

Interview with **Calvin Taylor**

Date: October 17, 1988

Interviewer: Paul Stekler

Camera Rolls: 4009-4011

Sound Rolls: 402

Team: D

Interview gathered as part of *Eyes on the Prize II: America at the Racial Crossroads, 1965-mid 1980s*. Produced by Blackside, Inc. Housed at the Washington University Film and Media Archive, Henry Hampton Collection.

**Preferred Citation**

Interview with Calvin Taylor, conducted by Blackside, Inc. on October 17, 1988 for *Eyes on the Prize II: America at the Racial Crossroads, 1965-mid 1980s*. Washington University Libraries, Film and Media Archive, Henry Hampton Collection.

**Note:** These transcripts contain material that did not appear in the final program. Only text appearing in ***bold italics*** was used in the final version of *Eyes on the Prize II*.

[camera roll #4009]

[sound roll #402]

00:00:12:00

Camera crew member #1:

Sound 12.

[slate]

Camera crew member #2:

Calvin Taylor.

Camera crew member #3:

OK, wait 'til you hear the set. Give me a set. OK. Any time now.

00:00:22:00

Interviewer:

You guys weren't included as part of the, the COME leadership. How come?

00:00:30:00

Calvin Taylor:

Basically, I, I think that, as, as I explained before, that we just did not fit the mold of what the leadership was at that particular time. Memphis, I, I can't speak for a lot of other places, but at this particular time, for Memphis many of the Black leaders were either ministers or political people that had been selected or were viewed by the White populace as the leaders. So, when we came along it was like we had no, no one to introduce us as anyone. We had no one to give us any credibility. We were just simply just some young guys who had a program. And at that time you have to realize that the, the, the situation around the country was militant. I mean, people were talking about Stokely Carmichael. Here come some young guys who look like Stokely Carmichael or sound like Stokely Carmichael. No one wanted that particular type of influence in the Civil Rights Movement at that time. So we, we suffered from that. I mean, no, no, no one ever did. Plus, we had some pretty famous Black leaders at that time in this city in terms of Maxine Smith and the NAACP and that kind of thing.

00:01:42:00

Interviewer:

What were your relations like with Jim Lawson?

Camera crew member #3:

Hold on. Let's change rolls.

[rollout on camera roll]

[wild sound]

Camera crew member #2:

OK, that's rollout on 2, I'm sorry, 400—

Calvin Taylor:

Is that OK?

Interviewer:

That's good.

Calvin Taylor:

OK.

[cut]

[camera roll #4010]

Camera crew member #3:

Speed.

00:01:57:00

Camera crew member #1:

Camera four thousand ten comes up, 402 goes on. 13.

[slate]

00:02:04:00

Interviewer:

How did the Invaders feel about being excluded by COME?

00:02:10:00

Calvin Taylor:

Rejection is difficult to take on anyone's part. I, I, in, in, in reflection, I guess, we didn't like it. I mean, you know, it was we felt we had a legitimate program, we felt we had some legitimate contributions to make. We felt there were some areas that, that involved the Black community in Memphis that needed to be addressed that the leadership was not addressing. So, when, you know, we expected rejection from the White community, but to get rejection from the Black community, and particularly to get it in such a personal way, because it was never as if they were talking to us as people with, as I say, contributions, you know, valid contributions, meaningful contributions to make. It was always as if they were talking to wild, young teenagers. And we didn't view ourselves as wild, young teenagers, you know. I, I've mentioned before the fact that when you look at the backgrounds of all the people who were involved in what was called the Invaders, you would find that there weren't that many wild, young teenagers. Idealistic, overly energetic? Maybe. You know. But wild. [shakes head] Not, not, not, not even rebellious, I, I, I think, at this point in time.

00:03:28:00

Interviewer:

The march at—

Camera crew member #1:

Just a second. Is it noisy outside?

Camera crew member #2:

It is starting to.

Camera crew member #3:

OK.

Camera crew member #2:

Can you cut?

Camera crew member #1:

Yeah.

[cut]

Camera crew member #2:

Rolling and speed.

00:03:37:00

Camera crew member #1:

Fourteen.

[slate]

00:03:40:00

Interviewer:

OK, we're back at the march that, that, that falls apart. And you get back and you're back on Beale Street or whatever. What did you see? What did you feel? What did you do? What do you remember?

00:03:53:00

Calvin Taylor:

Well, as I remember, when I got back, everyone was still...there was still the mad dash from Main Street, or what is called, it's Mid-America Mall today, but it, it was Main Street. Everyone was still running because the po—you know, police were trying to get the marchers, I guess, into one confined area, and I guess the area they were trying to get 'em into was back to Clayborn Temple, from, you know, which is where the march began. How did I personally feel? What did I personally do? I remember they asked me at the Senate investigation hearing, Did you throw a rock? And I said, In all honesty, yes, I did throw a rock. So that's what I did. I picked up a rock, a brick or bottle or two or three or four, I don't know how many, and I threw a couple, because you have to understand that the march, as far as, I guess, the Black community was concerned, even though they were not—and I don't think they were in favor of violence, I don't even think they had any inkling that violence was coming—there are years and years of frustration in terms of not only the sanitation workers aren't being treated fairly, I'm not being treated fairly, my uncle's not being treated fairly, now, it was just a release. And anytime anything's released there's just an outpouring, you know, an explosion-type situation. And at, for, momentarily I felt a great deal of relief. I mean, if you wanna know what I personally felt, yeah. I guess after tossing the first brick, rock, bo-bottle or whatever it is I tossed, the seriousness of what was happening then takes over. It's like, people could really get hurt, people could really get killed because all of a sudden you notice that there's a person, you know, with a bleeding head here, or there's broken glass all around you. There's, you know, firings. I mean, you don't know if the police are firing in the air, firing, you know, what's going. So then the seriousness of the situation sets in, and so to some extent you're now afraid. You're trying to think of, you know, what do I do to protect myself? And at the same time, how do we keep this level of intensity going so that people know, you know, that, that we really mean business as it relates to seeking some relief for what we felt like was, you know, mistreatment on the part of the White community in Memphis?

00:06:04:00

Interviewer:

You know what? I'm sorry, keeping it right in that time period, you get there, you throw that first brick. What did you do then? Just specifically what you did and what you saw.

Calvin Taylor:

I don't really know what I specifically did. I mean, that's a long time ago, that's twenty years ago.

Interviewer:

Mm-hmm.

00:06:21:00

Calvin Taylor:

You know, I, I do remember tossing a brick or two, and I do remember standing on a car urging people to, you know, to, to maintain their ground. That, you know, this is the one time that we must stand up to the people. I remember my high school instructor, Sister—can't even remember her name. What is that lady's name? Sister Mary Killian came along and I guess she thought I was still in high school 'cause she told me, Calvin, you get down off that car. [laughs] And I looked at her and told her, you know, something to the effect that she probably was crazy or something like that. But, police put on a pretty good rush, so then everyone decided it's about time to go. So, with everyone else, I did eventually get off the car, retreat back up Hernando to Clayborn Temple. I'm a little luckier than most people because at the time that I was going back to Clayborn Temple, I ran into one of the photographers from *The Commercial Appeal* and then he asks me about getting some photographs for the paper. So I sort of join hands with him to help him identify, you know, certain scenes to shoot, certain people to shoot and stuff like that. And I guess with his protection and the fact that he had his camera and his press card and that we were together, some of the fear subsided. I mean, I mean, I was standing very close to policemen. I mean, I remember distinctly looking at a policeman shouting at a lady who was standing on her porch, who was just absolutely mesmerized by the entire scene, trying to figure out what is going on and who's gonna do what, and him shouting at her. And I, you know, I was as close to him as I am to you and he didn't do anything to me and I guess it was because I was with the photographer from *The Commercial Appeal*.

00:08:09:00

Interviewer:

You told me that most people were surprised about the fact that there was violence on the march.

Calvin Taylor:

Mm-hmm.

Interviewer:

Were you surprised?

00:08:16:00

Calvin Taylor:

Not exactly. I knew that the march had all the potential in the world for violence. And when I say that the people were surprised, I mean in the sense of it actually happened. Not in the sense of will it happen, or should it happen, or do we want it to happen. At that time, our group, the Invaders, were very active in the community. We were very active in the high schools. We knew who our members were, so to speak, for lack of a better word, because we

did not have as such a membership card-carrying identification-type situation. That we just...the people that we called members were more in the sense of belonging to the same cause. We all felt like we needed to correct what was happening with Blacks in the city. So, there wasn't a thing of, Do you have your card and did you pay your dues? So, not members in that sense. But we were aware of the fact that, that, that there had been a great deal of talk about it. I mean, you know, I mean it was the urgings of the national militant leadership at the time that we must, you know, be prepared for violence. So it wasn't, it wasn't anything strange to us in that sense.

00:09:34:00

Camera crew member #3:

We have to stop.

[cut]

Camera crew member #1:

Sound 15.

00:09:36:00

Camera crew member #3:

Mark it.

[slate]

00:09:40:00

Interviewer:

I'm sure you're aware, that in talking to lots of folks, when they think about that march, the first thing they think about is they blame the Invaders for the violence.

00:09:50:00

Calvin Taylor:

True.

00:09:52:00

Interviewer:

How do you deal with a question like that, or how do you answer that?

00:09:58:00

Calvin Taylor:

[sighs] It wasn't unexpected. I mean, you, you, you have to look at the tone, the setting, the atmosphere at that time. We were being painted by everyone concerned, when I say everyone concerned I'm talking about both what they call, quote, "the responsible White media," quote, "the responsible Black leadership." We were being painted as people who were nothing but extortionists. I mean, we were terrorists, is what they would have called us, you know, today, in, in 1988. As I, as I said, we were not afraid of violence. We were not even afraid of discussing it as a means to achieve an end. It was being advocated by most of the, as I said, national Black, quote, "militant" leaders at the time. But when you think, when, when I think of us, the Invaders, in all honesty, we were left with no choice. When you seek to come to a table to reason with men regarding problems that face a community which you are a part of and you're actually met with, Get out of the room, you know, you don't know what you're talking about, or you're not old enough to understand, or you have not paid your dues, you have to—you don't have to, but you will...do something to be recognized. I don't think violence was ever a choice of the Invaders. I think the Invaders were left with no choice but violence. We could not be heard. We...no one wanted to hear us, but we would not be silenced. And that, and that was a problem. So, to be blamed for the march, for the violence on the march was just part of that we knew that we would get blamed for everything anyway, I mean, whatever went wrong. It would have to go—surely to goodness no one, no, no reputable minister representing COME was going to say we did violence. [laughs] White community knew they didn't do it, so it had to be the Invaders, you know. But as I said, I think it's just, it was just, it was just one of those situations in which the mood, the atmosphere, the frustrations and all of that was just ripe for violence, you know. I won't kid you now. I mean, we did discuss the fact that, you know, people should be prepared. I mean, everyone knows that if you carry a placard and it ha...it ha...it's been carried on a pole, that you have a pretty good instrument for doing some kind of physical damage to something. So, you know, we weren't, we weren't, we weren't innocent, but I don't think that, I don't think that the responsibility in terms, of we planned it, you know, a conspiracy, or we put it together and, you know, we, you know, it, it was not a military operation—

[rollout on camera roll]

[wild sound]

Calvin Taylor:

—is what I'm trying to say. You know. We, we didn't decide to advance to this point. No. Not, in that sense, no, we didn't do it.

00:13:14:00



Interviewer:

That's fine.

Calvin Taylor:

Yeah.

Interviewer:

That was very good.

[cut]

[camera roll #4011]

Camera crew member #1:

402 continues.

Camera crew member #3:

Mark it.

00:13:19:00

Camera crew member #1:

Sound sixteen.

[slate]

00:13:24:00

Interviewer:

The morning after the march you and, and Cabbage and Smith get invited down to the hotel, and you're in the room now and Martin Luther King comes walking in. Describe what happened.

00:13:46:00

Calvin Taylor:

I've never seen anyone look so gentle as Martin Luther King. [pause] He came out, he didn't really say very much. I mean, it wasn't as if he came out and said, Hello, how are you? or any

of that. He and Cab knew each other, so they kinda spoke, you know, in terms of, It's been a while since I've seen you, or something like that. And I remember Cab walking to the balcony window. John and I were seated on a couch actually facing his bedroom door as he came out. I've never seen this man in person, so I'm thinking that he's going to look like what the TV media made him look like. And I guess that's why I, I, I was, I was stunned, really, because Martin Luther King speaks and it's very charismatic, it, it's powerful. So I'm expecting someone to come out who has a very powerful sense about themselves, right, and you get just the opposite. Martin Luther King was a very gentle person, a very sincere person. He wasn't, it wasn't an act, it was just the way, just, just the way he was, as I remember it. And he did, in very soft-spoken tones, he asked us, Why did you disrupt the march, and break up the march and allow the violence to happen on the march? or something like that. And none of us—I mean, heretofore we'd been dealing with ministers who are angry with us and White people who have no respect for us, so it's very easy to react to them and to go, you know, You a liar, whatever the case may be, but you're standing here looking at this man who's exuding nothing but sincerity, who's saying that this cause is a lot deeper than Blacks and Whites getting along, it's brotherhood, it's man-to-man, it's God and the reason for Creation and that kind of thing, and you can't sit there and say that you didn't do it and expect him to believe it because you can't even say it well enough for him to believe it. And I remember we, when he asked the question, like, Cab, I guess, disappeared outta the balcony window. I, of course, turned my head to look in the opposite direction, which was the door which we had come in. [laughs] And as to what John was doing, I have no idea. He was probably holding his head down between his legs. But we never really answered the question. It was like we were waiting for Cab, who knew the man personally, who was the spokesman for the group, to say something. He never said anything. We never said anything. I think eventually we got around to just simply talking about what happened and why it happened, and that's when we could carry on, you know, a conversation. But as far as answering his question, I think we never answered it, so. You know, and I, and I, I think it had to do not with, not with wanting to be dishonest or not with wanting to seem dishonest or anything. It just seemed to be that whatever answer you gave was not going to be sufficient for a man who had dedicated his life to something that he truly believed in. I mean, you know. I mean, I've always felt like the other people that were around at that time, and maybe even us to some extent, did things out of expediency's sake. We felt like, you know, it was going to be good for everyone if, you know, Blacks moved up higher in society and this kind of thing, but with Martin it was not just a moving up level economically for Blacks, it was a lifting up of all mankind, brotherhood, you know. So, I don't know. I don't know how you put that together.

00:18:05:00

Camera crew member #1:

Over now?

Interviewer:

Mm-hmm.

[cut]

[end of interview]

00:18:12:00

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