

Abraham L. Woods, Jr.

KIMBERLY HILL: This is Friday May 5th, 2006, and I'm talking with Reverend Abraham Woods at his church in Birmingham, Alabama. This is Kimberly Hill. Thank you for meeting with me sir. It's a pleasure.

ABRAHAM WOODS: I'm certainly delighted to share with you. God bless you.

KH: Well, I'd like to start by asking you to describe what you think Birmingham is like from your lifelong experience here. What do you think the city is about?

AW: Well, I assume you're saying, what do I think the city is about now. Now if you are asking me about the city in the past, then I have some different answers than I would have about the city now. Are you asking about the city's past or the city's past and presents?

KH: We can talk about the city's past.

AW: All right. I think it is well documented by various commentators and authors and others who recognized Birmingham was one of the worst cities in the United States so far as segregation and racism was concerned. In fact, it was called because it was considered the Pittsburgh of the South, the magic city. But Birmingham indeed was a tragic city. It was considered to be the Johannesburg of America. So it was not a good place for African Americans to live. One reporter came down, and he documented the kind of city that Birmingham was. It was a city of fear. Not only were African Americans in fear, but many whites were in fear too you see. So the Birmingham police have been looked upon by some as the Gestapo of Birmingham. We equated them with the Gestapo in Nazi Germany. They summarily brutalized black folk, and not only did they brutalize black folk when they took a notion, but they also used deadly force on blacks. Some of the officers got an image and noted for doing that, put notches on their guns. Birmingham was a terrible place for black people to live. Certainly when you look at the commissioner who was responsible for the police activities, Eugene "Bull" Conner. His name is synonymous with racial hatred, everything that goes with it. He was determined that Birmingham would remain the same, and he went to every extreme to see that that was so.

We had a city hall in Birmingham, but black folk did not consider city hall being our city hall. What you had in city hall, there were blacks involved, they were janitors and maids and people who did the menial work at city hall. So it was not our city hall. In fact we were not as first class citizens here. Of course it's common knowledge around the world now when the civil rights movement got started, I was a

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part of the effort by Reverend Fred Shuttlesworth who organized the Alabama Christian Movement for Human Rights after the NAACP was outlawed in the state of Alabama. He saw the need, and we all saw the need of another organization to carry on the struggle. We had great hope because of the decision by the Supreme Court, the 1954 decision, *Brown versus Board of Education* where it overturned the decision in 1896 I believe *Plessy versus Ferguson*, which said that separate but equal was the law of the land. Of course, *Brown versus Board of Education* said separate but equal is inherently unequal and must be dismantled with all deliberate speed. We took great encouragement in that, and of course the NAACP and others had been trying to wage a struggle with lawsuits and other kinds of things down through the years. But I think 1954 was a watershed day for us.

So after the Alabama Christian Movement was organized, under the leadership of Reverend Fred Shuttlesworth, we went about seeking to desegregate public facilities. King was in Montgomery fighting the battle of the buses down there. Some of those sparks had blown up here, and we were trying to desegregate the buses and other public facilities here in Birmingham too. Of course we were going to jail, some of us with Alabama Christian Movement but not nearly enough people. We invited Martin to come up with the SCLC. Fred was one of the charter members of that. Of course when they got here, we certainly had our strategy lined up to move out and test the department stores and their policies that stated that we could be customers and we could shop and we could buy as much as we had money to buy. But we couldn't sit at the counter, eat a hot dog nor drink a Coke. We certainly wanted to test that. So we did. I remember leading the first group that went out to test that policy. There were other groups that would be going to other stores. So we were successful in testing those policies. However we saw the need for more of our people to go to jail. We weren't having enough people to go to jail. We wanted to really break the backbone of segregation.

And so it was Reverend Bevels, one of the lieutenants of King, a young Turk, who had talked to King about turning students out. King was somewhat reluctant about doing that. To my knowledge, some time later behind King's back, Bevels pulled that together, and we went out to the various schools throughout the city to encourage the students to come and join with us and demonstrate and protest. The students were ready. I remember going out to various schools and some of the principals tried to keep the students in but they were getting out of the school any way they could, some coming through windows.

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They had fences, they were jumping over fences. Some were dashing past the principal and the teachers at the door and that sort of thing. I shall never forget those hundreds of students who came from the various schools really, thousands of students and coming from the east, the north, the south and west, singing “I ain’t going to let nobody turn me around.” I’m telling you. It was really something to behold.

Of course I got back to Sixteenth Street where we had established our headquarters, and my wife, I believe my mother and my four children were there at Sixteenth Street, and my oldest three children said, “Daddy we want to go to jail too.” I said, “Well, good. I’ve been so busy trying to turn other folks’ children out of school, I had forgotten about you all.” They said, “We want to go too.” I said, “Good, you can go.” My baby boy five years old said, “I want to go too.” His grandmother and his mother said to him, “Son you’re just five. You’re too young. You just cannot go.” He said, “I want to go.” He was very passionate about that. Can I stop a minute?

KH: Sure.

AW: Okay John, come on in. They told my five-year-old son that he couldn't go. They sought to frighten him. So they asked him, said, “What would you do if one of those ferocious dogs got after you?” He put his hand in his pocket and pulled out a rock and said, “I’d hit him in the head with this rock.” They said, “You still can’t go.” He had a temper tantrum. I’m telling you. That son now is successful urologist down in Orlando, Florida. He has an outstanding practice down there. But he was not going to be deterred by the dogs like so many of the young people. It’s a record out, it’s recorded the water hoses, water that knocked us down and all of that, beaten by the billy clubs, and even the gas on occasion, it was sprayed on us, tear gas and all that kind of stuff. But in spite of that, we persisted. In spite of the fact there were numerous dynamiting. One section of our city was called Dynamite Hill because there had been so many dynamite blasts up there where black people were beginning to move in somewhere adjacent to the white community.

KH: It was this neighborhood wasn’t it? (College Hills near Birmingham Southern College)

AW: Yeah, up further where Attorney Shores lived, yes.

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AW: Up on the hill, and of course Shores’ home was eventually bombed twice because he was involved in civil rights struggle. But the young people went and they stayed at least five days or longer.

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All of us went to jail. We made a commitment that we did not want to get out. We wanted to stay in long enough to make a statement, and so that's what we did. When I went, my group, some of us along with myself considered as leaders, they took us out to the city's farm. I didn't even know the city had a farm until one morning they loaded us up from jail and said, "We're going to the farm." I thought, they thought that that would be something that we wouldn't like to do, but I was a farm boy. I remembered. My father had hogs and chickens and cornfields, sweet potato patches and all of that. So they were putting rabbits into the brier patch. So they sought to frighten us. They let everybody else up at the place where the cabbage and tomatoes and onions and all that stuff were growing and they told us to follow and gave us picks and shovels, and they had shotguns across their shoulders and told us to come go with them. Well, we wondered where we were going, leaving the farm. They kept walking us further and further into the woods. So we got really concerned about that. Why are these folks carrying us out into the woods? We have picks and shovels. Are they going to make us dig our graves and then kill us? We got very concerned. Finally they stopped out in a very dense wooded area and said, "All right, y'all start digging." Well, we talked with each other along the way and we said, "Dig for what? We're not going to dig unless you tell us what we're going to dig for." They looked at each other and laughed and said, "We think there is some water. We're trying to find some water for the farm." Well, we figured then that maybe they weren't going to kill us. They just frighten us and wanted to give us some digging. We dug, we had dug them a good hole when they got back in the evening, and they said, well, come on let's go. So they just wanted to give us something to do and give us some exercise.

But you know the story of what transpired and eventually Sixteenth Street Church was bombed. However Reverend Shuttlesworth's church and the parsonage was bombed, and he narrowly escaped with his life and with his family with no serious injuries. On that Christmas we were supposed to ride the buses the next day, desegregated. Of course we rushed out to the bombing scene. A reporter came up to Reverend Shuttlesworth as he emerged from the shattered house that had fallen down, almost literally upon him and said, "Reverend Shuttlesworth, we understand that you all plan to ride the buses in a desegregated manner tomorrow." Said, "Since your church has been bombed, your house, you were almost killed, what are your plans?" I thought Fred was going to say under the circumstances we're going to meet and we're going to decide what to do. Before that reporter could get it out of his mouth, Fred said, "If the buses run,

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we're going to ride tomorrow." So we did. Several of our people were arrested for a test case as they would be arrested for a test case with the department store. Of course that came before the test case for the department store. SCLC had not come in here at that time.

So I served on the strategy committees as a lieutenant of King and was eventually asked to come to Atlanta and work out of King's office, and I served as the deputy director for the South helping to pull together the historic march on Washington. That was really a great experience for me as I had to fly all over the southeast and back and forth, to the north, to the Urban League for meetings with the civil rights leaders, the labor leaders, Bayard Rustin and all the rest of them making our reports: how many buses had been chartered, how many planes had been chartered, how many carpools, how many trains had been chartered, things of that kind. So we were very concerned about getting a large number out. King was very concerned about that because he said, "Politicians count. If we don't have a good number, then they will consider that we don't have support and that our effort is going to flop."

I chartered a train that would lead from the coast of Florida, southern part of Florida and go up the coast, pick up coaches at the various cities and then move out of Florida into Georgia and pick up coaches going through Georgia and then out of Georgia into the Carolinas and pick up coaches going through that then into Virginia. You're talking about a long freedom train that picked up coaches everywhere. When we got to the Union Station, we stepped off and saw other trains coming in like the one we chartered and saw buses galore. We saw people coming from everywhere. We were some of the happiest folk you've ever seen. It looked like the numbers that John saw [possible reference to the Book of Revelations]. We knew that this march was going to be successful.

The other thing that we were concerned about was the order because many in Washington and elsewhere had said that many people together, there would be some disorder. We were very concerned about that. We had marches and instruct our people to be on their best conduct and they were. We had no incident as you know if you've read the history of that. When we got to the Lincoln Memorial, I'm telling you, I was standing somewhat behind King right in front of that huge statue of Abraham Lincoln sitting there at the Lincoln Memorial looking out over that vast sea of humanity that was all around the reflecting pool. Some of the people had their feet in the water of the reflecting pool and many were in trees all around. As far as you could see there was a vast horde of humanity there. The park officials said that we

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had a quarter of a million people, but I'm sure we had a half a million people or more there at the Lincoln Memorial. You would just have to be there; listening to it on tape, CD, is not sufficient. You just have to be there to be caught up in the kind of electric aspect of that situation that something was in the air, that something was coursing through your body to hear those speeches and to hear the singer Mahalia Jackson singing and the other speakers, and then when King got to his speech, "I Have a Dream." I'm telling you. It just, it just lifted us. It just lifted us. It's something that some of us can't really describe what happened and how we felt. We had those words together and said just what needed to have been said in the manner and in the tone that it needed to have been said. I'm just telling you, it just went through us, and if you'd been there, you'd never be the same there. Of course it's going on back to Alabama, going on back to Mississippi and going on back to this sort of thing. I'm telling you that that was some experience. Of course I mentioned that, but I've been involved in a whole lot of other things working with the movement and that sort of thing. Maybe I'd better stop because I get talking and let you ask some questions.

KH: Okay. Let's skip ahead to the early '70s. The Voting Rights Act had been passed and the assassinations happened and Fred Shuttlesworth has moved to Ohio. So what goals did the Alabama Christian Movement have?

AW: Well, our goals were the same. Even though we had the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voters Rights Act in 1965, we still had to work to bring those laws into fruition. So we had voter registration campaigns trying to get as many black folk to the polls to register as possible. These people by no means stopped their opposition. They still had ways of sort of slowing us up and things of that kind. From time to time the federal government would have to take a stand. Well, their efforts to end us had been overt. Now they become somewhat covert. But the efforts were still there, but we had to persist. We had to persevere. So we did do that not only in Birmingham but Selma and other places around the South. We were going to get to the point where the black electorate would be of such that we could aspire for political office. So that's what we had in mind also. So in some of the black belt counties, we were able to be successful because there you had larger black population there. We got of course in Macon County, we got a sheriff of course and Green County a sheriff, and we got some other kinds of black officials you see in public leadership and that sort of thing.

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Of course in Birmingham what we had to concentrate on to deal with the police department, and so we were determined that the police department would never have the role that it once had. We had asked for black policemen after the government was changed to mayor-council form from the commissioner form. They put Bull Conner out and other people who worked with him. But they would not listen. We even asked for black policemen to patrol the black communities. They wouldn't grant that. They said there might be some whites in the black community, and black policemen might arrest them. I was part of the group that recruited military police, and we had a Miles College professor who had his Ph.D. I would carry them to the class, and he taught them how to pass the test. But in spite of their knowing how to pass the test, they always found something wrong. You're one inch too short or you're too fat or you're too thin or you're this and that. They were not determined. But police, black police are going to eventually come under the administration I believe of the white lawyer who sought to be the mediator between blacks, the black business, black community and white businessmen, David Vann. I think you've read of him.

KH: I have.

AW: He's deceased now. He became mayor, and I think we got our first black policeman under his administration. We appreciated David Vann's position because we considered him as a friend. He was a good friend of a black councilman who had been professor at Miles College, Richard Arrington. Dr. Richard Arrington had been elected. He was elected to the council.

But in 1979 in the summer, white policemen shot an innocent black girl in the back with a Magnum pistol three times. They came to investigate another incident, and she had gotten in the car with the person that they were looking for. There were people that were trying to tell them that this girl had nothing to do with it. She wasn't in it. She laid down on the seat, and one of the policemen came in the other car and told her to get up. She got up and he shot her three times in the back. This is the straw that broke the camel's back for black folk. Many black folk in that community came out, set white businesses on fire, stoning whites, I mean cars with white passengers in them and that sort of thing. Chaos broke loose in part of our city.

As the new president of the Southern Christian Leadership, Birmingham chapter, I was elected in 1978. It was my job to seek to try to lead that situation. We started having mass meetings to pull our

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people together. We strategized as to what we would do, how we would deal with this situation. So we first met with the mayor to see if he was going to deal with Officer Sands who had killed this young girl. After he sided with the police committee, which said that this policeman shot this young lady, and it was justifiable homicide. That's what they had been doing down through the years. That was the straw that broke the camel's back and black folk would not accept that any longer. Some of us cried up in his office when he made that, made that ruling. So we said we're going to have to do something. So we decided, we usually met here at our church. We decided that that we're going to have to do this, put somebody in office that would be concerned about our interests. So we decided to ask Councilman Richard Arrington Jr., black, to run for mayor.

Prior to that we had a march, the largest march that had moved through the streets of Birmingham since the 1960s. We had about 3,000 people in that march. David Vann came out about three blocks from city hall to march with us. Some of our people saw him, and they were chanting, Sands, they've got to go. They saw him and Vann's got to go too. I'll never forget the dejected look on his face. I guess he thought that siding with the police, they were stronger than we were. It's a sort of a thing that he thought it wasn't too much we could do. You really don't kick a dog if you think he's going to bite you. So he thought we were harmless, I guess. So he went for the police. But—

KH: Did he take that as a sign that the black community's political power had really grown?

AW: What his—

KH: The fact that they could successfully—

AW: Well, I didn't know, we didn't, we didn't seek to see where the black political power was. We didn't seek to analyze the black electorate. We knew that there were more black folk who could vote now. But the white electorate was still, was still larger than the black electorate. We just believed that we could get something done. So we sought to draft him here. He wanted us to check with other folk, but when we got another one of our community churches some time later, we just drafted him. So he was in the running now. Of course most whites didn't think he could be elected. And blacks didn't think he could be elected. But at the conclusion of that campaign he was in the runoff with another white candidate, very, very conservative white candidate. When the votes were in for the run off, Richard Arrington Jr., became

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the first African American mayor in the city of Birmingham. The black electorate voted in about seventy or close to eighty percent of the black electorate came out and voted.

KH: Amazing.

AW: In fact the percentage was higher than the white electorate even though they had more voters. We came out in higher percentages, and twelve percent of the white electorate voted for Richard Arrington and that put him over the top. You're talking about a great time in the city of Birmingham. We hoped and we yearned and we dreamed of a time when that would happen. But frankly to tell you the truth, it came much quicker than some of us had imagined, the first black mayor. So things began to turn, began to bring in more black policemen and put them in leadership positions and revamped city hall, putting blacks in various positions there. So we had a revolution really. The fire department and all of that you see under Richard Arrington. The deal with the police with their policies and all of that. So under his leadership things started happening here in the city of Birmingham.

However eventually they got judges, and of course we got council members eventually. The black members of the council outnumbered the white members of the council. At one time we had the clout that we could've elected all black members. Of course the white citizenry started crying and saying there ought to be some white members. So we changed the area of selection so that they could have three. We could have six. They wouldn't accommodate us in that kind of way. We'd asked, but they wouldn't accommodate us, but we accommodated them so it wouldn't be a complete black council.

KH: That was in terms of districts that council members represented.

AW: Districts, that is correct, and those districts would be predominantly white where they could be elected. If we had, we could've had them where we had enough black votes mixed in them you see where we could get all blacks, but we didn't do that. So things changed completely when you look all around. Even the, to the fact that black superintendent of education hired, things of that kind. Blacks were in various positions of power and leadership. Even to the extent that later we even got a black police chief. But when you look at the situation you might say in a sense that everything has changed, and to some extent nothing has changed. Of course what one might mean by that is that powers that be did not sit on their hands. They came up with various ways to slow our progress or deter us from some things that we wanted.

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KH: Who do you consider the powers that be?

AW: Well, there were still segregationists and were still people who did not want integration -- politicians, people of that kind who were catering to the white folk who were not ready and that sort of thing. Then white businessmen who represented the economic power, and there were some things that a black mayor and black council could do. But when you came up against the economic white power structure where your taxes and your businesses were, then you had to, you had to listen and you had to do some thing that they wanted you to do. They moved their business out of your city or they had other ways of dealing with you. We've got a number of our civil rights. One would have to be an ostrich with his head in the sands to say that we made no progress, but even though getting [cell phone] a number of—

KH: Is that your cell phone?

AW: Some of our civil rights, C-I-V-I-L rights, we were a long ways from getting our S-I-L-V-E-R, silver right. As you know the per capita income gap between whites and blacks in this country, that gap is continuing to widen instead of narrowing. So that's an economic barometer or thermometer to look and see what is happening in some aspect. Birmingham is a better city. It has a right now to be called Birmingham instead of Bombingham. It really earned the name of "Bombingham," but it has a right now to be called Birmingham. We're making some progress. But there are many, we have not arrived yet. The dream has not really come into fruition even though we made progress, and then too, there are problems along the way. They're not problems posed by the neo-Nazis and the skinheads and the Klan, but problems which are presented by our own people, the lifestyle of some of our people now. This drug culture in which we live, the gangs and the deterioration of black families and the-- Now most black babies are born out of wedlock. That helps to raise the poverty index you see. It also creates other social problems. Then when we look at the violence which is taking place. In Birmingham last year there were 105 violent deaths, and most of them were by blacks against blacks. So I think instead of King's dream becoming a reality, in some extent it is sort of turned somewhat into a nightmare. We're going to have to, we're going to have to address what's going on. I agree with Farrakhan when he said that so many blacks are on the death march and we're going to have to change the direction. We've met the enemy and it's often the enemy is us. I knew there are still inequities out there, inequities so far as the judicial system is concerned, inequities so far as the political system and all of that and education and what not. But in spite of those inequities I think

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black folk have a great responsibility, and so often we have not, we have not shouldered that responsibility. So we black folk, African American, I agree with the comedian—I can't think of his name now. But he has a show on TV. He's a very respectable fellow. Dr., what's his name.

KH: Bill Cosby.

AW: Bill Cosby. I agree with Bill Cosby. I certainly agree with Bill Cosby. He's taken some heat in what he said, but there are some things that black folk have to do for themselves. There's no need of accusing white folks of bringing drugs into this country. We don't have to use it, and we don't have to sell it. But you do have blacks who take that as a cop out. They bring it in. This sort of thing. Well, that's true. Then too when we look at the situation from another moral point of view, somebody wrote a book and said that the barbarians at the gate, the barbarians are inside the gate and they're in the city. You have blacks like Snoop Doggy Dog I guess that's his name, whatever his name. He was on the front of an outstanding magazine. I don't know if it was Time or Newsweek as an outstanding and successful businessman. He said this, he was in the S business.

KH: S business?

AW: S-H-I-T business. He was in the S business. He was doing well because people bought his S. There was a time when the news media and when the black, white businesses did not embrace those kind of blacks. Then this fellow who recruit women and shake your booty and all this kind of stuff. I don't remember his name. But—

KH: There are so many.

AW: Yeah, there's so many. There's so many. How degrading to the community and to black women and even the rappers calling their own women heifers and bitches and that sort of thing. I shall never forget when I was—

KH: Let me--

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AW: On the campus. And he was asking her to come over to him, and he was calling her out of her name. All at once he said to her, B[itch] you think you cute you hear me calling? She went, she went to sashaying over to him. I had to dip in and I had to tell her, "You ought to be ashamed of yourself, and boy you ought to be ashamed of yourself," but that got to be a widespread kind of situation. So we've found the enemy and often the enemy is us. We're standing in the way. No wonder some whites are afraid Jesse said and all of us said you meet a black coming with his britches down below his posterior end with a cap all kinds of baggy t-shirts and this and that. You don't know what this thug hoodlum like person will be capable of doing. But that's what we got. We got our young ladies buying into this kind of negative devastating lifestyle. So King would not be pleased with that at all. I think in many instances we're standing in our own self, way.

KH: What do you think could've been done about decreasing poverty and crime back in the '70s or '80s?

AW: It could've been done about decreasing it. Well, SCLC under King had a poverty program and the tent city in Washington. It wasn't too long after that before he was killed in Memphis. But it was going to be a crusade against poverty, not just for blacks but for whites too. Of course I'm sure the powers that be got the message. That would've been revolutionary. So we are aware that poverty is one of the chief enemies. Katrina and Rita revealed that when they went through New Orleans. The cover was pulled off that kind of situation. Now what are we going to do about it. Unfortunately we have a president who believes in taking from the poor and giving it to the rich and aiding and abetting oil companies are making billion dollars worth of profits and never said anything to seek to discourage that. I guess because his family is in the oil business; Cheney's in the oil business and a lot of his other people are in the oil business. I do believe that somehow they have sought to manipulate the situation over in Iraq with the OPEC people over there to cause the barrels of oil to go up because the United States you have a lot of influence over there. They're over there. Of course I think it's just their policies.

So the pharmaceuticals, you can't buy medicine. They're cutting your throats. Other kinds of necessary services that's being rendered. They've got a stranglehold on this administration is doing absolutely nothing. So we're going to have to have a real poverty program. So people don't have

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insurance; millions of people don't have insurance. We've got this problem with illegal aliens, and of course when they get here, they get various services from various communities. Maybe there's a limit to it and the schools and all that. That's a taxing on the resources of which are here. So we need a poverty program, and that's very important, and that's what is absolutely necessary, not that it's going to solve all the problems, but it will go a good ways in our thinking in solving some of the problems.

KH: Have you seen a sharp increase in poverty in your own neighborhood?

AW: Well, I guess I can say yes and no. I say yes and no for this reason. I think that poverty, and I read a book when I was in school, and it was *How the Other Half Lives* I believe is the name of it. Poverty also is a state of mind. Some people are very poor because they take their resources and buy things which they don't necessarily need, which aren't necessities. The old saying, so many people buy what they want and beg for what they need. I see some of that still persisting, and I see so many blacks into poverty because they use the money for drugs and other kinds of things. They'll kill you just for a little drug money and all of that. They impoverish themselves and impoverish their families in that respect. So I say yes and no.

KH: It's not, at least in some cases it's no so much a matter of having the resources as not using them wisely.

AW: Not having the resources that you and of course the poverty level when you look at where the income is—let me take this pill--where the poverty level is. The single mothers, yes. Single mothers, they usually don't make enough money to get beyond the poverty level. So poverty in this country has increased, and I say yes and no. I would have to say to some extent it has increased. You said in my community, I live in a sort of an upbeat community and having worked hard and got to the point where I could move my family to an area called Forestdale where the people have good houses and things of that kind. But in so many other communities poverty has increased. It has increased in this country as you know. So I have to answer yes to that too. I said no because of some of the practices that we see prevailing. So let me take this pill. My doctor gave me six months and no more than nine months to live. I'm still here.

KH: Three years ago.

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AW: Carrying on. He marvels every time I take a PET scan. He doesn't understand what's going on.

KH: That's wonderful.

AW: Okay.

KH: We talked a little bit about how the community was involved when Mayor Arrington got elected. But how has community participation changed since then?

AW: Well, we still have community involvement, and if you mean so far as civil rights are concerned or whether you mean involvement in city activities. What do you mean?

KH: Is there a big difference between the two?

AW: Yes, there's a great big difference between the two. We have blacks holding outstanding positions of public service in the city of Birmingham. The communities are organized, and there are various activities in the community, which supported by city government, and they seek to better their communities. They're organized. They have presidents and this and that and the other. In fact it's a model that some other cities have looked at. They're trying to get things done in their community, roads, housing, this, that and the other. You've got quite a bit of involvement when it comes to things of that kind.

But I would say that involvement in the civil rights struggle has somewhat waned because so many blacks feel that we have arrived. I guess you know the civil rights movement has been roundly criticized. Even by some black reporters who ought to know better, saying that there's no need for us now, and how they can say that when it is a known fact that racism is institutionalized in the American society? Every institution in this society, whether it is politics, whether it is the economic structure, whether it is education, whether it is religion, it is true that even now in 2006 the most segregated hour in America is the Sunday hour. So as long as you're going to have racism, you're going to need a civil rights organization.

I know that there are those that say that civil rights organizations ought to be about dealing with AIDS, ought to be about dealing with drugs, and ought to be about dealing with this, that and the other. Yes, there are some implications that we see there but the civil rights organization's main work is to monitor the activities of our country to be sure that African Americans are treated in an equitable, fair manner. That does not always happen. The Lady Justice is not completely blind. You know that by the prison bureaucracy, business you see. It's no secret. It's no accident that you have more black folk

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incarcerated. Not that blacks don't commit crime, but you know the system, what the system does and that sort of thing. Even when it comes to drugs. If they've got a certain amount of one drug, and you've got a small amount of another drug—

KH: The smaller amount can send you to prison.

AW: That's right and the larger amount of the other drug gets you rapped on the knuckles. So I fashion the question, if I did, you asked involvement what I'm talking about. Yes, the NAACP's had its problems. SCLC has had its problems. Even the Kings have been criticized. We have a people who don't even know what the SCLC is about until they get in trouble. Then they call me, "is this the SCCC" or don't even know the name. Don't even know the name. They've gotten in trouble, and they want me to jump up and run and see about them, and if you don't do it, then they will be very critical of you.

KH: What kind of help do they usually want?

AW: That's right. Huh?

KH: What kind of help do they usually want?

AW: Well, on the job. Sometimes it's their own fault. They haven't been coming to work as they should've been. People just get tired of it. "Well, they used to didn't do this." I said, they let you by but you knew it wasn't right. They want us to jump on the folk without investigating, but I've been out on that limb before. I learned not to get out on that limb because when you really go to the business and corporation and get the other side and they come up with records. Then these people are really on plea in terms of mercy. They have a right to dismiss them. But I know a lot of discrimination is going on still with that. The federal government agency is underfunded, and it is not working well, and sometimes they go to that agency which is supposed to deal with that, and they give them ninety days to sue and this sort of thing. When things go badly, they come talk to us. The strategy's already set. So often there is little or nothing that we can do. Some think we walk on water. Even when the judge has ruled and he ruled unfair. Then they come to us, try to get the ruling changed and all of that. But there is not as much involvement of the rank and file masses. We have marches now when it's necessary, demonstrations now. Some people ought to be a part of it. They're sitting on the porch or sitting on the sidelines, standing on the sidelines just watching when they ought to be involved. I think that's around the country in the civil rights. No, there's not the same kind of involvement. Our people think they have it made. They have jobs. They don't know

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how they got them. They think they got there on their own abilities when we had to assail the doors until they opened to bring blacks in, and some of them thumb their nose at the civil rights movement. Some black politicians do the same thing. There are some black politicians out of Birmingham we've never been able to get to help the civil rights struggle. They have good resources and this and that, but they're tied up with other interests and other interests are against us. They don't want to be seen embracing us. So some black elected officials and sometimes they are some of our worst enemies. I hate to say that. But that is true.

I really hate to say this that the first black police chief was a black man. We applauded him because we wanted him. But I've always had an image of dealing with police brutality and the unnecessary use by police of deadly force whenever a Negro is killed and shot and this sort of thing. We investigate, and sometime we find the police did not need to use deadly force, and we deal with that. They don't want us to do that. So I've got an image in dealing with some of these trigger-happy policemen. They call me "Trigger Happy Woods" in the newspaper and that sort of thing. The first black police chief we got, the policeman killed a citizen over in the Northwood area. He was in a scuffle. He was in a scuffle with this citizen who was probably doing something wrong. This Negro got the best of him in the scuffle and threw him down on the ground and started running. Of course he told him to stop. But he refused to stop. So what does he do, shoot him in the back and get over him and shoot him while he's on the ground. You're not supposed to shoot a fleeing felon unless he's posing a danger to you. You knocked him down. He knocked the policeman down. He's gone. Now he's running. So we were having a press conference about that because we felt that that policeman needed to be dealt with. Do you not know the black police chief called a press conference to talk about it and had all the media there and what not and asked me to leave the press conference.

KH: On what grounds?

AW: Because he was calling it and asked me to leave. I don't obey all commands given me. But I knew he made a sad mistake. So I decided to leave. Of course when I went outside all the reporters came flocking around me to get my word and see what I had to say and this sort of thing. I was very disappointed because I never had a black, had a white police chief do that. Of course he --

KH: Ruled it justifiable homicide.

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AW: No. They finally sent him off. They sent him off. He's out now, but they sent him off.

They convicted him, grand jury convicted him because that was blatant murder. The present black chief we've got, she's a fine woman, a fine Christian woman, that sort of thing, but they wrote her up as a new chief and said, she's a tough woman. We know she's tough because she stood up to Reverend Abraham Woods and criticizing me for dealing with the police shootings. It was said to me "Why every time there's a police shooting you jump up. You want to demonstrate. And every time another Negro kills another Negro, you don't demonstrate no that." Couldn't understand that usually the law would take its course on that. But when it comes to a policeman, he hides behind his badge and hides behind the uniform and sweeps his misdeed under the rug. That's why. But we've come to find out that it's not all the white policemen now and not all the white folk. There's some black folk too now who are not right and who are not for the right thing.

KH: It sounds like the media gets a kick out of seeing the SCLC get opposition.

AW: Get what?

KH: It sounds like the media likes to see the SCLC get opposition.

AW: Yes. Yes. Absolutely so. They certainly play that up. You know that we can golf now at some of the places that were closed to us. That happened in the late '90s when I took a stand against the PGA [Tour] coming here over at Shoal Creek which was using tax payers' money and this and that and promised to demonstrate and picket. Of course that Shoal Creek controversy went across the country and across the world.

KH: I remember that.

AW: And I was roundly criticized by some sources, but thank God there were front-minded corporation leaders who sided with me, and corporations saw that it was going to be a terrible situation, and they started pulling out their support of the PGA here in Shoal Creek. So as a result a corporate leader came over to meet with me, and we were able to work out the fact that Shoal Creek would open its doors and take a black. They did, and that opened the doors around the country, other golf clubs that were closed to blacks and women opened up including the Master's, Augusta where our good friend Tiger Woods was able to come into great prominence. In other words if you ever see Tiger, tell him to send me a check.

KH: I was thinking that myself.

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AW: That's sad. I hate that his father just passed away.

KH: Yeah, yesterday.

AW: Yeah, some time ago. But have another question.

KH: Well, now that you're retired what do you expect the Birmingham chapter of SCLC to do in the future?

AW: Well, I passed the torch to my brother. He's somewhat younger than I am, but he was old enough to be involved in the struggles in the '50s and the '60s. He's been involved ever since with us. Three of his children also went to jail. He went to jail too on numerous occasions. So the movement is in good hands. I haven't gone anywhere. I will be available to give what assistance I can. But at my age I'm seventy-seven, and my health is not the best. Some of the things that need to be done and some of the places that we need to go and that sort of thing, then I'm not altogether able to do that now. But I'm going to do what I can. So old soldiers never die, they just fade away. So I will still be on the scene as long as God sees fit and give assistance wherever I can.

I resigned in 2000, well, I retired in 2002 from Miles College after forty years. After twenty-eight years as the president of the Birmingham chapter of SCLC, I'm just retired from that. By the way I'm still the national board member of national SCLC. I'm still the vice president of the state SCLC, and I still hold membership in some other community situations. But with my remaining years and most of my energy I think I need to give it to the church. I've been there thirty-eight years, and probably as long as they let me stay for a few more. I can give more time and more energy and commitment to the church. I think it was time for me to do that. So I'm not going anywhere. Groups still meet here. I'm the chairman for the King celebration, which we're going to have next January. We have from three to four thousand people at that breakfast, just about half divided, black and white. We give scholarships to students who write essays on some aspect of King's work. So I'm still going to be giving assistance wherever I am able to do it and where I'm somewhat needed.

KH: Have your church members been really involved in your civil rights activities too?

AW: Some of them have. But not all of them. In fact I guess they're like other folk. They get wrapped up and tied up, and frankly to tell you the truth, I don't think some know the importance of ministering outside of the church walls. I have some who would have been perfectly pleased and satisfied

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with me just staying within the confines of the church ministry. Of course I couldn't do that. I subscribed, I guess you'd call, social ministry or on the order of King and others who saw the needs and saw our people oppressed and exploited and mistreated. I could not stand idly by and stand behind the pulpit and preach and feel comfortable within the confines of the sanctuary behind the stained glass windows. We've believed -- and I wouldn't have been in the civil rights struggle if I didn't think it was a part of my ministry. But all of my people, all of the members have not felt that way. I've had enough, and those who might not have felt that way, they have not bothered me. But I must say that the congregation has supported me. They have not sought to deter me or been an obstacle in any of the activities that I saw fit. So I guess that's some kind of support too. But we've had a few who've become a part and parcel and working side by side with us in the struggle.

KH: What kind of support have you had from the white community?

AW: Well, not what I would have so desired. In fact various white organizations, they feel that if you get together and dialogue and talk about the problem and come together with blacks, that you're making some great progress. I've long passed that stage. I got to the place where I stopped being a part of some of these get togethers because when it comes to taking forthright action and coming out of the talking stage, I find that they're really not ready to do that. Some time ago I did have a lawyer who joined with me. He's not in Birmingham now. He was apart of the white organizations, and he said that he was going to share with me, and I would never have to address the problems, civil rights problems of this city without white support. As long as he was in Birmingham, he did that. When he left, then there were very few people to come forward. There is a white preacher which is really consistent, who worked with us. He's a chaplain of our organization. He's genuine. But getting whites to really move out. They're not ready to be controversial. They still want to keep their, keep their image with those in the white community who might not be ready to move out to bring about some equitable things for black citizens. They're just not going to shake the boat. We've got some blacks, black leaders too, who just not going to shake the boat. I call them racial diplomats because they seek to work, and you've got to have somebody who's going to work with the white community. But when it comes down to controversial things as marching, standing up, speaking out against any inequities whether it's in the business community, the police or whatever, they're very silent. They're not going to, they're not going to do that. So we have not had the kind of support from

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whites in the civil rights struggle as we, as I would like to have seen. Not to say that they're not a few every once in a while who will join with us. And of course we know when we look at the history of civil rights in this nation that it would have to be a thing of black and white together because there have been some whites who have given their lives as you know—Viola Liuzza, the Selma and Montgomery situation. [Jonathan] Daniels and [Reverend James] Reeb or whatever his name is, those seminarians. There have been others and those in Mississippi, the white New Englanders and this sort of thing. So we have some whites. In fact we had some whites in the congress and in various places that supported us. I guess it wouldn't be fair to say that none of them have made any contribution because I don't think if they had not, I think if they had not, then we probably wouldn't be where we are now whether they were on the Supreme Court or what not. So we have to give our white benefactors their dues because there have been some. Even during slavery there were whites who sought to strike a blow against that, against that system.

KH: John Brown especially.

AW: Right.

KH: Well, those are all the questions I have for you. Is there anything else you'd like to add? I want to make sure if you can remember.

AW: I think I talked enough now, and there are many other things I could say, but it's getting late and I'm going to have to, it's about six-thirty. I'm going to have to get something to eat. I hope I've said something that will be helpful to you in your endeavor.

KH: Yes sir. Very much.

AW: With all I said, you pick out, I'm not been altogether chronologically correct, but I have sought to deliver some aspects of the, of the struggle and where we are at this juncture. I'm happy to have been one of the ministers that was invited by the FBI to come to the FBI headquarters to give us a better understanding of the FBI because they were on our "do not like list, and of course when we got there, I'll never forget. The Agent Rod Langford, we dialogued, and he wanted to know we wanted to see the FBI do, and I jumped on him and said reopen the bombing of the Sixteenth Street Church [case]. All of the other ministers joined me, and when we got through with him, he said that he would see what he could do. It was Rod Langford, which quietly worked and went to the justice department and wherever he needed to go to get it reopened, and as you know to bring about the other convictions which took place. I was happy

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to be a part of that Rod giving credit for really harassing him and pushing him for to reopen that case. We were in a conference just a few days ago, and we had an award, a plaque Martin King I Have a Dream Award which we presented to Rod Langford who at one time was the head of the NAACP — of the FBI in Birmingham. He's the only law officer that the Birmingham chapter of the SCLC has ever presented an award to.

And of course Blanton was convicted. And then Cherry the judge listened to various people and decided that he was not competent to stand trial. We didn't buy that. We demonstrated in front of the criminal justice building every day except Sunday and Saturday, Saturday and Sunday until the judge finally changed his mind and sent him to the state mental institution to be evaluated. Once down there it wasn't long before they determined that he was competent to stand trial. So he did stand trial and was convicted. Nine-eleven had taken place. It's really when you look paradoxical or something. Those little girls were killed in that dynamite blast on September the 15th, 1963. Nine-eleven happened on September the 11th, four days before the 15th. So I often refer to people, to Cooper, I mean, Cherry as "Osama bin Cherry" and said that if we're going to be concerned about catching Osama bin Laden, then we have to be bring to the bar of justice our domestic terrorists.

KH: Which he certainly was.

AW: Which he certainly was, and we had many that mistreated blacks down through the years. So I was happy to be a part of that situation because I imagine I could hear the voices of those little girls under the altar crying "How Long...How Long?" It was a long time coming. But I have great relief when they were brought to the bar of justice and I remember Fred Shuttlesworth and me out in front of the criminal justice building, we broke out into singing "Glory, Glory Hallelujah, His truth is marching on." Oh.

KH: Thank you very much.

AW: You're quite welcome.

END OF INTERVIEW

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