Black Power Chronicles: Dr. Frank Smith

Dr. Frank Smith, a founding member of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), discussed his journey from activism to political leadership. He highlighted the transition from the Civil Rights Movement to the Black Power Movement, emphasizing the importance of gaining real power through voting rights and community control. Smith noted the significant economic impact of the Civil Rights Movement, increasing African American income from $9 billion in the 1950s to $900 billion by 2008. He also addressed contemporary issues like police brutality and the importance of community-based strategies for sustainable progress.

Dr. Clarence Lusane: Welcome everyone. I'm Dr. Clarence Lusane. I'm the Chair of the Political Science Department at Howard University. And it is my pleasure today to interview Dr. Frank Smith. Welcome Dr. Smith.

Dr. Frank Smith: Thank you.

Dr. Clarence Lusane: Of the many achievements of Dr. Smith, we want to note that he was a founding member of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, or SNCC, as it's properly known, in the early 1960s. He was a key organizer in Mississippi during that period, working alongside Ms. Fannie Lou Hamer, Stokely Carmichael, Dr. Martin Luther King and many others.

He later moved to Washington, DC where—along with other SNCC members such as Marion Barry, Courtland Cox, Ivanhoe Donaldson—he forged a stellar and impactful political and advocacy career. He served on the DC Board of Education and for four terms on the DC City Council.

His activism and work coincided in the early years with the emergence of the Black Power Movement, the subject of our discussion today. Welcome, Dr. Smith.

Dr. Frank Smith: Thank you. Glad to be here with you.

Dr. Clarence Lusane: I first want to give you an opportunity to talk to us about how you became an activist. How did you go from being a young man in the 1940s, early 1950s to becoming an activist?

Dr. Frank Smith: I grapple with this subject myself from time to time, but let me just say it this way – I landed at Morehouse College in 1959, the Civil Rights Movement started in 1960… pretty much, the sit-in movement and things. At the end of my freshman year at Morehouse, before the end of the school year, I stumbled into a SNCC meeting when they were just about to do a demonstration, and opened my mouth to say something about how disorganized this thing seemed to be, and they made me the leader of that organization. So I ended up, a few years later, being chairman of that.

After being in Atlanta, I agreed to drop out of college, along with a bunch of other SNCC people to form the organizing core of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee. And I went to Mississippi, where I stayed for six years.

It was an eventful but interesting career. It actually shaped my life, and actually formed a basis for my motivation for the rest of my life. My wish to young people today is that they can find their cause early in life, which will shape them… find their friends, give them an idea of something to do with themselves… that they can do that's important, where they can make a contribution. Those of us who were in SNCC were fortunate to find that, and I think it's a blessing that we achieved and also enabled us to have some impact for a long time beyond our careers, just as organizers in the civic [space].

Dr. Clarence Lusane: Let's go back and talk about that first demonstration. So what was that about?

Dr. Frank Smith: They [SNCC] were going to go downtown to picket at a department store which was not hiring any Black people there. In Atlanta [Georgia], they wouldn't let you sit at a lunch counter. They had a very expensive place over there where they sold these mink coats. People who had enough money to buy one. Black people could go over there and try one on, but they couldn't go into the dressing room.

You couldn't eat at the lunch counter, you couldn't try clothes on there. You couldn't work in the store, except as janitors and stuff like that. That was wrong for us, and because we knew that even when we finished our college careers, no matter how we comported ourselves, no matter how smart we were, how well dressed we were, the fact of the matter, we were barred from certain jobs in Atlanta and New Orleans [Louisiana] and in Washington DC, just because the color of our skin.

And so it devalued our education. And we were smart to figure that out, and once we got going, we just kept it up.

Dr. Clarence Lusane: So what year was that?

Dr. Frank Smith: Spring of 1960

Dr. Clarence Lusane: So this was before the very famous 1960 Greensboro [North Carolina] sit-in.

Dr. Frank Smith: That's right. Demonstrations were going on all of these campuses at the same time. In Nashville [Tennessee], the students at Fisk [University] were demonstrating downtown. In Atlanta, we were picketing and demonstrating downtown Atlanta. People up in North Carolina were picketing and going to jail too.

Dr. Clarence Lusane: Now, what I want to move to is discussing the Black Power Movement. Historians and politicians—we love to have categories. We have to have boxes to put things in. So, when we think about the 1960s and Black activism, we think of that as two key movements that drove that period: the Civil Rights Movement and the Black Power Movement.

Now, you've generally been seen, and perhaps even defined yourself, as a core founder and mover in the Civil Rights Movement. But how, in your experiences during that period and since then, did the Civil Rights Movement and the Black Power movement overlap in what you were doing?

Dr. Frank Smith: If you define the Civil Rights Movement as a movement to gain what we call equal rights or, equal access—that's really the better word to say—equal access to lunch counters, grocery stores, jobs, and those things that are covered by the 14th Amendment to the Constitution. The promise of equal protection under the law—that's what the Civil Rights Movement was about. Eventually, we get to the 1964 Civil Rights Act, which repealed some of those things.[1]

So, if you define civil rights like that, yes I was a part of that group when I was demonstrating in Atlanta. But by the time SNCC decided to go to Mississippi—when I dropped out of college in 1962, which was really only about a year and a half later—SNCC had made the decision to send full-time organizers into these places to register people to vote. At that point, in my view, the Black Power side of us started to form.

What were we doing? We sat down in Atlanta with a map, and we picked counties where African-Americans were the majority of the population. We didn't just walk out one day and go to Mississippi. We sat down and planned. Because we were college students, we were smart, we could read and write, and we could read these numbers. We deployed our staff to those places where we knew Black people were not just a majority, but a significant majority.

[1] The 1964 Civil Rights Act was a major legislative victory, as it outlawed discrimination based on race, color, religion, sex, or national origin, effectively repealing many of the legal structures that upheld segregation and unequal treatment.

When I went to Holly Springs, Mississippi, Marshall County was 76 percent Black. We knew that if we could register people to vote, we could take over this place. We could stop the Klansmen from burning houses and stuff like that, because we could get someone into the sheriff's department, the mayor's office, the police department, and we could serve on juries.

At that point, SNCC decided to become an organization serious about how we were going to gain real power in these communities. In my view, that's when the seeds of Black Power were born.

Dr. Clarence Lusane: Now, one of the vexing questions, picking up on that, is: when did the Black Power Movement basically start? So often, these [two movements] are seen as completely separate. But from what you're saying, there was a transition, and at least some parts of the Civil Rights Movement were the birthers of the Black Power Movement.

I wonder if you could talk about that a little bit and also about the transition that happened within SNCC. One of the things that distinguished the Civil Rights Movement from the Black Power Movement was that the Black Power Movement was Black. The Civil Rights Movement, by contrast, was clearly more than just African-Americans.

Dr. Frank Smith: I think that was, as I've tried to describe, what I call the seeds of it within SNCC. There were always people there who thought—and we coexisted as an entity, as an organization with people inside the organization—who still thought our major emphasis should be on these lunch counters [sit-ins] and on these outward things. Primarily because of the employment associated with these demonstrations.

We didn't just demonstrate because we were trying to buy a cup of coffee. In every case, in every city, if you look at the demands people made on these stores, the first and foremost of those demands was employment. Our people were suffering not only from high unemployment rates, but they had us structured so that we could only get the lowest-paying jobs—janitors, maids, cooks. We couldn't get the jobs that paid the money in the front offices and the professional jobs.

So, tied to that kind of lunch demonstration was how we got the public involved in this. The public didn't really care that much about these lunch [counters]—except that it grated on them and made them mad when they had to face it every day.

But what they really cared about was the fact that people couldn't get good jobs, because the people out in the public are concerned about making enough money to support their families, and they knew they were being discriminated against. And even worse than that, they were required, in many cases, to do this work of the professionals and were still being paid as janitors.[2]

[2] While people were focused on supporting their families, they were acutely aware of being denied fair access to good jobs due to racial discrimination. What made the situation even worse was that many individuals were performing tasks that mirrored the work of professionals, yet they were still being paid menial wages, highlighting economic and racial injustice in the workplace.

I'll never forget this. At the richest department store in Atlanta, Georgia, the maids arranged all of those window displays in the store. They were classified as maids. The person who got paid to do that job was classified as some kind of a technician. They were being paid as maids. They were doing the work, and they knew they could do it. They were the ones that came up with the ideas of what this place should look like.

People worked with a kind of a rage in their heart, knowing full well that they were doing the work of somebody who should be paid more. It made it easy for us once we could articulate what our goals were and our demands were. It made it easier for us to get the public behind. We culminated in the sit-in movement that disrupted things on the surface and got in the press with a boycott saying, "do not shop at this place until they agree to open up these boycotts and hire some minority people."

Dr. Clarence Lusane: You raise a really, really critical point, because the issue of—fundamentally, could people make a living? Could people be fairly treated – as [indistinct] Black politics, and something that W.E.B. Du Bois talked about, even [Marcus] Garvey talked about, certainly, the March on Washington in 1963.

Although it focused on these symbolic issues of segregation, essentially the March was a call for jobs. Did whites who were in SNCC and more broadly in the Civil Rights Movement understand that component of what the struggle was about? That it wasn't just the symbolism of getting rid of segregation, but that restructuring of the economic life of society was really critical as well.

Dr. Frank Smith: I think that people don't understand the full impact of the Civil Rights Movement. They don't understand that part of it. And I run the African American Civil War Museum here in Washington, DC and I've got a graphic on the very end of our display that shows you what the impact of the Civil Rights Movement was on the Black community.

On the income side, we earned like $9 billion or something like that, in the 1950s, all our money together. We're picking cotton and we're working all these days. By the time President [Barack] Obama runs in 2008, African-Americans earn $900 billion the year we record that figure. That figure is greater than the GNP [Gross National Product] for Canada for that year.

African Americans went from one condition in the 1950s to a tremendously different one. If you disaggregate those figures and examine where all of that money comes from, it mostly comes from jobs in the public sector. As African Americans take over these mayor's offices—in cities like Atlanta, Georgia; New Orleans, Louisiana; Washington, DC; and others—they bring into the government with them, highly-paid professional Black persons who can now earn a living and who can now buy houses.

They can take it, send their kids to good schools and they can drive good cars, and make a living for themselves. So you see those numbers go up, and as African-Americans take over those jobs. This doesn't happen in the cities. It brings us somewhat in conflict with these labor unions, in some cases, because many of these jobs in the city are unionized.

So you've got Marion Barry, Frank Smith, others from SNCC, trying to figure out how we get Black people employed. And we know we can't put all these people out. We can't fire all these people. You can't just walk in there and fire everybody, because they're protected by the unions. And besides, some of them didn't really need to be fired. Some of them did. Some of them didn't really need to be fired.

So what do we do? We have to increase the number of employees the government has. If you look at the number of employees the government had for the first several years Barry was in office in DC, you'll see that the number of city employees goes from 23,000 to almost 48,000 employees. Well, it ain't no use running for office if we can't get our people to work, what good are they gonna do? We're just gonna become caretakers for somebody else.

That's not a revolutionary, Black Power move. That's you just being a caretaker for everybody else. We developed the largest Black middle class here in Washington, DC, in the country. Most of those jobs were in the public sector. There were jobs as African-Americans take over as mayors. If you go to Mississippi today, the mayor of every major city in Mississippi is African-American, including the mayor of Jackson, Mississippi. So it's had an impact on the country. It's changed it and made it a better place for Black people.

Dr. Clarence Lusane: As you're laying this out and you're tracking this, my thinking is going back to the multiple definitions of Black Power, right? Black Power is kind of the movement, and that has specific people who were part of those organizations, from Congress of Afrikan People to [Maulana] Karenga's organization US, to people including the Black Panthers.

Then you have Black Power as kind of a symbolic term that everybody from Richard Nixon to Colby Young employed. Then you can argue that you have black power, small 'b', small 'p', that perhaps along the lines you're describing, where people were not necessarily ideologically tied to a particular term, but what actually happened in practice.

Now you were there at the beginning at the famous march in June 1966 where Stokely Carmichael and Willie Ricks, on that march, a number of times, apparently said the term "Black Power."[3] Now, it had been said before in the past, but that's where it really became kind of a

[3] The June 1966 march in Greenwood, Mississippi, was a key event in the Civil Rights Movement, specifically focused on advocating for Black Power. During the march, Carmichael and Ricks introduced and repeatedly used the term "Black Power" as a rallying cry for self-empowerment, pride, and the rejection of white dominance. The crowd responded positively to the slogan, as it resonated with their desire for autonomy and a sense of collective identity, marking a shift in the tone of the movement.

catalyst for a different way of thinking about how the movement was going to be shaped. And, as I mentioned, Black Power very much said 'Black people.' So you were there. What was your feeling at the time? Did you have discussions with Stokely Carmichael about this? And how did you see this evolution after 1966?

Dr. Frank Smith: I knew Stokely pretty well. Actually, he and I were in jail together in Greenwood, Mississippi in 1963. The spring of [19]63, we got arrested for marching people to the courthouse to register to vote. We spent about three weeks in jail together. You get to know people pretty good when you're in jail at the same time. It makes a big difference.

I think he always had a militant definition of African-Americans being able to control their own lives. You've got to remember something, he was deployed in the Mississippi Delta and Lowndes County, in the Black Belt. He's in Alabama, I'm in Mississippi. We are in places where African-Americans are a large majority of the population, where they can't vote because people just won't let them vote because of the color of their skin.

We're trying to figure out how to rally these people. I think in its simplest definition, what it means is, in these places where African Americans are a majority of the population, they should be able to vote so they can themselves control their own destinies. I think that was really the intent of what he and Ricks had in mind when they first put this out there.

Now the public takes it and spins it a lot of different ways. I remember on that same march, Dr. King said there's something about how – he thought it was bad, because it's essentially saying they're fighting white people – to say it that way. Stokely at that point, says: "You know, who cares? We gotta take care of ourselves. These people are killing us down here, like they don't care about us. They're killing us down here. We trying to find a way to protect ourselves."

That's a real discussion right there. That's not just somebody who's out there, that's making some kind of cavalier notion because of an egotistical idea. It was a real, serious matter. We were being killed. We went to Meredith March, because [James] Meredith had just been shot. Right? Why were we out there? James Meredith had been shot for trying to march. He started a March Against Fear and got shot by some person who really wanted to stop him and stop the rest of us too. To fight all of us, scare us all off.[4]

You've got to remember that as part of the backdrop. Some other things happen as a result of this too, and that is that it came down to the question of whether, for example, SNCC was going to allow white people to continue to work, or whether they're going to vote them out of the organization. And as those things start to happen, Black Power in SNCC takes on another aspect.

[4] The Meredith March Against Fear started in June 1966, with James Meredith attempting to march across Mississippi to challenge the pervasive fear preventing Black citizens from registering to vote. After Meredith was shot, the march continued with leaders like Martin Luther King Jr. and Stokely Carmichael. The march became an important symbol of the emerging Black Power movement. The marchers faced significant resistance, including violent police action, but ended with 15,000 participants and brought significant attention to voter registration and civil rights issues in Mississippi.

Some people said we went broke. By the end of the year, we were broke, didn't have any money, because all the money dried up. The number of whites who had been really, really a good part of the organization, who had been my friends and other people's friends did not feel comfortable anymore, wanted to go off and do something different. All that other stuff started to happen too.

Taken at its face, as the way this all started out, and how I think it ended up. It ended up being beneficial. Basically, what he was saying was just, "this is an unfair situation for African Americans, any way you look at it, because we are a majority in these places, and people won't let us vote because we are the majority. We can't get our share of the government. We can't get our share of the resources, our share of the jobs, because of the color of our skin, and because these people got their foot on our necks. We got to get their foot off of our necks before we can do anything else."

Dr. Clarence Lusane: There's a really important point you made in here that I hadn't thought about. So certainly Dr. King supported racial equality. Do you think he eventually, at some point, supported Black community power? In other words, as you talked about, Stokely's initial speaking of this term was to basically say where Black people have majority, Black people should have some control over what happens in their life.

King thought that might be alienating. Do you think King moved at some point to say, "okay, I really do think that particular meaning of Black power really is significant, it really is important," and that he'd agree with it. Or do you think he never kind of got there?

Dr. Frank Smith: I think that in the first instance, I think he probably would have gotten there if the second part of it hadn't happened. I think it became clear that, after a while at the SNCC meeting—I had to copy the minutes from the meetings where they voted to exclude whites from the organization. I think as those things started to happen—and Dr. King, I don't know that he was personally committed to this concept of integration.

But he was committed to one thing, which I think we can only be fair in stating, and that is that he knew that we needed the support of a large number of what I'm going to call "well-meaning whites" in order to move this country forward. That African-Americans by ourselves, we are a minority in this country. Now you start saying, well, in places where we have a majority we ought to have some power, yeah. But if you go nationwide, we are a significant minority here. We're 20 percent of the population.

So for us to ever get to the point where we can elect Barack Obama President or elect somebody in—and most of us were living in places where we were minorities. I was living in Newnan, Georgia, Blacks were only 20 percent of the population. I don't want to buy into a system where it said, okay, if I'm the majority, I get to be treated right? But if I'm only 20 percent, you can treat me any way you want to. I don't believe that.

Minorities have to be protected too, and that's the essence of what America is about. I think that Dr. King would have probably supported it, but it happened so quickly, you're talking about a matter of months. Before one thing leads to another, the press was going along, and all of this.

I think by the time this all got sort of spread out, I don't think King would have supported it, because I think he believed genuinely, and he was correct about this too, that in order for African Americans to move forward, we had to keep our friends, our white, well-meaning white friends who were willing to stand up with us go to jail with us, in some cases, get killed with us. Schwerner, Goodman and Cheney get killed with us in order to advance the cause of civil rights and equality here in the country. I think that that was a wise strategy.[5]

Dr. Clarence Lusane: At some point you, Marion Barry, Ivanhoe Donaldson, you guys all end up in Washington, DC.

Dr. Frank Smith: Absolutely.

Dr. Clarence Lusane: Why Washington DC, and how were you all able, in a relatively short period, take over city government? Washington had been around since the beginning of the country. It had basically been controlled by the federal government, so it wasn't even locally controlled.

So how are you guys who, however you were perceived by Black Power advocates were certainly seen by white power advocates as militant. So how were you guys able to work that system? How were you able to both—why you came to DC and then how were you able to eventually come to power?

Dr. Frank Smith: Many of these people, including Barry, moved to Washington DC before I did. I moved here in 1968 in January, and the public will remember this because Dr. King was assassinated in April that year. So I had only been here a few months when Washington DC went up in flames. A riot breaks out.[6] I'm looking around saying to myself, maybe I made a bad choice. Maybe I'd be better off in the Mississippi Delta.

But the fact of the matter is, at that time, African-Americans in DC were really not much better off than they were in Mississippi. They were discriminated against in the job market. There were jobs they were barred out of because of the color of their skin. That's just like Mississippi. They couldn't vote in local elections. They couldn't vote for mayor, they couldn't vote for school board. They couldn't vote for city council.

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[5] Michael Schwerner, Andrew Goodman, and James Chaney were civil rights workers who were murdered in Mississippi in 1964 during Freedom Summer, a campaign to register Black voters. Their killings were carried out by members of the Ku Klux Klan, with local law enforcement involved. Their deaths drew national attention to the dangers of civil rights activism in the South and helped galvanize support for the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965.

[6] The riots were a reaction to the deep racial and economic injustices that King had fought against. The D.C. uprising led to massive destruction, National Guard intervention, and long-term economic impacts on the city.

Just like Mississippi, they had an oppressive white regime that was a police department here in DC, many of whom came from the South, because they had a guy named [John L.] McMillan [U.S. Representative] who was running the city government from South Carolina. He was hiring his buddies from down there to be – they were coming up here and getting on the police department because they wanted to make a career of beating up Black people.

This place was a lot like Mississippi, except that the Klan was not as bad as they were down there. So we could organize in DC. And I think once the local people realized how really bad off they were and how much they were being denied basic human rights for work and basic human rights for dignity.

There were places where they couldn't shop either, and there were places where they couldn't try out clothes. So once they realized that, once we brought that to their attention and went to work on a Free DC Movement, we were not only able to get the right to vote for council and mayor here in DC, but also to get ourselves elected to office so we could implement some of those programs that we had talked about doing as street organizers—militant street organizers.[7]

Now we can implement some of those programs, like the mayor's Summer Youth Program, which Barry brought into the government with him. He organized Pride Incorporated while in government.[8] I had organized housing programs in the Mississippi Delta. That's what I was doing my last few years. I get on the city council. I introduce a homestead program which let people fix up their own houses, sell them a house for $250 a piece in the city government.

We develop a very large cooperative housing program here in the city, because we want to see some of those programs implemented, and here we have an opportunity to do it. So Washington became sort of a place where we carry out some of those ideals, and not just here, but also across the country.

Dr. Clarence Lusane: What strikes me is really important for what you guys were able to accomplish and what you brought to the table, as you pointed out, you, Barry, others didn't just come to the city and said, "elect me to office." Firstly, because there was no office to be elected.

Dr. Frank Smith: Right. Absolutely.

Dr. Clarence Lusane: Even if there were, you know, that wasn't the path. The path was, you guys spent a number of years working in the communities and building programs and organizations that were able to then be translated into the administration, when Barry came into power, programs that needed not just to be located in neighborhoods, but really could have a city wide value, right? And how deliberative was that?

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[7] The Free DC Movement was a political effort to secure home rule and voting rights for Washington, D.C. residents, who were historically denied the ability to elect their own local government. Activists pushed for self-governance, leading to the passage of the District of Columbia Home Rule Act in 1973, which granted D.C. the ability to elect a mayor and city council.

[8] Pride, Inc. was a job-training and economic empowerment program founded by Marion Barry in 1967.

Dr. Frank Smith: Let me just frame this another way. I would dare say. I would posit to say that at the time we ran for office—Marion Barry, myself, John Lewis and others—that we run for office as probably the most qualified group of people, I won't say Black people – people.

You look at some of what's going on in the country now, people say, "Now, well, he didn't know about this. The first time they ever did this, he didn't know what he was doing." We knew what we were doing. Nobody ever said that about us, right? We knew what we were doing. We have been educated in the best schools. I was at Morehouse, Marion Barry almost finished a PhD.

John Wilson, who was the chairman of the city council here, was a good student down in Maryland. Ivanhoe Donaldson – We knew what we were doing, and we were working hard at trying to do it, and that's why the public believed in us and kept electing us to office. The public is not stupid. They know the difference between somebody who's doing something to try to help them, and somebody who's doing something to try to harm them, they know the difference, and they know you should support one and scorn the other.

I think that made a difference in terms of us. But I wanted to say that because people might ask. Marion Barry was born in Mississippi. I was born in Georgia. He was the mayor. John Wilson was born out of St. Mary's County in Maryland. Hilda Mason, who was on the council with us, was born in Virginia. And Nadine Winter came from someplace down in Virginia. You keep going.

Even David Clark, who was on the council with us, had been a lawyer for SCLC [Southern Christian Leadership Conference], for Dr. King and the Poor People's March. We all had a very strong background in the Civil Rights Movement and so and it gave us a chance to do something here that really didn't happen anywhere else. We built the largest Black middle class in the country, here in DC, maybe the largest Black middle class in the world.

Now, many of them have moved out to Maryland and Virginia now, and they took their money, which they had the right to do. They thought they were getting a better house and getting a better school and a better neighborhood, which they had the right to do.

Because we have passed laws that made it possible for them to move into neighborhoods where they couldn't move before. That's right. I think it made a difference. It was healthy for America. It was certainly healthy for the Black community. Made America a better place for all of us to live.

For those people who never saw a sign that said "colored go here" and "colored water" and "ride the back of the bus," and who was never turned down for a job just because of the color of their skin. If you never experienced that, thank God for you that you never experienced it. But there are some of us still alive, who still remember those scornful, hurtful days. And I'm very happy that my children and grandchildren never had to see that because of the efforts by myself and

others, many of whom gave their lives so that those things could be taken off the landscape of America. And then of course, to see an African-American get elected president in the U.S., not just not once, but twice. It's a good time.

Dr. Clarence Lusane: What was the relationship between the city council and the mayor with community based organizations when you guys came back? Because part of what seems to be the cocoon of protection for what you guys were attempting to do was that there was some bases in the community for that. But the community, of course, is very diverse, and there were Black Power organizations and Black militant organizations. What was the relationship between those groups and what you guys were doing?

Dr. Frank Smith: Let me say – I'm sure this was true when I was there, Barry was there, and also certainly true during the Obama administration. You never do enough for all of the people who need your help. We were never able to erase unemployment from the very high levels in southeast Washington. For example, we were never able to get all the homeless people off the streets. And the Lord knows, I don't know what happened to the public school system here in the District of Columbia. We're doing some work on that now at the African-American Civil War Museum, by bringing kids to our museum, because we have a study that says that kids who go to museums do better than kids who do not. So I'm working at that right now, myself and my staff.

The fact of the matter is— the question is, did we move the needle forward? And the reason why I gave you that statistic earlier about the increase in income? Because I think the record clearly demonstrates that this Civil Rights Movement made a significant difference in terms of the quality of life for Black people in the United States. Not only did we just get rid of those signs that were so demeaning for you to see. I don't know how we ever got from Georgia to Washington DC without going to a bathroom, because there weren't any bathrooms for Black people at any of those service stations down there.

They didn't even have two bathrooms. They couldn't afford two, so they had only one for whites. So what did we have to do? We had to figure out some other way to relieve ourselves. And so it was ridiculous, when you start thinking about it now, absolutely ridiculous. The country has changed, and I think it made a difference.

It changed not only because of our efforts, but also because we were smart enough to reach across the aisle and find our friends in other places, in labor unions and other organizations, churches and schools, who were willing to help us because they believed in human dignity, also and freedom. They were willing to risk their lives.

At the end of the day, we end up sharing some of those resources. You say, “okay, if the income in the Black community goes from $9 billion to $900 billion – if we weren't making that money, somebody else would be making it.” That's some of what this current administration is trying to

reverse now. What they're saying to people is, "if we can get these people out of here, we get this money back in your pocket where it belongs."

To some extent, this is a fight over money. Don't make no mistake about that. This is a fight over money too, and it seems like we're always going to be in that fight. We have to prepare our young people. You're doing this at Howard University now as a professor, I do it at a museum.

Every parent and grandparent out there, and I view it, is teaching kids now the value of hard work and discipline and how to find their friends and stay with them. Put your arms around your friends, and don't forget to hold hands. But you got to look both ways before you cross the street, because it's still dangerous out there.

Dr. Clarence Lusane: We're in a dangerous period, for sure, and one with a lot of anxiety. I would argue, probably some frustration with political leadership, but kind of across the board. When I think of Black Power, 2017 on the electoral level, I think of Ras Baraka in Newark [New Jersey], Chokwe Lumumba Jr. in Jackson, Mississippi. And then, in terms of sort of on the street level, Black Lives Matter. How do you read today's wide array of Black politics, particularly what I would call the children or maybe grandchildren of Black Power?

Dr. Frank Smith: Let me say, first of all, something about Black Lives Matter, and that is that the Civil Rights Movement left unresolved this issue of police brutality. This issue was around when we were around too. I just remind the public that the Black Panther Party starts out in California as a party to try to defend themselves against police brutality.[9]

They weren't talking about patrolling the Black community trying to stop somebody from the outside, from coming in there. They were talking about the police department, which was really brutalizing the Black community. And that was in Oakland, California, not just in Mississippi and Alabama.

The first elective office Barry had in DC, was with the Third Police District Advisory Committee. That was before we got any elective offices here. What was that committee doing? It was holding hearings on police brutality in Washington, DC. This issue has been around for a long time. We just never were able to figure out how to deal with it.

The Muslims [Nation of Islam], when they started the Fruit of Islam, they used to have these famous marches down the street. They were talking about protecting the Black community against police brutality. So this issue has been around for all these years. We have just never had a systematic way to deal with and I think Black Lives Matter is really doing the country a service, making the community safer by bringing this issue to the forefront now.

[9] Initially focused on armed self-defense, the party expanded into community programs, such as free breakfast for children.

And I thank God for them. I'm glad they're out there. I feel a little safer. I've got teenage grandchildren out there now, and I feel a little safer about them being out there because somebody's watching. It's really important for somebody to be watching, because if ain't nobody watching, the devil can do you a lot of harm.

Dr. Clarence Lusane: And what about Chokwe and Ras Baraka?

Dr. Frank Smith: I knew Chokwe's father, who was there. I spent time with him before he actually had a fatal heart attack that killed him. He didn't win the first time, I was glad to see him win the second time. I have not talked to him personally. I did not know him personally. I knew his father. I've heard good things about him. I look forward to meeting him. I'll be in Mississippi soon. I look forward to getting a chance to meet him and talk to him.

Jackson is still the capital of Mississippi. It's the largest city in the state. I'm glad to hear that there's an African-American there who says he's going to do something significant for his people. He has talked about this publicly. I read a lot about him, about him trying to reduce the unemployment rate down there, trying to help some housing matters in those communities that are really devastated in Jackson. I wish him well. I look forward to meeting with him, and hopefully anything I can do to help, I'm in there with him.

Dr. Clarence Lusane: I knew his father as well, from Detroit [Michigan]. His father's from Detroit, and I remember his activism around the Republic of New Africa.[10] And then when he went to Mississippi, and for a long time, he had deep, deep roots in Jackson and Mississippi.

But it's a real challenge because in a period when we were growing up—if you look at the [19]60s, [19]70s, even to some degree, the [19]80s—the amount of support that cities were getting from the federal government was very critical and provided a lot of resources to help with education, with infrastructure, with transportation.

All of that more or less died under [Ronald] Reagan and bases never kind of come back. So cities really are left on their own. To me, always a question of, to what degree will there be a corporate strategy for how we move forward, or will there be a community-based people strategy?

When I think of Chokwe and Jackson, I think of Ras and Newark, what they advocate as a platform is a people's based strategy that can sustain. But it seems that it's a really difficult challenge. In Washington DC, you guys were able to—see this was what I was trying to get to—to take a city government and make it work.

[10] The Republic of New Afrika (RNA) was founded in 1968 by Black activists seeking to establish an independent Black nation in the U.S. South, including Mississippi, Louisiana, Alabama, Georgia, and South Carolina.

Dr. Frank Smith: Let me be clear about this now. All those years that we were in office, I had served 16 years in the office here as a council member, the District of Columbia government never had enough money to pay its bills. In any of those years, we had to take nothing and make something out of it, because we knew our people were suffering so badly that we had to figure out how to juggle these things enough so that we could make it work.

This government now has a $750 million surplus.[11] People go around now bragging about how much of a surplus they have. Anybody can have a surplus if they don't do anything to help homeless people, if they don't do anything about employment for all these young people out of work. It's like me saying, "I got plenty of money in the bank." I could have plenty if I didn't pay my mortgage. I'd have plenty of money in the bank, but I wouldn't have anywhere to stay either.

To some extent, I think we have to keep pushing them to do better, because they do have resources. My career was spent on all those years when the city didn't have a lot of money, but I still did a homestead housing program. We still did rent control laws that protected these properties. We still protect the people who lived in these properties. We still put in circuit breaker tax legislation so people didn't get put out of a neighborhood just because the taxes went up—because the value of the property went up.

If you've been living there for a long time, you ought to be able to stay there. There are ways to do this, but you have to have the will, and the public just has to keep pushing our elected officials to make them do the right thing. I have a lot of faith that we have a lot of young people now coming to office in DC, like Chokwe down there in Mississippi. These young people are smart. They're well educated. They come from good families and I think they'll do well. I have a lot of faith in the future here.

But let me say one other thing about these cities. The city, for most African-Americans, has been sort of an enabling institution. People leave the Mississippi Delta and where did they go? They went to Chicago. When my folks left Mississippi, Georgia, they went to Chicago. My mother's family went to Dayton [Ohio]. They didn't move to some rural area. They moved to a city.

Why did they move to the cities? Because these cities were enabling institutions where they could walk in there, as you described to me earlier, you could walk into Ford Motor Company, get in line and get a job in two days. Because that's what they were there for. And they made a little money, and they sent money back home to support their families, and eventually moved their families here with them.

These cities were enabling institutions for Black people who are coming out of slavery with their newfound freedom, setting up these colleges and universities and churches and schools and

[11] When Mayor Marion Barry assumed office in January 1979, he reported inheriting a $284 million budget deficit.

things like that. When African-Americans in Washington DC talk about being displaced, they're not just talking about the fact that they have to move, because all of us moved. I moved from Georgia to get here. You moved from Michigan to get here.

So all of us may have to move to do better, but we moved to a place where there were enabling institutions that were supporting us. We joined churches and schools and labor unions because those things helped us to better our lives and better our communities. That fabric is coming apart right now, and so when people get scared about being displaced, they're frightened because they know that whole network is coming apart, and without that network they are frightened about whether they can themselves make it, and also whether their children are going to be able to sustain their same level of income and influence.

There's good reason to be concerned about it. And I just wanted to say that, because this is not an irrational response. It is a rational response from people who see their network and their support unit coming apart. That village that had helped them to go from poverty in rural Alabama to middle class in Washington, DC or Chicago or Dayton, Ohio has come apart.

The government has to see this as a development strategy, and find ways to put money there, to retain those values that those institutions have provided for America as stepping stones for people who are trying to make a better life for themselves and their families. Ain't nobody gonna look at that and say we got any leadership like that coming from the White House at the moment.

The leadership that's coming now is very different. But the federal government has provided substantive farming communities all across America because it wanted to keep those farms alive, because they meant something to the country. They've got to look at these cities that same way, where they look at these cities as places that need to be kept alive because they mean something to the country.

Dr. Clarence Lusane: I think that hits a lot on the head of where we're at, what the government is or is not doing. I would step back and look at one of the things that's happened in our lifetime which has been a transition in government philosophy, where we grew up as still sort of the beneficiaries of the New Deal and then the Great Society.

Somewhere along the way in the [19]70s, [19]80s, the idea of a government that actually takes responsibility for the least of us, that says there has to be a commitment to protecting people who are the most vulnerable, went out the window.

Dr. Frank Smith: Let me challenge you on that a little bit, professor, because I think that this public debate that's taking place now about healthcare is interesting within that context, because

they're debating a bill which was passed by the Obama administration would provide a network of healthcare for low-income people and others, working and non-working people too.

One administration ago, the government put in a pretty progressive piece of legislation that is designed to take care of these people. Now, you got a second administration here now trying to turn it around, and they're having a heck of a time trying to turn it around. Why? Because so many people benefit from it. And then those people wake up and realize that they're getting so much out of this. I would say that as a professor of history, or somebody who's looking at this through some kind of lens, the fact of the matter is, we're in an interesting period where there's a public debate going on right now about how much benefit this government is going to provide to people who need healthcare in the United States.

Dr. Clarence Lusane: I think absolutely very little. I would argue that Obamacare, the Affordable Care Act, was certainly a progressive step over what happened, but had severe limits. And I would say that in the context of the difference between the right of people to have healthcare versus the right of people to have health insurance.

So there's a big difference. And I would say that President Obama was, and I use the term, he was a neoliberal Keynesian, meaning that while there were parts of the New Deal and the Great Society that he embraced—from the perspective of building it within the framework of corporate America—that that put limits on exactly how far he would go.

The broader point I was trying to get was that since the 1980s, whether it's been Democrats or Republicans, the idea of the welfare state has eroded. And as you're pointing out, now, the extreme of that is what we're seeing under the current administration. So my question is, how do we address the larger issue around governing philosophy and governing strategy?

Dr. Frank Smith: One of my roles as a father and a grandfather is to try to provide not only advice and direction to my offspring, but I also have to try to provide some sense of direction and optimism for the public. Let me just say that although we're going through these devastating moments and this discussion, the fact of the matter is, we won the last election. That coalition of African-Americans and progressive whites and Hispanics and others. We polled more votes than they did. So we'll get them next time. This is America. There's going to be another election. This is not one of those places where they can cancel elections because they're scared they're gonna lose. If you lived in one of those countries, you can't do that in America. We got better rules than that here in the United States. There's going to be another discussion.

This whole debate is taking place not only in the context of some legislation that was put in place by an African-American president and his coalition, but it's also taking place within the context of another reality, which is that in a year and a half or two or three, there's going to be another

election. So some of this damage that can be undone by these people here now, we're going to reverse it the first chance we get, because we want America to go another way.

Those of us who believe in freedom and who believe in democracy believe, as Dr. King said, the moral arc of the universe has changed. And I'm paraphrasing here now, it has changed, and it bends toward justice, and I think we passed that threshold here in the United States.

I think that leadership, which President Obama has provided and which the African-Americans have provided here in the United States has enabled America to get into a place where we deal with this race issue better in the United States than they do in many of these other countries. We really do. I've been around the world a couple of times. I've been in the civilization belt of Europe.[12] I've been in the deserts of Africa. I've been to the safaris in South Africa. I've seen a lot.

African Americans in the United States do better than they do anywhere in the world. We've got more doctors and lawyers and teachers and preachers and millionaires and billionaires because we've been fighting our tails off ever since we've been here. And we won't settle for nothing but the best, and we won't give up, as long as we got a breath to breathe. And you know, we'll fight.

I think we've provided an image for people around the world that you can win some of these fights. If you've got your soldiers in the field, they've got to believe they can win sometimes. If they don't believe they can win something, they are going to stop fighting, because there's nothing for them to fight for. What they're fighting for is victory. The idea of victory is on the other side of all of this. Something good is going to happen. When they stop believing that, they're going to stop fighting.nWe've got to keep our soldiers in the field, because there is victory to be had, and we've got to claim our victories a little bit at a time when we get them, to get our soldiers ready for the next fight. There's going to be another fight. There's going to be another election, there's also going to be another fight for African Americans.

I travel all around the world, African-Americans are mistreated, dark-skinned people, people who have dark skin, Indians, Blacks, Africans, are mistreated around the world, and many of them in their own countries. This issue of race is something that we are just having to wrestle with worldwide. I think we've got to continue this thing. I think we've made progress on it here, progress that I think has emboldened other people around the world—emboldened them to believe that they can make progress in their own communities, too.

That's been the essence of this fight. I'm happy to play the role in it. I think the Black Power Chronicles is going to do a good job of explaining this to the rest of the world.

[12] The term "civilization belt of Europe" likely refers to the historical and cultural centers of European civilization, encompassing regions with long histories of intellectual, political, and artistic influence.

Dr. Clarence Lusane: I have to say: Dr Smith, it's been a pleasure and an honor, and I appreciate the optimism. I think you're absolutely right. You can't progress unless you believe you can progress and optimism is critical. Thank you so much.

Dr. Frank Smith: Alright, thank you.