INTERVIEWEE: STERLING TUCKER

INTERVIEWER: THOMAS H. BAKER

April 21, 1969

B: This is the interview with Sterling Tucker. Sir, let me begin here with just a brief bit of background. You were born in 1923 in Akron and have a B.A. and an M.A. from the University of Akron. You joined the Urban League, worked with the Urban League in both Akron and Canton. Then in 1956 you came to Washington as a combination of the local executive director of the Urban League and the League's district representative.

T: That is correct.

B: When in that time did you first meet or hear of Mr. Johnson?

T: Of course, I had heard of him for many years, from the time he was in the House of Representatives and of course his work in the Senate. So I guess it's been kind of a name that's been known to me much of my adult life.

B: The year after you arrived in Washington was the year of the passage of the '57 Civil Rights Bill. Did you play a part in that?

T: Not a major role. The Urban League of course is not a lobbying organization as such. So I had no role in that regard, but what we did do was to testify, by invitation, on the Bill. We did work with several leadership groups in civil rights around the bill--but no major role in that bit of legislation.

B: Did you meet Mr. Johnson about that time?

T: Let me see--I don't recall when I first met Mr. Johnson. My guess--it was sometime later. I think probably I really didn't meet him until

after he became Vice President, or somewhere near that time.

B: What sort of opinion did you have of him then--that is, as a civil rights leader? Had you formed an opinion of Mr. Johnson in this regard?

T: I don't think that Mr. Johnson was considered a civil rights leader. There weren't many in the Congress who were. You thought of him of being a very skillful leader in the Senate but not necessarily in the field of civil rights. I don't think his reputation good.

As a matter of fact, with the 1960 Democratic Convention, the fight over his nomination for the Presidency was much around--the opposition was to the fact that he didn't have a civil rights record at all, although Senator Kennedy didn't have a great civil rights record either. As a matter of fact my feeling about the two of them at that time was that it didn't make very much difference who was the nominee, except that I couldn't quite see Mr. Johnson as the nominee, probably less because of his record than more because of the location and his drawl. But one assumed that Senator Kennedy probably would move more in the direction of aggressive action in civil rights than Mr. Johnson would.

B: No one would have made that assumption about Mr. Johnson in 1960?

T: That he would have moved more aggressively?

B: Yes.

T: No, I don't think there was a basis for that assumption, although when you look back over his record, his record was really no worse, you know, than that. In other words, neither had been a leader, but neither really had been an obstructionist--at least had a reputation as an obstructionist in the field. So I would say that I just hadn't

thought of him in that way.

I thought of Mr. Johnson, however, as a rather skillful politician, and that's in the finest sense of the word really because the art of politics is very important in government. I had always had the feeling, however, that the Presidency was an office that sometimes made the man. Somehow maybe it's because either my faith in our form of government or maybe my hopes for it--that I believe this is true. Maybe I just hate to think that someone who shouldn't be President could become President.

B: That's a good point. Then during the years of Mr. Kennedy's presidency, did you occasionally see Mr. Johnson, say in connection with his work in Equal Opportunity Council or anything else?

T: Oh yes, I did see him and must say [that] I was very much impressed by him. I felt he was sincere.

B: How did he convey that kind of impression?

T: Because one got the idea that he wanted to do a good job. He did some things with that committee then--the President's Committee on Equal Opportunity or whatever it was called at that time--that really hadn't been done before. He brought in some people who were serious about dealing with the problems. He took more than a passing interest in the job. He didn't consider it a nominal kind of an assignment. As a matter of fact, I sort of got the feeling that he looked upon it as his major assignment in the Vice Presidency.

He started Plans for Progress. This is a program of businessmen who voluntarily comply. I had some question in my mind as to whether or not there should be such a thing as Plans for Progress because I felt maybe if there was a law the law should be enforced and people

shouldn't be figuring out ways--but then I came to the conclusion that you have to have ways of implementing a law, and Plans for Progress might be an effective tool. But I wanted to make sure this was not a way for businessmen to evade the law--such as it was. There wasn't much power that the government had. But still contractors rely heavily--a great deal--upon the government in a great way for business.

But as I saw him operate at Plans for Progress meetings, as I heard him talk to employers, aside from the language of his text when he would get away from his text and just started talking to them, he laid it on the line. I must say that I became impressed. I, like a lot of other people, however, I think found myself in the position of still wanting him to prove himself to me--again, because he didn't have that record, and secondly, the part of the country from which he came was not one noted for progress in the whole field of race relations.

B: Those were perhaps crucial years of the civil rights struggle in the South, the freedom rides and James Meredith at the University of Mississippi, Birmingham. Did you participate in any of those?

T: Yes, I participated in a good many of them. I was on the Birmingham march when the people were gassed. I was on the Selma-to-Montgomery march. I was gassed in Mississippi on the Meredith march. I was a Vice Chairman of the March on Washington in '63. I was heavily involved in most of that activity. Close to Dr. Martin Luther King --closely associated with all the national civil rights leaders.

B: What was your opinion of the Justice Department's, and the Kennedy Administration generally, handling those events?

T: I was impressed with the ability of the Justice Department and the Kennedy Administration to gain the confidence of the civil rights leadership to the extent that it did, because in effect the leadership, the whole civil rights movement, was fighting the establishment. And nothing could be more establishment than a federal agency. So the kind of people who were put together in that Civil Rights Division was really remarkable.

B: You mean people like Robert Kennedy himself and John Doar and Burke Marshall?

T: Yes.

B: That group?

T: That whole group of fellows found a way to really gain the confidence and the support. I really felt the civil rights movement felt the Civil Rights Division of the Justice Department was an ally in the cause.

B: Did you by any chance serve as any kind of liaison between the civil rights leaders and the Justice Department by virtue of your position here in Washington?

T: Not in any official way because Clarence Mitchell of the NAACP was here and he's kind of Mr. Civil Rights because--I believe he's a registered lobbyist, one of the few.

But I had a unique role by having a local assignment. I therefore was involved very much in the local community in the nation's capital. Then by having a national assignment it gave me a regular identification and a regular relationships because the District government was also owned by the federal government--and the fact that I was one and part of the same. I had entree throughout the federal establishment and

had a close working relationship. I was consulting frequently and was in regular contact with them. I was also in regular contact with the late Robert F. Kennedy because of some of his interest in local problems also. He had a great interest there.

B: I was wondering if anyone from the civil rights division ever asked you a question like, "explain Dr. King to me."--that kind of interpretive activity.

T: No, no I never got any feeling that he was an enigma or a question mark particularly.

B: I meant that really as a type rather than as a specific question.

T: Maybe I don't understand it.

B: I was wondering if the Civil Rights Division ever needed any explanation as to what the civil rights leaders wanted.

T: Oh, I see. No, I never got that feeling. I got more the feeling that they were interested in what the plans were so the government could determine an appropriate role to assist in the implementation of legitimate goals, to insure there wouldn't be difficulty, and to help provide for peaceful assembly. And the concern I never felt was with Dr. King any more than with the whole movement, except that he was kind of the nominal leader of the movement--although the other nine of the big ten wouldn't have ever have admitted to that.

B: I suppose that Dr. King struck the popular fancy more than, say, Whitney Young or Roy Wilkins did.

T: Dr. King, aside from his great ability to articulate dramatically a problem and aside from the fact from his position as a moral leader which can sway the conscience, he was a part of a movement which was very dynamic. He had a way of picking up a whole organization and

moving it to a specific location and then generate excitement and activity, even if not always change.

B: You were involved closely in one of the high spots of that period, the March on Washington in 1963, I believe you were a Vice Chairman and one of the organizers.

T: Yes.

B: While the march was in the planning stage, did you work closely with government authorities, particularly the Civil Rights Division?

T: I worked with a number of agencies of government because there were a lot of mechanics involved. There was the Civil Rights Division; there was the Parks Service; the various police, both local police and the Capital police and the White House police and the Park police. There were so many branches of government--in the local District government the Health Department--that were involved. We were working with all these details.

B: Was the government worried? Did the government officials fear violence?

T: They feared the possibility of it--not only the government but a lot of other people. I never did at any point and maybe it was because we were involved in too many details in getting the thing together. But of course there was concern in government of the possibility of violence. Whenever you get hundreds of thousands of people together in an environment of some hostility and they are coming from everywhere, from all kinds of backgrounds, the problem of directing properly and controlling the mood and activity is not necessarily easy.

B: After the speeches that day a group of the leaders went over to the

White House to meet with Mr. Kennedy and Mr. Johnson. Did you go with them?

T: No, I was picking up the pieces, and I was dead tired.

B: I can imagine.

T: I did not go because Whitney Young was going. So I was making sure --seeing that the people got out of town. One of our great concerns was to make sure that this happened. So I was still working. I was part of the working corps.

B: Then in time, shortly after that, comes Mr. Kennedy's assassination and Mr. Johnson's succession to the Presidency. Did he contact you soon after he took over the Presidency? He made a number of phone calls to various civil rights leaders.

T: I think about a week after the burial of President Kennedy--I know it was on a Monday that Whitney Young met with the President, and I believe suggested to the President that in addition to civil rights legislation, such as the Act which subsequently came in '64, that what was needed for the black community was economic activity--more action in that area. Late that afternoon I got a call from then-Assistant Secretary of State G. Mennen Williams, for African Affairs, saying that the President had called him and asked him if he would get a few people together to think through what it was that the Johnson Administration might do in the way of developing its own program in this field. I gather the President had been impressed with his meeting with Whitney Young that day and moved pretty rapidly. I'm not sure based upon that contact alone, but he was anxious to move in this whole field.

I remember that night about a dozen of us met way into the night

in Governor Williams' home, thinking through and talking through the kinds of things the Administration ought to do.

B: Was this the kind of thing that later showed up in the War on Poverty legislation?

T: Mainly the same kinds of concepts were involved here. A couple of things that were interesting: One is, we espoused in 1963 in our national conference in Los Angeles, when Whitney Young first came out with this idea of a Marshall Plan, and that was where you have to give preferential attention to the problems of poor blacks because that's the only way you can really close the gap. The whole concept of the Marshall Plan was rejected because people said that's discrimination in reverse. But in a way the Poverty Program was a form of the Marshall Plan because it simply recognized the need for a special attention in a problem area. So we often said the government had adopted our program without the language.

It was interesting, however, in the '68 campaign--just to jump ahead--when Vice President Humphrey as a candidate used the language "Marshall Plan." But then there was an area of confusion for me. Because soon after the War on Poverty got going the word was around town that actually the War on Poverty had been designed by the Kennedy Administration and was one of the programs to be implemented. Now I had no knowledge of this at all so I was a little confused.

I had been under the impression, and was under the impression, that growing out of some of the conversations that President Johnson had, and out of the meetings that we had, and all this seemed to be a natural kind of evolvement.

B: Who were some of the people who met with you at Governor William's

house?

T: It's difficult now to really recall. One person whose, for some reason, name sticks very much in my mind, because she has such a pretty face, was that of Patricia Harris, who most recently was a dean for a short time at Howard University Law School--but who was later named by the President Johnson as Ambassador to wherever it was that Perle Mesta was the ambassador to.

B: Luxembourg I believe.

T: Luxembourg. But, interestingly enough, no other names come to mind readily.

B: Was the group predominantly Negro leaders?

T: I would say at least half of them were. I get the feeling, but it must have been about half and half.

B: Did you continue as the Urban League head to work with the proposals for legislation?

T: I'm trying to figure the year. In '61 or '62 our job in the national Urban League, my assignment there became so big we decided to set up a full time Washington bureau, and I was asked in effect to become what we call a bureau chief. But I chose to remain with the Washington Urban League, although again my connection with the National Urban League continued. So at that time we did get someone full time in Mrs. Senori Johnson, who became Director of the Washington bureau, who carried the major load there, although by virtue of my connections and by virtue of my responsibilities, I remained a part of that whole picture.

B: Do you remember when Mr. Johnson began thinking about home rule for the District?

T: I don't know when he began but it must have been right about '64 or '65 he really talked about it. He did more than talk about it; he really was on the stump for it.

B: Did he call for your assistance?

T: Not specifically. He never called for my assistance specifically in the home rule effort. He was out there moving. The White House called for my assistance, not Mr. Johnson personally, but the White House did under the Reorganization Act for the District of Columbia. And we would testify on home rule bills.

B: Did the White House show an interest then or later in any of the Urban League's projects here in Washington--in your Job training projects, or Pride Incorporated, or any of these other activities.

T: It's hard to say when the White House does something, or someone else, because it may not directly come--now in the case of our specific projects I would say "no, there was no expressed White House interest." There was expressed interest, however, by agencies in the federal government. In the case of Pride it was Secretary Wirtz, who showed a very special interest. He called me one day and asked to talk about some of the needs of the District, and we did talk about this and how Pride grew out of this whole idea of some of the specific needs of the Districts. Then he wanted us in the Urban League to help set it up for it's initial period of operation and work with some of the administrative and programming problems, planning problems, that a new organization would obviously face--particularly one where these young people would not have had this kind of experience before.

B: Did you have any kind of continuing contact with individuals on the White House staff, like Harry McPherson and Cliff Alexander?

T: Right along we did, yes.

B: I was wondering if they would come to you simply for information about what was going on in the black community.

T: The contacts were regular contacts, and so out of it would come normal discussions. In other words we established a kind of regular relationship and would see them informally, but I didn't make a lot of trips to the White House to sit down to discuss issues on the District.

B: Do you know if, particularly later in his administration, Mr. Johnson had by any way any sort of links or even ears out to the more militant blacks?

T: I don't know except that through the Justice Department--at first it was not in Justice, you know the Community Relations Service. I felt that the kinds of people who were employed there were people who did have their ties into the militant community, amazingly so. Again, I thought it was remarkable that they were able to achieve this communication, this rapport with the militants. But it seems to me that this was the arm of government that was able best to have these kind of ties and links.

B: You're probably more than tired of people raising the issue of your difficulties with the Internal Revenue Service, which I think have been thoroughly explored but may I ask you the circumstances of your pardon by Mr. Johnson?

T: I'm not sure that should be a part of this history. I would probably strike it when you send it back in because I don't quite see that--because I don't see a pardon as a personal thing--because it was not handled in that way. I never had any contact with the White House on

it at all, and I didn't handle it through the White House. I simply made an application without benefit of counsel. I simply made an inquiry to the Justice Department as to procedure and I assume it was handled in routine fashion.

B: That's sufficient answer. The question really I was wondering was anything more than routine about it.

T: No, nothing more than routine about which I'm aware because, just as we said, when I was confirmed by the Senate for my present assignment of Vice Chairman of the Council, Senator Tydings, who had been a U.S. attorney, said that not in all the years of his service was he aware of any case in the nature of mine that ever went to prosecution.

B: Yes, I read that testimony and I think we should point out here for any scholars using this should refer themselves to that testimony which I think covers the whole situation very adequately.

You participated in a White House Conference to fulfill these rights, did you not?

T: That is correct.

B: What was your opinion of that? Was it a worthwhile enterprise?

T: It's difficult to say whether or not a conference is worthwhile. You never know what the benefits are. Sometimes the long range importance of the conference was that there was a forum created by the White House itself to give wide ranging attention to critical issues, and the extent to which this was done focused the attention of the country more directly on some of the major issues of the time. To that extent it was useful. Now whether or not there were effects that, a planning that took place grew out of it, I'm not sure there is any direct relationship or at least easily observable

--any relationships that [one] could say are benefits of the White House Conference itself.

One thing that it did do, it did stir a good deal of controversial discussion of Pat Moynihan's A Negro Family--and probably with some injustice to Pat Moynihan. But nevertheless there was an appropriate area of discussion that I think got aired perhaps more as an unofficial part of the Conference than official.

B: That seemed to be at least the focus of debate if not of the entire Conference.

T: Yes.

B: You were also coordinator of the Solidarity Day March during the Poor People's Campaign in '68.

T: Yes.

B: You replaced Mr. Rustin after what appeared to be some kind of difficulties between him and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference people. Did this present any particular troubles for you?

T: No, no special troubles at all, no more than any other tough job presents.

B: From the standpoint of a newspaper reader, it looked like a pretty tough job.

T: Well, it was indeed. When you have about ten days to mobilize the massive national effort of protest after you've had a campaign going on that had looked pretty negative in the eyes of the press--the way the press projected it across the nation, in Resurrection City and in the Poor People's Campaign itself. And then when you have someone else who is scheduled to serve as coordinator of the march

and he seems to be in conflict or there's a falling out between the coordinator and the others, one can see what kind of problems there might be.

B: What precisely did happen between Bayard Rustin and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference?

T: I hope someday that one of them will write about it because I'm not really sure. I'm not really sure, and yet I was very close to it. In meetings with mainly Rev. Abernathy and Bayard Rustin--I was in telephone communication with them regularly, and because at that time I was going to be serving as the Vice Coordinator, coordinating details from this end, so I didn't come into the thing completely cold. As near as I can figure it, it would appear that some of Rev. Abernathy's lieutenants--and I have a feeling it was more his lieutenants than himself--were unhappy that Bayard Rustin seemed to be taking such an aggressive, independent role in planning the Solidarity Day March. I got the feeling some of them felt that he was working particularly to separate the March from the Poor People's Campaign itself. And I felt that some of them felt he had crystallized demands of the campaign which were either different from those--the march was different from the campaign, or at least that he had done them independent of their discussion. I got the feeling that some of them felt that this was a Bayard Rustin thing, rather than a Poor People's Campaign kind of thing.

Then some seemed to question his real feeling for the campaign itself, because some said he made some remarks at a time the campaign was contemplated even prior to the death of Dr. King that this was not very much sense.

Then like any other kind of controversy, a lot of other things get added. Some inferred, perhaps, that Bayard Rustin was of a different school and was not really with it in terms of the demands of the "now," and that the March of '63 was another day, and this day is new and things are different.

There was one area, however, of discussion which in some ways to me didn't seem very relevant. In Bayard Rustin's call for the march, he said, in effect, that all people who favored integration as a means to achieving equality were welcome to the march. There were some who were in the campaign itself who felt that integration was kind of irrelevant, that anyone who favored separatism also was welcome. My view was when I wrote my, in effect, call, in dealing with that language I simply said that those who support the goals of the Poor People's Campaign were invited to come, were urged to come, and that seemed to be acceptable to them. But I think the question of integration versus separation versus black power versus white power versus any other kind of power somehow got all mixed up in the question of hunger and shelter. And what happens you got a kind of philosophical discourse and they went off in different directions.

B: That must make for a knotty problem and one I suppose you felt yourself.

T: I didn't see the basis of philosophy here with reference to this particular activity. As a general rule over long-range planning, there is a question--for instance, I find it possible to work with the radicals around specific things even if I may object to some of their philosophy. We were poles apart philosophically on some things,

but in other areas in specific activity we may not be apart at all. So you work with people in areas where there can be agreement.

B: And you can stay in communication with them?

T: Oh yes, yes. I can fight with them; I can fuss with them; and I can support them when they ought to be supported; and I can oppose them vigorously, with great vigor, when I feel I need to oppose them. And they do that with me.

B: Another area of questioning--in 1967 you made a trip to the Far East under the auspices of the State Department tour, and some controversy arose out of it regarding your views on Viet Nam and your expressing them. Before you went on the tour, did you talk with anyone at the State Department like Mr. Frankel in the Cultural and Educational Bureau about this kind of thing?

T: Tell me about that controversy. You probably know more about that than I do.

B: No sir, I don't. All I know is that you made this tour of the Far Eastern countries, and a question arose at sometime during the tour about whether or not you should speak out on the question of the war in Viet Nam. That's really just about all I know about it.

T: You said the question arose somewhere in the tour as to whether I should speak out on the war in Viet Nam?

B: Yes, sir. As to whether or not it was appropriate. Did you not at sometime during your trip abroad there, express opinions about the war in Viet Nam?

T: Well, I probably did. I don't know whether you read my letters from abroad or not.

B: I've seen them, yes.

T: I did a book of things, but I don't quite know the import of your

question. In other words, I talked to Mr. Frankel before going. I talked to him after I came back, and I never got the impression from Mr. Frankel, either before I went or before I got back, that there was any concern in the Department about my views on Viet Nam because I went there as an urbanologist, as an urban planner, not as a expert on the war. And I didn't give any speeches on Viet Nam because I'm not an expert in that area. I'm very careful, if I go somewhere as an expert to speak on subjects about which I'm expert. I went as an individual, however, under an exchange program--leaders program--and I answered question occasionally about not whether we should be there or not be there because I am not and was not privy to that kind of knowledge to make such a decision. But I did talk about the loyalty of the Negro soldier. And I was concerned also about the black soldier in Viet Nam and some of his views as I understood them from time to time with reference to this.

I think the Department was probably a little skittish here and there about me or anybody else abroad making comments about a war under auspices of the Department. But I was never asked to or not to act. No one ever asked me to speak on it in the Department. In other words, no one told me to speak on it and no one told me not to speak on it.

B: That's really the question I had in mind. You were not told to avoid the entire subject?

T: No. No I was not told to avoid the subject at all.

B: And no repercussions of any kind when you came back?

T: No, no. I didn't find any repercussions. I understand Congressman Rooney, during hearings while I was away--who as you perhaps know

keeps a tight and-close eye on the budget of the Department of State, made some reference to the State Department sponsoring my trip abroad --and for what reason I'm not sure except he may have thought I had some views or may be I expressed some views which were contrary to the views of the government. The reason I asked really because I really have not seen anything or heard anything which would have suggested the basis of what Congressman Rooney--I don't know whether he made specific reference to me or not but I understand he did.

B: That was the basis of my question, Congressman Rooney's comments about the thing. What I was really trying to find out was, in effect, whether or not the State Department had tried to censor your comments or anything?

T: Oh no. As a matter of fact I got the impression that--then just after I understand Congressman Rooney made his comments I made a speech to the Overseas Press Club which made the press back here and I gather about which the State Department was delighted. At least, as a matter of fact, when I came back they told me they were greatly pleased by the press reports. Now I understand that everywhere I went the press reports of my travels--not just the press reports but the post reports, were glowing reports of my travels.

B: Of course, I ought to point out in this record that you're hardly an amateur at that. You had made a similar trip in '55, I think, and following, then in '68 you went to Israel.

T: That is correct.

B: I believe that time you were invited by the Israeli government in your capacity as an urban sociologist.

T: That is right.

B: We're about at the end of this, is there anything you think--

T: Can you tell me what did Congressman Rooney say? I should have checked the Congressional Record.

B: The import of it was--this is a very rough paraphrase--"why should the government of the United States finance trips abroad by those who are criticizing our policy in Viet Nam."

T: I see.

B: Probably a very selected interpretation of certain aspects of, say, your question and answer session.

T: I see.

B: Sir, is there anything else that you think we ought to cover in this? Any other areas of contact with Mr. Johnson or his Administration that I've omitted here?

T: I would say that I came to know Mr. Johnson perhaps as much as anyone not a part of the official family could know him--fairly well. And I must say I felt very good with him. Contrary to the way a lot of people seem to feel I trusted him because I believe that he knew on this question--I think instinctively he knew what was right. I don't say that he had instincts in this directions because I don't believe that a man has instincts if he has instinctive tendencies. But I think instinctively he was right on this, and I think he stuck his neck out in a number of directions.

I think he caught the spirit of the times. And this was amazing. This is difficult for white people generally to do, and I think he really felt what was going on he had a way of being able to feel the vibrations of the dynamics of urban life. Maybe in other areas he also had the same kind of sensitivities.

I think that history will show--and I would say this if I were in a room all by myself in the quiet of the night when the lights are low and I talked only to my conscience--that here was a man who discovered himself in terms of kind of a real purpose, you know, and a kind of a real being and that discovered some of the important work of life.

I think this is pretty much it.

B: Do you think he kept that understanding on to the last inspite of a good deal of criticism he received from white and black?

T: Oh yes, I do feel that way. I think that maybe he couldn't express it and exercise it as fully as he would want always, but I think he always felt it.

Here was a man who was really a victim of his times. For a war to explode the way it did, for Martin Luther King and then Robert Kennedy to be assassinated in his time, for him to come into office as a result of the assassination of another President, for the youth movement to explode as it did--you know, all in his time, none of which really he had much to do about.

If someone were writing a play or movie they wouldn't dare put all of this in one movie because it would be unbelievable. But here it all happend in a short space of a few years in the Administration of one President. To survive all of that and you move a country ahead at the same time--for a country to discover itself and to find some new undefined directions out of which growth may later come--it's just remarkable. And while he had the trials like most presidents never had that probably he was president at a time when history will show that the greatest period of a new kind of activity. Maybe, like

Dickens, he was a president at the best of times and at the worst of times. I guess history will show whether that was true.

B: We'll have to wait and see about that. Thank you very much Mr. Tucker.

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