Black Power Chronicles: Courtland Cox

Courtland Cox, a former member of SNCC, discussed the evolution and significance of the Black Power Movement. The call for Black Power by Kwame Ture – aka Stokely Carmichael – in 1966 motivated African Americans to create their own positive definitions of self and to highlight the negative societal self-definitions and perception and societal constraints faced before the call for Black Power. Cox acknowledges that the movement benefited from the genesis to post-World War II political awakening of the World War 2 Black veterans and legal strategies of the NAACP that resulted in the Supreme Court decision. He also reflected on the generational divide within the Civil Rights Movement and the strategic shift from protests to political organizing. Cox's involvement in Marion Barry's Administration underscored the importance of the Administration's power to effecting change for the Black community, and he also noted the ongoing need for political engagement, education, and organizing to advance Black Power principles.

Kwame Holman: Hi, I'm Kwame Holman, and this is the DC Black Power Chronicles interview of Courtland Cox on May 17, 2017. Courtland is a founding member of SNCC [Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee]. He served as Program Secretary and [sat] on the Steering Committee for the March on Washington. He helped found the Drum and Spear bookstore in Washington, DC.

In 1973, he was Secretary General for the 6th Pan-African Congress. He worked with liberation movements across Africa and in minority business development for the first Marion Barry administration in 1979 and throughout a distinguished national and international career.

Courtland, thank you and welcome.

Courtland Cox: Thank you.

Kwame Holman: Courtland, you were an intimate of Stokely Carmichael. You knew H. Rap Brown, H. Rap Brown's brother [Edward Brown]. You knew all the important figures of the Black Power Movement. As you think back now to what happened in Lowndes County [AL], or early on throughout the Civil Rights Movement, as you had the nexus with the Civil Rights Movement and the Black Power Movement. What is Black Power? What was Black Power, as you creators perceived it?

Courtland Cox: I think as we perceived it—Black Power seems to me to be about Black people being able to define who they were and decide their existence. The ability to define and decide was very important, and I'll tell you why. When we were coming along, and you know, we're now talking—my period really starts like, say, 1955. My consciousness of what was going on in the United States, Black people were defined in highly negative terms.

Everything about them, from the width of their nose to their hair to their complexion, it was so that we hated ourselves. People used to bleach themselves with Nadinola… they used to straighten their hair with congolene.[1] They used to try to use clothespins to narrow their noses.

There were a lot of things that we used to do that reflected self hate. Black power came along and said, Black people are beautiful just as they are, just as we were created. Just as our hair, nappy hair, is great. We wore it natural. We don't have to put clothes pins on our noses, we don't have to lighten our skin.

So the ability to define just at that level was important. But then on the other level, in terms of definition, there was a whole sense that you were not intelligent, you were not smart. So everything from, Black people could not be quarterbacks, because it called for thinking. Black people could not be pitchers in baseball games at the professional level because they couldn't think.

I remember in 1968 where the discussion was, Black people could run short distances, but they couldn't run long distances because it took strategy. And that was the year that Kipchoge Keino from Kenya came in, and I don't think a white person has won a long distance race since.

But there was a whole thinking that was there. There was another level in terms of definition, how we got defined. No matter how smart you were, if you try to go to college, they will always tell you, you really shouldn't do that. If you were in high school, they wouldn't want you to take academic subjects. They want you to take vocational subjects. If you would take shop [classes].

There was a whole conspiracy to make sure that you were not allowed to achieve. The other thing—like if you were a musician, or if you were in the arts—you would create stuff, but other people would steal it, and they would make money from it and you couldn't control your rights.

You couldn't do what Jay-Z is doing now, or Stevie Wonder, or Puff Daddy, or any of these guys. So my sense is that the need to define and the ability to define who you are, so you could act as a person was very important in terms of the discussion of Black Power. And the ability now to

[1] Nadinola is a skin-lightening cream that has been historically used to achieve a lighter complexion, reflecting societal pressures favoring Eurocentric beauty standards. Congolene, a hair-straightening product, was commonly used to chemically alter natural hair textures, further illustrating the internalized biases against Black features.

decide what you could do, where you could go, who you were, what colleges you could go to, what you were taught in school, who you should associate with, what you should be named.

All these things were very important. So I would say, in terms of the early discussion of Black Power, the ability to define who you were and your existence and decide what you would be doing in life, in terms of the pursuit of life, liberty and happiness were the essential ingredients.

Kwame Holman: Why did it happen then? And as you said, the late [19]50s into the 1960s and then the famous story begins to take shape. Why did you and Ivanhoe Donaldson and Stokely Carmichael and Charles Hamilton and Willie Ricks and everyone come to that point, at that point, is to say these things must be thrown off.

I've heard in other interviews, you talk about being in Harlem and the influence on you of jazz music and of—and I assume—sort of out of the Harlem Renaissance kind of thing.[2] Why do you think it happened for you and the rest of the people then?

Courtland Cox: I think the real big turning point was World War II. I think what you had were a group of guys who were sent overseas to, quote, "fight for freedom," and when they came back, people like Medgar Evers and Amzie Moore and Mr. [Eldridge Willie "E.W."] Steptoe, and people even like Miss [Ella] Baker, who didn't go over the war, or people like A. Philip Randolph, and people like Bayard Rustin and all these people.

They saw the war, and they saw what happened in the war, and a lot of them determined that they were not going to take it anymore. So, you had a lot of political action. A lot of it was done through the courts. The one big piece was the end of World War II. The other piece was Brown v. Board of Education.[3]

May—actually today—1954, May 17, when the Supreme Court decided that Plessy v. Ferguson, which said that segregation was the law of the land, Brown v. Board of Education, reversed that, at least in the area of education. So then you had that.

So then you also had, as you pointed out, the awakening. You had three things going on. In the rural areas you had the organizing of the NAACP [National Association for the Advancement of Colored People], particularly in the South, on the vote. Nationally, you had Howard University, and people like [Samuel] Nabrit and Spottswood Robinson and Thurgood Marshall moving in a legal way. And then in the urban areas, you had the explosion of creativity at a lot of levels, in terms of music, in terms of jazz, because that was the big period in terms of jazz. In terms of literature, you had that. The Langston Hughes and others.

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[2] The Harlem Renaissance (1910s–1930s) fostered Black artistic and cultural expression, with jazz playing a central role.

[3] *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) was a landmark Supreme Court case that ruled racial segregation in public schools unconstitutional, reshaping civil rights and education in America.

And then you had the whole sense of bigger possibilities. And then, along with [19]54 and that, you remember, [19]55 you had the Montgomery Bus Boycott. And then in [19]57 you had Little Rock [AR], the integration of the School in Little Rock.

By 1960 when I'm 19, the people that you mentioned, they're all—I mean, Stokely, Ivanhoe and I were born in 1941—so we were all coming of age at that point. We really were standing on the shoulders of the veterans of World War II, the Black veterans of World War II. You know the NAACP, the Roy Wilkins and all these others, and then the people—because when I grew up in New York—people [were] putting out magazines, I lived in the same building that Lou Donaldson lived in. You had all of that.

I used to go down to 125th street and every corner on Lenox Avenue and 125th street, somebody was on a ladder talking either about Black nationalism, they were talking about the ills of this country. The four corners had somebody on a ladder talking about it, so there was a great deal of vibrancy that really gave us a sense that there were possibilities out there that probably the generations before us didn't see.[4]

Kwame Holman: Spike Lee in his film Malcolm X depicted that Harlem scene, and Malcolm X is on one of the corners in Harlem and raised above the crowd.

Courtland Cox: No, I was there. I saw Malcolm. I mean, particularly the best corner on 125th Street was the one where Michaux's bookstore was.[5] So there was a great bookstore up there. Basically, again, back to the definition. We were told that we contributed nothing to history. That's why Carter G. Woodson started back in the early 1900s to try to create Negro History Week.

They were just a few — [J.A.] Rogers, who would have a little pamphlet called *[World's] Great Men of Color*.[6] A few race men who try to go against the tide of negativity that was visiting us on a continuous basis. So my sense is that there were a lot of desperate things that came into our view of the world. But, I mean, you can see whether it was Mississippi with Amzie Moore or Michaux in Harlem. There were all sorts of strivers in different ways for people to say, we are worth we are a people and we are worth it.

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[4] 125th Street and Lenox Avenue in Harlem were hubs of political and cultural discourse, especially during the Harlem Renaissance and Civil Rights eras. Street orators contributed to a dynamic atmosphere of activism.

[5] *The National Memorial African Bookstore*, owned by Lewis Michaux, was a key intellectual hotspot in Harlem, attracting activists like Malcolm X. It served as a gathering place for Black thinkers, fostering discussions on nationalism and civil rights.

[6] J.A. Rogers was a Jamaican-American historian and journalist known for his work on the history of Africa and the African diaspora. His book *World's Great Men of Color* highlights notable Black figures throughout history.

Kwame Holman: You're talking about a movement as a whole, an awakening of African-Americans in this country and in the [19]50s and [19]60s. And yet there is the perception of a schism, a line between traditional civil rights leadership and their agenda and desire and what you and others in the Black Power movement were calling for.

It's as if, in shorthand, the traditional movement was asking. You were demanding. You were declaring. How close to reality was that schism? I mean, you were there on the podium at the March on Washington, trying to negotiate situations so that every part, every group, would be satisfied with what was going on. But how do you perceive that, that perceived schism between the traditionalists and people like yourself?

Courtland Cox: I would say it's much more generational, and people don't realize. When people think of Martin [Luther] King [Jr.], they think of him—I don't know what people think of him in terms of age, but Martin was killed before he was 40. He led the bus boycott at 26 and so you had on one end of the spectrum, Roy Wilkins and that generation. Then you had Martin [Luteher] King in the middle, and then you had us, and there were a lot of traditions. And then you kind of had Ralph Bunche and others like that on the other end.

And there were a lot of things that said—we as young people said what we see around us will not stand. We said that we are going to change this environment so that we could exist in it. To their benefit, they saw the dangers. They saw that these people would kill you, that these people would do a lot of things.

My sense is that while they were not going to go to Mississippi with John Lewis, during the Freedom Rides, or they're going to not go to Alabama or join the sit-ins, or go to even the Eastern Shore Maryland. They weren't going to do that because they know what was going to happen. They were the ones who, when we were in jail, we could go to get the support for. They were the ones who would help explain to—as they say at that point, the white folks—that these aren't bad people.

My sense is that there was a generational piece there, where we were prepared to deal with much more danger, to be much more bold. The other thing that we did, particularly in SNCC, that was important, that informed our lives, is that we were on the side of the least of these. That is to say that we started out with the sit-ins, and we did a lot of sit-ins and demonstrations.

But when we went south to Mississippi and Alabama and Georgia, we worked with the sharecroppers, people who this country had no value for, and we were the ones that tried to elevate them. And there was a disruption there. But my sense is, I think the big difference with us is probably the age. The generational piece probably played a bigger role in terms of the way we

saw the world. Later on, it probably became political, but in the early days, I think it was much more generational.

Kwame Holman: You mentioned the violence against those standing against American apartheid. I'm reminded that you talked in another interview about being motivated by the murder of Viola Liuzzo, of not having a real sense of the physical danger you put yourself in, and of riding with Ivanhoe Donaldson and a Volkswagen when you learned of the murder of Martin King.[7]

It said that the images of fire hoses and German Shepherd police dogs helped turn the psychology of the country, of the majority in the country, toward understanding the civil rights movement. How do you perceive the role of the violent nature—is it understood? Why did it not dissuade so many of you from doing what you did?

Courtland Cox: The one violent piece that affected my generation more than any other was the murder of Emmett Till. Just like the murder of Trayvon Martin, those are the kinds of things. At that time, I was 14 years old and when I talked to a lot of my peers who were 13, 14, they were impacted, because Emmett Till was that age. So it said, that is something that can happen to us.

I also think that when we looked at all the violence, when we looked at—I think what you mentioned in terms of Viola Liuzzo—we were prepared. I think my mother would always say to me—she was, she was both proud and scared to death. She would always try to figure out how she could get me to—she was alright with what I was doing, but she was very nervous about the violence.

And I remember we worked in Lowndes County, and I went to the trial of Collie Leroy Wilkins [Jr.], and he was the person that [was] accused of murdering Viola Liuzzo. I looked around, and I was the only Black person in the room. And I said to myself, you must be really crazy, because these guys could disappear you, and nothing would be said.

But I do think that for most of us, for me—it's kind of very interesting. All my life, I've looked at this issue from the inside out. So I mean, a lot of what people perceive in terms of the fear and the violence, was there. But you had to figure out how to understand your circumstances and be able to function.

Because I remember in Alabama, I was passing out leaflets for a mass meeting, and a lady said to me, “Boy, the sheriff know you here?” I said, “I guess so… yes, ma'am.” She said, “Boy, you ain't dead yet?”

[7] Viola Liuzzo was a white civil rights activist murdered by the Ku Klux Klan in 1965 after the Selma to Montgomery marches.

Because the community understood the sense of violence that would attend what we were trying to do. But I must also say that it was the community that protected us. Because one of the things that you have to—particularly when we're in the South, in Mississippi and Alabama—it was, we did not carry guns. We were nonviolent, but the community had guns, and they really respected us for our abilities to carry on and to be brave, but they also knew the realities.

And I know when I was in Lowndes County, Mr. [Mathew] Jackson used to be up at night in the field next to the house with his shotgun ready to protect us. So my sense was that violence was all around us. As I said, the violence in terms of understanding it with Emmett Till, understanding the nature of what was going on with Viola Liuzzo. The nature of understanding of Sammy Younge who—was one, a SNCC person—who was killed at the gas station. Just the brutality that we face.

The murder of Medgar Evers, the shooting of Jimmy Travis. We knew it but we—the murder of [James] Cheney, [Andrew] Goodman and [Michael] Schwerner, we knew it, but we knew that if we were paralyzed by it, things would not change. As I think of violence, it's still hard for me to really be overwhelmed by it. But if I sometimes think about it from the outside in, as opposed to the inside out looking at my life you begin to shake your head and say, boy it was some interesting times.

Kwame Holman: Indeed. The famous Civil Rights Acts [referring to the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965] pushed forward by the actions of you and others and by Lyndon Baines Johnson, came to pass in the late [19]60s, and there came a period in the early [19]70s, because I want to lead into the Marion Barry era and your involvement there.

But I wonder if you had a sense that after those, the major civil rights laws, public accommodations, etc, became law, that those things in the movement for personhood, for African-Americans, hit a plateau in any way. I mean, it was like the disco era or something, and, and the Civil Rights Movement was not at the forefront as it had been. There was [Richard] Nixon and Watergate and what have you. What was your thinking in the early and mid [19]70s?

Courtland Cox: Yeah, you see, my view is that this is a journey. For me, here's the kind of chronology I have. You know, in the early [19]60s, I was involved in protests trying to bring about certain kinds of awareness, as they say, speaking truth to power and all that. And I think for a lot of us, it became clear that the demonstrations and being in the street and being in resistance was not going to be enough, because this was a power discussion.

So a lot of us started engaging in the vote, and when we started engaging and trying to register people to vote, it was also clear to us that if just registering people to vote was not enough, political organization was important. So we put together the Mississippi Freedom Democratic

Party [MFDP]. Even though it could not be an official entity, political entity, electoral entity, it was an alternative that began to challenge the Democratic Party as to what, in fact, it was able to do in terms of dealing with all the rhetoric it was putting out there vis-à-vis the Black community.

So in 1964 at the Atlantic City Challenge, when they did not, in fact, really respect what we were trying to do and then respect the rhetoric that they said, we began to think differently, and we said we cannot try to integrate into the Democratic Party and become part of that.[8]

So we moved to Lowndes County, and we started talking about Black people now beginning to control their own realities, even if it was on a county level. And using that experiment, we said, if we're 80%—because Lowndes County was 80% Black, they had four Black people registered to vote—we said, as opposed to just getting them registered to vote, we need to have regime change so that they need to be [in] every elected office in the city—I mean in the county.

So we're talking about Sheriff, we're talking about Tax Assessor, Tax Collector, Probate Judge, all the things, everything. And we knew these people, a lot of them couldn't read and write, but we devised a way to not just get them to vote, but we [wanted] regime change, to take over the county, so we were now beginning to think of power not only just voting, but controlling the vote, controlling the electoral office, controlling the resources.

Then we moved on—at least I moved on—beginning to understand that while this was a big experiment in Lowndes County, it would not deal with the urban areas, it wouldn't deal with a number of things. So we engaged in a lot of discussions about that. That was a period when Black Power came out in [19]66. So we came here to DC. We did Drum and Spear Bookstore.[9] We did the Center for Black Education. We taught, actually, what was Federal City College, at the predecessor to UDC [University of the District of Columbia] .

And so we then understood that we needed to do more. So then we moved on to—well, at least I moved on—to trying to reach out to Africa and the 6th Pan-African Congress. And then after that, understanding that had its limitations, I came back here and went to the Barry administration.[10]

So for me, at least for me, in my case, while I was visible in terms of demonstrations and all that in the late [19]60s, early [19]70s, I was still on a continuous journey to try to find answers to the problems that we face, which is something that I still continue to do, so that the visibility to me

[8] The 1964 Atlantic City Challenge refers to the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party's (MFDP) attempt to be seated at the Democratic National Convention, challenging the legitimacy of the all-white Mississippi delegation. Despite their moral argument, the party was offered only token representation, leading many activists to question their faith in the Democratic Party.
[9] The *Drum and Spear Bookstore*, founded in 1968 by former SNCC activists, was a Black-owned bookstore in Washington, D.C. It became a major center for African and African American literature, political thought, and cultural activism.
[10] Marion Barry, a civil rights activist and politician, served as mayor of Washington, D.C., for multiple terms.

didn't make a big difference. My being engaged in the struggle, in ways, trying to figure out how to do it and where to go, whether I was in Africa or whether I was in Lowndes County. That, for me, was the big issue. And I think that while a lot of stuff wasn't visible, it didn't mean that nothing was happening.

Kwame Holman: Indeed. Did you have a sense, though, that the American public at large felt that a page had been turned with the Civil Rights Movement?

Courtland Cox: Oh yeah, they want to turn the page. Because for a lot of Americans, the [19]60s were terrible. The [19]60s were disruptive. Because basically, you had a status quo. You had a status quo. I mean, first of all most of the teams, most of the baseball teams and the basketball teams and all of those [19]50s were all white.

Now you're beginning to have Black people come in. I mean, it got so—I looked at the Miss USA pageant the other night. Of the 10 people who were finalists, 6 were people of color… so for them, they're saying, "we used to be all white... what has happened to us… we want our country back!" While this was a small thing in the [19]60s—because they had *Father Knows Best*, and it was a very white male dominated discussion.[11]

Now you're having a discussion where they now have to share America with a bunch of other people that don't look like them. And this is a big cultural and psychological problem that has caused a lot of disruption. So while they thought that the [19]60s were bad, we think this period is bad because whose interest is being served?

Kwame Holman: You continued your activism—as you say, and so did many others— after the page was being turned in the late [19]60s and early[19]70s. And that included being in Washington. You talk about, you've talked in your Smithsonian Museum of African American History and Culture, interview, and in your Gelman Library, George Washington University interview.

You talk about coming to Washington and seeing that, far from there being all the problems that brought you into the fight for personhood, far from those problems being solved, you found a Washington that was segregated, where people were locked out. African-Americans were locked out of the economic mainstream, and that was the way it was everywhere. You decided, along with others, to start to get involved in trying to change that.

Courtland Cox: Yes, I mean Washington, when I came here—I came to Washington in 1960. January of 1960. There were no Black bus drivers because O. Roy Chalk, who owned the bus

[11] *Father Knows Best* (1954–1960) was a popular American sitcom depicting an idealized white, middle-class family led by a wise and authoritative father. The show reinforced the dominant social norms of the era.

system, DC transit, said they would steal the money. There was no home rule.[12] So the people and the Congress ran the city and and the chairman, I think his name was [John L.] McMillan was from South Carolina. Black policemen—you didn't have any Black policemen of any significance anywhere. The Washington Post, which is the great, quote, "liberal newspaper" at this point, they used to have ads for Blacks and whites. So they had a colored section for Black people. The Black people didn't hold any significant offices anywhere around including in the law firms. They were not partners in the accounting firms. They were not partners in the newspapers. They were not reporters on TV. They were not there.

People who see today can't imagine how segregated this town was when I first came here in 1960. We had segregated restaurants. Clifton Terrace was all white.[13] We had segregated housing. So I think that you couldn't help but be involved in trying to change the circumstance. Because Washington, DC was definitely a Southern town.

Kwame Holman: You came to know Marion Barry, and you got involved in the campaign, and you became an integral part of—along with many other people coming from a wide range of backgrounds, Blacks, whites, gays, etc.,—in pulling off an upset victory for Marion Barry in 1978.

Did you and Marion Barry, former head of SNCC, come to that surprise, if you will, victory with the idea that we are going to bring the principles of SNCC, of the Black Power movement, to the administration of the city of Washington?

Courtland Cox: I think it was just in being—I tell young people all the time the real issue in any government and any campaign is whose interest is going to be served. That is in fact, determined by where the budget is spent. It is determined by what policies exist. It is determined by what the cabinet looks like. It's determined by what the laws look like.

And so we came in—actually it was very interesting that campaign. I guess it was a surprise cause probably everybody assumed Sterling Tucker might win because he was supported by most of the Black middle class in Washington, and Marion was not. But I don't think we came in and said, if we win we're going to put Black Power—no. We came in and the people who were critical—Marion had a critical mass of SNCC people around him, Ivanhoe and others, who understood that we had to act in the interests of a broad group of people who had been left out.

[12] *Home rule* refers to Washington, D.C.'s ability to govern itself rather than being directly controlled by Congress. Before the District of Columbia Home Rule Act of 1973, Congress—often led by Southern segregationists—held full authority over local laws, budgets, and governance, limiting the political power of the city's majority-Black population.
[13] Clifton Terrace, a large apartment complex in D.C., was initially an all-white residence, reflecting the broader housing segregation that limited Black access to quality housing in the city.

So you mentioned the gay community—the gay community, Gertrude Stein, was big in helping Marion get elected. People in Southeast [Washington, DC] who were neglected. Marion loved the seniors. The seniors love Marion. Marion—a big thing in terms of young people [was] the Summer Youth Project [referring to Marion Barry's Summer Youth Employment Program]. Marion did a number of things.
We understood that you had to broaden the base of the people who participated and benefited from government and I don't think we had any statement about that. But you know, given that the majority of people in this city were Black, then in fact, the people who were going to benefit from it will be Black, cause we're going to expand you know who the city served from the small group of people that it used to serve.

Kwame Holman: The Barry administration, the cabinet that attracted professionals like yourself with long experience doing myriad kinds of work. There were high profile people, [City Administrator] Elijah [B.] Rogers, others who, who came and created a superstar cabinet, if you will, in 1979 and thereafter, but you had as part of your agenda, like Lowndes County, a spoken ideal of empowering poor people. And that wasn't common.

Courtland Cox: No, definitely. Marion was very clear. Marion benefited—I think maybe three, four or five people. Now I'm thinking about it from the outside in. I think, as I mentioned, the people who have been locked out in a lot of ways and despised—the gay community is one—I would say, you know, the people east of the [Anacostia] River.

Particularly senior citizens, the people who were being put in jail and trying to deal with those issues. The people who did not have possibilities of a future and he did a number of things with young people. So that's one group, but Marion helped tremendously the Black middle class. Particularly law firms who wanted to do business with the city, accounting firms, *The Washington Post*.

I remember the Wall Street firms, the Merrill Lynch's, and all these people who wanted to do government bonds.[14] So they would send their usual suspects down and Marion said to them, if you want to do business with me, don't send anybody that doesn't look like me. They got the message. So the law firms began opening up, the accounting firms, the Wall Street firms, The Washington [Post] all these people began to get the message that Marion had the center of power.

It's not a call for Black Power, which is aspirational. It was having the center of power which made the difference. So, if they wanted—and the budget was smaller than, I think maybe $5.2 billion and which is a couple of dollars at that point—if you wanted to deal with the people who

[14] Wall Street firms like *Merrill Lynch* have historically played a major role in underwriting government bonds, which fund public infrastructure and municipal projects. However, for much of the 20th century, these financial institutions had limited engagement with Black communities and leadership.

control this budget of $5.2 billion, you had to change your ways and you could have that discussion.

The other thing that really surprised me, I was in a cabinet meeting, and I was sitting next to the police chief. It was hard for me to really get my mind around it, because every time I saw a police chief, we were on the opposite sides of anything, and I'm sitting next to the police chief, and I'm sitting in the room and decisions are being made.

So my sense is, I realized I had been both in protest and power. Protest, you're protesting decisions that have been made. Power, you're making decisions and you're just you're making the direction. So I said to myself, I've been in both protest and power, and I think power is much more effective.

If I wanted to help the Black community, if I wanted to help the people who were poor, who've been disfranchised, being in protest is one thing. If you don't have power, that's all you have. But seeking power to be able to define and make a difference is a very important thing, because, at the end of the day, that's what people care about: your ability to affect their lives in ways that make a difference.

My sense of our ability to seek power is something that we have not really incorporated. We have had the discussion of Black Power, and it helped tremendously. I think the slogan for Black Power helped tremendously because it allowed us to think of ourselves differently. It allowed us to think that we should be in power. What Marion did was we were able to achieve power by, as you said, a surprise move, and then we were able to actually make a difference in the lives of thousands and thousands of people.

Kwame Holman: In fact, it's been said that Marion Barry, through his various—and the rest of you in the administration—through the various administrations created from a nascent Black middle class in Washington, government workers and so forth.

By bringing in people who would, who would work for accounting firms and law firms and etc, created and and exponentially increase the size of the Black middle class in Washington, some of whom moved to Prince George's County [MD] and created a major tax base there as well, and it's one of the things you have talked about with respect to the the famous shortcomings of Marion Barry that doesn't get discussed when people are talking about Mr. Barry's personal life versus the things he achieved, the way he changed the city and its inhabitants.

Courtland Cox: I think Marion had his own issues, but I also think that there is a lesson to be learned here. Because in a lot of ways—that whole thing about physics, for every action, there is

an opposite and equal reaction—I think Marion's first term, everybody would agree that, in terms of bringing a professionalism to this city, everybody would agree that it was unparalleled.

So what began to happen is that Marion started talking about minority business development, and basically it centered around the whole issue of procurement. While people in the white community and the power structures were not pleased with it—and they could get along, let them. But where Marion crossed the line, and they really decided to go after him, was when Marion said that 25% of all equity participation in downtown development had to go to the African-American community.

They said, you're messing with our money and you have lost your mind. So basically what began to happen is—and if this is the way they always come at you—they began to talk about Marion stealing and the people around him stealing and stuff like that. But Marion really didn't care about money. I mean, he literally did not care about money, but that's the way they came at him first.

People don't remember that *The Washington Post*, again, started writing all these articles about stealing and all this corruption and it's centered around Marion. Because we used to have a poker game, Ivanhoe and Elijah Rogers and others and myself, we used to play poker. And the question was, were they passing money to Marion and so forth? Marion would generally lose in those poker games, and people would laugh at him, but, but they've tried to create that aura around him.

They started talking about corruption and stealing, and *The Washington Post* started driving the discussion. Then the US Attorney [for Washington DC] Joe [Joseph] diGenova picked it up and investigated, investigated, investigated, and *The Post* got frustrated because diGenova wasn't doing the job that they wanted them to do to get Marion.

They had to give it up because they could find no stealing and no corruption, because Marion cared nothing about money. So they decided, then, okay, what is a weakness that he has, and women clearly was one of Marion's weaknesses — messing with women and, you know. And so they brought this woman who was a friend of his into the discussion. And basically there was a whole discussion about her pressing him. He wanted to have sex. She wanted, saying, well, if you’re gonna do that, we have to have drugs.

It was the setup and that's what people—you see, Marion stands—let's go back to this. Marion cannot stand as a symbol of seriousness and hope for Black people, because he would stand for a situation of power and how they should act. There are probably about five mayors in this—Coleman Young, Maynard Jackson, Marion, Harold Washington, and recently Chokwe Lumumba.

Chokwe and Harold died of heart attacks. They destroyed Young. They tried to destroy Marion and they isolated Maynard. This country cannot, at this point, stand a Black person who is seen to be acting in the interest of the Black community.

Even with Barack Obama, when Michelle and Barack did the fist bump, they had a whole—the bandoliers and you know this whole sense of these wild people with guns and so forth. In their head, any strength in Black community is seen—even when LeBron James decided that he was going to move from Cleveland [OH] to Miami [FL]. The whole sense that he, in fact, could determine his own life and have strength.

In baseball, this brother [Curt Flood]—his name is escaping me—who really established free agency and moved out—into. When you look at [19]68 Olympics—Tommie Smith and [John] Carlos—any time a black person is seen to have strength, there is a need to destroy him, because in a lot of ways, this country cannot stand that.

So while Marion, clearly on the issue of women was not a saint, what you have coming at you, is—they don't care about Marion and women. They care about his being a symbol of power, and they have got to substitute their image of him for the image that we might have. What I find interesting is that whether you're talking about the Black community or whether you're talking about people who are poor or middle class or upper class, they have a very strong, supportive Marion. The white community can't deal with it.

Let me go back to another point about Black Power, this discussion of Black Power. Most of the white liberals, even people who were in SNCC and other places like that, when the utterance of Black Power and defining yourself and being the person that you want to be—that was not viewed as a way of establishing your humanity, or, as you talk, of personhood. It was viewed as being anti-white and high negativity comes with that.

So my sense is that in this country, whether we're talking about Marion Barry, whether— Curt Flood is the guy, the baseball player—whether we're talking about Curt Flood, who stood up on the question of free agency. Whether you're talking about LeBron James and certain circumstances, if there is a sense that the relationship is changing, where whites are on top and Blacks on the bottom, there's a sense that you're trying to create some equality or a power relationship that's different. There is high negativity, and the first way they're going to come at a politician is corruption.

Kwame Holman: So, Courtland, is the Black Power agenda of today, the same as before, to make right those wrongs that prevent people from living fully the way they would wish to live,

and that may include having more success than their white counterparts? Does it involve a diverse sense of equality and opportunity for everyone, for gays, for everyone?

I've heard you say recently that poor whites and African-Americans—and this was a discussion I contrasted with what you said back in the [19]60s, if you will—that the question on the table was whether whites could be part of what SNCC was going to do. And some of you and SNCC said, go to the white community and reform there.

You've said recently that there is an agenda of poor whites and Black people that is possible, and it's something that Malcolm X talked about as well. What is the Black Power agenda today?

Courtland Cox: There are two or three things. I think that poor whites probably have it worse than poor Blacks in a lot of ways, because they're invisible. They're called, by their own community, called poor white trash, and there is nobody who stands up for them and they get run over continuously and just used.

What the poor Black community has is the Black middle class, and they're attached to each other by race. So the Black middle class fears that if they don't stand up for Blacks in the poor community, they will also be hurt. So at least there is that thrust of the Black community.

Kwame Holman: That opportunity could be taken back and the middle class blacks could slip back in.

Courtland Cox: So that thrust is a big generator of hope and power for the total Black community. Now, I think [Donald] Trump has made a big difference. From Trayvon Martin on, when I talk to a lot of young Black people, resistance was the thing. Being in the streets was the thing. The question of the gay community and so forth, poor community, they were all good with that. But they wanted to be in the streets because they thought that that's where you did things.

And when we try to talk to them about the vote and so forth, you know, it's alright. Now they're very clear. They now understand the vote and power makes a difference, but they also understand that the federal government is not their friends. So what I'm beginning to see is a lot of young Blacks talking about organizing and gaining political power at the local and state level.

So my sense is that they are now thinking about power. They're now thinking about coalitions. You know, whether with environmentalists or with women, Planned Parenthood or so forth, they're thinking about coalitions. But they now know that being in the streets is not enough. They now have to be at the centers of power where decisions are made, because they now see that—along with the Hispanic community and others—the only way they could protect themselves from various forces is to actually begin to hold some of these political offices and elected offices.

So my sense is that—I mean, Trump has been a very clarifying event for young Blacks. I'm telling you before the election, telling them that you know you needed to get involved, because you will be destroyed if you don't. Because they assumed that things would go as they were going, and you could never face the danger that they face today.

Now Trump has been a clarifying event, and they're now beginning to focus. I don't have to talk about a vote anymore. I don't have to talk about the need to gain elected office. I don't have to do that anymore, because they understand it in ways that I couldn't talk to them about it. So I think, as I look at today I find a lot of young Black people who are very smart, very energetic and beginning to move in the right direction.

I don't think in these environments, they're going to articulate Black Power as a singular piece. They're going to talk about powerful Black people, but they're also going to relate to other entities in and around them. At some point I think they feel that they need to overwhelm the forces on the other side that have now gained control of the federal government. So that's kind of what I see at this point.

Kwame Holman: And finally, Courtland, to the extent that some of those very smart young people, Mr. [DeRay] Mckesson at Black Lives Matter, some of the others, some of the women there understand a SNCC legacy, a Black Power legacy. Having studied it, as many of them have. You've talked about the need for generalized education, about the movement and how, as being an important thing, what would that accomplish? Why hasn't it happened? Why don't K-12 know about it and how can that be accomplished?

Courtland Cox: I want to talk about two things, the institutional question that you raised, and then the other question, I think the young people, a lot of the young people, look to SNCC, and I tell these millennials—I kind of joke with them, pull their leg saying—well, you know, these guys, some of them, they go up to 35. I said, when I was in SNCC anybody over 28 was considered old. You guys who think you're young, we were 17 to 21 when we were in SNCC.

But they respect what we have done and call on us to talk to their group and one of the things that the SNCC Legacy Project, which I'm working with, is trying to do, is hold a lot of intergenerational discussions politically.

The other question you asked, the K-12 and college and so forth. I would say, before, 20 years ago, the history—basically everything was Rosa Parks sat down. Martin [Luther] King Jr. stood up, and the world was alright and everything was centered around Martin [Luther] King Jr. But over the past 20 years, there's been a campaign to collect a lot of documents and so forth about the movement. I mean, we've really gone a long way.

CRMvets [Civil Rights Movement Veterans], which is out in California, has a website, CRMvet website, then we have now done the SNCC Digital Gateway. This discussion will be part of it, and we're now collecting enough documents so that we can get teachers to begin to have a body of work that they can look at. In fact, in July, we're bringing together teachers in Mississippi who will begin to look at the movement history and be able to teach that in class and we want to expand that.

The first step of beginning to do what is necessary for education, we're collecting the documents that can be the basis of the education and teaching materials. Maybe the next, I would say, 5 to 10 years, we need to begin to have a cadre of educators, I would say, from grammar school all the way to post-college, where we would begin to tell the story, begin—and again as I started—be able to define what history is, and decide where we want to go with it. That again, is the real question: our ability to define who we are and to decide how we pursue life, liberty and happiness.

Kwame Holman: Courtland Cox, thank you very much.

Courtland Cox: Okay, thank you very much.