

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: With the help of specialists, experts, I prepared a long memorandum. I called in um Doctor Myron Wollman, um psychologist to help in the preparation of that memorandum. um to discuss in part programmed instructional techniques for teaching people how to read and giving a summary of evaluations of those techniques, some of which he had devised himself; how they would work and how effective they were. And uh, then drawing up um a proposal as to how we would start with the certain number of cities and then expand it to cover the entire country and how in ten years period of time we would have saturated the nation and hopefully uh wiped out illiteracy. So this was a lengthy memorandum. I then summarized the memorandum for the President himself and both documents were sent to the White House. Very shortly I got a call from the President, indicating that his staff had gone over the long one, and he the short one and they were impressed. They liked the idea. The President said he had one suggestion to make.

That suggestion was um that um I line up the other Civil Rights leaders behind this proposal because he felt that if it were just CORE and Farmer, uh it wouldn't have the wholehearted backing of all the Civil Rights organizations and he thought it ought to be a un across the board operation rather than one organization and one individual and I agreed with him on that. I'd already assigned one of my top staff persons uh to uh make contact with experts in the field of literacy and to work with them as a liaison person. I then uh talked with the other Civil Rights leaders. We set up um a nonprofit corporation called the Center for Community Action Education and I, I got on the Board of Directors of this corporation, nonprofit corporation. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., Roy Wilkins head of the NAACP, Whitney Young, head of the National Urban League, A. Philip Randolph, head of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, Dorothy Hite, head of the National Council of Negro Women, John Lewis, National Chairman of SNCC, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, in addition, I got the Vice President of Howard University to serve on the board. Um, two corporation heads to serve on the board and two leading trade unionists, including a President of one of the international unions, AFSCME, American Federation of States, County, and Municipal Employees whose President was the late Jerry Worth. I then uh notified President Johnson that uh I had taken those steps. He expressed pleasure with it and said I think the next thing for you to do is to um prepare a formal proposal to submit to OEO, many of you are too young to remember OEO and to know what it uh is, what those letters stood for. It was the Office of Economic Opportunity which um had been established as an agency of the federal government to administer the anti-poverty program, the so-called War Against Poverty which was a basic part of President Johnson's uh 'Great Society'

in quotes. So with the help of Dr. Wollman, who I mentioned earlier, and several other scholars and uh proposal preparers as you know uh preparing proposals is a specialized um technique and so we had to have some proposal writers in on this. We prepared a first rate professional prop, proposal and were prepared to submit it to OEO. Prior to submission I went through the usual process of touching bases. One has to touch all the political bases. I uh uh talked with the Commissioner of Education, who was head of the, what was then the Office of Education in HEW, Health, Education, and Welfare Department and uh showed him a copy of the proposal. He liked it and backed it enthusiastically. I met also with Harlem Congressman Adam Clayton Powell Jr. who happened to have been Chairman of the House Labor and Education Committee, which held the pursestrings of OEO. It was important to talk with him. And uh he thumbed through the proposal, read uh, sn, snatches of it and uh liked it and says it looks like a very good proposal to me, I think OEO will be interested and we'll probably fund it. Met with uh some other persons and got uh positive to enthusiastic responses. We then submitted the proposal to OEO and waited. Well now this this um seemed to me and it seemed to the other Civil Rights leaders to be a major step forward, something which could provide program for the restive youth in the movement who felt that the things which they had been doing for months, indeed for several years was no longer particularly relevant and they were looking for some new steps to take which would be more meaningful. We thought it was something that would get to the root of the problem and uh make a real changes in the quality of life for masses of people. It would be something that would supplement the effects of the Civil Rights legislation, the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965, which was yet to come. Well the proposal met a good response at OEO, Sargent Shriver who was director of OEO um read it over himself and he liked it. He then sent it down to the members of his staff at OEO; it had to go through the snaff, the staff route. It had to be read by the Community Action Staff, by the legal staff, and the other departments in OEO and approved from their standpoints. And uh we received calls from the various departments asking questions about various parts of the proposal, that's a usual process,

when a major proposal goes into a government agency. Uh some of them suggested certain changes in language and those changes were usual made, sometimes we argued them and they withdrew the suggestion but in most cases we agreed with them and made the changes. Um, it was approved, by all of the staff people who read it and was sent up to Sargent Shriver's desk with strong recommendations from staff for him to sign it and fund it. The proposal called for funding of approximately one million dollars for the first year, not a large amount of money because you see we were counting on volunteers; people who had been accustomed to volunteering like the uh the people, the masses of students who went to Mississippi during Freedom Summer when Schwerner, Goodman, and Chaney died. They didn't get paid salaries, they went as volunteers, like most of the CORE and SNCC activists they were volunteers so these would be volunteers who would not be paid possibly and if the money was there they would be paid expenses but by and large it would be a volunteer operation and hence the uh budget was small, one million dollars for the first year. Uh, an increase in the budget each of the next four years and the first year the proposal called for the selection of ten pilot cities, ten major cities which would be chosen to test the program out and make sure it was working and uh correct the input if necessary then the next year expand it to twenty additional cities and the next year expand it more and more and more and at the end of five years then um have an evaluation from an outside group to see how it was working, whether it was on track, whether changes needed to be made in the format, whether new techniques of instruction needed to be used and then prepare for the second, and hopefully, the final five years to wipe out functional illiteracy in

the country. That was the plan. So it was on Sargent Shriver's desk awaiting his signature. I called Sarge and asked how it was coming along and he says, fine, we have the staff reports and I'm going over the staff reports and it will probably be signed and funded very very shortly, I think it's just a matter of several weeks now, everything seems to be on track. I could reach Sarge anytime I made a phone call and I could reach the President whenever I made a phone call because this matter was of utmost importance and was high uh on their list of priorities. The plan also was for me to head it up. The plan which was not put in writing there in the proposal but was understood and was passed on by word of mouth was that once it were funded I would resign as National Director of CORE and head up the Center for Community Action Education and administer the national crusade against illiteracy and functional illiteracy. We did not put this in writing and this was not announced now because uh it would not be politic to announce it this far in advance um, that would have encouraged internecine warfare within CORE over the question of succession, who would be the next National Director because after all that was a big plum. Um, whoever became National Director of CORE, which was one of the top Civil Rights organizations, would automatically, by virtue of holding that position be a top black leader. But that was the understanding and all the Civil Rights uh heads of organizations knew it, Sargent Shriver knew it, and LBJ knew it. All was going well in 1965. Christmas morning, about 3AM, I had come down to Washington to visit my parents for Christmas holidays and uh, at their home, 3AM I was awakened by a phone call saying for gosh sakes Jim go out and get a copy of the Washington Post. There's a big front page story and a full exposé of your literacy program. So I threw on clothes and dashed out to the nearest newsstand that was open that early in the morning and got a copy of the Washington Post fresh off the presses and surely enough, front page, big story. OEO to fund Farmer literacy campaign two column story, continued on an inside page, practically a whole page, a picture of Shriver, a picture of me. Accurate in almost every detail. A few minor inaccuracies but even said that very soon, on the funding of the program James Farmer, CORE's National Director will resign his post as National Director of CORE to head up

this drive against functional illiteracy in the country. Well this was a premature leak. We're not ready for that kind of announcement. It was calculated to uh throw CORE into turmoil and that's what happened. My phone started jumping off the hook, calls from CORE staff members all over the country and CORE chapter chairman and other offices all over the country. And Jim, what in the world is going on, the wire services are calling, UPI and AP, *New York Times* calling us, the local press calling us saying they see stories on the wire that you're leaving CORE to head up some program against uh uh illiteracy. We never heard anything about this. What's happening? What is this? What do we tell them? What's going on? Sometimes the voices became hysterical. Good reason. What do we say? I said, say no comment. Alright, well we can say no comment to them but don't you think we ought to have some comment. Shouldn't we know something about this? What IS going on? The pot boiled, continued to boil, boil over. I uh, tried to reach Sargent Shriver, couldn't reach him. Soon after the Christmas holiday, couldn't reach him. He didn't return phone calls. Very shortly he took off for Africa on a safari, lion money. I couldn't reach anybody at the White House, couldn't reach the President. And uh the pot continued to boil within CORE. And um a column appeared by two conservative columnists, Evans and Novak, which uh said as follows and I'll summarize it and paraphrase it. It said very shortly the federal government through the Office of Economic Opportunity is going to fund a massive campaign, drive against illiteracy and functional illiteracy to the tune of one million dollars the first year, increasing each year thereafter to be headed up by CORE's National Director, James Farmer. On the surface this appears to be a highly meritorious idea, however that is just the tip of the iceberg.

Farmer is not interested in literacy, he is a political animal. What he intends to do is to build himself a political base in those ten cities which he will select as his pilot cities for the first year. His objective, question mark. To throw off the white power structure, exclamation point. The rest of the column was in that vein. Then Capitol Hill began jumping. One Congressman said, why should we make Farmer the savior of all the illiterates in this country. Another said uh why should the federal government fund a social revolution. Another one added, yeah especially when that social revolution is aimed at throwing us out of power. I still could not reach Sarge Shriver, could not reach LBJ; and pot continued to boil within CORE. I had to take action within CORE because uh, sides were already forming, lines were being drawn over succession, knives were out for internecine warfare, could have torn the organization apart. I uh called an emergency meeting of our Board of Directors called the National Action Council and at that meeting, on short notice, I resigned as National Director and asked the National Action Council to um appoint uh a Search Committee to uh narrow the applications, the applicants down to two. And I wished to be on that Search Committee. The National Action Council did as I suggested and the Search Committee narrowed the applicants down to two. We set another early date for another meeting. And at that meeting, I uh backed one of the candidates, a friend of mine, Floyd McKissick to succeed me as National Director and Floyd won in the balloting to become the next National Director of CORE. I still could not reach Lyndon Johnson, could not reach Sarge Shriver, tried to reach Adam Clayton Powell, could not reach him. He did not return my calls. Um, A. Phillip Randolph, the venerable elder statesman of the movement, one of my heroes by the way; if I had three heroes in life, Randolph would be one of them. The other two would be Norman Thomas and Eleanor Roosevelt. But A. Philip Randolph was, uh happened to be in the White House for a meeting of labor leaders with the President and at that meeting he um brought up the matter of the literacy program, which was not on the agenda of course and asked the President uh if the Farmer program is going to be funded, if so, when, if not, why not. And he said he asked that question for two reasons, one because he considered it to be a very

vital program which should be funded and implemented promptly and two because Jim is a good friend of his. The President said uh, well I'm all for it, I'm for it a thousand percent just like I told Jim when he sat in that very chair you're sitting in Mr. Randolph. I'm for it a thousand percent. Well, what's holding it up Mr. President, Randolph asked. Talk to the chairman. The chairman? What chairman? Chairman Powell, the President responded. Well what does Adam have to do with it, asked Randolph. Oh he's Chairman of the House, Labor, and Education Committee and he holds the OEO's pursestrings. So uh after the meeting at the White House uh Phil called me, Phil Randolph called me and reported on that conversation with the President. I then asked Phil if he would um call Adam, that I'd be, had been unable to reach him. Phil tried to reach Randolph [misspoke] called me back in three days and said he had left three messages and Adam had not returned his call. I then called Dr. King and asked uh Martin if he would call um Powell. He did and uh he reached Powell and Martin called me and said um he asked Powell what do you have against uh Farmer's program? And Adam said, I don't have anything against Jim's program, I think it's a great program. Just like I told Jim when he was, when he showed it to me before he submitted it to OEO. Well then, uh why are you holding it up?, Martin asked him. He said, the President told me to ax it. Said well, since when do you do what the President tells you to do. He said oh um they're gonna give me something uh um something for it, something that I need very badly, something I've gotta have. He said what, and Martin said Adam declined to say. Um, a prominent black reporter and writer called me a few days later and said that he knew what it was that they were going to give Adam. And he had learned from



confidential sources which I am not at liberty to disclose here. That um they were to get Adam off the hook on a libel case. Adam had been uh charged with libel for calling a lady in Harlem a bag woman for the rackets. And he had uh um been found guilty and the judgment was a 160,000 dollars. So um, according to this uh writer, reporter, uh they were going to get him off the hook on that. I told him that I thought that was too uh fantastic for the imagination. Oh, he says, oh don't you believe that because um the only person who can reduce that judgment or cancel it is the judge and the only person who can get the judge to do it is Bob Wagoner. The only person who can get Bob Wagoner to do it is Big Daddy himself. So here's the scenario: LBJ will call Wagoner, Wagoner will call the judge, presto, Adam is home free. I laughed at that one. Said politics doesn't work that way. Said alright, you wait and see. It wasn't many days later that I turned on my car radio and heard that uh the judgment had been reduced from a 160,000 to 40,000. Pure coincidence, maybe. It should have been paid then and it was not. Well the literacy program went down the drain, politically. [music, static]