

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: There were not only troopers, there were deputies, some of the so-called rednecks, that is the rural people from the countryside. Those who generally speaking were considered to have the harshest, uh, biases, prejudices, the most racism had been deputized and given horses, given guns, given clubs, given tear gas, given cattle prods and uniforms. One of these deputies from the countryside, kicked open the back door of the funeral home and came in, burst in screaming "come on out here Farmer. We know you're in here". That was in the back room and there was a large back room. I was in the large front room. There were about 300 or so people in this funeral home with us. There was a long hall joining these two rooms. There were small

rooms on both sides of the hallway where bodies are kept. I was looking, uh, over heads in the hall, I being taller than most of the people there, right into the face of this trooper's deputy. And his hair'd fallen over his eyes, sweat was dripping, his face was distorted, contorted with hate. He yelled "come on out Farmer. We know you're in here". He saw one large fellow standing against the wall and he thought that was me. Apparently he had never seen me except in pictures said "here he is, that's Farmer. Come on in boys. We got him". The poor fellow was saying, I'm not Farmer, I'm not Farmer. He was reaching for his ID to show him. I told him later I was disappointed in him. I thought he was gonna take that rap for me [laughs]. And I'm not Farmer. Another trooper stuck his head in the door and said: "naw, that ain't Farmer. I know that nigger." Well I started to make my way down the hall. I figured that I had no right to jeopardize the lives of all those people who were in there. If they were lookin for me, then I would go down, face this deputy and say: "looking for Farmer? I'm James Farmer. Do you have a warrant for my arrest? Uh, what are the charges?" Uh, fortunately, some of the people who were in there with me had better sense than that. As I started down the hallway, uh, two of the men grabbed me, one of them covering my mouth and they pulled me back into the front room. One of them said: "Jim you're not going out there tonight. If you go out there tonight, you won't be alive tomorrow morning". Said, "that's a lynch mob baby" and one woman standing there said "Mr. Farmer, if you go out there tonight, we're all going out". One fellow handed me a loaded .45. I opened it and saw that it was loaded, six bullets in it. I took the bullets out and put them in a drawer of the table and handed him the empty gun back and said no, uh, if the troopers burst in here with a loaded gun, I might take two or three of them with me but then what would happen to all of these people here, they might kill most of the people. But we can't do it like that. Then the woman mortician, this funeral director, whom some had called a 'nervous Nellie' rose to the occasion.

She looked at me and I could not read her thoughts at all but for a brief moment, our eyes locked. Then she looked away and straightened her shoulders and made her way down the hall and advanced on this deputy, shaking her finger in his face. She said ‘Do you have a search warrant to come into my place of business?’ He blinked and backed up surprised because he didn’t know what a search warrant was. He said, naw. She said ‘well I’m a tax payer and law abiding citizen and I have a wake going on here’. “These people ain’t at no wake.” ‘That makes no difference; you can’t come in here without a search warrant! Now get out!’” She practically had her finger on his nose and she forced him out the back door. A woman can get away with a lot. But um, a couple of minutes later he kicked the door open again, stuck his head in and said “Alright, we got all the guns and all the tear gas and everything. And you ain’t got nothing. We give you just five minutes to get Farmer out here, five minutes, that’s all.” And slammed the door. Some people dropped down on their knees and began praying. One minister led some other people in prayer. Someone else started singing, softly ‘We Shall Overcome’. I looked at my watch. Oh what goes through one’s mind at a time like that, uh, honestly I did not expect to live through the night, I did not expect to live through the next hour. Well, my life didn’t pass before my eyes, no, um, I thought about many things. You know, I have a very low tolerance for pain; I don’t like to hurt and I [laughs], I wondered if it hurt to die. I actually wondered that. I wondered if the act of passing from life to lifelessness hurts. That may sound strange but I wondered that. And then I uh, hoped that they would kill me before mutilating me, rather than the reverse. Then I wondered if I had remembered to make last month’s payment on my life insurance policy. Then I hoped that there was some photographer out there who would get pictures of it so that those photographs could be used to publicize the movement, promote the movement and raise funds for CORE and the movement. And then I just brooded and looked at my watch, five minutes

pass, ten minutes. Things seemed quiet outside, uh, shall we say deathly quiet. There was a knock on the door.[makes sound of a knock] Troopers? No, troopers weren't knocking that night, they were kicking open doors. So I asked, who's there. And it was two, uh, black ex-Marines from an adjoining town. One of them had was some old buddy of mine. We had become fairly close, we'd get together, evenings after work at a black restaurant and share, have a hamburger or a hotdog or something and uh, talk about the events of the day. Uh, both of these fellows were known as pretty rough customers. Uh, they were not nonviolent. In fact, nobody bothered them, not even the police; they were known to carry guns even in their car and on their person, uh, it's what we sometimes called if you pardon the expression, 'The Crazy Negro Syndrome'. You know, that Negro's crazy, don't mess with him. So they, they didn't, nobody messed with them. Well these two fellas came in, they'd heard by the grapevine what was going on. And my buddy said, "uh Jim, man it looks bad out there." Said, "uh the troopers are still kicking open doors in, in the black community uh, screaming for you, looking for you. Now they have set up roadblocks on every road leading out of town and are stopping every car, searching for you." Said "and the troopers who are out back of this place have headed in the direction of the magistrate's house and I guess they're going for a search warrant and they'll get it and when they come back here, you're life's not worth a blood nickel. So, man, we gotta get you outta here fast, somehow." 'how?', I asked. He said "well, I don't know, um maybe we can use one of the two hearses that this lady has down in the basement garage; she has two Cadillac hearses." Said, "well, you know, they, they think I'm in here so they'll be on the lookout for a hearse." " Well, they think you are here, but they don't know it. If they knew you were here, they wouldn't still be kicking open doors". So they [Farmer's friends] decided to use not one hearse but two hearses. One as a decoy; the other as you might say, the real McCoy. They um, drew a map,

showing the roadblocks, marking them, A, B, C, D, and sent a driver out, one driver in uh, uh, one of the hearses with instructions to head for roadblock A, when you get close to it, put it in reverse, back up fast and then head fast for roadblock B. The objective is to try to lure the troopers away from one of the roadblocks, making them pursue you, the driver and if it works, radio back on the two way radio that this, uh, mortician has in each of the hearses and let us know which roadblock is now unmanned. The driver took off in the hearse with his map. He'd call back in the radio, "I'm approaching roadblock A, they see me, and now I'm in reverse and I'm backing up, seems to be working; they've jumped in their cars and they're coming after me, I'm heading for roadblock B and the troopers there are coming after me, they're closing in on me now from the front and the rear; I'm gonna be stopped over and out." And I was then put in the back of the second hearse and two heavyweights were put in the front seat and my ex-Marine buddy got in his car and escorted us through roadblock A. The roadblock itself was just two wooden horses and so he hit those horses with the bumper of his car, knocked them out of the way, made a U-turn and waved goodbye. And we took off at high speed. My driver floored the accelerator and the Cadillac lurched forward. And we took off at high speed on dirt and gravel roads, the back way to New Orleans. The blacks uh, say that they knew this road, this area better than the whites did because this was their hunting areas, there were segregated hunting areas, in that part of the state of Louisiana. Occasionally, the driver or his companion would say, "Mr. Farmer, there's a car approaching, get your head down." I would then lie down on the floor of the hearse. Ok, it's all clear now, you may sit up. You know, my uh buddies had first proposed that they have a casket in there and I lie in that casket. I vetoed that because I was sure if they, the troopers, had stopped the hearse and opened that casket, I'd get hiccups or something, or sneeze. Um, but uh, I was lying on the floor of the hearse or sitting up in it and we were going

fast, turning, taking curves on two wheels. We didn't, we did not know how widespread the hunt was, the search was for us. Since uh, state police were involved, even though their identification was concealed, we thought it might have been statewide conceivably. So we, uh, entered New Orleans by back roads and uh, one of the men in the front seat radioed to a black funeral home in New Orleans that um, we have James Farmer with us, we had to run from a mob in Plaquemine, may we bring him there. The answer was yes, bring Jim here by all means. You know, I, I was a little uneasy with all this emphasis upon graveyards and hearses and funeral homes; I hoped it wasn't prophecy of any sort. But at any rate, we went to this, uh, funeral home and from there, I um, called my CORE chairman in New Orleans, Aretha Tassel and asked Aretha to set up a press conference at her house for 11 o'clock that morning. It was the wee hours of the morning now. She called the press conference and the reporter said, "are you sure that James Farmer's gonna be there?" She said "of course, I'm calling it in his name." "Yes, but I heard a flash on the radio that he is reported missing in Plaquemine Louisiana." Said that "I'm calling it in his name and he will be here." I called my wife, in New York, to tell her that I was alright. Went to the news conference, well attended. Representatives from the wire services, AP and UPI and the networks, stringers were there, local press, all there. I told the whole story, briefly, succinctly. They listened raptly, incredulously, had a few questions and then left. I don't think a single word of that narrative got outside of the state of Louisiana. How? How did it...how was it stopped? You tell me. When they speak of management of the press, I'm not sure how it's done, or how it was done in that case. The only thing I saw inside the state from the press conference which was well attended, everything taken down on tape or writing. The only thing I saw inside was a small item on a back page of the New Orleans Times Picayune saying that yesterday, CORE's national director, James Farmer, held a news conference at which he said there had been some trouble in

the town of Plaquemine and he had finally left the town in a hearse, period. That was all. I called the regional office of the FBI in New Orleans, spoke to the regional director, told him what had transpired in Plaquemine. He listened in silence and his comment was, I was afraid of that. I said, what does that mean? He said, nothing. I called my staff in New York and told them that I did not intend to be a fugitive from any place in this country, for this is my country. I was going back into Plaquemine the next morning and would be at the courthouse of that town at 10AM so that if there was a warrant for my arrest I would be there to be served with it. Uh, one of the top officials of the FBI, I recall his name, Cartha DeLoach, who I think was the number three man of the FBI at the time, he is no longer with the agency, um, walked into the CORE office that day, right after my press conference and demanded to know what in the world is going on in Plaquemine, Louisiana. My staff members said Jim called and tells us that he is returning to Plaquemine tomorrow morning, will be at the courthouse at 10AM, well you guys have gotta protect his life. DeLoach said we are not a protection agency, we are an investigative body. My staff guy screamed if Jim dies tomorrow morning, his blood's on your hands. The top FBI official put his hat on and said, I repeat we are an investigative body, not a protection agency; however, this is an extraordinary situation and wh, left. When I got back to Plaquemine along with one of my lawyers from New Orleans, there was a crowd of men all white in front of the courthouse. It did not look like a mob; they had no weapons in hand. They were not apparently threatening us, just looking. On the other side of the fence, bordering the yard of the courthouse, there were women, all white and children, all white. Apparently, curiosity seekers wouldn't miss this, they're standing there looking. My lawyer and I walked toward the steps of the courthouse, the men did not try to block us. Standing on the steps were four or five or six men in suits, it was a hot day and as I started up the steps, they showed me ID, identification, which read, Federal

Bureau of Investigation. I nodded and I must confess felt a bit more comfortable, walked inside the courthouse and the first official person I saw there, I inquired. First I said, I am James Farmer and I asked if they had a warrant for my arrest. He said, "James Farmer? No." "You mean I am not wanted for anything?" "No, you're not wanted." In spite of that frenzied man hunt, I was wanted for nothing. So my lawyer and I turned around and walked back to his Thunderbird and went back to New Orleans. Now I do not know what was up that uh, day that night day and night of September first. I asked a black physician who was the only black physician in the parish, a parish is the word for county in Louisiana, they call the counties parishes. I asked him to check with some of his patients, he had quite a number of white patients, he was a very good doctor and to see if they had any idea what was up that day and night. He called me back, a week, two weeks later and said he had gotten it from three separate sources. That the word was out that I was to be killed the night of September first; the word had come from high up. I asked him what that meant and he did not know, he said either his patients did not know or were not willing to tell him but he said they all said and they reported to him separately that uh, the troopers who were rampaging were not going to kill me they were not to kill me, they were going to beat me to within an inch of my life and then turn me over to an un-uniformed mob and my body was not to be found for a long time, if at all. That would probably mean the body would be weighted down and thrown into one of those bayous as bait for alligators or whatever they have there or garfish or whatever. Well I demanded that the FBI come in and investigate this whole incident; it, it was bizarre. They sent an agent in to investigate, take affidavits there were 300 rural blacks lined up to give affidavits, sworn affidavits on what transpired. The agent came in roughly about uh 10 o'clock and started taking affidavits, he left about a quarter of 12 for lunch and I think he's still out to lunch, never returned from lunch. Never, so far as I know, the investigation was never



continued. Now let me say that Plaquemine has changed; it could not happen now. Right after the incident, blacks went on a voter registration and voter education campaign. Threw the sheriff out of office, replaced him with, someone who is uh, was more to their liking. They ran a black for sheriff knowing he could not win, however there were two whites running and finally, close to election the black withdrew and threw his votes to the man they wanted in. And that man won handily with the support of the blacks and he knew how he won, he had the support of blacks and that was his measure of victory, his margin of victory. Uh, the chief of police was uh changed by the black votes. There are now blacks on the police force of Plaquemine, in the sheriff's department of the parish. There are blacks holding key public office in both the parish and in the state. It has changed now as it has changed in much of the South. [music, static]