

*Civil Rights History Project  
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Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of African American History & Culture  
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Interviewee: Mr. Courtland Cox  
Interview Date: July 8, 2011  
Location: Recording studio, ground floor, Jefferson Building, Library of Congress, Washington D.C.  
Interviewer: Joseph Mosnier, Ph.D.  
Videographer: John Bishop  
Length: 1:43:40 minutes

Joe Mosnier: An hour, hour and fifteen –

Courtland Cox: Okay.

John Bishop: We're launched.

JM: Today is Friday, July 8, 2011. My name is Joe Mosnier of the Southern Oral History Program at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. I'm with videographer John Bishop. We are in the Jefferson Building of the Library of Congress in Washington, D.C. to do an oral history interview for the Civil Rights History Project, which is a joint undertaking of the Library of Congress and the Smithsonian's National Museum of African American History and Culture.

And we're delighted today to be with Mr. Courtland Cox. Mr. Cox, thank you so much for sharing some of this part of the afternoon with us and thank you for coming over.

CC: Well, thank you for inviting me.

JM: Um, And one other quick note, um: We are not recording to, uh, the camera cards but to the hard drive. Okay, um, I thought I would start maybe with just having you sketch a little bit of your family history and history as a child, because I knew that some of your time was in Trinidad and some here.

CC: Right. Well, I was born in New York, uh, in Harlem, in 1941. And my mother moved me and my sister to the West Indies, to Trinidad, where my grandmother and our family were, uh, in 199 – four years later, in 1945. I stayed in Trinidad from 1945 to 1952. And then I came back to, uh, New York after my grandmother died in '52 and lived in Harlem for a couple of years and then moved to the Bronx.

Um, I attended, uh, Catholic school, uh, St Helena's, and, uh, and then, you know, went from – well, actually, Catholic St. Aloysius Grammar School, which was actually interesting, because it was, uh, all African American nuns, uh, at St. Aloysius, Order of that. And then, uh, I went to St. Helena's and then went to Howard University. My mother sent me to Catholic school because, you know, at that point it cost ten dollars a month, which was, you know, serious money in 1952-54, but also she wanted to make sure that I had the best education that she could get, and at that point, you know, she was not too well sold on public schools.

Um, I grew up in the projects, mostly, in New York. And, at that time, you could see a lot of the issues that we see today in the '50s. I mean, you know, a lot of people were doing drugs, mainly marijuana and heroin. And, of all the, uh, people that, uh, I grew up with, my peer group, probably only three of us graduated from high school – my sister, myself, and one other. Um, and the reason I was not impacted, I think, was because of that time I spent in Trinidad, where education was stressed in my family. So, I can look back and see my cousins and their numerous – I mean, the women have PhDs; the men have been, you know, accomplished in

education, and it was a strong presence. I mean, there was no assumption that you would not go to college. It was assumed that you did, you know. And your mother – my mother said, you know, that, you know, “Your cousins are doing x, y, and z, and we expect this of you.” So, I mean, the expectation was deep and internal.

Um, I left, when I left, um, St. Helena’s, um – and that’s interesting. When I got to St. Helena’s there were only four African Americans in the school. By the second year, I was by myself. [Laughs] Uh, so that was quite an interesting thing during that time.

JM: In the Bronx.

CC: In the Bronx. Because, uh, you know, there was a sense of isolation. And one of the things that I felt, you know, in that time was I would go to school, but as I was coming home, I would hide my books, because I would try to, you know, I kind of lived in both worlds, the world of going to school and the world of being where, you know, people were. I mean, it was very interesting. The young people I grew up with, my peer group, they – because I had an accent, because I had a different history, they had a lot of respect for me. They respected I was different, in the sense that I was going to school and I wasn’t trying to do different things. They just – they just thought I was different, and that’s fine. [0:05:00] And so, uh, I had some space because of that. Um –

JM: Can you say a word about, um, your sister and other siblings?

CC: Uh, my sister is Lorraine, Lorraine Cleveland, Lorraine Cox. Um, and, you know, she – as I said – she’s the younger sister by about two and a half years, uh, and that’s it. And, um, you know, my father, I think the last time I saw him I might have been ten years old. I haven’t, you know, I saw him probably at that point, so, uh, did not see him. He was not a major factor in my life.

JM: Yeah, yeah.

CC: Um, you know, but my sister is, you know, went to the health area and is still, you know, working in health. She, uh, became a registered nurse, went to medical school for a while but had some issues, and so she's still doing nursing.

JM: Yeah, yeah. How did you, how did you get your attention pointed towards Howard?

CC: My cousin went to Howard. Uh, my house was the stop for all my relatives coming to the United States. My mother was the head of the family branch here, so everybody came here. So, my cousin, Erskine [Alleyne], um, who, um, was coming, who was a little older, but he came to go to Howard. And he was, I guess, maybe in his late twenties, maybe early thirties. So, he came here, spent some time, you know, going to Howard, maybe two and a half years, and went to medical school, became a doctor, OB-GYN.

And, you know, my view is, "Okay, well, he's doing it. I might as well do it. It's not –" you know. And at that time, you could go and – I mean, because I had not figured out what I was going to do – and at that time, you could go take a test. You know, I guess you didn't have to take the SATs and stuff like that. You could just go take a test. And so, I got on the bus one day, Greyhound bus one day, and, you know, came down to Washington by myself, took the test, went back to New York, and, you know, I passed the exam. And, you know, they said, "Hey, why don't you come on down?"

And at that time, you know, tuition at Howard University was seven dollars and fifty cents a semester credit. So, basically, you could save a little over a hundred dollars, get your fifteen hours, room was forty dollars, board was forty dollars, and, uh, you could, you know – so I worked in the Post Office and, you know, saved money to go to school.

JM: Were you a political adolescent at all in your high school years?

CC: Uh, not political in a sense, but aware. I mean, because on the – I mean, I was part of a discussion – I mean, a part of two or three discussions, you know. I mean, you know, the whole question of segregation of race was much more pervasive, uh, in terms of people's assumption of what you could do, the barriers that existed, and so forth. So, there was always discussion of that in kids who were fourteen and fifteen. I mean, as I think back, people were very aware at fourteen and fifteen of what was going on in society.

Then, we had another group of older guys, at that point maybe in their twenties, who were in the jazz scene, so they would talk about the culture, they'd talk about the music, they'd talk about [John] Coltrane, they'd talk about [Thelonious] Monk, they'd talk about all these people, you know, that – you know, so there was a sense of a culture and a history that was delivered by these older guys that, you know, gave me some sense of that, but, in terms of politics, no. I was aware of what was going on, but also aware of other kinds of things, but no organized kinds of political discussion at all.

JM: Yeah, yeah. Tell me what, um, tell me what you encountered when you got to Howard, what the campus was like, what your sense of what you were going to do was, and how you settled in.

CC: I really – I think I didn't have a clear sense of what I was going to do.

JM: Yeah, yeah.

CC: Uh, but, you know, I did have a sense of right and wrong and kind of was impacted by what was going on, beginning to go on in the South, particularly with Emmett Till. And, I mean, politics – back to the political question, I was very much aware of what was going on with Emmett Till, I was very much aware of what was going on in Montgomery. So, but I didn't have

any – I was just aware of it and I had a sense of it, but not, you know, any great, you know, any great depth [0:10:00] in terms of understanding.

When I got to Howard, you got – there was – you know, places all over the place. I mean, Washington was a very segregated city at the time, whether you were talking about housing, whether you were talking about black and white ads in the *Washington Post*, whether you were talking about the police department, whether you were talking about trying clothes on in the, in the various department stores, I mean, all those things existed. Uh, so, you know, I was faced with it in a way that I wasn't faced with it in New York.

Also, at that point, with the sit-ins – so, it was a small group of people who decided to do stuff at Glen Echo, uh, in Washington, and we formed the Nonviolent Action Group [NAG]. Uh, you know, and some were the people who, you know, later went on to really be prominent in SNCC were all part of that. Um, and, you know, we, uh – we did two things. We did sympathetic actions for things going on in the South, but we did – you know, we went out to the Eastern Shore of Maryland and demonstrated there. We, uh, and Stokely Carmichael, who was in school with me at the time, was famous for helping to organize these demonstrations, because he would promise, “Okay, we're going to go demonstrate, but we've got a great party after the demonstrations.” [Laughs] And, you know, and so, you know, um, you know, young people want to do that.

Some of the other things that we did while I was at Howard, I mean, RFK Stadium, when the Redskins were first here, we picketed because there were no, uh, African American football players. Um, we, uh, Route 40, which was segregated, the route from Washington to New York, we were, you know, involved in those demonstrations. We worked with Julius Hobson, who was at CORE, [Julius Hobson] Senior, to – we were his shock troops. I mean, Julius was, you know,

older than we were, but when he wanted a demonstration, he would call on us to, to be, you know, the shock troops.

And we did other things at Howard. We had the outside things that we did, in terms of demonstrations, but we also created Project Awareness. And Project Awareness, I mean, the first three things that we did, I mean, I'll never forget them. First, the first was a debate between Bayard Rustin and Malcolm X on the question of segregation versus integration. The second was a debate on – with Norman Thomas and Herman Kahn on the question of thermonuclear warfare. And the third was a symposium with Jim Baldwin, uh, Ossie Davis, John Killens, moderated by Sterling Brown. And, uh, and for the after-party, Sidney Poitier flew in so that, you know, just to see what the boys were doing. So, I mean, we – you know, for people our age at that time we were – I mean, we were – whatever we were, I mean.

And then, the other thing that was also clear, you know, we were also in the Student Council. You know, Tom Kahn, who was a member of NAG, was the treasurer of the Student Council. Uh, Stokely Carmichael was in the Student Council, you know, student government. And then, the other thing that was Mike Thelwell, who was, you know, a member of NAG, ran the newspaper and got great awards for the quality of the newspaper. So, we functioned, you know, externally, in terms of demonstrations, but in terms of Howard, in terms of people who could organize and do things, we were there. We were in the leadership of it.

And we were also encouraged by a lot of the professors, because they thought – they adopted us as their children, uh, particularly Sterling Brown. He would invite us to his house. He would, you know, have, you know, discussions. He would talk to us about [W.E.B.] Du Bois. He would talk to us about, you know, other people that we've had heard about. He would, you know, he would talk to – he would, you know, not only play at his house the jazz

music or the blues; he would come to our dormitory and talk about the history, he would talk about the poetry. You know, we had, you know, others, Conrad Snowden. You know, we had, uh, other professors. You know, we had others who, you know, just thought that we were doing what they would like to do, and they tried to give us all the encouragement that they could.

JM: Tell me about [0:15:00], um, a little bit more about this group and your role in relation to all these, all these other folks you've mentioned.

CC: Well, the NAG was really run by three people, [laughs] three large egos, I think: uh, Ed Brown, who is, you know, Rap's older brother [H. Rap Brown's brother]; uh, Stokely Carmichael; and myself. Uh, and I think, you know, people looked to us, uh, in terms of the, um, you know, in terms of leadership issues. I mean, I think that, uh, when it – a lot of – I did a lot of stuff on the Project Awareness stuff, uh, in terms of organization and pulling it together; also, a lot of stuff on the demonstrations and so forth. Um, I didn't do too much in the Student Council, didn't do too much on the, uh, student newspapers, but on those two we were very active.

JM: Yeah. Tell me about, um, how you – how NAG and all of, so many of you, um, deepened your, uh, engagement with SNCC.

CC: Well, I mean, at that point, SNCC was, SNCC in the early days was – it's Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee – so it was really a coordination of student groups across the country. So, therefore, NAG was one of the student groups across the country. You know, Nashville was another, Atlanta was another. So, we were just part of – so, we sat in with, you know – I sat on the coordinating council for SNCC and, I guess, on the executive council, committee, at some point, you know, to, you know, help pull the organization together.

JM: Yeah. Did you travel to Atlanta?

CC: Yes.



JM: Yeah, yeah, for early meetings.

CC: Yeah, used to be going down on Highway 29, and I remember gas was twenty-nine cents a gallon. Now, I couldn't drive, but I'd ride down there. So, gas was twenty-nine cents a gallon; cigarettes were twenty cents a pack.

JM: Um-hmm. Did you smoke? [Laughs]

CC: I used to smoke. I used to smoke until 1971, and I was on my way to Africa and I saw – I was in LaGuardia airport and I saw that cigarettes had gotten to seventy cents a pack and I said – in the machine. I said, “I know where this is going. It's time for me to end this conversation.” So, I stopped smoking.

JM: Are there interesting – interesting, yeah. Are there, um, are there things that stand out vividly in your memory from those early trips to Atlanta for those SNCC meetings?

CC: Uh, the SNCC meetings or the trips? Which – I mean –?

JM: Uh, well, they'd both be very interesting, but I'm thinking of the SNCC meetings.

CC: The SNCC?

JM: Yeah.

CC: They were – I mean, we – the good thing about – interesting. The meetings were and the discussions were interminable, and we talked about everything. I think probably the thing that's most important, as I think about it – and I've just kind of, I've just thought about this lately – you know, most of the young people were asking, “Why?” Given the basis, given the kinds of things that they faced, they were asking, “Why?” At the SNCC meetings, we thought about how to change, and everybody said, “Why not?” Okay? I mean, paraphrasing that famous poem.

I mean, it seems to me the difference and the real genius of the young people – and we're talking seventeen to twenty-two, you know – of that group was that we moved from asking why the situation existed the way it did to talking about why not change it in a way that we should be living. And once you cross that barrier and don't feel you have to ask those who created the situation to make the change for you, then you are free. And therefore, I think the things that struck me about those conversations, about the seventeen to twenty-two-year-olds, that the barriers of normal thinking and intellectual thought were broken, and the discussions about where we should be going, what we should be doing, and so forth, were limitless.

JM: Yeah.

CC: I mean, I think that's the thing that, you know –

CC: It didn't strike me then, but it strikes me now.

JM: Yeah, yeah. Also looking back in that context, you had mentioned that, [clears throat] that your peer group in the Bronx saw you as, could accept you as someone who was somehow a little bit different.

CC: Yes.

JM: Because your life experience had been different –

CC: Right.

JM: You'd come—had time in Trinidad. Was there any parallel, then, to your experience [0:20:00] inside this group of young activists at SNCC? Were you – did you feel that your personal history distinguished you in some way that mattered, say, to your participation in those conversations, your perspectives, your philosophies?

CC: Um, I didn't. I didn't think so.

JM: Okay.

CC: Okay, but I mean, there was always this West Indian discussion. I don't know. It even appeared in *Time* or *Newsweek* magazine, where people considered people like Stokely, Ivanhoe [Donaldson], and myself, you know, to be, quote, "have a different view" because we came from environments that might have been a little less restrictive. I didn't – I never bought into that.

JM: Yeah, yeah. Tell me, if you would, about – actually, I want to take you back to have you tell me about the Rustin-Malcolm X debate.

CC: Oh, it was *amazing*. It was amazing. They had just built Crampton Auditorium at Howard University. The capacity was fifteen hundred. And, I mean, leading up to it, we tried to get the professor who was the head of the government to moderate the debate. I'm not going to say his name. He thought it was beneath him to have Malcolm X at Howard University.

We went to Emmett Dorsey, who was a professor at Howard, a wonderful, big bear of a man, who would say in his class that racism is architectonic to the Constitution of the United States, and he would point to the three-fifths clause. He, you know – he agreed to, uh, moderate the debate. We had a dinner before the debate with Malcolm and Bayard, and Professor Dorsey was talking. And Malcolm said, "Professor, I think we better let *you* speak tonight, because you have much more information than anybody in this room," which was really true.

We got to the debate. I mean, Malcolm had maybe about three hundred of his followers in the front. Bayard gets up, and I think he speaks first. He does speak first. Every – each participant had thirty minutes to speak. Bayard speaks fifteen minutes, and he says, "You always hear my point of view through the press, everything. I now want to give Malcolm fifteen of my minutes to help, to give him to present."

And Malcolm was, I mean, a dynamite speaker. And the thing that struck me was Malcolm – if you listen to “Message to the Grassroots,” that’s basically the speech that he gave, uh, the album and the thing, but, and I hadn’t heard it. This is 1961; I hadn’t heard it. And he would tell a joke or something like that or clap, and they’d be applauding. [Claps] And when he did that, his people would then do that. I mean, the discipline was phenomenal. [Laughs] I said, “Whoa! What is this?”

Uh, and I will tell you, from that debate, people at Howard saw us different. I mean, that we could bring Malcolm X and Bayard Rustin, have fifteen – people were pounding on the door the whole night, trying to get in. I mean, people, I mean – because that was considered a big auditorium. We brought, I mean, you know, kind of pizzazz and, you know, all sorts of things there. People looked at us totally different after that. I mean, students, “Hey, these guys have something that we don’t have.” I mean, I think that’s kind of – that gave us a little cachet that we probably wouldn’t have had ordinarily.

JM: Yeah. What was your early sense of, um –?

JB: Joe, let’s pause for a sec.

JM: Okay.

[Recording stops and the resumes]

JB: We’re back.

JM: We took a short break. Um, I was going to ask, um, about – you’ve just mentioned the Malcolm and Bayard Rustin debate, um, and these other things, and how this cachet attached. I’m remembering now that the question I wanted to ask was shifting themes a little bit. Uh, early on, what was your – how did you gauge the prospects of substantial, true kind of structural change through the nonviolent protest strategies that were emerging through SNCC?

CC: We had big debates about that. We had, we had – and the Nashville group had one view; the Howard group had another. [0:25:00] The Nashville group believed in nonviolence as a philosophy and a way of life. I mean, and John [Lewis], I mean, John, uh, is probably the, you know, the poster child for that. You know, Diane Nash. You know, Jim Lawson, those guys. The people at Howard, we viewed nonviolence as a tactic, you know. And, you know, one of the things that the nonviolent people's philosophy – those people, they felt that, you know, you could appeal to men's hearts.

You know, my view, and which I've said to them, was that you might as well appeal to their livers, because they're both organs of the body. There was nothing to that. You did not – you engaged in nonviolence because the other side had overwhelming force. There was not a sense that the other side would do the right thing if you told them, because at the end of the day, the other side knew what it was doing to you better than you did. [Laughs] So, it's not that they didn't know what they were doing. They wanted to do it. [Laughs] So, I mean, that – so, we had huge, huge – I mean, that was a source of early tension. I mean, early – '61, '62, so forth. We did not believe in nonviolence as philosophy.

JM: [Clears throat] A kind of parallel question: In these early years, especially when things heat up in the South, '62, '63, what was your evolving sense of what you might be able to expect from the federal government, if much of anything?

CC: Um, slim and none. I mean, I think there were individuals, particularly John Doar, particularly Burke Marshall with the Civil Rights Division, who were, you know, uh, very helpful. But, I mean, I, you know – you know, there was a story sort of like – the house was bombed in McComb [Mississippi]. This was – I think this was '63, '64 – it may have been '64. And we went down there.

JM: You were in Mississippi in '64?

CC: We were in Mississippi, I'm sorry.

JM: Yep.

CC: We went down to McComb. The FBI was there. They said to us, "Look, don't make any mistake about it. We're here to protect the evidence. We're not here to guard you or protect you." Okay, that's first. [Laughs] Then the guy said to us, "Look, how many guns do you have?" And we said, "We don't have any guns." And he said, "Well, I've got two and I'm scared to death." [Laughs]

So, you had two issues. First, their mandate was limited, because, you know, of both the political, local political issues, which affected the federal political issues. And, at the end of the day, most of these guys, as individuals, thought they would be overwhelmed. So, I mean, uh, you know, we, you know, we tried to communicate to the federal government as much as we could communicate and tried to – in certain circumstances tried to do that. But, you know, many of the people in SNCC, including myself, felt that, you know, most of those agents who came from the South were *of* the South and therefore sympathetic not to us but to, you know, the communities that they lived in.

JM: Sure. Let me bring you back to '62 for a minute. Um, in the spring, you and Stokely Carmichael and, I think, one or two others sat in at Robert Kennedy's office.

CC: Oh, yes, we did. Butch Kahn was the other, third person – Butch Kahn and Tom Kahn. [Laughs] You've really done your research.

JM: Can you recall that?

CC: Yes. It was – it was funny. Uh, we went there and we went to the, to, uh, Kennedy's office, and I think they were in a quandary as to what to do. And so, basically, they

just said, “Okay, just leave them there,” or something. And then, uh, late in the afternoon, they were going to come and move us out of the building, take us out. So, um, Butch Kahn started calling the press from, um, from Kennedy’s office and included the Soviet press in the people that he called.

So, then they came at the end of the day and they were, you know – we went limp, and they were dragging us out. So, as they were dragging us out, they probably got [0:30:00] maybe fifty [or] sixty feet down the hall. Stokely says, “Wait a minute! Wait a minute! I forgot something [laughs] in the office!” So, he gets up, goes and gets the stuff in the office, goes back to exactly where he was, says, ‘Okay.’” [Laughs]

So, so, I mean, so they just took us out of the office and just said, “Bye. See ya.” Just took us out of the building and said, “Bye-bye. See you.” You know, so, I mean, so that’s what I remember about it. [Laughs]

JM: It’s interesting how – one of the things that’s so interesting about doing these interviews in 2011 here is that the emotional mood about all this has shifted so much –

CC: Right.

JM: That we say it and we recall these things with a smile, and yet, you were there for what were just deadly serious reasons.

CC: Oh, yeah! No, no, we were very serious!

JM: Yeah, absolutely!

CC: Because we thought that the Kennedy administration – first of all, we thought that the Kennedy administration, particularly the way they dealt with Martin King, you know, earlier, was basically an opportunist approach to things. We thought that, you know, Bobby Kennedy and the Justice Department was not being very serious. They were also very opportunistic and

had a view that they would only do what they were pushed to do, even though the law of the land, you know, which changed in '54 [with the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision] to be, you know, be on the side of the ending of segregation, you know. They had bought into the “go slow” approach and “don’t disturb” approach and “look, don’t cause any political trouble for my brother” approach, you know. So, we felt that, at the end of the day, they were about themselves and not about, you know, making this country a better place for everyone.

JM: Yeah, yeah. Um, let me ask about [clears throat] two things. Obviously, you’ve given, you’ve been asked to give many interviews over the years. And two episodes are often the focus of a lot of attention, and I want to sort of take them up together –

CC: Okay.

JM: Because I think in some ways they have a relation. You can tell me if you agree. Um, the, uh, struggle over the John Lewis speech at the March on Washington in August of '63, and a year later, the Atlantic City MFDP [Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party] struggle at the Democratic National Convention. Um, because in both those instances, I think *I* think of them as having to do with that forceful and quite idealistic and quite hopeful push really bumping into up against some very, very rugged power. And so –

CC: No, I think I want to take them, the two separately, because I think the Atlantic City had a much more profound impact than, than the March on Washington.

JM: Yeah, okay, fair enough. Okay, good.

CC: Uh, the March on Washington, I was the representative for SNCC, uh, and –

JM: To the Steering Committee.

CC: On the Steering Committee. And for whatever reasons – at this point I can’t remember – I passed out John’s speech before the March.



JM: To the press.

CC: To the press. Because I assume I was trying to promote John's speech – I mean, that's why you would do that. Then, we're at the March, and John – we get a call. Archbishop O'Boyle says that he is not going to participate in the March on Washington, you know, if the criticism of Kennedy's administration and the whole reference to “marching through the South as [General] Sherman” – but I think that last part about “marching through the South as Sherman” is a little, you know, was a ruse, because the real – they did not want the Kennedy administration, uh, criticized.

And, you know, um, we, at that point – when I say “we”: John Lewis, uh, um, Jim Forman, myself – you know, told Archbishop – Bayard [Rustin] came to us at that point, and we told, uh, you know, “You can tell Archbishop O'Boyle to go straight to hell.”

JM: Regarding any changes to the speech.

CC: Any changes to the speech. We were not going to change. And then, what Bayard did, and Bayard is a very clever person. He went and got A. Philip Randolph. A. Philip Randolph said, “I know.” You know, he gave us our propers [note: that is, made a gesture of showing respect]. But he said, “Look, I have worked since 1941 to make this happen, and it is important that the coalition is held together.”

And it is out of respect for A. Philip Randolph that we were, you know, we went in the back of the Lincoln Memorial – Jim Forman, John Lewis, [0:35:00] Mildred Forman, and myself – and we changed John's speech. Now, the way that was perceived in SNCC at that point was that – particularly me and Forman – we caved in. And so, the criticism was individual to us from the SNCC people. It wasn't the broader society.

I think Atlantic City was a lot different. I mean, people worked – I mean, people worked all summer. They faced tremendous, you know, uh, hostilities. And they thought that the rules – they played by the rules that they were supposed to be playing, and everybody was engaged in that. We went to, we went to Atlantic City with the sense that if – again – if you presented the facts to the nation, then it would make a difference. The first thing, the first clue was when Fannie Lou Hamer was speaking, Lyndon Johnson called a non-serious press conference to say that, “Today is Tuesday,” okay, and to take her off the air.

But in the bowels of Atlantic City Convention Center, Bob Moses, Charlie Cobb, Ivanhoe Donaldson, all of us were – we, I mean, people were scrubbed, we put on suits and ties. We, I mean, you know, all that sort of stuff; some of us hadn’t had ties on for some time. But we went around and we were able to pigeonhole enough people like Edith Green and others to support, you know, the Mississippi Freedom [Democratic Party], at least at the Credentials Committee level. Then, when it was known that we had enough, to, enough representatives, Lyndon Baines Johnson really started acting ugly. He called Hubert Humphrey, and he told him, “If you want the vice-presidency, you better stop these people.” He called people who were up for judgeships. He said, “If you don’t do this, you are through booking.”

Now, we had the list of people, and a Congressman, whose name I will not put out here at this point, you know, came to us. And I remember Bob Moses and I were in a meeting. And the Congressman asked us for the list of people who were supportive, because he said what he wanted to do was show, you know, Lyndon Baines [Johnson] that he had, in fact, the kind of, you know, support, and therefore, you know, therefore to be able to move the agenda in our direction.

Bob Moses just looked at him and stared. And I said to Bob, “Do you think he’s going to steal the list?” Bob hesitated a little more and then he gave him the list. “Do you know? If you’ve seen – if I saw the list, you’ve seen it.” What that Congressman did was use that to get the Johnson administration to go after each one of these people to get them to capitulate.

JM: These were the, this was the minority, but sufficient minority who were going to vote to put it to the floor.

CC: Sufficient minority to do a minority report, yes.

JM: That’s right.

CC: So, this Congressman, you know, took the list and went and then, you know, gave us, you know, you know – I wouldn’t use the word “betrayed,” but it was close.

At that point, you know, we had, you know, worked the whole time. We had, you know, basically played by the rules that were established. And when it came out that, you know, they had collapsed the minority representatives, the group of minority representatives, the representatives who would participate in the minority report, what happened was they then offered two seats, you know, in the balcony somewhere, two seats on the floor and then the others could be sitting in the balcony. And people like, you know, people that we [0:40:00], quote, “are on our side” – I would say National Council of Churches, you know, AFL-CIO, Martin King, you know, NAACP, uh, the, uh, Joseph Rau, um, you know, everybody, *everybody* said, “This, you should accept this.”

We said, “Okay, well, just –” I mean, and SNCC always kind of worked with the people, and it was Bob’s idea. All right, we met in a church. He said – Bob’s view is, “Okay, if you want them to accept it, make your presentation.” And they presented and they, you know, talked about it. And the people said, “We didn’t come up here for this pretense. You know, we came

here *believing* that if you played by the rules, in fact, the rules would be observed.” So that, you know, so that not – it wasn’t only the Johnson administration. It wasn’t only, you know, Hubert Humphrey. It was the whole liberal establishment that said, “No! The rules – when it comes to power – these rules don’t obtain.”

So, at the end of the day, the refusal of, you know, the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party to deal with that, you know, so-called “compromise,” you know, and the kind of sense that power prevails, not the sense of, you know, the ideals and the things that we, you know, people espouse. You know, capitalism always trumps democracy. You know, then people were able to see it firsthand. I mean, at, I mean, we – you know, in ’64, you know, I was twenty-three. You know, everybody else was around that, and they said, “Hey, this is the way it happens, huh?” You know? “Not all that stuff we read in the books. This is the stuff that happens. *It wasn’t idealism*. These were the rules that you put out there. This wasn’t stuff we thought up. This was what you said the party rules were. And when it came to, came, the deal came down, this is the way it came down.” And then people said, “Hey, we no longer trust you.” I mean, I think people then started disengaging from the electoral process and what people considered foolishness.

JM: Yeah.

JB: Could you, um, just add a little bit? Um, step back to when you started to go to the convention. Just line out what you had anticipated would happen, what the context was.

CC: Right. I think when we started with the, you know – first of all, we had worked, we created the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party. We went to all the counties in Mississippi. We held meeting after meeting, you know, when, you know, the rules of the Party said that, in fact, if you did these things, you would be seated because you would be representing these things

and you functioned by the rules. So that, when we went to Atlantic City, having functioned by the rules of the, of the Democratic Party itself, we expected to be seated. We expected to be, you know, the Democratic Party in Mississippi. And, in fact, when we got to, you know, we got to, uh, Atlantic City, we found out the rules had changed.

JM: Yeah, yeah. Let me have you, um, if you would, please, um, talk about the transition, then, *after* August '64 to Alabama and the way you thought about widening the project with new approaches to what, I think, a term you had used was "the unqualified."

CC: Yeah.

JM: Yeah.

CC: I think of all the things I have done, I did in SNCC, I'm most proud and most, uh, I like what we did in Lowndes best. Um, the reason we went to Lowndes County was to deal with the kind of violence, particularly the shooting of Viola Liuzzo. When we went there, you found a county that was eighty percent African American, and there were four registered voters. Now, the – Alabama had a law [0:45:00] that allowed you to have a political party at the county level. It also had a rooster, which said "for the right" above it. [note: Cox is describing the Alabama Democratic Party's emblem, which was a rooster accompanied by the slogans, "white supremacy" and "for the right."]

Now, the question then became, "How do you achieve political power, and how do you achieve regime change?" Because, before, we were all talking about, uh, you know, registering people to vote. We were all talking about, you know, if you presented the facts, if you did that, and if you played by the rules, then, you know, the rules would be supported. In '65, the view was, okay, here are the rules and how do we manipulate them to achieve our own – because we're not taking them to anybody, because we know what that's going to be.

So, we're saying, "Okay, if you have an eighty percent majority, then you ought to be able to run the county." So, you know, office of sheriff, office of county assessor, tax assessor, county clerk, county court – I mean, the judge. And the problem was a lot of people, one, they did not read or write, and, two, the idea – they didn't know a lot about the offices or responsibilities of the offices, and, three, you had to get them to believe they could do it. So, what we did – Jack Minnis, who was the research guy in Atlanta, who was absolutely brilliant, I mean just absolutely brilliant – we researched the laws.

And once we found out you could have a party at the county level, we could say, "All right, what does it take to build a party at the county?" So, we then researched the roles and responsibilities of each of the offices. Now, we knew that people were not going to sit down and read law books. So, what we did was we created comic books, which talked about the roles and responsibilities. We got people who would agree to run for sheriff, and we gave them the comic books, and we passed the comic books, and we put their pictures out there so that people could see them in that particular context.

The other thing that we did, you know, was we created a propaganda piece called "Mr. Black Man," and it's a story I developed with Jennifer Lawson, who is now working with PBS. She did the graphics; I did the text. And I used a phrase that I heard from, uh, a woman in Mississippi. She said, "You know, us black people have been using our mouths to do two things: to eat and say, 'Yassuh.' It's now time we say, 'No.'" So, I used that to create a sense that we have been doing all these kinds of things and we've been eating and saying, "Yes sir." It's now time we support Mr. Black Man, and it could be, you know, so-and-so for sheriff, so-and-so for tax assessor, so-and-so. Because our argument was it's no use protesting police brutality by the

sheriff. The way to deal with it is get a new sheriff, who accedes to your view of the world. So, then, we, you know, got people to believe.

Now, as, you know, we went on the plantations and, you know, and obviously, you know, there was a lot of reaction. They threw people out of their houses, you know, violence and so forth. But what we found in Lowndes County, his name is Mr. Jackson. We found, I mean, he's a guy who owned his land. I mean, he was a guy who was the salt of the earth. When you see him, it looked like he was just – he's coming out of the earth. He was just very strong, and, you know, and his view was – he was quiet, he wasn't highly educated and all that, but he was very strong. And he gave us his house and he would stay up all night to protect us with his gun.

So that, you know, so that basically our thinking in '65 had said, "No more about 'go on and take these rules.' No. [0:50:00] You've got to create your own rules. You've got to now assume power. You've got to now – the discussion is no longer about protest. The discussion is about power. How do you now assume power, you know, given you have the demographic, you know, advantage? And how do you move that discussion?"

You do your research. You now understand how to go about it. And, basically, over time, you know, convincing people like Mr. [John] Hewlett and others to run for sheriff and others, that we were able to now be able to take over every, uh, position in the county. You know, I wrote a pamphlet and I can't find it anymore. You know, I gave away a lot of this stuff that I used to have. But it was a pamphlet that I wrote called "What would" – paraphrasing a Biblical thing – "What would it profit a man to gain the vote and not be able to control it?" Because, at that point, the discussion of control and organization to move that control was particularly important.

JM: Yeah, yeah. Let me ask a couple of things. Let me have you describe, um – you alluded, um, to the atmosphere of violence in Lowndes County in that era. Can you say a little more, because I know that, for example, Jonathan Daniels is killed out in the –?

CC: Yes.

JM: In the county seat outside the – when they're sprung from jail that Saturday morning.

CC: Right.

JM: Just a little bit about the experience of being there and confronting that and observing that as a –

CC: Well, I was not exactly – I mean, the reason we went into Lowndes was to show, after Jonathan was killed and Ruby [Sales] was almost killed, you know, that we were not going to be afraid. So, we came in after that, and, you know, particularly people like Stokely Carmichael, Ralph Featherstone, Willie Ricks, you know, Bob Mantz – you know, we came in after that to make sure that we were going to show that we were not going to be run out. Uh, and so, I mean, I think for the community, which was, you know, was there, you know, saying that, "We ourselves would live in the community. We would be at risk with you," was the same thing.

I mean, and this house we lived in – it was interesting. You know, it had no running water, so we had to prime the pump in the morning to get our water. It had one butane gas heater in the living room. And it had a hole in the roof, so when it rained, you had to have a pan in your bed, so it wouldn't rain on the bed. But, I mean, it, you know, so – and when you wanted to get relief – excuse me for a second.

JM: Let's take a little break.



CC: [Coughs]

[Recording stops and then resumes]

JB: Okay, we're back.

JM: We're back on after a brief break.

CC: Okay. When you wanted to get relief, we would drive to Selma, which is about twenty-three miles – I mean, not only relief – a bath. [Laughs] And, you know, uh, we'd go to Chicken Shack. [Coughs] Excuse me. Can I get some more water?

[Recording stops and then resumes]

JM: And you were talking about Selma. Okay, we're back after a short break.

CC: So we, you know, we, um – we used to go to Selma to get a bath or take a shower, to go to Chicken Shack, listen to some music and get some fried chicken, and then drive back to the county. But, I mean, people saw us living there day to day, and it gave them comfort that, you know, we were serious people and that, you know, the kind of violence that was visited upon the county by, you know, the people who killed Daniels, uh, and almost shot Ruby and so forth, that we would, you know, would stand up to it. So, I think, you know, our living in the county, or living where we – or southwest Georgia or Mississippi – you know, that counted. I mean, that was SNCC's trademark. We lived where we worked, I mean, as opposed to, you know, dropping in and dropping out.

JM: You, personally – how did you deal with that kind of pressure, fear?

CC: I think I always told myself, "There is fear there, and you shouldn't be paralyzed by it." I mean, I remember once we were driving. I was driving with this young guy, uh, John Jackson, Mr. Jackson's younger son. And these guys started chasing us with a pickup truck, and

they had guns. I mean, and we were going – I mean, we must have, [0:55:00] on those dirt roads we were probably going seventy or eighty miles an hour.

And, you know, you tell yourself that you could deal with it – I mean, you fantasize all sorts of stuff. Like, for example, I always thought that, okay, I could probably get away from somebody who had a gun, but I had a problem with, in Alabama because I thought they would use bombs. So, I was never – I was more nervous about Alabama than I was Mississippi because I thought they would bomb in Alabama and shoot in Mississippi. [Laughs] You know? And therefore, you keep telling yourself, “Okay, don’t be paralyzed. This is a dangerous situation. Don’t be paralyzed.”

Now, sometimes, I remember I looked around – uh, in the trial of Collie Leroy Wilkins [Jr.], uh, who had shot Viola Liuzzo, I looked around in the courtroom and I was the only person of color in the whole courtroom. And I started thinking, “All right. What did the people – what were the kids that I went to college doing?” I mean, they were doing – and I said to – you know [laughing], “You’re really crazy. I mean, this is a little dangerous here.”

I mean, so, I mean – I think when you are in it, you have mechanisms that go into place that don’t calculate the danger, or deflect the danger from you. Um, I think it’s only if something actually happens to somebody you know, it brings it home. I think when you get outside of it, you think about, you know, “That was a little interesting.” So, I mean, I think that, you know, I was affected. I mean, I always try to rationalize it. You know, there were others in SNCC who were not so lucky. But I went through a series of rationalizations. I mean, that’s the way I dealt with it.

JM: Yeah, yeah. Let me ask you about the ’65, ’66 period in SNCC –

CC: Okay.

JM: And Carmichael replaces Lewis and –

CC: Yes.

JM: Whites are expelled. Just your – how you moved through that period, um, if you can describe it, and your perspectives on those transitions.

CC: I think, I think basically, which goes back to Atlantic City, the organization was becoming much more militant, in the sense that the whole sense of – I mean, there was always that – remember in 1962, we had one group who felt, you know, the philosophy, another group that felt this was a tactic. So, basically it started getting wider and wider and wider. And most people – John, again, a true believer, you know, felt that you needed to continue to appeal to the people who were in power to change their ways – and we started believing less and less in that discussion.

So, I mean, so that is, you know – but this is something that was, I don't think, looking back on it, sudden discussion. It was, you know – from the beginning, you know, John had a view about if you taught people, and they did the right thing then, you know, other people like that, that they would actually do the right thing because in their hearts they were decent human beings. And we didn't believe any of that. So, I mean, at that point – you know, it became a critical point, especially after our experience in Atlantic City.

JM: Yeah, yeah. Um, can you say a little bit more specifically about the two, those two transitional moments, one, the decision to expel whites from SNCC, and then the, when Carmichael replaces Lewis?

CC: I think, I think that a lot of the stuff, I mean, a lot of – I mean, the stuff about the replacement, Carmichael replacing John, I mean, Stokely had just come out of Lowndes [County]. He had a lot more energy than John, in terms of that. He probably reflected the mood

of the black community and a lot of younger people in SNCC. And I think John held on to the ways that he knew and his views of, you know, [1:00:00] how things should be.

Um, I think that, you know, the country – I mean, you know, after Lowndes County and the whole discussion of Black Power, which came, you know, at the Meredith March [of June 1966], you know, and, you know, this whole discussion, you know, the *Washington Post* and the *New York Times* started generating editorials, which said, you know, um, you know, this is a bad thing. Even today, you know, people say, “the good period in SNCC,” and then, “the bad period in SNCC.” The good period represents when they viewed that SNCC was, you know, uh, believing in, you know, the American Dream and all that, and that whites were involved in it. And then, the bad period in SNCC was the period when SNCC did not feel that, you know, the people who were making the decisions were ever going to be in their favor, and they needed to look to themselves to move the discussion.

So, I mean, and my sense, I mean, I think, again, the Movement, the whole discussion, I think it was at Peg Leg Bates [Clayton ‘Peg Leg’ Bates, African American entertainer who owned the Catskill Mountain estate where the meeting took place], to, uh, expel – not expel – no, I don’t think that’s the word to say. I mean, I think the basic position of SNCC, and Jim Forman articulated best – he said, “Look, the problem that we face is not in the black community. The problems we face are in the white community about the way they feel about things. So, we think that it’s important that the whites who are organizers and sympathetic to us should go to the white community and begin to organize in those communities to create, you know, sympathetic relationships.”

I mean, I think the way it got characterized was probably, you know, unfortunate. But I think that is what, you know, people – now, people had been with SNCC all this time,

particularly the whites, felt that they had a home and therefore, you know, into this new thing was, you know, very difficult. But some, like, you know, who went and did a good job, and they, you know, founded Southern Student Organizing Committee [SSOC].

You know, but, you know, but I think the way it was, you know, the fight that went on at Peg Leg Bates, um, where I guess I was quoted as saying that, I guess it was, “Race is necessary but not sufficient,” something like that, um, you know, my sense was that, I just think that we were trying to deal with problems. We were trying to figure out, you know, how do we end these barriers. You know, but, you know, people started saying, “Well, how come you don’t love white people anymore?”

I mean, “What?” You know, we’re facing, you know, destruction at a lot of things, and, you know, this discussion of, you know, “Why don’t you like whites anymore?” We were saying to the white community, “Help us! Go into the white community to help make changes there.” And so, therefore, I mean, I think the way it was characterized, and the way it’s still characterized, I think, is unfortunate, but it is what it is.

JM: Well, it had the impact of – one immediate and fairly short order impact was the funding was so much harder to come by.

CC: Oh, no question. I mean, and particularly people like Theodore Bikel coming out and, you know, making his statements about it, and other people, it cut the funding tremendously.

JM: Yeah. Let me switch to a theme that, uh, takes us away – well, it takes us into a, into one of the dimensions of a widening frame of consideration, I think, in this era.

CC: Right.

JM: And that’s Vietnam and –

CC: Yes.

JM: I want to ask – it's fascinating – I want to ask about your participation in, um, Stockholm in '66 –

CC: Right, right.

JM: And then, in '67, you go to Stockholm for the War Crimes Tribunal, uh, Bertrand Russell, and, um –

CC: Right.

JM: Can you spend a little time on that story? It must be very interesting.

CC: You've done your homework; [laughs] I can see that. Let me just go – let me go back a little bit.

JM: Sure.

CC: Um, SNCC was – SNCC has made statements both on Vietnam and the Palestinian issues. And we made early statement on Vietnam [1:05:00], which impacted Julian [Bond] greatly. But you remember at that time that, you know, the argument for some of the established Civil Rights Movement was that you could only speak on issues of race. You have no right to speak on the issues of Vietnam. Now, you also have to understand that most of us, most of us in SNCC, including myself, got—one, wise. And because, you know, even before the Tribunal piece, the view in SNCC was, “You want us to fight a war over there when we're facing this here? Are you – what is the issue here?” And then, you know, so a number of – the frame was set, in terms of this discussion.

And, you know, so I went over. We were invited, after a number of statements, by the Bertrand Russell people, to come, and I was asked to go. Because we had – you know, I had – we had gone, SNCC people had gone to North Vietnam, you know, Charlie Cobb and Julius

Lester. I was invited to go, but I declined. But I went over there to represent SNCC in the group. And I walk into – I get into London, and I really don't know much about the European scene. And I go to this dinner, seven-course dinner, you know, with all sorts of liquor and stuff like that. [Laughing] I've just come out of, you know, Alabama. I said, "What is all this?" I mean, you don't know if you're going to get too full or too drunk.

But it's interesting. At that dinner were Bertrand Russell, Jean-Paul Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir, Isaac Deutscher, [and] Dedijer [Yugoslavian politician and historian Vladimir Dedijer], I mean, you know, all the huge weights of European intellectual thing. And what struck me – this may be just a little silly, but, you know, both of those guys, Sartre and, uh, Bertrand Russell, such huge egos – they were about five foot five, I mean, at best. [Laughs] I mean, you know, they were, you know, *little* guys. I mean, um, and Dedijer, who was with the Yugoslavian, you know – huge guy, I mean, you know. And so, we get to, we get to, we get to the thing and we agree that we would, um, you know, have this, and I would participate. I come, I think, I don't – Russell was not – he was at the dinner, but not very active, because he was –

JM: Ninety-four.

CC: Ninety-four, yeah. But the real leader was Sartre. Now, what strikes me is that Sartre is smoking and smoking, would say whatever, and everybody would genuflect, "*D'accord, d'accord.*" I mean, it was like, there was, every – you know, it was sort of like, you know, he was the Pope, you know, blessing his group. Everybody just – that's all they would – you know, agree. So, I go back and I come back. We go to – so this was, I think, in London. This was in London. So, they agree to have this thing in Stockholm. So, I go to Stockholm. And, again, it's first time in Stockholm, and it's strange. The weather is just up and down. But it's the cleanest place I've ever been, a great, clean place.

So, I'm sitting next to Simone de Beauvoir. And we're – you know, they are talking. Colonel Ha Van Lau is – from the Vietnamese – is talking. And what struck me about him is his absolute humility, you know, about the war, about the mistakes that they've made, the need to change and correct and so forth. So, every time Jean-Paul Sartre would say something, Simone de Beauvoir would turn to me and say, "Do you understand?" I looked at this – you know, I didn't say to myself what I said about – I said, "Yes." She said, "But do you comprehend?" [1:10:00] I said, "Yes!" Wh-wh-, you know?

So, then, I ask Colonel Ha Van Lau a series of questions, because remember they were using pellet bombs. This was when we started – the United States started using pellet bombs [that is, cluster bombs]. So, I asked Colonel Ha Van Lau, I said, "In wars, there are generally, you know, institutions that people tend to attack: you know, infrastructure, that is to say, the economic infrastructure, the factories; the political infrastructure, the, you know, the capitol and so forth; and other things." And I said, "It seems to me in guerilla warfare, you don't have those infrastructures that you can attack. All you have is the people. So, do you think that by definition of what you have, that a war, a guerilla warfare between – you know, that the only way an industrialized country has to attack, you know, against guerilla warfare, is to commit genocide, because you have to attack the people?" He said, "Yes."

She never asked me again did I comprehend or understand. She – let me tell you something. She was like – she was pissed. Because I, you know, implied that the war that the West had to fight against wars of national liberation had to be wars of genocide. She never asked me another question. [Laughs]

JM: Let's take a little break here.

[Recording stops and then resumes]



CC: The reverence that Sartre was held in –

JM: Yeah.

CC: I mean, he was –

JM: Yeah.

CC: Now, I will tell you at that point I was put on several lists.

JM: I might ask you that when we come back on, but – John, you've got to give me a heads up on that. We're back on?

JB: We're back.

JM: Okay, please. Did you want to say that on the tape?

CC: Yeah.

JM: Okay, please. Yeah.

CC: You know, because – I mean, whether – one of the things that I found out is I was put on several lists, uh, mainly FBI and CIA. Um, and, you know, they followed me wherever I went. And whenever – I mean, on my – wherever, whether I was coming – whenever I came back to the United States, they would – you know, I would be surrounded by agents. And I would say, “Oh, you just picked me out at random?” They, you know, they looked at me. And they'd searched everything and they'd make sure, you know, to see if I had any documents and stuff.

On my way – in 1970, on my way to Africa, you know, the British – I was going to go into London. They stopped me in Heathrow. At that time, you didn't have, you know, planes going to Africa every day. And they would not let me in London, so I had to sleep in the airport for two nights. And they took me under armed guard and put me on a plane going to Africa.

Now, so, you know, at that point – you know, at that point, I was viewed, um, as an enemy of the state, um, and was treated as such, uh, by both the FBI and, you know, the CIA.

Now, the FBI was a little more aggressive in the sense that they would, if I was going to go – I was going to go speak at Cornell. And the FBI then said to the people there who invited me, “Don’t you know who this guy is? Why are you inviting him?” So, they tried to discourage, I was told that. But when I – you know, I do have my FBI files, CIA files, and IRS files. And when I look at the work that the FBI did, as a taxpayer, I’m ashamed that they did such sloppy work. [Laughs] You know, so, you know, I thought the CIA did a little better, but the FBI, they just need to pull up their socks. They need to do better work.

JM: This was a Freedom of Information Act [1:15:00] request?

CC: Freedom of Information Act, yeah.

JM: I need to take a little break, so let’s –

CC: Okay.

[Recording stops and then resumes]

JB: Okay.

JM: Okay, we’re back on?

JB: Yeah. When you mentioned that we started using pellet bombs, what was that?

CC: Yeah, they were called cluster bombs. You know, you would have one big bomb.

A cluster bomb is you have one big bomb and had a lot of, uh, little bombs in it. And then, once those bombs, uh, got close to the ground, they’d explode, and BBs, BB, uh, pellets would, uh, would be in those pellets. And so, they couldn’t destroy a building or anything. They were just designed to kill and injure people.

JB: Thank you.

JM: Um, let me – we've already begun in important ways to touch on the whole question of, um, where this work is leading and some of its implications, because you've mentioned already that you're closely watched by the federal government and all of its agencies of surveillance and national security. Um, but I'm very interested in the story of the development of the effort that culminates in Tanzania in '73 in the Sixth Congress of Pan-Africa – yeah.

CC: Okay. Well, one of the things that – I mean, Stokely Carmichael and I talked a lot about moving the discussion, you know, because – let's say, after the, after the Atlantic City Convention, I began to understand that you had to think much differently. You could not keep asking people, you know, who were, in fact, benefitting from the status quo to change the status quo.

And I felt that it was important that you, as we tried to – people went to the discussion of Black Power and what we had to do in our communities and so forth that, as I looked at it, it was clear to me that there was nothing in the black communities, whether you're talking about Harlem or all these other places, where you had any kind of economic infrastructure that could make a difference. So, therefore, while, you know, rhetorically and politically, it was kind of good to talk about, you know, how these communities could defend themselves and do for themselves and so forth, you know, they didn't grow any wheat, they didn't – you know, they had no agriculture, they had no industry. They had nothing and they had no resources that could make a difference.

So, therefore, the question of making alliances and beginning to work with people outside of the country, uh, particularly the African continent, which was in this kind of, emerging itself, you know, became important to me. Uh, at that point, I met, um, Pauulu, um, his name is Brown [born Roosevelt Brown, later Dr. Pauulu Kamarakafego, of Bermuda], um, and C.L.R.

James, you know, the noted West Indian authority on cricket and intellectual, uh, and also the man who wrote *The Black Jacobins*. Um, and they talked about the Fifth [Pan-African Congress].

JM: In '45?

CC: In '45, 1945. And we thought it would be important to get African people on the continent of Africa and the Diaspora to begin talking about how there could be a cooperation, you know, to help, you know. What people in the United States had and the Diaspora was, you know, technical, uh, skills, you know, engineers, that, you know, kind of thing; and, you know, what Africans had, land, resources, and so forth. And how could—and also, the other thing that was going on at the time was liberation movements, so how could we be supportive of all those kinds of things?

So, we went around to, um, you know – the President [Julius] Nyerere [of Tanzania] agreed to host the conference. And we went around with C.L.R. James. Uh, I went around with C.L.R. James and Fletcher Robinson, who was a medical doctor. And we went to talk to, you know, we went to talk to a number of African leaders. We went to the OAU [Organization of African Unity]. I, in terms of organizing the Sixth Pan-African Congress, I was named the secretary-general. Um, and that, I was secretary-general – we're talking – I'm now, um –

JM: Thirty-two years old.

CC: Thirty-two years old. [Laughs] And I go, you know, to ask to talk to – [1:20:00] I go to talk to Sékou Touré, you know, the President of Guinea. And, you know, I, uh, you know – it's interesting. We went there. I stayed in Guinea for two days and then I was told, "The President will see you." And at thirty-two years old – Sékou Touré is known as a – and I walk into the office, his office, and he has this entourage of people. And I have my notepad. [Laughs]

I make the speech. And, I mean, I am – I can tell you, I was perspiring from both arms. But I tried to maintain my calm and cool and collectedness, and presented the case. And, you know, he agreed, I mean, he was more inclined to agree. He invited me to lunch at this place, and we had some fish and rice. It was very nice. I went to see, um, you know, Forbes Burnham in Guyana [Prime Minister of Guyana], you know, to talk about it. So, we had – and I also talked to a number of radicals in, you know, in the, um, the discussion.

Now, with the Sixth Pan-African Congress, we had the same kind of problem, you know, state power versus, you know, insurgence, particularly in Caribbean. Um, and, you know, what happened was that, you know – and also in Ethiopia. What happened was, you know, the state governments said that they would not participate in the Sixth Pan-African Congress from the Caribbean if the, the insurgent types were invited and were allowed to come. And the Tanzanian government sided with the governments. Then, also, the Eritrea, you know, the conflict with Eritrea was going on, and, you know, the Tanzanian government also said that they couldn't come. And then, but the Tanzanian government was supportive of the liberation movement, so they were there en masse.

And, um, you know, you know, the conference itself was, you know, a big success. Even people today, I mean, it's interesting, um – professor from Harvard who taught Obama, um, and his name is, uh, Ogletree, Charles Ogletree, he was at the Sixth Pan-African Congress and he reminded me. You know, there were a lot of people. Barack Obama – I mean, Amiri Baraka was there. I mean, there were a lot of people who were there, in terms of – so, the people who were there from the United States were the people who had been involved in the Movement and who were moving along. Uh, you had that group, you had the liberation movements, you had the

various African states, you had – I mean, and I think it was an important statement in terms of, you know, what we needed to think about.

But the problem was, once that conference was over, we didn't have the infrastructure. I mean, some things happened, I mean, in the sense that support for liberation movements continued. [Someone coughs] Other things that happened was that we did send some technical people to Tanzania, and some others moved to Tanzania. Uh, and there was a lot of intellectual discussion back and forth, particularly around Tanzania and others. But I think the kind of broad, uh, discussion that we wanted to have and maintaining that discussion, and building on it, we didn't have the infrastructure.

So, I think that it pointed the direction that we needed to go in, but it did not allow us to really have the kind of relationships that we wanted. But, I mean, the Sixth Pan-African Congress grew out of our view that, in fact, if we were going to deal with something, the economic issue was going to be important, and we did not have anything that was fundamental to the economic development of our communities in our communities. I mean, that was particularly important.

JM: Yeah. Let me pull you back inside that story just to say a little bit more about your – how the [1:25:00], uh, how the story unfolded so that you emerged in that role as secretary-general. It's really quite exceptional.

CC: Yeah. I mean, I think that, you know, clearly the intellectual godfather was C.L.R. James. He wrote the Manifesto, he wrote the Call, and stuff like that. Um, I think that I – I mean, for better or for worse, I've always in some ways been perceived in SNCC as an intellectual type. I mean, you know, I mean, whether that's good or bad, I'm not, you know, and therefore – and I also had, and I guess people assumed I had some organizational skills. Um, so

when – and I put – and, you know, I understood the question, and I think, as I put the time and energy into it, you know, people felt that, uh, not only did I understand the issues, but looking back, you know – and it was a little bold, my thinking that I could deal with the heads of government and the heads of state and talk to them about a proposal and [laughs] get them involved in it.

But I think once, I think what gave me cover – I think two things: first – if C.L.R.’s involvement in the conversation gave Nuyereere the comfort that this was a serious conversation, and then, Nuyereere’s involvement in the conversation made other heads of state think this was serious. So, therefore, I mean, I had cover that I just – if I didn’t mess it up, it would be all right. I mean, I think that’s kind of how it was, as I see it.

JM: Yeah. Um, it’s a very interesting story. Let me take you back to ’68 for a couple of things.

CC: Okay.

JM: Two main things I want to ask about in ’68. [Clears throat] One is the, um, bookstore and press that you opened here.

CC: Oh, yeah, Drum & Spear.

JM: Another is just the climate of that year with King, RFK, Nixon in the fall elected.

CC: Yeah. [Laughs] I think the, uh, we had just – I had come back. You know, I had decided to come back to Washington.

JM: Oh, can I –? Forgive me. Can I ask one other thing in front of that?

CC: Okay.

JM: Because it comes chronologically in front, and I meant to ask this. You declined the invitation to go to North Vietnam.

CC: Yeah.

JM: Is there an interesting story to tell about that decision?

CC: No, I just thought that I had – I had just come back from, you know, the War Crimes Tribunal, and we were invited, you know. I mean, I didn't want to be the person who was always doing something. Now, I was invited to go to Russia, but I didn't go because I thought, in February, it'd be too cold. [Laughs] But the other one, about North Vietnam, I didn't want to go because I had just been, you know. Other people should, you know, go.

JM: Okay. The bookstore and the press.

CC: You know, after I came back from the, uh, War Crimes Tribunal, I decided to settle in Washington. Uh, and we decided – Marvin Holloway, Ann Holloway, um, Charlie Cobb, Judy Richardson – we decided to – you know, information was important, and we decided that, you know, a bookstore and a press would be good. Um, and so, we opened a bookstore on 14<sup>th</sup> and Fairmont Street, you know, dealing with African and African American history and also things that dealt with, you know, Palestine, dealt with Vietnam, dealt with issues of war and stuff like that.

And, I mean, we, it was, you know, I mean, it was – it was a great political venture, but I'm not sure it was a great business venture, in the sense that we did a lot of stuff, but I don't think we ever made any serious money. But it was important because it – I mean, people remember it today. In fact, there is a plaque on that building, you know, that, you know, the bookstore was there. And Drum & Spear, you know, we were able to publish, you know, C.L.R.'s book and, you know, some other books that we did, um, Palestinian poetry and other things, a book of African names and [1:30:00] so forth.



So, I mean, I think it was about: How do you now organize information about the African community? And we, in addition to the Drum & Spear bookstore and the Drum & Spear press, we had the Center for Black Education, so that, so that information and education now became important. Now, how do you begin to think about the world differently? How do you begin to read different books? How do you begin to do things that were different? So, I mean, I think that was our thinking in terms of, you know, why we established the, you know, bookstore and the press.

JM: Um-hmm, yeah. Your reaction to –?

CC: Oh, yeah, King's – we were, Ivanhoe [Donaldson] and I were going to, uh – we were going to make a speech somewhere in Pennsylvania. And we were riding in a Volkswagen. You know, those Volkswagens in those days, if you were going uphill it was a struggle; downhill you were all right. Um, and we, you know, heard about King being killed. And, um, you know, it was like a total shock, I mean, total disbelief. Because I don't think that any of us, even though we knew that this was a dangerous situation, the concept of King being shot was a bit beyond what most people would conceive to be within the realm of possibility. And when he was killed, it was a shock to everybody. Because I think, you know, most African Americans thought, "If they could do that to him, what are they now prepared to do to us?"

And then, we came back and we were in Washington. And, you know, the Poor People's March headquarters were 14<sup>th</sup> and U Street. [Someone coughs] And I think the next day or so, you know, Stokely and others started, you know, making a lot of noise about, you know, King's death and they started marching up, you know, 14<sup>th</sup> Street. Um, and, you know, what people characterized as rebellions took place. And, you know, it was interesting. There were two things going on at the same time. Externally, to the white community, there was a lot of hostility.

Internally, even in the actual rebellion, like, there was a lot of peace and calm. So, if somebody said – you know, people were very polite to each other. Uh, you know, if somebody said, “Well,” you know, “can I help you get this television,” [laughing] so, you could, you know, take it away. I mean, the thing was very, I mean, to each other, the sense of solidarity was very strong. And externally, it was very – you know.

So, I mean, I, you know, I was, you know, I was just – I remember I was sitting on the hill on 13<sup>th</sup> Street, just looking and seeing what’s happening, and it was, you know, it was just fascinating. I was just watching it, um, you know, and I thought, “Well, you know, there’s people –” there was nothing that could be done. I mean, I think, I thought that people were leading with their frustration. I thought it would get them nowhere. I thought that and about a dollar fifty would get them on the bus. But, you know, that’s what they wanted to do. Uh, I think that the reaction of the mayor, Walter Washington, at that point, when he declared martial law and had tanks on Columbia Road and 14<sup>th</sup> Street was quite interesting and, again, was another sense of what power will do, you know, analogous to, you know, Atlantic City, I mean, to protect property, to protect its own interests. So, that was, you know, to me, a big lesson.

Um, I think, you know, that, you know, in ’68 also – I mean, I think the other impact was Bobby Kennedy’s being shot. Because I think, you know, Bobby Kennedy, you know, he – I think he really showed a great deal of humanity [1:35:00] and sophistication after King was shot. I mean, probably of all the people, public people, he understood. I mean, it was not an intellectual discussion with him, you know. It was, you know, he had been there, and I think his words were really appropriate. Uh, and what he had just said in South Africa, was also very good. So, I mean, I think he found his voice that was really very, you know, very important. But then – you know.

You know, I think what people began to see, uh, and then with the Chicago Convention, um, you know, with, uh, you know, the people watching. I mean, I think for King's death and Kennedy's death, people just thought about this as a very violent country. I mean, and, you know, where you had, you know, somebody like Rap [H. Rap Brown] saying, you know, "Violence in America is – violence is as American as cherry pie," I mean, that kind of mindset. I think the Chicago piece, at least for me, I mean, I was kind of not involved in it, in a sense. I mean, when I say "not involved," I was not only physically not there, I was emotionally not there. Um, and I thought that it had a lot more to do with Vietnam and, you know, and people acting out their sense of, um, frustration in terms of ending a war that, you know, people felt people were dying and there was no way to deal with it. I mean, people felt that the government was not listening. And, um, you know, while I knew a lot of the players there, I wasn't – I mean, I was an observer. I was not a participant, I mean, I just – either physically or emotionally. I just was watching it.

JM: Let's take a short break.

CC: Okay.

JM: Just a quick pause.

[Recording stops and then resumes]

CC: I mean, I think that, um –

JM: Okay, we'll come back on.

JB: We're on.

JM: Okay, we'll come back on.

CC: You know, my sense is, I've done a number of things, uh, and, you know, I've seen a lot of these, you know, movies and so forth. You know, and as I think about it – and, you

know, it's interesting, because Stokely and I used to talk about stuff. And we used to view this like an onion. You know, we knew that the basic issue was economic. We were brought to the United States for economic reasons, and the only way we would be able to deal with it was the economic issue, dealing with the economic issues. But there were several layers and several barriers between where we were, you know, forty years ago and where we could get today.

So, as I think about it, you know, it seems to me that, you know, the modern civil rights era, what I call the political era, starting in '55, really ended in 2008. That – the whole thing – we had three accomplishments in between that time: we ended segregation in public accommodations, we did voting rights and spread it to the South; and we did political – organizational, electoral – politics. With the election of Obama, all the presumed barriers that we had before us, you know, are now gone.

Now, but before '55, you know, we have to look at the NAACP and the things that they did for us. They allowed the country – they functioned in the courts, so they allowed the country to now say segregation is no longer the law of the land. It reversed *Plessy v. Ferguson* in, you know, in 1896 and established a new thing, a new, uh, frame of reference in 1954. So, I mean, so you look at that, and then, before that, the whole fight to end chattel slavery and establish the African American as part of the American society. So, you look at – so, these things don't exist in one-offs. They exist in a continuum.

I think at this point we are now [1:40:00] able to do what Stokely and I discussed forty years ago: We are now able to focus on the economic discussion. Because what we have is, you know, an information economy, and things, you know, manufacturing and so forth, while important, they are not the drivers. I mean, intellectual property and the ability to conceive ideas and move the discussion is particularly important. And that the kind of literacy that is necessary

in order going forward, you know, includes – both includes English, but includes math and computers. So, therefore, we now have to think and conceive of these things, you know, a lot differently. And I think my role and the role of people like myself is to understand what the fundamentals are.

Now, one of the things – and I was talking to Bob Moses the other day, and, you know, he was saying that nothing we did was really radical. You know, getting people to vote, you know, sitting at a lunch counter and organizing politically is not radical. What was radical is who we tried to include in the discussion, you know. So that, to me, is the same fight that we have to understand we have to bring: that we have to broaden the economic base. We have to include, you know, particularly not only African Americans, but poor whites, you know, who are being used as soldiers for, you know, for purposes that nobody, they don't even care about them. They call them heroes, and then when they come back here, you know, nobody cares about them. You know, Native Americans and so forth. So, we now have to say, "All of these people at the bottom now have to be part of the American economy. And they have to begin to get a quality education that allows them to participate in the American economy. And those people who have intellectual property should be able to monetize them and create wealth and institutions."

Now, that – given even today's discussion about who gets cut off and who doesn't, you know – I mean, that is a radical concept. Nothing I said about what we should be doing is radical. What is radical is who is included in the conversation. I mean, and to me, you know, that is the lesson that we have to talk to the young people about, because they keep looking back at what we did in the '50s, '60s, and so forth, and trying to figure out what are the lessons learned. The lesson learned has to be the broadest inclusion of people, not the particular act or so

forth. What we did – that is what we have to figure out, and how do we now put that in an economic context. It seems to me that is what I'm interested in doing, going forward.

JM: Mr. Cox, I really want to thank you. It's been an honor and a privilege.

CC: [Laughs] Okay.

JM: And we appreciate your time.

CC: [Laughs] Now, you've done your homework. I mean, I have to say –

JM: It's a real pleasure.

CC: I must say, I mean, you, I guess – what do you do?

JM: Historian.

CC: I mean, I guess so. So, I mean, it's definitely clear that you're a historian.

[Laughter]

JM: Well, anyway.

[Recording ends at 1:43:40]

END OF INTERVIEW