

CLAYBORNE CARSON
INTERVIEW WITH ALLARD LOWENSTEIN
May 16, 1977

CARSON:

Why don't I get your address on the record.

LOWENSTEIN:

OK. The home is 163 Lindell Blvd, Long Beach, New York, 11561 and the office is U.S. (Mission), 799 U.N. Plaza, New York.

CARSON:

OK. I'd like to start with the beginnings of the Mississippi Summer Project in 1964. I guess you've gone over this a number of times, but I wondered if you would state the origins as you saw it, in your particular role.

LOWENSTEIN:

Now you want that mechanically or ...

CARSON:

Well, I think I would like to get a narrative, but also it would be useful to get some of your conceptions of what it was meant to be.

LOWENSTEIN:

And what's in there that doesn't cover this?

CARSON:

No, well it does to an extent, but it's very sketchy and I ...

LOWENSTEIN:

Well, it seems if you could maybe focus on things that I could flush out from there, it might save you some time ...

CARSON:

OK. Well, let's work from Forman, because I think his is the more controversial account. Basically, he makes the argument that, says that when you recruited students from Yale and Stanford to come down, that he'd mentioned to Bob Moses that he had reservations about you based on some things which had happened in the past, and he basically makes the claim that you were subverting Moses' authority. For example, he gives, he stated that a volunteer said that he was working under Lowenstein and that Al wanted the volunteers to converge on Yazoo City, or something to that effect. And so Forman advised that Moses was in charge of the project. So, basically, he's making the claim that you were undermining his authority in Mississippi.

LOWENSTEIN:

Well, Moses never felt that way, I don't think that, I mean I would, I mean the last thing I would want to do is to get into an argument over Forman's particular embitterment. I mean he went through a lot, has a right to be bitter. But there was never any sense between Moses and me of that difficulty. It is perfectly

true that there were terrible difficulties within SNCC and between SNCC and COFO, and COFO did not regard it as a SNCC project; it regarded it as a COFO project, and that COFO was not under Moses, that is to say ...

CARSON:

So what did you see as your role?

LOWENSTEIN:

Well, the most important role I had at the beginning in some ways, the role changed. At the beginning, the idea was first getting the idea approved by people, because it was the question of selling that idea and doing that.

CARSON:

To whom?

LOWENSTEIN:

To everybody, because it was an idea that first had to be sold to...Evers was enthusiastic right at the start, but then you have to raise money for it, you have to get some broader base of support, get some, as I recall, the CORE guys that were down there, whose names I should remember but , who would talk to each of the separate Civil Rights groups who were there, because there was within the Civil Rights mechanism, there was a lot of internal tension. Moses was, as near as I can recall, enthusiastic from the beginning as (the course of) SNCC went on. So one role ...

CARSON:

So, who besides you was selling this idea?

LOWENSTEIN:

Well, at the beginning it was just me. I mean nobody else. it was an idea that when I proposed it, fell between the COFO See, Bob was very much the preeminent figure among the Civil Rights workers. Charlie Evers was the preeminent figure in the perception of Mississippi blacks, because of his brother.

CARSON:

The impression of the interview is that the project originated after the assassination.

LOWENSTEIN:

Oy yes, oh, absolutely. In fact, the project originated, I got there I would think around the 4th of July, and it didn't originate for a couple of weeks, maybe 3 weeks after that. While I was there at the beginning I kept wondering what is it you do. Because I expected it would be like North Carolina, but somewhat worse. Instead it was like South Africa, but a little bit better. I mean, on the continuum of oppression, it was infinitely different from North Carolina, because nobody could do anything. I mean you had a court order to integrate a park but you couldn't get anyone to go there because

CARSON:

What led you to come down?

LOWENSTEIN:

Well, I first got a phone call. I'd been involved in the demonstration at (Raleigh). And we'd just finished integrating Raleigh. I was teaching at State, S.C. State. And when we finished those demonstrations, one of the things that brought me down was that Higgs was arrested and left the state, so there was no white lawyer doing anything about Civil Rights. And because NAA[CP] had been bankrupted by the National arrests and closing of bonds after Majors' assassination, the general atmosphere was not to do anything about Mississippi at all. So the went to other states and got their (voter) kind of thing, which I found troublesome, and people who were suffering most seemed that ... it was difficult to justify. Aaron Henry I'd known before that. He and I'd been friends before, and so the first place I was aiming at, in terms of a locus to work from, was Clarksdale. And I saw Aaron in Clarksdale right after, early after I arrived.

CARSON:

What was your organizational affiliation?

LOWENSTEIN:

None. But when I was there a while, it was clear that none of the marching, and whatnot they were doing in North Carolina or the appeal to white churches or any of the things that had worked there were going to work. It was just that everything was finished there, just a spirit, a bankruptcy, you couldn't get ... the people would be arrested, as I say, under a \$1000 bond for anything. And then the judge there was Eastland's roommate, and he would ... so you had to get to the proto-puritan law for you to get out of prison on an illegal arrest. It was appalling. It was actual, total oppression in a way that was physical, legal, social, economic, and in that disaster, one had to sit down and try to figure out, well what do you do about it? And if you don't write it off, you've got to think of something new, because nothing is working. Picketing, marching, and voting. So that was what started me thinking. Now, the tension, Evers and Moses did not have a good relationship, and SNCC and COFO had had problems. So there was a period of time when a good part of what I did was to mediate the situation between different factions in the civil rights movement and then from that base out to the supporting elements in the constituencies in California, New York, wherever money in Congress, and things like that. So that was the general arrangement at the beginning. They offered me a title as whatever I wanted since the idea had come from me. They wanted to ... and I felt very much that it should be first of all, it should be black, and then it was better if it was a Mississippi person. I never, I don't think I ever took a title of any kind. If I had one, it was as an advisor, but it was never a formalized thing. And the only authority that I ever tried to exercise was when the authority came out of discussion. Make ideas or suggestions. But it is very clear that the mood between the two

headquarters on Lynch Street, got very ugly and very internal, within SNCC and then COFO, but then between the two. And there was that value being an outsideperson ... it was that as long as I've ever maintained a close and warm kind of relationship with Moses, and with Evers, and worked between them. It was useful. But it was that and it wasn't easy, because of all the circumstances. But it was useful to do that. And since I'd generally, was fond of both of them, and admired them. It was a role that someone needed to do and I was trying to be useful that way while bringing in whatever help. The great bringing in help came about late, as you know, because we started on the freedom rides long before the idea of students came up. But the freedom rider idea was that it excited the whites to such an extent that there was worse oppression. People were paying a higher price, and it was clear that nobody was going to report it. And that was another shock, to discover that you could not get coverage. One of the things that made Forman very bitter and made a lot of SNCC people very bitter was that there was such a discrepancy in the degree of coverage that occurred when white people came in from out of the state and were oppressed, that that excited a kind of coverage that black

CARSON:

I think I've got that motivation

LOWENSTEIN:

And that was very valid. And of course the question that raised was a very simple question. Understanding that, and being appalled by it, you could still use it. I still wanted to get a focus on what was going on there, and I knew that required us to get people to come in. Once they were there, and the country learned about it, my conviction was that the country would rally to change it. Now, there you get into the philosophical question which always is unresolvable because it depends on what your goals are. Our goals were always reformist goals. What we were trying to do was to get an opportunity for Mississippi black poor people to become middle class people in the United States with the rights that middle class people had: economic, political, and civil. There were people whose goals were not that, and felt very strongly that getting the poor black community into that situation was undesirable. That the fact that the society was so sick, that what you wanted to do was to tear down, build up and create a different society. So obviously when there were two separate views of what we were trying to do, you're going to run into two separate approaches of how to do it. And that is, in many ways, the forerunner of what happened in the anti-war movement. You had the kind of conflict about purpose and about tactic. And in the course of that, Charlie Evers and the people who were sort of pro getting them into the integrated middle class structure people, you had not only the personality conflicts that were already there, and the authority conflicts, and whatnot, organizational jealousies, but you also had very genuine differences of view as to what you were trying to achieve, in the whole movement. That runs in Atlantic City, it runs into the way you run the Democratic party, but it also runs into how you interpret what's happening.

In other words, if black and white together is the goal, which is very different than if black power is the goal perceived as it can be perceived by people who became very hostile to the idea of integration; it was the forerunner of the Muslim feeling and a lot of other things. And what's so fascinating about that period is that we were all struggling over that as it was getting born, watching each development. I remember one of the most bitter experiences I had in Mississippi in personal terms came about because one of the people who went down to Mississippi as a result of my efforts at Stanford, was a guy called Dennis Sweeny, who became, do you have any notes on a Dennis Sweeny?

CARSON:

I don't know the story.

LOWENSTEIN:

It's a very very illustrative story in terms of an autobiography. It's too long to tell you now, but the basic point of it was that he, after he got there, became very radicalized. He was sent to McComb. He was in very great danger physically, he was arrested, when they blew up the Freedom House and in the course of that decided that were involved in what he viewed in Forman's politics were the enemy, much more than the white power structure. And since Dennis and I had been quite close friends, it became a very very personal thing. And Forman and I were never friends. It was never a relationship that had any history to it. I never worked with him. And from the first moment I knew him, he disliked me and was hostile and was bitter. I mean I knew that right away. Dennis and I had been good friends at Stanford when I was here, among people that we worked with trying to end a lot of the social injustices here. He had been the forefront of that, a very talented person. He went to SNCC in Mississippi, during the period when SNCC was getting into "black power" and during the period when I was becoming the sort of villain in their eyes, he became very much the spearhead of their campaign against me in a lot of ways. We met under very ugly kinds of circumstances at places where he would attack me from a very personal feeling.

CARSON:

Didn't some of that have to do with the charges that I think even, who is it here, that, well I'll read it: "The disclosures in Ramparts, combined with Lowenstein's activities in the NSA, Spain and Africa made me suspect that he was close to CIA circles if not actually on its payroll."

LOWENSTEIN:

There was a fringe of radicals that always had assumed that I was in the CIA, even though Ramparts was very careful to make clear that I was not, and that the CIA came in after I was out of NSA, and that I was one of the targets of the CIA, which is clear to everybody who has studied the history of Target, in the sense that I was to be excluded from everything, because they worried that I would not accept the relationship, and I was excluded. But at the time when Forman was involved in his view of what was to be done with the Civil Rights Movement,

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LOWENSTEIN:

But what I was finishing with Dennis Sweeny was that he, after becoming very much involved with SNCC, ended up being thrown out of SNCC himself because he was white, and, as the thing radicalized further, it became more black. They ended up accusing him of all the things that he had accused me of except it was done after he had put all of his emotion into SNCC and it very very badly damaged him. And he's someone I don't think that I don't know where he is now. He called me from Philadelphia maybe 2 years ago out of the blue and told me that people were trying to kill him. It was a very sad sort of end for a very talented person that hacked out the fillings of his teeth because he said the CIA were using those fillings to damage his brain. And he just simply had gone to the point where, I don't know if there's any way he could be reclaimed from this tragedy. I guess what I'm saying is that there were the personal elements in that whole situation, black and white people who were damaged so badly in the course of it, it produced genuine, paranoid and very often very deeply bitter and permanently damaged people. It was not limited to ideology. There was an interesting overlap between ideology and psychology in that whole thing. And any time, I remember one night, I don't know if it's in there or not, when we were up at SNCC headquarters, we'd finally gotten some money out from Stanford to rent cars so that we wouldn't have to be in places that the police knew about. We couldn't get people to rent us cars. Finally we got some by appealing past the local people. They rented us at the airports. I don't remember if it was Hertz, Avis or who. And Stokely and people like that were to pick up the cars at the airport. And they were held up at gun point by the highway patrol. And some guy held a gun to Stokely's head and said, it was ugly stuff, "blacks are inferior, admit you're a no good son of a bitch.." and Stokely wouldn't. And the guy cocked the gun and was going to shoot him in the car, and then someone said don't shoot him here, there are too many people watching. It was all filled with that kind of thing. To live a day through was difficult, and, while I was sitting in the headquarters, some whites drove by and threw things at the glass window, and had guns, and yelled at us that they would kill us that night. And I called Bob Owen, who had been a friend of mine. He was at Princeton, who was in the Justice Department. He was in Mississippi. And I told him what was happening and it looked to me doubtful that we would be alive the next day the way things were going. We were locked into that place and couldn't get out of it. This car kept circling, we knew the police were But those things, really kept happening, so that if you worked with that long enough Actually nobody understands anymore that people didn't snap under it is incredible because the stresses were just constant. And I was one of the lucky ones, because I periodically left. I remember that you would feel just to drive to Memphis, or driving to New Orleans, you'd feel like life had begun again. And for just that day you wouldn't have to feel, feel the terror of driving a car and know that you were going to

be picked up and whatever happened you had no protection anyway. All of that atmosphere had been lost. And what I'm saying about it is, that if you understand all of that, there isn't anyway that you can ever underestimate--what is the word!--the reasonableness of going crazy. It was almost, it was just that way. And a lot of people, good people, Dennis Sweeny is white, what happened to him was paralleled with blacks,

CARSON:

Before we have to go, what I would like is if you could kind of give a word picture of Moses first and then Forman from your perspective. What were your impressions?

LOWENSTEIN:

Forman I really don't know well enough to be fair. You know, I'd see him under circumstances where he was. I heard him make some effective speeches, but I really don't know him personally. Our meetings were so infrequent and from the beginning were so very charged with the animus that he had that there wasn't much use

CARSON:

Have you ever figured out any sense about why he had that animus?

LOWENSTEIN:

No. I think some of it was ...

CARSON:

You mentioned something about his NSA days, that he had encountered you at a early, I guess 1956, 1957, NSA convention. Well, anyway, what about Moses then?

LOWENSTEIN:

Forman's presence in Mississippi was infrequent during that period anyway, so that he wasn't a continuing factor. It wasn't like he was someone I had to deal with all the time. When he would come, it would be a presence, but

CARSON:

What about Moses then?

LOWENSTEIN:

Moses was brilliant, serene, gentle, infinitely patient. There was a quality of almost inhuman--inhuman in the sense of angelic--it was a quality of just such goodness in Moses, as a person, during that early period, in the fact of such enormous difficulty, that it would never occur to anyone that knew him and watched him that you didn't feel that you were in the presence of something better. That was what you felt around Moses. There were judgments you could question. And there were I think moments when you might wish that there was a greater strategic overview, but as a person, as a presence, as an influence, he was not only indispensable, but unparalleled.

CARSON:

Do you recall your first meeting with him?

LOWENSTEIN:

I think that my first meeting, he had taught at Horace Mann, where I had gone to school. So it is possible through some coincidence that I had met him before then. I don't know that. I mean if he were to say to you that he had me before that I would say that was probably so, that that was so, if he said it, and that may be. Because when I first met him there was some sense that we had met somewhere before. But my first recollections of him are the early, I think in Greenwood, at the SNCC event, where Tim Jenkins was doing his black preacher number, which he was extraordinarily effective at. It was a marvelous thing. He would sing and he would preach and really make people feel good. And Bob, from the very first that I saw him, what you recognized in him was a quality beyond the run of the mill, generalized way that people were. You knew there was something special. There was something about him that reminded me of Frank Graham in some ways. He had that same quality. Now, that's not what he was at the end. It got to him. And I would have thought that nothing could get to him. So that he wasn't as serene and totally self-controlled as one thought. But I didn't see that for a long time, but there were very profound changes in him, and anyone who went through that and didn't change would have been genuinely super-human. But I thought he was that. I don't understand all that happened to him later. I don't understand that I'd seen...I knew that for a long time he wouldn't talk to whites at all, which is totally the reverse of where he was when it all began. And the relationship with Donna had something to do with a lot of that, which showed that I didn't know very much about it, because I knew her separately from him and had great admiration for her, and then the chemistry between them, I don't know what that was. I saw him at a NSA congress, which I can't tell you the year of, but which came sometime later when we were talking about the anti-war movement. He was very anxious to be helpful with that. So there were zig zags of his personality and the trips to Africa and the view of what he wanted to do with his life. All of that I can't tell you much about. But I know what he meant that summer of '63 and the fall of '63 when there was just...much of my sense of what I had to do was to be a bridge between him and Evers and other people. I never had to question whatever about the unique, I keep wanting to say saintly, which sounds almost over-simplified, but there was that about him. There was in him at that time a goodness, and a toughness that are very rare to see mixed in a person, plus an intellect which was extraordinary; the capacity to grasp what was happening in a meeting, to understand what people's sensibilities were, and to be kind, but to be also very much a figure of strength, and to have influence. He never made a speech in which he raised his voice that I can remember. There was never a time when humor was a factor. It was all simple and straightforward. He influenced almost a generation of public speakers for the movement. I mean they all began talking about Bob Moses. And it was an enormous tribute, the way that people reacted to him, that people wanted to become like him, which very few people affect people that way, and Bob Moses did.