. In fact, Lillian Smith, the writer, with whom I had been associated

in the Fellowship and Reconciliation for many years, two or three days after the boycott began wired Dr. King and said that she knew me and was asking me to come to see him, because she felt that my experience in India, here, and in Africa and in nonviolent tactics might be useful to him.

Well, as an indication of how little Dr. King had really thought out, I went down and I took with me Bill Worthy, who was a writer and did some things for the Post. When we were ushered into Dr. King's living room and asked by a woman who was sort of taking care of the children--Dr. King and Coretta were both out at the time--to have seats, I took a chair on the couch and as I came around to face an armchair in which Bill Worthy was going to sit, I said: "Watch out, Bill, there's a gun in that chair," because he was about to sit on a gun. In other words, at that point Dr. King was permitting himself and his children and home to be protected by guns.

There was almost a near tragedy outside Dr. King's house because late one night a telegram was being delivered by a young kid. The two watchmen were there, and one of the watchman almost shot the kid, thinking it was--. At any rate, that incident brought Dr. King up against the implications of these guns. We talked many, many hours about tactics and nonviolence. I presume that Dr. King may have learned something from those discussions.

B: Sir, I guess that ten minutes is about up.

R: Well, I've time for one more question, I think.

B: There may not be time for the answer. Again, I know that your association with Dr. King continued on through the '50's. Then about

1960 there was this well-publicized episode involving you, Congressman Powell and Dr. King, which I think is pretty well on the record except for one thing. Why was Congressman Powell so insistent upon separating you from Dr. King?

R: The Democratic convention that year of '60 was in August, was it?

B: Yes, sir, in Los Angeles.

R: In Los Angeles. Now in July Dr. King went to Brazil. I got a call from Dr. King in Brazil saying that he felt that I should talk with Mr. Randolph and we should call off the demonstration next month at the convention. And I asked him why. He said, "Well, because Adam Powell, who is very irresponsible, is threatening to do some unkind things and is going to embroil us in something unpleasant; and therefore maybe we ought to call it off and not go through this."

B: Actually, sir, the threat was to publicize a rather selective version of your background, wasn't it?

R: Yes. He was going to raise some questions about my moral integrity. So I said to Dr. King, "Look, you know this kind of thing is first of all immoral, and second of all, if you permit a man like Adam Powell to get away with this game, what game will he not play. This is blackmail."

So I went to see Mr. Randolph, and Mr. Randolph said, "Well, you just tell Dr. King that we're going to proceed whether he comes along with us or not."

At the same time I had raised $150,000 for the defense of Dr. King in that tax case. And Reverend Kilgore and a bunch of ministers here in New York were my committee. They went to see Adam, and they

came back and said to me that they felt that I should resign as the adviser to Dr. King because Dr. King did not want to get embroiled in a fight with Adam.

Now, this is further complicated because Dr. King, Gardiner Taylor, and a number of others had withdrawn from the National Baptist Convention and set up the Progressive Baptist Convention, which angered a number of the ministers. Powell was close to the minister in Chicago, who headed the National Baptist Convention, a man who was so absolutely ignorant that when they named South Parkway Martin Luther King Drive, his church was on South Parkway, and he spent $35,000 having the church entrance moved to the side street so he wouldn't have to use that address.

B: Who is that man, sir?

R: J. H. Jackson. So Powell was playing three games. He was trying really to find some way to do something unkind to Martin because of this move Martin made on the church; he was trying to get us to call off the demonstration there; and King was getting so big that he didn't want people around King who could help to do the things that would make him bigger.

B: One question here is, is Congressman Powell doing all of this on his own, or is there anyone else urging him on, for example, any one of the Democratic party who doesn't want a ruckus at the convention?

R: I saw no evidence of that. Furthermore, as far as a ruckus was concerned, Mr. Randolph and I had been doing these things every year since 1948, and we had never had a ruckus. We began in Philadelphia in '48, and we had never had a ruckus. I don't know whether anybody was urging Mr. Powell on or not, but knowing

Mr. Powell, I don't think he had to be urged.

B: Then, sir, it resulted in your, at least publicly, separation from Dr. King, or resignation.

R: I decided that the best thing to do under these pressures, since I knew Dr. King was distressed, was to say, "Well, I resign."

B: It was your decision?

R: Oh yes. Dr. King never asked me to do it, never.

B: I asked because Dr. King was criticized by some for allegedly caving in to Congressman Powell.

R: I think that he did not cave in. Dr. King said, "Okay, I won't go on with the March." But I knew that he was inwardly distressed. Now if you have a man who is your adviser and helper, what's the use of advising and helping him if you're distressing him!

That's interesting, because when Strom Thurmond in 1963, just before the March, spent an hour and ten minutes denouncing me on the floor of the Senate and bringing up all those old charges, at that point Dr. King stood absolutely firm. So it was perhaps fortunate that the Powell thing did happen, because he had a chance to rethink it.

B: Did you really separate from Dr. King, sir?

R: Oh, no.

B: This was sort of a facade?

R: Once I said that I had resigned, then there couldn't be any more pressure on him about me. But Dr. King and I met frequently, I went to his home frequently, I continued to serve on a little group of seven people who met with him once a month to discuss what he was doing. It had no effect, other than that I was executive secretary

of the committee which had raised the money for his tax case, and I got out of that and someone else took over.

B: I think my time is definitely up now.

R: We can get together another time, I trust.

INTERVIEWEE: BAYARD RUSTIN (Tape #2)

INTERVIEWER: T. H. BAKER

June 30, 1969

B: This is a continuation of the interview with Bayard Rustin. Sir, to pick up in the beginning of 1965, did you have any connection with the Voting Rights Bill of that year?

R: Yes. That year I became the Chairman of the Board of the Leadership Conference on Civil Rights and had quite a good deal to do with mobilizing space for that bill and sort of being in a small committee which approved various compromises as they came off the floor--and protested others.

B: Who would have been in that group, sir? Clarence Mitchell, I would assume.

R: Oh, Clarence Mitchell, Joe Rauh, Mr. Wilkins, myself, and Senoria Johnson.

B: Who was that?

R: Senoria Johnson. She works for the Urban League in Washington.

B: Was that group in any sort of contact with President Johnson?

R: That group as such I don't believe met with Johnson, but Roy Wilkins met with Johnson several times on this. And if I'm not mistaken, Clarence I think talked with the President.

B: Was there ever any question in your mind that the bill might be compromised to death?

R: At one point there was fear of that. But I think the President was committed unquestionably to it and knocked some heads about it also.

B: Knocked heads among congressmen?

R: Yes.

B: Apparently Senator Dirksen's support was a key part of it.

R: I think when Dirksen came around it became inevitable that we'd then get it.

B: Did you ever form any opinion as to why Senator Dirksen came around?

R: I don't know really why he did, but I suppose he must have felt it was of some real importance to us. My view would be that I just hope he's going to stand up now while Nixon attempts to destroy it--which would be very terrible indeed.

B: Were you satisfied with the formula contained in that bill for its application?

R: As I remember, we settled for that formula as being a tremendous step forward, which of course it has proven to be.

B: At the same time that bill was going through Congress, the Selma to Montgomery march was going on. Were you involved in that?

R: Yes, I was involved in that. I helped with some of the plans of it. I was down there for it. That march was in some ways the beginning of the break off from a commitment to nonviolence that began really at that time on the part of some elements.

B: You mean various individuals began to break off?

R: Various individuals were very much turned off because of the violence by the police that was used against them in that march.

B: I have heard that Dr. King at various times during that episode almost lost control of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference to more militant groups.

R: I don't think he ever would have lost control of the SCLC. I think he almost lost control of that march. That's a different

matter.

B: Yes, I phrased that badly. That would be more precise. Who would the more militants be at that time, sir? Stokley Carmichael?

R Stokley Carmichael, and some of the SNCC people who had got involved. Literally, though, they did not need to embarrass Dr. King. Some of his own people like Hosea Williams, who is very often totally irrational and who never really weighs the consequences of what he's doing.

B: Did you attempt to mediate these differences?

R: No, because I knew that Dr. King really--they had no choice but to follow his advice and counsel because the townspeople as such, the bulk of the people, if Dr. King had pulled out, would have pulled out.

B: Were attempts made to keep the Justice Department or the Administration informed of this kind of internal dispute?

R: No, I doubt that that took place. I think they became informed largely because, as is always the case, they had their own agents in there watching all the time. We're always aware that there are government agents. One of the advantages of the government agent, and one of the ways in which you can tell him, is that he always works harder than anybody else. Therefore he's both an advantage and a disadvantage.

But since Dr. King never sought to hide any of his strategy and tactics, it didn't matter.

B: Was there any active cooperation between the Justice Department, or more exactly the Attorney General's office and the civil rights leaders on the scene of events like these?

R: Well, I think that under the Johnson Administration it was increasingly

easier to get people from the Justice Department to do what we wanted them to do--which was to come in and show a presence, to observe, or to get watchers in and things of that kind, because if people knew they were there they tended to react more responsibly--from both their side and our side.

B: Do you think that increased cooperation was due to President Johnson or to, say, Ramsey Clark?

R: I don't think you could separate them. I think Ramsey Clark had instructions from Johnson as to how he was to behave, and I think that this was not difficult for Ramsey Clark to do because he wanted to behave.

B: Then there's the matter of J. Edgar Hoover and the FBI and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference. As is now beginning to appear in the newspapers, presumably there were wiretaps or other kind of surveillance on Dr. King during this whole period.

R: I think there's no question about that. I think Dr. King felt there was. There again, from a civil libertarian point of view, I think this is very monstrous behavior. But from the point of view of the movement, I don't think it had any consequences whatever, because Dr. King never tried to hide. He was always very open and public about what he was going to do as far as the movement was concerned. And as far as Dr. King's private life is concerned, I think most people in our community would say that's his own business. We're not even interested in it.

B: But Dr. King and the movement were aware of this kind of thing?

R: Oh yes. At this period one of the great jokes whenever you picked up the telephone--often I'd say when I was calling Dr. King, "Well,

Martin, how are you doing." And Martin would say, "Fine." And I'd say, "Well, J. Edgar, how are you doing!" And Martin would laugh. This kind of joking went on, and we were all suspicious of the fact.

Furthermore if the FBI has its spies, our movement is not quite without its spies.

B: In what sense?

R: In the sense that we know people who work in every department of government who are black and who have a great allegiance to the movement and who come and tell us things--it's only natural--and in the Department of Justice.

B: And in the FBI?

R: I'm not going to say about that. But I'm saying we have them in every department of government.

B: Did this kind of thing take the forms of other kinds of harassment?

R: I'll give you an illustration. A man came to me and said, "Mr. Rustin, there are rumors going around that in the hotels where Dr. King stays they are bugging his room with sound equipment and photographic equipment. I don't know whether this is true, but I think that in every room Dr. King goes into you ought to be aware of that possibility." Therefore one of the things that sometimes happened is that in the course of being in the hotel at a very last minute we would rent a room down the hall very quickly and have a strategy meeting or in advance rent a room in the name of somebody who lived in that town that we knew who was responsible at the last minute and just go down the hall and have strategy meetings. So obviously there were all kinds of possibilities of such harassment.

B: Did this kind of thing continue after 1965, after President Johnson's

order about the limited use of electronic surveillance?

R: I can't prove that it did or didn't, but I can tell you very frankly we felt it did.

B: Did you ever complain to the administration about it?

R: No, I don't know of any formal complaints to the administration about it. We just felt that this kind of snooping had become so widespread, and since we weren't a civil liberties organization --we were an organization that had to spend our time getting our job done. And, as I say, I don't think we had very much to hide from the government. And if we had, we would have been irresponsible because I think in the United States, given the climate that we're in, the assumption on the part of groups working for social change ought to be that we're being spied on. That ought to be the assumption.

B: Did anyone every speculate on why J. Edgar Hoover seemed to have this vendetta against Dr. King?

R: There was lots of speculation, but none that I know that made sense to me.

B: To move on to a slightly different area, sir, that summer of '65 was the summer of the Watts riot.

R: Yes.

B: Did the Watts riot catch the civil rights movement by surprise?

R: No, I don't think so. In fact, many of us had been warning that this kind of thing was going to happen. If you'll remember, it had just happened the year before in New York. Our position was anybody who predicts when this kind of trouble will come and where it will come is foolish because it can come anywhere at anytime. That was

the view which we were taking.

B: In view of that, had the Southern Christian Leadership Conference particularly been thinking about moving into the northern cities before the Watts riot?

R: Yes. There had been a great deal of discussion going on about that since it began. The discussion really began with the Harlem riot.

B: In '64.

R: In '64. Now, if you will remember, Dr. King came to New York after having been invited by a group which was then headed up by Roy Wingate, and Wingate of course double-crossed King. Wingate called the executive committee of that group together, and they said they would like Dr. King to come in and talk with the mayor.

Now, I was watching out for Dr. King's interests because I knew that that group had some very wild people in it, and I didn't want King to be embarrassed. So I called Wingate and said, "Look, before you invite Dr. King in here, you'd better take this up with your committee!"

Now, I say Wingate was head of it, by which I mean that each month a different person took over the leadership. That particular month Wingate was the head of it.

He called the executive committee in and the executive committee voted that Martin should come into New York. I then called Martin and said the coast was clear, the executive committee had agreed.

In the meantime, without my knowing it and Wingate's reporting it, a number of the other leaders such as Lawson and Joe Overton and a number of rather unimportant people in general, but important to that group since they were trying to maintain unity with the left,

they met and said they didn't want King to come in.

Wingate never told me this. King came in and was met at the airport. We drove up to talk to Wingate, and at that point there was a great deal of feeling that maybe King shouldn't see the mayor. But the appointment had been made so King and I went to see the mayor.

Now I tell you all this background because it is from this that King then conceived the idea that maybe it was time for him now to come into the North. A number of us felt that that was not where King belonged; that he was going to run into, in the North, what he had not run into in the South and that is a highly political series of organizations in the North and a great deal of bickering; that the Northern community were not religious fundamentally in the way the Southern were. Mr. Hill, who is my colleague here, and I, who were on Dr. King's little eight-man committee which met with him and discussed strategy, were very much against his coming North at all. And I think that his coming into Chicago later was a bit of a fiasco.

B: The techniques of the Southern rural areas didn't seem to work too well in the cities.

R: No, exactly, nor did the methodology that King used, which was largely based on whipping up sentiment through prayer meetings. That's not a Northern style.

B: Did Dr. King himself become aware of these inadequacies toward the last?

R: I have a feeling that he had begun to have some very deep apprehensions about the Poor People's Campaign, as to whether it was really going to work.

B: You mentioned a couple of times the group of seven or eight people who met regularly to plan strategy. Who was in that group?

R: There was a white Jewish lawyer in New York, whose name was Harry Wattell; another Jewish fellow, who was a real estate man, whose name was Stanley Levison; Michael Harrington, who wrote The Other America, sat in from time to time. They were the three whites. Then there was myself; Norman Hill; Mr. L. T. Rettig, who was with the OIC and who is historian of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference; and also several people on King's staff--like Andy Young was the one who always came. Bernard Lee came occasionally; Abernathy came occasionally, and actually never contributed very much--in fact he usually went to sleep--and Clarence Jones, a lawyer in New York City who had defended King on a number of occasions; Cleveland Robinson, who was at that time head of the Negro American Labor Association.

As I look back upon it, it was an unproductive group because, except for Norman Hill and myself and Michael Harrington, most of the other people on that committee would tell Dr. King what he wanted to hear. And toward the end, Mr. Hill and I had become essentially non grata with that group. And I leave out the personae because we were continuously invited, but nobody paid any attention to us.

B: You were just non persons there.

R: Yes.

B: I gather from your phrasing that this group no longer meets.

R: The group no longer meets as far as I know. And I'm pretty sure that if it did meet, I would probably not be invited. Because if the group told Dr. King what he wanted to hear, I'm sure Dr. Abernathy

doesn't want to hear anything but what he wants to hear, and I'm not interested in playing that kind of role with anybody.

B: Is Reverend Young sort of the chief-of-staff, or was under Dr. King's leadership?

R: That was the problem. You could not have a chief-of-staff under Dr. King's leadership because Dr. King had the tremendous weakness of not being able really to discipline his staff in terms of work. If one of them got absolutely obstreperous, Dr. King would come in and tell him to calm down. But in terms of assigning jobs, people just pretty much ran off and did what they wanted.

B: At the time of Dr. King's assassination you were in New York and on your way to Memphis and stopped after a call from the White House, for a meeting with President Johnson, didn't you?

R: Yes.

B: What went on at that meeting?

R: President Johnson first of all wanted to express to us his deep shock at what had happened and pledged to us on the other hand that he was going to continue this fight; that the loss of Dr. King should not mean that in any way the government was going to let up; that he would put all force of government to find who it was who had done this heinous act; and that in the meantime he wanted us to reassure the community that these things would be done. And he hoped that we would help the community go through in as peaceful a manner what was a terrible shock for the community. I think it was exactly what he should have done, incidentally, and the very fact that we were there I think helped. Although things didn't seem very cool, I think the fact that we were there on the part of great numbers of

people did indicate a tremendous interest on the part of the President in the movement.

B: Is the President convincing on occasions like that?

R: Yes. I think Johnson--whenever I've been with him, he has been tremendously convincing. He has a way of, in personal conversation, making one feel very, very confident. Unfortunately, this did not seem to happen in television and the like.

Of course, I think another aspect of that was people don't mind being lied to if they're lied to in a Boston accent. Or they don't mind a gap of some kind if it's on the part of people who are reported to have great culture. It's interesting to me that the biggest lie the government ever created as far as I'm concerned was the embarrassment of Kennedy to Adlai Stevenson, who stands up at the U.N. and tells a fantastic lie because he'd been lied to.

B: On the occasion of the Bay of Pigs?

R: The Bay of Pigs, yes. But this didn't disturb people because they were mesmerized by the so-called culture and refinement of the Kennedys, which is a tremendous, as far as I am concerned, judgment on the stupidity politically of the American people.

B: After that White House meeting you went on to Memphis?

R: Yes.

B: Did you get involved there in any of what must have been a leadership struggle within the Southern Christian Leadership?

R: No. Because what I went to Memphis for was to organize the March, because I felt that if Dr. King deserved anything, it was that he should have what he wanted in Memphis, which was a peaceful march. So I went down to Memphis and got hold of all of the ruffians who had

caused the trouble before, made them feel terribly guilty now that they felt contrite about Dr. King's death, got them to take the basic disciplinary leadership of the march, and assured there wouldn't be any trouble; went to the police and got passes so I could move around the city because, if you'll remember, there was a curfew imposed. And we organized people from labor and the churches and all, and we had a fantastically important march.

The SCLC at this time were too busy getting Dr. King's funeral prepared to engage in any internal conflict. Also, Abernathy, who is not the brightest person in the world but who is clever in a way, recognized that he had to move very swiftly to contain this thing. So he called a meeting a few hours after Dr. King's death of the staff and got them to pledge loyalty--though some of them did it rather reluctantly--and then called a meeting on the day before Dr. King's funeral--which always seemed to me to be a bit graceless--of his [Dr. King's] board.

Now Dr. King had a handpicked board of people who were loyal to him, and they had never really had any fundamental policymaking power as a board. If Dr. King wanted it, it was done. So Abernathy came into that meeting with a couple of the staff members and said Dr. King had told them that if anything happened to him, that Abernathy was to take over. So, just as they had always said, if Dr. King said "ditto," they said "ditto." So if that's what Dr. King wanted, they voted it. So it was a rather, I felt unhappy way to go about it. It seemed to me they would have waited until after the funeral and handled this.

B: Had Dr. King ever given any thought to his successor?

R: I don't know that he had. I know this, that he had always felt that he needed Ralph because--for some reason which I cannot understand. Ralph went everywhere with him, though, as I say, he was mostly asleep. And never in any discussion that I was in did I feel that Dr. Abernathy made any intellectual contribution whatever.

B: At the end of Resurrection City you were scheduled to organize the Solidarity Day. And, in a quarrel that I don't think was ever made quite clear, ending up not doing it--being replaced by Sterling Tucker.

R: I resigned because when I had agreed to do this--when Abernathy had called me and asked me to do it I had drawn up fourteen points, the most important point of which was that he had to deescalate his demands because the government could not possibly overnight meet any such demands as he had and that what he was going to do was to ruin the whole thing by coming out with nothing, wherein if he had deescalated his demands and made them in a sense nonnegotiable he was then in the position really to negotiate. Furthermore I had gone--when he had asked me and before I said yes--and had talked with the Attorney General of the United States and other departments to find out if I did deescalate these demands to a given level, was the government in fact prepared to come through with these demands. And I got a "yes" answer from the government and cooperation on a number of things.

B: Excuse me sir, from the government you must have talked to someone specifically.

R: The Attorney General.

B: Mr. Clark?

R: Mr. Clark, who said that the government was in fact prepared to make a major contribution on every one of the points which I had.

Now I relayed this to Reverend Abernathy--and he was delighted--only to discover that the day after I told him that I would now proceed Mr. Bevil(?) made a statement denouncing my coming in. Hosea Williams began to make statements, and Mr. Abernathy remained silent. So for four days while I was in the process of organizing I kept calling Abernathy and getting no answer back. And on the fifth day I announced that if I did not get a reply from Abernathy on the sixth day that I was going to go to the press and say that I had been given the responsibility but not the authority to carry out the plan. And under those circumstances I resigned.

Now I am very happy I did resign because I just think that it ended ignominiously where something indeed could have happened that could have brought the whole nation to feel that something was really going to happen about poverty here. I did not place that responsibility on the government at all, but on Abernathy and his aides.

B: To change the subject slightly, sir. In '66 the Freedom Budget was issued in the name of A. Philip Randolph, but are you not perhaps the main architect of the Freedom Budget?

R: I would say that Randolph conceived the idea and obviously just told me to go and get it done, so I don't know whether the architect conceives or not. But that's what happened, in fact.

B: By implication the Freedom Budget itself is a criticism of the Johnson Administration, and at the time you rather explicitly criticized the President for cutting back the War on Poverty in sometimes rather harsh and direct language.

R: Yes.

B: Did you hear from the President about that?

R: No, I never heard from him directly about it. Sometimes some of his aides would come to me and talk to me about my attitude, or what I said, Cliff Alexander frequently came and talked with me.

B: Were they asking you to be quiet?

R: Oh, no. They were just trying to explain some of the problems the President had, and why he felt that he couldn't move any faster than he was, why he had to do what he did.

I never had any black man who worked for the government come to me as a messenger to say, "Don't put the pressure on." Usually the blacks who worked in the White House and in other high positions in government have said to us, "Good. Nothing is going to happen unless you keep up pressure. Now obviously the man is going to be embarrassed by certain types of pressure, but nothing is going to happen unless you keep it up." I must give those guys who work in government credit for that.

B: Would you care to credit them by name? For example, would Mr. Alexander be in that group?

R: Oh yes, by all means. Cliff is one of the guys that I respected very deeply who worked in government precisely because he understood the necessity for our making pressure. Carl Holman was another one. He's the vice president now of the Urban Coalition.

B: Would Roger Wilkins be in that group?

R: Yes. Roger was most certainly in that group. In fact, Roger has become a bit of a black "powerite" these days--very radical.

B: I believe he has a specific definition of black power which is not

quite the same as some of the real militants.

R: There are so many definitions of it it's almost a meaningless term.

B: Because actually you found yourself simultaneously criticizing the Johnson Administration and the black power militants.

R: Right. But my criticism of the Johnson Administration was critical support. I said some rather harsh things, but I worked for Johnson, I defended him against the extreme peaceniks who tried to make him solely responsible for what had happened. I never took the view that he lied any more than any other President, or misrepresented things. My view is that obviously the President of the United States is never going to tell the people everything. That is quite impossible.

B: I know the time is just about up. One very general question. Did you get the impression, say, after '65 or '66 that the administration had simply lost direction in civil rights, that it was paralyzed with no new ideas or new projects?

R: No, I don't think I ever got that impression. My impression was that the Johnson Administration, despite the fact that it was necessary for us to kick it all over the place because you always have to do that if you want to get something, had done more up to the end than any other group, any other administration--including the Kennedy Administration, which I happen to think is horribly overrated because I don't know what John Kennedy did on domestic questions that is so great, that he achieved. I think Johnson was the best we've ever had.

But in civil rights there is a situation in which if the party you prefer is in and if the President is one you happen to think is doing a good job, it is under those circumstances you have to be even harsher on him than at any other point. There was no need being

harsh on Ike during those years of absolute inactivity. What was the purpose! You're not harsh because you want to be nasty. You're harsh because you want to create a political stir at a given point. So when you have a guy in who is literally no good, you just dismiss him as a smell (?) fungus and proceed.

B: So the criticism was a high compliment.

R: That's right. That's what you always have to do.

B: Sir, it's almost 3. Is there anything else you'd like to add to this?

R: No.

B: Thank you very much, sir.

74-65

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By Bayard Rustin

to the

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