

R.L.T. Smith
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JM: Rev. Smith, could you tell me how and why you were motivated to run for Congress in 1962?

S: Mr. Marshall, the background leading up to that decision was the fact that Negroes here in the State of Mississippi have been disenfranchised as far back as I could remember, and from the information I was able to gather from local citizens who were here during Reconstruction, this disenfranchisement went back to around the late 1870's. Those believing in our constitutional form of government () in the Constitution of the United States that all citizens here in this state should have the right to help elect those who - governors who make our laws, and who make decisions in the courts, many of us were then, and certainly we are now, disturbed () that as American citizens we were disenfranchised, and the effort to run in the regular Democratic primary in an attempt to be the Democratic nominee in the Congressional elections, was a means of calling the attention of the powers that be here in this state, and in the nation, that Negro citizens here were keenly aware of the power of the ballot on the one hand, and that if we had the opportunity to participate in the election of our officials, whether it be Congressmen, whether it be Governor, whether it be Justice of the Peace or constable, we were then and we are now of the opinion that we could bring our influence to bear to make for better government on the local level, the state level and the national level. Secondly, this effort was to arouse Negro citizens to the fact that if they sleep too long on political matters, that we - to use a common term, we should be about our Father's business in trying to get our names on the voter registration rolls, and to actively participate in the process of government.

JM: Sir, do you think you could discuss some of the particulars of your campaign?

S: Well, the particulars of the campaign - this was not a racial campaign as such. The campaign was intended, as was mentioned, to rouse Negro and white alike, and attempted to appeal to the better judgment of the decent thinking white people by pointing out ...

It was intended to point out to the decent minded white citizens of this state that there was much room for improvement, particularly in the caliber of men who would represent us, whether it was in the Congress of the United States, or in the state legislature, or on the governing board of the county, that is the Board of Supervisors of the City Council. We attempted to point out that men who were elected on the basis of their rac-ism, on the basis of their promise to keep the Negro in his place, were in fact doing an injustice to all of the

people, and that rather we should both white and Negro try to elect the best man - not only with the best qualifications but with the best program for development of our natural resources and our human resources, and in that way would improve the lot of all the people. And it was our hope that if and when this is done, that Mississippi won't be branded as a nest of hatemongers and a poorhouse of this nation. Rather we envisioned peace, prosperity, tolerance and a genuine spirit of Americanism, here in our state, to follow.

JM: Sir, can you talk specifically about the campaign - what opposition you met and how you coped with this opposition?

S: Well, the opposition was about what we expected - at first there were all kinds of threats of violence, of murder, arson and bombing, some of these of course may have been crank calls from hatemongers, but some were designed really to do just what they threatened to do. And of course we had to take whatever safeguards that we could to guard against assassination, to guard against murder, to guard against arson and to guard against bombing. And in addition to that, of course, in very subtle ways, in various places, they varied from place to place, there were threats of economic reprisal and other threats against those who participated in the campaign.

JM: Now, you had a bit of a struggle to get television and radio time, from what I understand. Can you discuss that?

S: Yes, we did have quite a struggle. When I first announced my candidacy, practically everybody took it as a joke, as a great big joke. My campaign committee recognized the fact that in order to reach the people across this congressional district, in an effective way, we would have to reach them through television, and by radio - we were mindful of the fact that newspaper coverage, to say the least, would be hostile. And incidentally, the newspapers ignored it - ignored the campaign completely, except an initial announcement, and that of course was accepted as a joke. We went to several of the radio stations, and both television stations, they too accepted it as a joke and offered to sell us as much time as we desired, and gave us a package deal that actually was what we might call a bargain price. We didn't know how the presentation on radio and television would be accepted, on the one hand we didn't have the money to finance this on the other. We accepted the package deal, on the basis of paying for each appearance as we called for it. After the first appearance on television, the whole district was shocked. They were shocked by the approach to the problems that confront us, and they were shocked by the presentation of a congressman's () in the Congress. And instead of having something that could be laughed at, they found in that address something that would appeal to reason, would appeal to reasonable white and Negro citizens alike. And it was apparent that that would certainly disturb the status quo, and they reneged on the promise to let us have radio time, rather television time, and we appealed, and we appealed, and we appealed, and we appealed, and finally

to the FCC, and even the FCC seems to have gotten bogged down some- way, and of course I made my appeal direct then to the President, John F. Kennedy. And things began to happen, and of course we were able to get some time then, on television. Now, incidentally, at one of the television stations, the manager there at that time was very hostile, he was one of the leaders in the segregationist movement - the leader in the movement to maintain the status quo. And his advice first was that I go down to Negro sections and speak - the Negro (large-holds), that would be the place to go... and - () we didn't ask him how to operate a campaign, as American citizens we simply wanted to buy time on television to present our campaign to the citizens of this congressional district. That disturbed him much, he wanted just to run a Negro campaign, that would just appeal to Negroes; I told him that it wasn't intended to do that at all, the white people in this area need to be awakened right along with the Negroes, all of us were asleep on certain basic American concepts, and all of us needed to be awakened. And that disturbed him much. And finally after the FCC shut down on these stations, these television stations, and said they had to sell us time, when we went down to sign the contract with him he took great pains in telling us what danger that I was in, what danger that he was in, and incidentally this radio station is on South Jefferson Street, and just east of South Jefferson Street and adjacent to it, the banks of () River. And he said that his body and mine would likely be found floating in that river the next day, that my house would be bombed, my businesses would be bombed, and if he went on through with it, he said he was gonna have to hire about 50 extra guards to guard the television station and premises there, because he'd already been warned that they were gonna blow up the television station, that they were gonna blow up the towers out at the - where- ever their power plant was. And of course in order to justify that, he said he was gonna have to put barbed wire all the way around the television premises, and he was gonna have to board up all the glass windows, to - well, he attempted to - by fear, and incidentally that's what's kept we Negroes down, here in the south, it's fear. These night riders coming round and bomb and kill and burn, and of course somehow or another the sheriff was (out of pocket), the constable was out of pocket, the police were out of pocket, and they were terribly surprised the next day that that actually happened, and of course they got in and do the - question the Negroes, rounding up Negroes. But ...

Now, Mr. Marshall, in reference to the bombing and the shooting, we did experience - not bombs as such, we experienced a shooting at my house, and of course the breaking out of the plate glass windows in my business, they were - there were some five of - some four I believe we had, large plate glass windows, and they were broken out - well, they were broken out so many times until finally the - well, I think after the second time the insurance companies would not replace them, and I replaced them a couple of times after that, and somehow the police were unable to protect the building, unable to find out who did

it and - instead of replacing the plate glass with other plate glass, I replaced it with plywood, and I have plywood right now where plate glass should be at one of my businesses.

This manager at the television station, after he tried every technique that he knew - incidentally, he's a very shrewd man, he's a very smart man. After trying every technique of fear and intimidation he was so afraid - he seemed very hopeful that I would back down. So he asked me now, what do you want to do now, and before he could get through saying it I told him I'm ready to sign the contract. And it unnerved the man so, until he was shaking, as if he was in a cage of tigers. But after that we made the television appearances, and very few threats came in, other than the same ones - the fact of it is you could detect the same voice, or rather voices, (there were) other threats after the television appearances, but contrary to what I thought - what I might have hoped for - my mail was (cluttered up) with, and I have some of that mail yet, with letters from local white people, commenting favorably on the addresses that were made on television. And my telephone was ringing continually, day and sometimes over in the night, from white citizens, not only here in Jackson but from other outlying areas and some of the counties that you would hardly have expected. And in some of the counties, where there were no Negroes registered at all, Negroes were afraid to go to the county seat and offer to register, I got a few votes. And they had to be white votes, because no Negroes were registered there at all. And despite the fact that there were many reports, and these reports came from white people who observed, that there was mishandling of the ballots and miscounting of the ballots, I didn't protest because I knew from the beginning, and those who support the campaign knew from the beginning, that we couldn't win the election. But we felt like we won in the sense that we had aroused the decent-minded people that this is a new day, that we need to take a new look at our situation here, and not be chained to the past and stay in the same old rut, and have as our prime objective one segment of the population trying to keep our foot on the neck of the other segment of the population. So from - looking at it from that angle, we won what we actually went into the campaign to win.

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JM: Now, who is involved in working directly on your campaign staff, and how much do you think they contributed?

S: We did not have a large campaign staff. Dr. A.B. Britten was nominally the campaign manager. In fact Mr. V.R. Collier was the assistant campaign manager, but he actually ran the campaign. We had only one paid employee, and that was Mrs. Caroline Tyler. Frankly, I'd have to comb through my memory to be able to name all of the volunteers who worked. We had Negro and white volunteers, some put in maybe eight hours a day for four-five days a week, some would put in a half a day once or twice a week. But we had a fairly efficient campaign staff.

JM: Can you talk a little bit about William Higgs's role?

S: Yes, Mr. Higgs was - and he is a white Mississippian, native Mississippian, and he's a lawyer, he's a graduate of Harvard University Law School, and he was most useful in the campaign; not only had he studied political science, but he was the - he was the candidate for the nomination two years prior to my running. And he was able to pass on some very helpful information, because of the experience that he'd gained in that campaign. He was conscientious, and he made a great contribution of time and talent to the campaign.

JM: What about Robert Moses?

S: Yes, Robert Moses was here at the time. He had been engaged in some type of civil rights activity in McComb, we'd been invited down to McComb by Mr. C.C. Bryant, who is - who was then and is now the president of the McComb chapter of the NAACP. They were having all kinds of difficulties there, night riders and - well, day riders for that matter - in their effort to get Negroes registered and to... In going to various meetings there at McComb we met in Negro churches there, in their local mass meetings, directed by the NAACP and others, we met Mr. Moses and found him to be a man of considerable ability. He's well trained, a keen mind, and - when my campaign began, without any invitation Mr. Moses showed up here in Jackson, and he came by and offered his services, and of course we accepted his services. And he was very helpful, he was a typist among other things, and he could help Mrs. Tyler with the typing, and with various phases of the campaign, he proved to be very helpful.

Now, I would like to say, incidentally, that - of course Mr. Moses was a very competent man. And he had his own ideas, I had mine, he had his - others who volunteered in the campaign had theirs. I did feel like I owed it to good conscience, and I owed it to the people of this congressional district, this state and this nation, to make final decisions of policy, any kind of policy statement. I reserved that as the candidate, to make policy statements.

JM: Can you talk a little more about what you feel is important of the campaign?

S: Yes, I can. I think - I owe it to good conscience, and I owe it to the public spirited citizens here, and in other areas of this nation, to mention the fact - and this is widely known, of course, by people who have engaged in any kind of campaign - that a political campaign is an expensive operation. When it covers fourteen counties, like our district here covered at that time, it was a very expensive operation. We didn't have any money. Some who might have contributed, for reasons best known to them, they did not. We just didn't have sufficient money. In making appeals to some interested people in the east, we received some contributions from some very fine people - contributions and advice, we better say. For instance, Mrs. Eleanor Roosevelt, who gave us much encouragement, and I treasure some of the fine letters that she wrote giving advice and encouragement, I treasure them very highly, and I still have those letters. And many other

people in the east, in the New York area, in the Boston area, and in other areas. And incidentally, there on the campus of Yale we were very much encouraged by some of the fine people there at Yale, they gave good advice, and they made liberal contributions toward the expenses of the campaign, and for that we were grateful then, and we shall ever be grateful for their advice, and the liberal contributions that they made. And because of that, I feel that they kept us in the right channels in so far as policy was concerned, and we wound up the campaign without any appreciable deficit. And I repeat that we are most grateful to those who made those contributions.