

## Black Power Chronicles: William “Bill” Clay

Bill Clay, a former Congressman from Missouri, discussed his political career and the historical context of Missouri's role in the Civil War and racial segregation. He highlighted the 1930 bond issue in St. Louis that funded Homer G. Phillips Hospital, a significant Black-run institution. Clay's involvement in labor and Civil Rights movements, including integrating construction unions, was noted. He also detailed the formation and impact of the Congressional Black Caucus, its role in national politics, and his legislative achievements, such as the Family and Medical Leave Act and the Hatch Act reform.

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**Tony Harrison:** My name is Tony Harrison. I have the privilege today of talking with an old and dear friend, Congressman Bill Clay from the state of Missouri, the City of St. Louis. And on behalf of the Black Power Chronicles, which is an oral history project of the old members of SNCC [Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee] in trying to record our history and make a record of our history that might not be in the normal history book. We have the privilege of having Bill Clay here with us, and it's an honor to have this opportunity.

**Bill Clay:** Well, thank you. It's an honor to appear with an old friend to rehash something from—

**Tony Harrison:** A long time ago. I wanted to start out by talking about Missouri, because in preparing for this, I went back and did a little reading on the history of Missouri and then how that bled into your political career. I didn't realize that Missouri was the northernmost slave holding state, and its actions as they interacted with Kansas made a major contribution to the start of the Civil War.

**Bill Clay:** Yes, but Missouri was part of that compromise—The Great Compromise—that after states could come in, one would come free, one would come slave.<sup>1</sup> In Missouri, even though it was a slave state, they only had one law that demanded separation of the races, and that was in the field of education. It was against the law to have mixed races being educated in the same building, same room.

Otherwise it was by custom, was what happened. But they were just as rigidly segregated as Mississippi and Alabama and Louisiana and the other southern states.

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<sup>1</sup> The Missouri Compromise of 1820 maintained a balance between free and slave states by admitting Missouri as a slave state and Maine as a free state, while restricting slavery north of the 36°30' latitude in the Louisiana Territory.

**Tony Harrison:** Not by law, but by custom. And that bled off into the divisions that took place within the politics of Missouri.

**Bill Clay:** That's the other thing. There was never any real effort after reconstruction to deny the vote to Black people. And so in 1930, [19]31 the Black citizens in St. Louis sponsored a constitutional amendment bond issue in St. Louis to build a hospital, a \$1 million [\$18.8 million in 2025] bond issue to build a hospital that—and in the language it says would be for Black people, would be run by Black people from the top to the bottom.

They passed that bond issue and the Republican mayor and the Republican controlled Board of Aldermen diverted the money to \$1 million for street lights and sidewalks instead of building the hospital and the Black community was furious. When Roosevelt got elected in [19]32, the Secretary of Interior came in and of course, the Black people elected a Democrat. They were responsible for electing a Democratic mayor, and—Bernard Dickman was his name, and he brought in Roosevelt's cabinet member of the interior, [Harold] Ickes and they brought the \$1 million and in seven years they built that hospital.

**Tony Harrison:** Under federal authority?

**Bill Clay:** It was controlled by the city. They replaced a million dollars. It was Homer G. Phillips hospital, [a] 600 bed hospital with 1000 employees, all of them Black, from the top down to the bottom.

**Tony Harrison:** Now, what year was this?

**Bill Clay:** 1938, it opened. For the next 20 years, 75% of all the Black doctors in this country interned in that hospital, Homer G. Phillips hospital. But see, when I personally got involved in politics, there were 50,000 Blacks in the City of St. Louis registered to vote.

**Tony Harrison:** Now you were...I've got it in my mind that you were also on the city council.

**Bill Clay:** Yes, I was on what they call the Board of Aldermen.

**Tony Harrison:** How long were you on the board?

**Bill Clay:** Five years and then I got elected as a ward committeeman of the Democratic committee, because that's where the patronage was established. We established our political system after Chicago, and their aldermen. The committee people control the patronage, so I gave up the Board of Aldermen to become the committeeman and also to decide who would go in 30 jobs and when.

[crosstalk] Those were my jobs. And from that, I was able to form a political club with some real power and influence with other people, because if they wanted support we could deliver—

**Tony Harrison:** Y'all could dog trade off.<sup>2</sup>

**Bill Clay:** Yes, and that's what happened.

**Tony Harrison:** Now, were you active in the labor movement?

**Bill Clay:** I was active in Civil Rights and labor too. I worked for the state, county and municipal workers union, when I was on the—

**Tony Harrison:** Which is current day AFSCME [American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees].

**Bill Clay:** Yeah, with AFSCME. On the Board of Aldermen, I was an agent for them. And later I was involved in integrating the construction unions, and so I worked for the plumbers and pipe fitters union in St. Louis. In fact, I took 15 Blacks in an integration program that I helped structure [it] and then they hired me as the coordinator for the integration program.

**Tony Harrison:** So that's on the side of the building trades, where we still today have problems with the integration of the building trades and getting Black participation in those trades.

**Bill Clay:** But the ones I integrated, we had no problems, because we made a commitment that for the next 10 years or so, when you took a white one in, then you had to take a Black one in. In fact, it was kind of comical, because the newspapers and all had predicted that we were going to have a massive retaliation from the white [workers].

So the second day after it went into existence, I'm in the union hall. I look out there, there's a demonstration out there. These white people were marching.

I said to the head of the Union, "What's the problem?" He said, "These are the people that were in line to be hired. They said we didn't bring enough Blacks in."

**Tony Harrison:** So that they could get hired.

**Bill Clay:** Yeah, they wanted some more Blacks to be taken into the union so they could come in.

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<sup>2</sup> "Dog trade off" refers to the practice of political bargaining, where favors, jobs, or support are exchanged for loyalty or influence, often seen in patronage systems that distribute resources based on political alliances.

**Tony Harrison:** What year did you go on the city council?

**Bill Clay:** In 1959.

**Tony Harrison:** And you stayed there five years

**Bill Clay:** Until [19]64.

**Tony Harrison:** Then you came off of the city council and went into ward leadership. How long did you stay in the ward leaders?

**Bill Clay:** Oh, probably 15 or 20 years. Even after I got elected to Congress, I kept that. It was a non-paying position. It was a power position.

**Tony Harrison:** So you all had, I've got it in my mind that you all had a reasonably effective political organization in St. Louis.

**Bill Clay:** Oh, I think we did. We elected governors. We were responsible for [Mel] Carnahan being elected governor of Missouri, for several mayors being elected and for several being unseated.

**Tony Harrison:** So in the spirit of the power that had been centered in the Black community through this political piece, the Black Power Movement that had started down in The South was already, in a way, alive and well in St. Louis, in the framework that you all [created]. This was in the mid [19]60s.

**Bill Clay:** The power structure—the protests started in St. Louis right after the turn of the century. In fact, when the first Black [person] elected to Congress—the priest from Illinois—got elected in 1928, we came within 5,000 votes of electing the first Black to Congress from Missouri in the same election.

As I said, there was no effort to deny the Black people a vote in the state of Missouri, and so they even had enough power to almost elect a Black [person] to Congress in 1928.

**Tony Harrison:** So what happened that this didn't get followed up on more quickly right after that election to then go back—since you lost that time—to go back the next time?

**Bill Clay:** That was a follow up because, as I said, in 1930 they passed the bond issue to appropriate a million dollars.

**Tony Harrison:** But you were the first to get elected to Congress out of Missouri?

**Bill Clay:** Yes. But we had Black elected officials. When I got elected to the Board of Aldermen, there were already four Blacks on the Board of Aldermen, and I got elected with another Black—was two of us—which increased it to six. And before I left, it was like nine out of 28.

**Tony Harrison:** You were about a solid third of the Board of Aldermen.

**Bill Clay:** Yes, and also on the same day I got elected to the Board of Aldermen, there was a minister who got elected to the school board—the first Black elected to the school board. And the story I want to say is, his name was John Hicks.

Years later, when I was a member of Congress and on a cruise, I met a musician, and he said, “Oh, you're from St. Louis.”

I said, “Yeah.”

He said, “My good friend is John Hicks, the famous jazz pianist.”

And I said, “Yeah, I know—I have never met him, but his dad and I were elected the same day.”

So this singer on the cruise, she said, “I got Hicks's number.”

She got Hicks on the telephone and we talked, and he said, “Well, I'mma be in St. Louis three months from now.”

I said, “I'm coming to see you.” And I did. I went to see him. That's when I met him.

**Tony Harrison:** Oh, that's outstanding. You went from...and kept up the ward membership for how long after you were in Congress.

**Bill Clay:** Probably 15 years.

**Tony Harrison:** Now what made you decide to run for Congress?

**Bill Clay:** I thought it was about time that we had a voice at the national level. Then we had a Black in the state legislature who actually—

**Tony Harrison:** Troupe?

**Bill Clay:** Yeah, Troupe.

**Tony Harrison:** I know Troupe. I knew the son.

**Bill Clay:** Yeah his son or his nephew. You knew his nephew. His name was [Charles] Quincy Troupe. His uncle drew the district in violation of all the Democrats wanted.

They had a Democratic governor who was opposed to the Democratic majority in the House and in the Senate, but he structured a deal with the Republicans and some out-of-state Democrats to draw this district, because what the Democratic party wanted to do was to marginalize the—

**Tony Harrison:** They wanted to cut up the Black piece and share it around to other districts.

**Bill Clay:** And then they were going to annihilate the influence of Republicans in the rural community. He made a deal because he was one who orchestrated with the Republicans in the metropolitan St. Louis area and the Democrats in the agriculture area, and we drew districts that preserved some influence for the three groups. The governor filed a lawsuit; the courts dismissed it. They said, “Oh no, you can't discriminate.”

**Tony Harrison:** So that was the byproduct of the Troupe intervention and manipulation of the body politics. It created the district that allowed you to run?<sup>3</sup>

**Bill Clay:** Right, yes.

**Tony Harrison:** Now, the climate around that time—was around [19]68. That was when all of the movement was taking place across the country. So, you were a part of that evolution of our politics following the passage of the Voting Rights Act, but it didn't have a direct impact on your engagement because you all had the vote and access to the body politic for many years before that. But you went in doing that whole post-Voting Rights Act empowerment that took place in the South.

**Bill Clay:** I was already an instrumental part of CORE [Congress of Racial Equality] with Jim [James] Farmer and we were agitating then. We started the Freedom Rides.

**Tony Harrison:** That CORE was a principal architect of.

**Bill Clay:** We started the experimental program in St. Louis. We moved with some people into Illinois and rented buses, and then went down through Arkansas, Mississippi, testing the facilities in the bus station.

**Tony Harrison:** So what happened? That has been completely lost.

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<sup>3</sup> Charles Quincy Troupe's uncle, James "Pal" Troupe, played a key role in redistricting Missouri's legislative districts, defying Democratic Party leadership by working with Republicans and rural Democrats to create a district that preserved Black political influence, ultimately enabling Bill Clay's congressional run.

**Bill Clay:** I know, but then what happened was CORE made it the national program. They took it up to Washington, and then it started up there and went down through the Carolinas.

**Tony Harrison:** And subsequently brought us Alabama, and the bus ride and the Freedom Rides in Alabama—they got bombed and folks got beat up. That's a part of John Lewis's legacy, and that history. I had no idea, never heard of the work that you all did coming out of St. Louis into Arkansas, Illinois and those other surrounding states.

**Bill Clay:** We didn't run into that kind of opposition. There were some places that were still without service, but there was no violence, and so we were documenting that these places were in violation of the law—in violation of the travel bans that the commission said you could not segregate in these facilities for interstate commerce travel.

So we were the test people from out of St. Louis and Illinois, going into Arkansas, Tennessee, and Mississippi. And then national took it over.

**Tony Harrison:** And that then ended up being televised.

**Bill Clay:** In Alabama.

**Tony Harrison:** Because we had a big conflict in Alabama. It ended up being Anniston, Alabama, which is about 50 miles east of Birmingham, and then Birmingham with the organized Klan and the organized city government that was in league with the Klan.

**Bill Clay:** You don't have to tell me about Anniston, Alabama. I was stationed there.

**Tony Harrison:** Oh, get out of here.

**Bill Clay:** I was there when the Supreme Court issued the separate but equal decision.<sup>4</sup> And of course, I was the one that upset that plant, that base down there.

**Tony Harrison:** The depot, the Anniston depot?

**Bill Clay:** No, Fort McClellan. They were not abiding by [Harry] Truman's executive order and the law that was passed. [Dwight] Eisenhower was the president when I went down there, and he was still trying to enforce the law, but they had barber shops that would not cut Black hair, so I organized the boycott of Blacks on post. For two months, none of us got haircuts.

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<sup>4</sup> The "separate but equal" decision refers to the 1896 Supreme Court ruling in *Plessy v. Ferguson*, which upheld racial segregation under the doctrine that separate facilities for Black and white Americans were constitutional as long as they were equal.

I worked at the commanding officer's, so he came in one morning and said, "I'm ordering you to get a haircut."

And I said, "Oh, I'll go right now. Come on with me. Let's go down and see if they will cut my hair."

He said, "No, you gotta get it in town."

I said, "And pay twice what these white soldiers are paying at home?"

He said, "You either get a haircut or we're going to court martial you."

I said, "Fine, that'll be good, because *Ebony* and *Jet* have photographers on their way down here, because we've already reported what's happening on this post [indistinct]."

I said, "On Thursday nights, we can't go in the club because you bring white girls in from Anniston and Blacks can't go in. And we got some other things, since you want to play hardball."

I lived off post. I went back to my house and my wife, and I said, "We need to integrate that swimming pool."

We lived in housing projects. We got some Black kids, told them, "Put your swimming suits on. We're going swimming."

We drove out to that post and jumped in the pool. Some guy in a swimming suit came over and said, "I order you to get out of the pool."

I said, "Who are you? [He said] I'm Lieutenant so-and-so. " I said, "Where are your bars?"<sup>5</sup>

He had on a swimsuit. Right when I got back to the unit, the colonel said, "We're going to transfer you."

I said, "What about the court martial?" He said, "We're going to transfer you."

He gave me a whole stack of places where I could go. I said, "Well, I'll go back where I came from, Missouri, about 100 miles from my home."

And he put me on transfer and gave me three weeks' travel time to get back from Anniston, Alabama to Fort Leonard Wood, Missouri.

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<sup>5</sup> In this context, "bars" refer to the insignia worn by military officers to indicate their rank. In the U.S. military, lieutenants typically wear one (gold) bar for second lieutenant or one (silver) bar for first lieutenant, and the absence of bars could call their rank into question.



**Tony Harrison:** How far is that from St. Louis?

**Bill Clay:** About 90 miles.

**Tony Harrison:** Now, where's mom and dad fit into all of this? You are all politically engaged. You were involved in the pilot politics.<sup>6</sup> You were involved in the labor activities. You were part of a union. And how did all that come to be and—daddy was a school teacher, lawyer?

**Bill Clay:** No. My daddy was a skill mechanic. He was a second torch man. He had the same job for 30—40 years.

**Tony Harrison:** And was he a part of the Union?

**Bill Clay:** He was a union official at the job where he worked. He worked in Illinois, across the river. We live like, eight blocks from the Mississippi River. He worked across the river. He was the lead of the union over there, but it was small.

They cut up box cars—trains, box cars, and then the company out of Chicago sold scrap metal or whatever it was, but no, he worked the same job for about 35 years.

**Tony Harrison:** You were of a good union paid background, middle-class, African-American [family] growing up.

**Bill Clay:** Yes, stable family—

**Tony Harrison:** Your mama was what? What did she do? [Was she a] school teacher?

**Bill Clay:** Oh, housewife. She had seven children.

**Tony Harrison:** Oh, she was a solid housewife.

**Bill Clay:** And, of course, my dad was kind of in the neighborhood. We lived in a tenement house. He was one of the stable people there. So in the neighborhood, he helped a lot of people, because he made good money. And he helped a lot of people. We had some [families] who couldn't feed the kids. Well, they had people in the neighborhood who could feed them.

**Tony Harrison:** Everybody looked out for everybody else.

**Bill Clay:** Everybody looked out for them. I had a couple of guys I know would come by at least twice a week to eat.

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<sup>6</sup> "Pilot politics" refers to a test case or experimental political strategy implemented on a small scale before being expanded more broadly.

**Tony Harrison:** That background and that stability was a part of what contributed—his union membership and engagement, based over in Illinois, also contributed to your sense of freedom to engage?

**Bill Clay:** No. That was just a little small company he worked at. That might have been 15–20 people there, but our families were big, and that was part of the Civil Rights Movement and the political movement. My dad and my mom came from Missouri slave owners. And the family had come—and my dad had eight brothers and sisters.

**Tony Harrison:** Oh, my Lord. Y'all had a big army.

**Bill Clay:** My mom had eight brothers and sisters so when I had a picket line—and nobody left St. Louis. Our family is still in St. Louis. I go back often now. There was a family reunion just a month ago. We still got all these people there.

So the Civil Rights Movement was enhanced by the Clay family who had hooked up with other families, like the Troupe family [which was] and a couple of others.

**Tony Harrison:** This is immediate Post-Reconstruction in which this agrarian, making babies, family thing was still alive and well.<sup>7</sup>

**Bill Clay:** Right. Our family is still in St. Louis. My son [Lacy Clay] is in Congress so his base is family and friends of our families. He'd been there for 17 years now.

**Tony Harrison:** And doing a pretty good job carrying on daddy's legacy.

**Bill Clay:** Well, I tell people he's an imposter. He's impersonating.

**Tony Harrison:** Let's go back to—what was the catalyst for the caucus being organized? I remember [Charles] Diggs. I remember you. I remember...who else was a part of that?

**Bill Clay:** [Robert] Nix.

**Tony Harrison:** Nix. I didn't ever get really to know Mr. Nix. That was Philadelphia.

**Bill Clay:** Well, in 1968, three Blacks, for the first time in history, were elected to Congress on the same day. That was Louis Stokes, Shirley Chisholm and myself. Already, there were six Blacks who were operating under something they call a select Democratic Committee, which was an arm of the Democratic Party in Congress. With the three of us being elected—

**Tony Harrison:** And those were all these Northeastern guys at that time?

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<sup>7</sup> Post-Reconstruction refers to the period following the end of Reconstruction (1877–early 1900s), during which the federal government withdrew its protections for Black Americans, leading to the rise of Jim Crow laws, racial violence, etc.

**Bill Clay:** Well, Northeastern and Midwestern. Then we just added to the Northwestern and Midwestern. The first Black elected in the 20th century was in 1928— [it] was Oscar De Priest from Chicago. He served three terms, and then he was defeated by a guy named William Mitchell, who was a Democrat who served four terms I think. He was elected in [19]33 and he served four terms. Then Bill Dawson was elected in [19]41. So all three came from the same district. But then in [19]45 Adam Clayton Powell [came in] out four years after Dawson.

**Tony Harrison:** What about Nix? When did Nix come out of Philadelphia?

**Bill Clay:** Nix came after Diggs, I think. Then you had [John] Conyers out of Detroit and you had [Augustus] Gus Hawkins out of California. So we're at six. When we got there to make it nine—after we looked around and Stokes said, we ought to formalize this operation that we got here and [we] shouldn't be an arm of the Democratic Party.

But then we said, okay, we'll go along with it for a while, because of so many things happening at that particular time. And that's when they had the killing of the Black Panthers in Chicago. So we said, okay, so we—

**Tony Harrison:** Which produced Bobby Rush today.

**Bill Clay:** Yes. When we went to Chicago to investigate that—because the Democratic Party was party to the killing. And the Democratic attorney, he was a party to J. Edgar Hoover—they were all in on that.

While we were there conducting the hearings, we had three Black people to testify, who later became members of the Black Caucus. And Bobby Rush wasn't one of them. We had Harold Washington, [Ralph] Metcalfe, former athlete and Gus Savage, who was a newspaper—

**Tony Harrison:** I remember. Newspaper guy and a little rabble rouser.

**Bill Clay:** We had, we had those three to testify. And as a result, we got the federal government involved in the investigation over and above the FBI. What happened to Black people—I mean, they were furious about this.

Because this was outright murder. They shot Fred Hampton and [Mark] Clark. They killed them in the middle of the night. They knew exactly where the bedroom was. It was about eight other people in there. None of them got shot. They shot up two bedrooms.

**Tony Harrison:** That was a part of the COINTEL [counterintelligence] program that was implemented under leadership at the FBI.

**Bill Clay:** The people out in Chicago, they were outraged, and they organized an unelected state attorney. They went and supported the Republican state attorney. [Edward] Hanrahan was his name. They beat him by hundreds, thousands of votes.

**Tony Harrison:** That also reflected a parallel to the kind of political machinery that existed in St. Louis and the political machinery that existed in Chicago. And this was an internal rebellion against the Democratic machinery there in Chicago.

**Bill Clay:** And in the next election, what happened was that Metcalfe replaced Dawson. Then you had a second one—George Collins got elected from there. Then we had [Charles] Rangel beat Adam [Clayton Powell Jr.] And then we had [Ron] Dellums to come in from California—

**Tony Harrison:** From upstate. You had Gus down in LA [CA] and then you had Dellums from up in Oakland [CA].

**Bill Clay:** From Baltimore we had Parren Mitchell.

**Tony Harrison:** So, you all got to be a center of gravity in the number of members that you had evolved to have at that time.

**Bill Clay:** That's when Stokes said, "Look, why don't you formalize and write papers?" [He] asked me to write the papers. So I sat with Diggs and we organized the charter to set up the president, vice president, treasurer, etc., committee chairman, and all of that. By now, we had 12 members.

Then I wrote in the organizational papers. I said we ought to have a new politics, disassociated from the Democratic Party, because we need to start with the premise that we have no permanent friends, no permanent enemies, just permanent interest.

**Tony Harrison:** Which has been adopted to you and attributed to you all up and still to the day,

**Bill Clay:** Because that became the mantra. Rangel said, and we are to name ourselves the Congressional Black Caucus. That's how we got the name. Everybody agreed, and we had been trying to get a meeting with the new president, Nixon, for almost a year. He refused to meet with us.

So with this new structure that we had, Stokes says, "Why don't we boycott the State of the Union?" And we did. We boycotted the State of the Union, and all kind of hell broke loose. Even our liberal friends in Congress were saying that's disrespectful of the Office of the President.

Our response was: how come you weren't as articulate when, for the last year and a half, he has refused to meet with the legitimate spokespeople for Black people in this country? You ain't open

your mouth. So, we will be disrespectful of a person who's disrespectful of the office itself, so we bark out of it.

And you know the national news people. They gave us one hour to respond to Nixon's State of the Union.

**Tony Harrison:** Who delivered the message?

**Bill Clay:** We divided it into 15 minute units. Some went to Southern states. It was like 13 senators.

**Tony Harrison:** Was Barbara Jordan there by that time?

**Bill Clay:** I don't think so. No, she came later. It was 11 people from the House [of Representatives]. I was one of them. I went to Detroit along with a congressman from Pennsylvania and a senator from Connecticut. We had our 15 minutes there. There were four other locations. One was in Washington, DC, and one was in the South. One was out in California, and we responded to the president at the State of the Union.

**Tony Harrison:** This is new history. Old history being brought alive.

**Bill Clay:** And then what happened was, we kept agitating on the floor of Congress about his refusal to meet with us. The Soviet Union and China were in Africa trying to align themselves with the new development African nations, and were having success, and they were publicizing it all across the world, and they were also publicizing Nixon's refusal to meet with us.

Finally, he caved in, and he had to meet with us in March after Metcalfe and the rest of them got there. We had a six week notice that he would meet with us [on a] certain day in March. So what happened was we had people like Carl Holman, Ed Sylvester, [Walter] Fauntroy.

**Tony Harrison:** Who was a part of [the group with] Martin Luther King in Washington and the Poor People's March.

**Bill Clay:** They banked in at the Delta national home [headquarters] in Washington, DC. Frankie Freeman and Lynnette [Taylor]—the Executive Director of the Deltas—and all participated in pulling together Black people from around the country to develop 60 recommendations to give to Nixon.

And we brought the recommendations of writers, we brought educators, we brought experts in the health field, to develop these 60 recommendations, which is probably the most comprehensive report on Black America ever put together. We call it a Black paper. It wasn't a white paper. It was a Black paper. We presented that to Nixon.

**Tony Harrison:** So this would have been, historically, the first meeting of a collection of Black elected officials with a president up behind the state.

**Bill Clay:** Yeah, as a collective group because they had met with people, but not as a political voice. And so we met with the president. He had all of his cabinet there, and we presented him [with] these 60 proposals. And Diggs, who was chairman of the Black Caucus, suggested that he respond to us by May the 17th, which was the day that the Supreme Court had issued the anniversary of separate but equal.

He did respond, but he responded 24 hours later, on the 18th. But he admitted, when he responded to us that it took something like 200 hours—with the total number of people who had worked on the responses to us.

In addition to the initial meeting with us, word went out that we were going to be on *Meet the Press* the Sunday after the meeting at the White House. So, that Saturday, he called the meeting of the Black supporters of Nixon's program to devise a strategy to respond to us. Who was going to be on *Meet the Press*? So on *Meet the Press* that Sunday, it was Diggs, Hawkins and myself, who represented the view.

**Tony Harrison:** That's Diggs of Detroit, Hawkins of LA and Bill Clay of St. Louis.

**Bill Clay:** And we responded to all of the—we explained the proposals, and then the responses.

**Tony Harrison:** Now, how responsive were the responses?

**Bill Clay:** It was not responsive. They tried to do what they normally do to give a good PR appreciation of, "This is a great country—all men are born free." Yeah, we know.

But anyhow, we were on our way to establishing the new Black politics. So then we said, "Now, if we're going to be the main spokesman for the Black community, we've got to have a base." We already had an elected base because [there were] Black people that said, "We want you to represent us."

But we had some things—some fear—like the Civil Rights organizations. The NAACP [National Association for the Advancement of Colored People] and the Urban League...they kind of said, "No, wait. Are they going to move us out?" We had no intention of moving them out. We were going to just establish the political agenda for our people.

The other thing that labor unions had was real reason to fear us taking over the agenda, because all of us had gotten elected and beat labor and beat their candidates. Thirty-three unions opposed me. I only had three unions that supported me, but I kicked the hell out of them.

And the same thing had happened with other members—Parren Mitchell didn't have the union support. Dellums didn't have the union support.

**Tony Harrison:** Oh, yeah. He came out of the war movement.

**Bill Clay:** And so they had the union. Our position was: we will eliminate the spokesman between us and the people. We don't need you liberals determining our agenda and how far we can go. We established that as one of our main rules: we will establish the agenda and decide how we will do it, and we will organize our support.

We started off with the ministers, meeting with them across the country. We had the educators. Gus Hawkins organized all of the Black educators, and we had a three- or four-day conference with them. Metcalfe organized the medical community at Meharry University with the Black Doctors Association and Black Dentists Association, Black educators.

**Tony Harrison:** That meeting was held at Meharry?

**Bill Clay:** It was a three-day conference. The educational conference—Gus Hawkins had here in Virginia. I had a communications conference in alliance with Howard School of Communication. And so we had that. We brought in Blacks in the media—newspapers, television, very few—and we outlined the program to attack the media, to include and increase the number of Blacks in the media.

And then you had Dellums and [Shirley] Chisholm, who had a conference on Blacks in the military, and they went to bases around the world to point out how they were being discriminated against and not being promoted, etc. And so that's how we organized a national power base for the Black Caucus.

**Tony Harrison:** So you had a dual track. You had your individual constituencies—with the support that got you elected—and then you went out and broadened that base of support into a national network. And if my recall is right, some of the sessions that the Black Caucus talks about today were done back then.

**Bill Clay:** Right. Yeah.

**Tony Harrison:** That should have been under Howard Robinson's leadership as the first Executive Director of the Black Caucus.

**Bill Clay:** Yeah. And what happened was we had the first Congressional Black Caucus dinner, which gave us the money to hire staff and to buy a building.

**Tony Harrison:** I remember that.

**Bill Clay:** We had it at the dinner, which was really fantastic.

**Tony Harrison:** And unheard of.

**Bill Clay:** The hotel only accommodated 2,000 people. We must have been 5,000 trying to get in. And let me tell you, the early people that came to the Black Caucus weekend—most of them were working for cities, for states; they paid the expenses.

But at that dinner, our principal speaker was Ozzie Davis, and he laid the plan out for the Black Caucus. And that was an historic speech he made. The honorary chairman [was] Nancy Wilson and Bill Cosby.

**Tony Harrison:** You making me go back to thinking about things that I was close to and had forgotten about, because I was Howard Robinson's support person.

**Bill Clay:** He was the first Black Caucus chair.

**Tony Harrison:** And Diggs had recruited him from the State Department, since Diggs was a foreign policy guy within the caucus at that time.

**Bill Clay:** I think Hawkins really recruited him because we were in Japan. That's where we met Howard. He was in Japan. Hawkins and I—Diggs wasn't with us—and Stokes were together. We met Howard and the State Department put him on loan at first for us.

He was helping us to organize the first dinner, and after that, we raised enough money to hire him, and he retired. He had to retire. That's how he got—

**Tony Harrison:** Because I had him tied up with his relationship with Diggs. I wasn't aware of the relationship with Mr. Hawkins.

**Bill Clay:** I was with Hawkins when we met him.

**Tony Harrison:** Let's come to some more current politics—as the dynamic of the history that you have talked about, and the history of slavery, the history of the politics that evolved in Missouri, because there was not a prohibition against political participation, access to the vote there.

So what were the issues that you were most active with? I know it was labor on one end, and even though they hadn't supported you in getting me there, I also knew that education was another. So if you think back, what were the most important issues that you feel you were attached to and that the caucus was pushing?



**Bill Clay:** Well, first of all, let me clarify my relationship with labor, even though 33 labor unions opposed my opponent. The labor union that I integrated—the Pipefitters—was George Meany's old union.

When we showed up to be sworn in—that weekend, in celebration—Meany gave a reception for me, and he had every big name he knew of in Washington to be there. John McCormick and Speaker [Thomas] Tip O'Neill, everybody, all of the main people—and all of the unions that opposed me.

**Tony Harrison:** He had them all there.

**Bill Clay:** I stood at the door with him, and he introduced me to everybody coming in. He said, "This is going to be my man, alright, Capitol Hill." And so he said he's going to represent us on the Labor Committee. This is a fascinating story. Wilbur Mills was chairman of the committee—

**Tony Harrison:** Ways and Means?<sup>8</sup>

**Bill Clay:** No. They had a committee that decided who [crosstalk]. They published the list of people, what committees they were going to be on. It was in the paper. I called [Meany and said], "Mr. Meany, I want to thank you for trying to get me on the Labor Committee."

And he said, "Trying? What do you mean?"

I said, "I didn't make it."

He said, "What do you mean you didn't make it?" I said, "I didn't make it."

He put me on some other committee. He said, "Let me tell you something." He came through the phone, loud, and used a little profanity. He said, "Let me tell you something—you ain't that important at this point. I ain't gonna let no country boy put short pants on me."

The next day, I was informed that I would be on the Education and Labor Committee and also that I would go ahead in seniority [to] the other people who had been appointed to the Education and Labor Committee.

**Tony Harrison:** So you jumped a few bodies.

**Bill Clay:** Yes. I did. And I just want to clarify that my relationship with the labor unions paid off for them, because I—

**Tony Harrison:** Didn't you also end up on postal [House Committee on the Post Office and Civil Service]?

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<sup>8</sup> Ways and Means refers to the House Ways and Means Committee, one of the most powerful committees in the U.S. House of Representatives. It oversees taxation, revenue generation, Social Security, Medicare, trade policy, and other economic matters.

**Bill Clay:** I ended up [as] chairman of the postal, but that was a secondary committee, though it was important to federal employees—people who work for the federal government and the Postal Service.

**Tony Harrison:** Did the Postal Service then still have any patronage connection, or had that sort of gone by the wayside?

**Bill Clay:** I had jobs as chairman. I had jobs. We had patronage.

**Tony Harrison:** You have patronage coming from both the home base and then you ended up with patronage support from the federal [government], from your committee assignment on the postal side. And then you had the Education and Labor staff and the instruments to move the Education and Labor agenda throughout.

**Bill Clay:** Yes.

**Tony Harrison:** Now who else was on Labor and Education with you? Gus [Augustus Hawkins] was there, wasn't he?

**Bill Clay:** Oh, yeah, Gus was there. Shirley Chisholm was there.

**Tony Harrison:** The thing that I remember about Shirley, more than anything else...she had been appointed to the Agriculture Committee. And she came back and protested that she had been appointed to—ain't no farms in Brooklyn. And then she found out that the food stamp program was under the Agriculture Committee and sort of backed up off of that after she found out.

**Bill Clay:** But then they did move her over to the Education Committee. When I got appointed to the Education Committee, Adam was there. Adam was—they put him back into Congress. The courts did, and then they penalized him so he didn't participate. Really, that's how Rangel won.

He said they took part of his salary away from him. When the press would say, "Well, you missed this vote and that vote," he had a standard answer. He would say, "Part-time paid, part-time worker."

**Tony Harrison:** And he still had the base of the church.

**Bill Clay:** I think he had given up. He just didn't want to be—

**Tony Harrison:** Yeah, that whole dynamic that evolved around, but had been laid off on it.

**Bill Clay:** He was a fabulous legislator.

**Tony Harrison:** Some folks say he is still the leader in the amount of legislation that has been passed by a single member.

**Bill Clay:** I hate to be bragging, but I passed 295 bills that became law.

**Tony Harrison:** Watch out. Was most of that through education and labor?

**Bill Clay:** Yes. Through education and labor and through the Postal Service. A lot of them was legendary pieces of legislation. I passed the Family and Medical Leave [FMLA] Act. Hatch Act reform. Five year vesting in your pensions, which was very key, because people couldn't leave their jobs, because they'd lose their pensions.

So I passed the legislation [for] five year vesting. COBRA [Consolidated Omnibus Budget Reconciliation Act]—if you lost your job, you could take your insurance with you for 18 months. Portability with your pension. You can transfer your pension from this job to another.

**Tony Harrison:** That's still active and alive today.

**Bill Clay:** Oh yeah, and Family and Medical Leave. They still arguing. I couldn't get it [to be] paid-for leave, but we did get it through after all of those years.

**Tony Harrison:** Now, if you think back to the time of that period in the late [19]60s and moving up and through the [19]70s, the rhetorical framework at that time had a lot of underpinning of the Black Power movements that were taking place in this country.

Was that having much influence on the way that the politics and the caucus was taking place with you all off of another dynamic that was sort of breathing also the politics of the climate then?

**Bill Clay:** The politics of the climate of the time, kind of merged in with the protest movement. People who came to the Blacks who got elected were not opposed to the protest movement. We were all part of the protest movement. The next layer of people who came in were like Andy [Andrew] Young, Barbara Jordan.

**Tony Harrison:** I can tell you a great story on the Barbara Jordan piece. Julian Bond and I were walking down by the Press Club on 14th [Street] and F [Street] and bumped into then the Lieutenant Governor of Texas, whose name I cannot remember at this moment.

But he informed us in the course of that conversation that you all are going to get a new member in the Black Caucus, and she will be coming up here soon, and her name is Barbara Jordan, and this was a year more out, but the deal had already been cut.

**Bill Clay:** Let me tell you [Ralph] Yarborough was a senator in Texas. [George] H.W. Bush had been blasting him for five years, how he was too liberal and all. Yarborough asked me to come and be the principal speaker at a fundraiser in Houston, Texas. I was up on the platform, and I heard all this commotion in this thing, about six, 700 people.

He was raising a tremendous amount of money. [I] heard all this commotion, and I saw people coming in, and I saw this little Black woman coming down the aisle. Said to myself, "Who is this?"

**Tony Harrison:** Who was it?

**Bill Clay:** It was Barbara Jordan. I didn't know who Barbara Jordan was, but she took the stage and that microphone, and within three minutes I knew who she was, because she said everything that I was going to say in the next 30 minutes. I mean Barbara—

**Tony Harrison:** She was strong.

**Bill Clay:** Oh, she was strong. And that was my first meeting with Barbara Jordan.

**Tony Harrison:** So, you all became good friends as a byproduct of that.

**Bill Clay:** Right. Oh yeah.

**Tony Harrison:** Because she was not appointed. She had not been elected yet, had she?

**Bill Clay:** She was in the State Senate.

**Tony Harrison:** She was in the Senate, okay. She was a strong person.

**Bill Clay:** Yes she was.

**Tony Harrison:** Many moments of recall. Now, at the same time all of this was going on in this country, you said that Augustus was doing foreign affairs and I know—

**Bill Clay:** Diggs was really chairman of Foreign Affairs Committee. I said I was traveling with Gus.

**Tony Harrison:** So the decolonization process that was taking place in Africa was going on around that time, so you had—

**Bill Clay:** Diggs and Conyers were really the spokespersons for it. Conyers had legislation to boycott companies who were dealing with South Africa, and Diggs was negotiating for the rights of these people who were gaining their independence to have a relationship with the United States.

And I remember that Diggs, Metcalfe and myself went to Africa and we left Senegal going to Sierra Leone in the middle of the night. It was like one o'clock in the morning when we got to Sierra Leone and it must have been 10,000 people out there to welcome Mr. Diggs to the country, because of what he was doing for them. It was amazing. I came and I just looked [and said], "Hey, what's going on here?"

**Tony Harrison:** So that was because—now of the flag and the umbrella that he was carrying on behalf of those independent countries as their decolonization was taking place, and independence for each one of those.

**Bill Clay:** Right and he was giving voice to them in the Congress. He was making speeches for them. You know, you have to —

**Tony Harrison:** Back during that time, there was also an active—on the continent, and in this country—a Pan-African movement going on to try to help Black folks align themselves with that transition that was going on in Africa in particular.

**Bill Clay:** The Pan-African movement was started back around the turn of the century. W.E.B. Du Bois and people like that, of course, Marcus Garvey later on. That was going on. But they were promoting independence [for] nations in Africa. And of course, Conyers was not liked, in particular, by the colonials.

I remember we were on a trip once we were on this congressional trip. When we got to South Africa, we landed in Cape Town—big city. We were the only ones in the airport, except for two ticket processors and a few security guards. Completely empty in that big town and they wouldn't let us go into the city because Conyers was with us, and he was promoting the independence of Blacks.

**Tony Harrison:** So he was in that anti-apartheid posture.

**Bill Clay:** We could not go into the city [in] the airplane. We were in a military plane. They refueled, and then we flew on down to Pretoria. So we spent a couple of days down there.

**Tony Harrison:** Let me ask you something more immediate. The history of Missouri is that it has been dancing on being sort of the bellwether state of what's been happening in the country over the years. Going back to the beginning, the 1900s and on up through that whoever was getting elected president, except for one or two occasions, Missouri had helped elect that person.

**Bill Clay:** It was the border. But it goes back even further than that. General John Frémont took over St. Louis and the metropolitan area during the Civil War and freed all of the slaves. We had slaves, and freed men in law. He freed all of the slaves, which the military commanders had the right to do when they captured those areas.

Abraham Lincoln heard about it a week later, and he rescinded the order. He put Black people back into slavery in Missouri. He said, "No, this is not our strategy. Missouri did not leave the Union. We are only freeing the slaves [in] states that left the Union," which he had no authority whatsoever.

How could he free the slaves in Mississippi and Alabama and Texas? In Tennessee and Missouri and a couple other states that did not leave the Union, he left the Black people in slavery, and he put us back into slavery in St. Louis. We were out for at least a week. We were free people, but Lincoln put us back into slavery.

**Tony Harrison:** But that kind of internal conflict that has been a part of the history of Missouri, are you surprised that where Missouri has sort of evolved to be in these last 10 or 15 years to be entering more and more toward the Republican side of the spectrum?

**Bill Clay:** I'm surprised that they have taken the foothold in Missouri that they are. Missouri is right with Mississippi and the rest of them trying to deny Black people the right to vote. They want to go back—retrenchment on our rights. They have gerrymandered the states.

**Tony Harrison:** Now they only have two Democrats.

**Bill Clay:** And they both Blacks.

**Tony Harrison:** It's now like Alabama and Mississippi.

**Bill Clay:** We used to have Republicans that you could deal with and relate to, but now you got the same kind of Republicans that the Dixiecrats used to be. The Democrats from the South used to all be anti-black. And so now we've got—that's an increasing number of people now that are Republicans. I'm ashamed of the way some things are happening in the state of Missouri right now.

**Tony Harrison:** Then thinking about the balance there. It used to be a balance in the congressional delegation that's just gone away. As you just said, the only two Democrats in the delegation now—two Black folks from St. Louis, your son [William Lacy Clay Jr.] and my friend, your friend, brother Emmanuel Cleaver. I read something recently that Eldridge [Cleaver] was a distant relative of Emmanuel.

Like in the South, the only place that we have Democrats in the South—starting basically almost from Virginia all the way out to Texas—are Blacks who are the congressional members and delegations that are disproportionately white.

Now you got coming up in the election—I think Mr. [Donald] Trump carried Missouri during the last election by a significant—almost 20%. And there's the fearfulness that on the upcoming Senate race, your U.S. Senator that's coming up in [20]18 will face this same kind of changed and evolved political chapter.

**Bill Clay:** I've been in politics a long time, and I sort of can read what's transpiring. I don't believe that the people who elected Trump are going to be able to—

**Tony Harrison:** Concede [Claire] McCaskill.<sup>9</sup>

**Bill Clay:** Oh, no. I don't think they're going to do that. And I don't think that they're going to be able to maintain those Republican seats that give them [a] majority now in the Senate. Because a lot of the people that voted for Trump, they expect their representative to have a little courage and be honest.

These Republicans trying to defend the foolishness that's going on now with this man who's thoroughly unfit to serve in that position, has to be upsetting a lot of decent people who are intelligent. Now, you know you can be decent and be a fool, but the majority of the people that vote, and especially in the northern communities, are intelligent.

**Tony Harrison:** Well, we shall see. [20]18 is coming upon us rapidly. Bill Clay, former congressman from the great city and county of St. Louis, the great state of Missouri. Thank you so very much for sharing these thoughts and bringing history. And to me, bringing history that I did not know even existed. Thank you so very much for participating.

**Bill Clay:** Thank you for having me on and I look forward to seeing—

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<sup>9</sup> In the 2018 U.S. Senate race in Missouri, incumbent Democratic Senator Claire McCaskill faced a challenging political landscape, as the state had shifted more conservative, with Donald Trump winning Missouri by nearly 20% in 2016, raising concerns about her ability to retain her seat.

**Tony Harrison:** We're gonna make sure you got a copy of this tape too, so you'll see how well you did.

**Bill Clay:** All right. All right.

**Tony Harrison:** Thank you so much.