

ANNOUNCER: The following program is produced in cooperation with Mary Washington College of Fredericksburg Virginia, continuing a tradition of academic excellence in a changing world. James Farmer's reflections, a personal perspective of the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s. [background talking] In the past, James Farmer was one of the most eloquent and outspoken voices of the struggle for racial equality. From the Freedom Rides, to the sit-ins, to the March on Washington, he motivated both blacks and whites and articulated for the nation the demands and the dream for racial equality across the country.

1960s FARMER: You have started a revolution in the past ten years since those historic words were uttered by the nine men of the Supreme Court. You have been in the streets marching, the staccato march of your feet punctuated by the clanging of jail cell doors have set the stage for this revolution.

ANNOUNCER: James Farmer is currently Commonwealth Professor in History at Mary Washington College. Tonight he continues his thirteen part series of lectures on the Civil Rights Movement from his personal recollections.

FARMER: Now for the march itself, many people wonder how it started and they assume that maybe Dr. King one day said come on y'all, let's march and everybody got together and marched. No, not so. Or Roy Wilkins or Whitney Young or maybe Farmer; no indeed. The originator of the march was a man by the name of A. Philip Randolph, who at that time was the elder statesman of the movement. Perhaps you've never heard of the name of Randolph, the late great A. Philip Randolph, the founder, and then President of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters. Uh, Randolph was one of my heroes; I still consider him to be one of the greatest of the Civil Rights leaders of history. Phil Randolph, Phil as we called him, was not a member of the so

called Big Six or the Big Four depending upon who you included in that group. He was not a member of the Council on United Civil Rights Leadership, uh the top leadership of the Civil Rights groups that met approximately monthly in New York in the early sixties because he was not then head of a national Civil Rights organization; he was head of a trade union and only heads of civil rights organizations were in the Council on United Civil Rights Leadership. Randolph, in order to come before that council had to get unanimous permission of the members of the council. So Phil, who had the great, undying admiration of all of the members of the council, called Roy Wilkins, and uh, who was acting chairman for a period of time, there was a rotating chairmanship and told Roy that he would like permission to come before the council and present a proposal to them. Roy Wilkins then called the other members including myself and to get our approval and of course, there was unanimous approval because we all had such enormous respect for Phil Randolph. Randolph proposed a march on Washington. He proposed that those Civil Rights organizations represented there: the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, the National Urban League, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, Congress of Racial Equality, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, the National Council of Negro Women, pool some of their resources and some of their staff and organize a gigantic, he called it a monster, march on Washington, involving black and white, Protestant, Catholic and Jews, labor and capital, to come to Washington to protest discrimination in employment and demand jobs for all and to demand passage of Civil Rights legislation. This uh, recommendation of Randolph's was approved by the council and Randolph was named director of the March on Washington and he appointed, uh, uh, Bayard Rustin as his deputy to do the um, work of organizing the march with the assistance of certain staff persons of the various organizations. The National Council of Christians and Jews participated then and um, the uh

National Council of Churches, uh, some of the labor organizations such as the United Automobile Workers of America that's uh President Walter Reuther in the leadership um, the United Electrical Workers of America and some of the other unions uh, participated and the march uh, plans were underway. Uh, I was arrested in Plaquemine while the march was being planned. Um, I was urged to come out and received telegrams from both Roy Wilkins and Whitney Young urging me to bail out of jail and come to the march and make a speech on behalf of the organization which I headed, CORE, the Congress of Racial Equality. Well, I did a lot of soul searching then and decided that I could not do so in good conscience. How could I leave my colleagues in jail, when they wanted to go to the march too? I chose to stay in jail. Actually, I think that both Mr. Wilkins and Whitney Young felt that I was trying to upstage them (laughs) cause uh, they felt that um, by staying in jail uh, I might be saying to the throng assembled in Washington for the march that here these people are making speeches and I'm acting in jail, in the Deep South. Well, uh, nothing was further from my mind than that. After all, um, some upstaging that would be because uh, press from all over the country, nay, all over the world would be assembled there in Washington to capture those speeches for posterity. The media would be there. This was, would be a media event and the fact that one of the leaders was absent would go largely unnoticed. So if there was any attempt at upstaging, it would be absolutely stupid because it could not work. But uh, I remained in jail. I watched the March on Washington on television however, local citizens of this town and Louisiana, Plaquemine in Iberville Parish brought me a television set and the jailers allowed them to bring it up to my sale, my cell, a little black and white set and uh, I observed the march. The press announced that there were a quarter of a million persons there; that was an understatement. Actually, there were at least 400,000 persons there. They had originally predicted there'd be a 100,000 or more and there were

400,000. It was uh, like a prayer meeting. The uh, White House had been frightened of it, fearing that it would lead to riots in the street. The National Guard, indeed, uh the Army had been brought close to Washington and camped in tents, in the event rioting broke out, they would be close by and could move in quickly. The President, President Kennedy had tried to get the March called off. He feared violence so much, but it was most peaceful and the climate there was one of friendliness. Everyone seemed to be friendly and peaceful. I watched it and I was impressed, I wept during some of the speeches. I wept especially during the speech of a Rabbi and Walter Reuther of the United Auto Workers and particularly during the now famous speech of Martin Luther King Jr., 'I have a dream' and I wished of course that I'd been there. When the march was over, just a couple of days later, Louisiana canceled all bail bond requirements and let us out on our own recognizance, which indicated of course that the high bail was merely to keep us in jail and keep us from going to the march. So they said, alright you can get out now, no bail required. I got out and then followed the most, uh unlikely and the strangest episode in my life. Local citizens, black citizens of this town held a march to protest police brutality. This was on uh, September 1st, 1963, mark the date in your memory. Just a few days after the march; the march had been August 28th. Practically every black citizen of Plaquemine was in that march, the issue was so sharp. The march, led by most of the ministers proceeded, they had asked me to lead it and I had declined to do so because they were being accused by the city fathers of Plaquemine of being led by an outside agitator, namely me. And I uh, well I didn't mind being called an agitator after all as um, Thurgood Marshall who at them time was with the NAACP Legal Defense and Education Fund, uh told me, he said Jim, don't be afraid of being an agitator because every housewife knows the value of an agitator. It's the instrument in the washing machine which bangs around and gets rid of all the dirt. So uh, I didn't object to being called an agitator but I

thought it was an insult to the local black citizens of Plaquemine uh, to be told that they were being led around by the nose by an outside agitator. So I asked them to do this march by themselves and I would remain behind; I would stay in the parsonage, the home of black Baptist minister, the pastor of the Plymouth Rock Baptist Church, where many of our rallies were held and where the marchers gathered before their march began. The march was stopped when it got to the edge of town by city police. It was not broken up; the marchers were not dispersed; it was stopped and the marchers were held there, told just stand, wait. What were they waiting for? A little while later a large number of state police cars came speeding up followed by a large number of horse vans. State police, state troopers mounted the horses and rode into the crowd of marchers, swinging billy clubs, wielding electric cattle prods. Those instruments, which were used in many rural areas to move uh, bulky cattle. They're battery operated and if the cow won't move; if Bossy wants to be very bossy and will not move, then Bossy is stuck with a electric cattle prod and gets a shock and that moves Bossy. Well the troopers had electric cattle prods and they stuck the people with them and they got shocked. The troopers also had canisters of tear gas on their belt and they had their guns too. One girl was trampled by a horse, rather severely injured, others were cut and bruised from the clubs. The would be marchers came running back to the church in disarray, crying, screaming. There were a couple of nurses there who bandaged up those who were injured. Troopers rode right into the church, if you can visualize that. I did not know that the steps were strong enough to carry those horses but they did. A few of the horses were prodded right up the steps into the church. Those troopers who rode into the church had uh, gas masks on and the troopers hurled tear gas canisters into the crowd of people, the hundreds of them who were there. People ran still screaming and crying out the back door of the church, some running for their homes; others running into the parsonage, the minister's home

next door where I was. The troopers broke the windows of the church out those plate, those uh, colored windows yes, stained glass. They uh, turned over the pews. They brought in high pressure fire hoses and turned them full blast on the inside of the church. There was a reporter from a Baton Rouge daily newspaper there and his bylined article the next day said Bibles and Hymnals were floating in the aisle. They soon got him out of there and they discovered there was a reporter there one of the troopers stuck him with an electric cattle prod and he got into his car and headed fast for Baton Rouge and wrote his story. That left us isolated because the press was our protection. People hesitated to brutalize us as long as the cameras were there, preserving it for posterity. They did not want to be seen on television news doing their dirty work; did not want to be captured for the front page of daily papers doing it. But with the press gone we were at their mercy. There was something strange about the troopers at, on this occasion. Their name plates and badge numbers were taped over, so that it would be impossible to identify them from those things. Two of my young staff members of CORE who were hiding outside, one had hidden under the steps of the church, another had climbed up a fig tree. The two of them overheard one trooper talking to others and he said to them 'when we catch that GD nigger Farmer, we're gonna kill him'. In the parsonage, we could hear shouts out in the street 'Run Nigger, Run!'. Hear horse hooves 'get up, run nigger run' and be held down obviously by an electric cattle prod or something. 'we'll let you go nigger if you tell us where Farmer is' I think every black citizen of Plaquemine knew where I was and that afternoon but nobody was telling, nobody was telling. Phone calls came in to the parsonage informing us that uh, troopers, state police were kicking open doors in the black community. This was not Johannesburg, Plaquemine Louisiana Iberville Parish, September first, 1963. Kicking open doors screaming 'come on out Farmer, we know you're in here'. They'd ransack the house and not finding me, turn over

furniture tear it up and go on their way out the door toss canisters of tear gas in and then go to the next house, kick open that door and go through the same process. Troopers who were outside of the parsonage began tossing tear gas bombs in to the parsonage. A window would shatter, in would come a canister of tear gas and place would fill with it [makes noise of gas spilling out of container spppp]. Another window, another canister, another, another, another, another. I'm sure you've never been massively tear gassed and I hope you never will be, you probably never will be, but uh, when that happens you feel that death would be merciful. You would do almost anything to be able to fill your lungs with oxygen, with air, and to stop the burning in your eyes. I, I have believed for a long time that the eye problems which I've had for the last seven years were a result of the long duration uh, tear gassing of that evening and night. My ophthalmologist however, I must hasten to add uh say that there is no evidence in the literature on tear gas, uh, to support that belief. Yet, we were massively tear gassed. I was trying to get phone calls out of town, long distance calls. I tried to call the White House, the President of the United States. I tried to call the Department of Justice, the Attorney General. I tried to call the FBI. I tried to call members of my staff in New York but uh, that day in Plaquemine Louisiana Mar-Bell was not placing any long distance calls from the black community. I would give the number, and we would lose connection and I'd get a dial tone. I tried repeatedly with the same results. As more tear gas and more came into the house most of the people who were in the house would burst out the back door into the backyard to fill their lungs with air, a little respite. And as night was falling now, dusk had fallen, floodlights would sweep across the crowd in the back yard looking for someone, probably for me, obviously. Not finding me, tear gas was thrown in to the crowd behind them to force them back into the house, more gas into the house to force them back in to the yard, more floodlights, back into the house, the yard, the house, the yard, the house, the yard.

I didn't go out with the crowd because I thought that to go out meant to die since they were looking for me. I sent uh, one I think it was two young CORE men crawling through tall grass to get to a black owned funeral home a half block away to ask the mortician there, a woman funeral director if uh, we could come there for refuge since this place had been gutted and was so full of tear gas we just couldn't abide it. Now the uh, funeral director had never been a part of the movement, she was one of the few blacks in town who had never marched with us, had never attended our rallies, had never done anything in the movement. In fact, some of the young activists had called her um, a nervous Nellie. Well I thought her answer would probably be no but lo and behold her answer was yes. And so we began crawling in twos, threes, or fours through the tall grass and weeds to get to the back door of this house, this funeral home. Crawling isn't exactly the word, we moved like soldiers move in the Army, on th, our bellies using our elbows, keeping our heads down so as not to be spotted by the troopers who were around. We get to the back door and tap on it at its base and she would open the door come in and the door would be closed, quickly. Um, when all of us, or most of us were there, it was clear that we had gone someplace, had left the parsonage because the shouting and screaming and crying and yelling had stopped. And it didn't take the troopers long to figure out where we had gone, so they came to this place, a funeral home. They were behind a funeral home then, yelling 'come on out Farmer, we know you're in there' 'we're gonna get you'. Inside the funeral home, I was trying, still unsuccessfully to get phone calls out of town. [music, static]