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JAMES FARMER ORAL HISTORY, INTERVIEW I

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By James Farmer

to the

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ACCESSION NUMBER 74-58

LYNDON BAINES JOHNSON LIBRARY
ORAL HISTORY COLLECTION

Narrator: James Farmer

Biographical information: Civil rights official
b. Marshall, Texas, Jan. 12, 1920. B.S., Wiley Coll., Marshall, 1938; B.D. Howard U., 1941; Founder, Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), 1942, nat. chmn., 1942-44, 50, nat. dir., 1961-66; race relations sec. Fellowship of Reconciliation, 1941-45; lectr. race and labor problems, 1948-50; student field sec. League Indsl. Democracy, 1950-54; internat. rep. State, County and Municipal Employees Union, 1954-59; program dir. NAACP, 1959-61; leader CORE Freedom Ride, 1961; pres. Center for Community Action Edn, 1965--; asst. sec. for administration, US Dept. Health, Edn & Welfare, 1969-70; Nat. exec. bd. Am. Com. on Africa, 1959-64; Chmn. Council United Civil Rights Leadership, 1963--.

General topic of interview: Farmer's career as a civil rights leader, his relationship with Lyndon B. Johnson and Johnson's push for civil rights legislation.

INTERVIEWEE: JAMES FARMER (Tape #1)

INTERVIEWER: HARRI BAKER

October, 1969

B: This is an interview with James Farmer, who at the time of the interview here in October of 1969, is assistant secretary of Health, Education, and Welfare for Administration.

F: That's right.

B: And just very briefly, a summary of an active career, you were born in Marshall, Texas, and went to Wiley College there, and then to Howard in Washington.

F: That's correct.

B: And in the 40's you were one of the founders and the first National Director of CORE; and in the 40's and 50's active in a number of civil rights and labor groups; from '59 to '61 you were Program Director of the NAACP; then from '61 to '65 National Director of CORE; and then with the Center for Community Action on Education and a number of other things.

F: Let's make one correction. Where you said the early 40's I was the founder and first national chairman of CORE.

B: Yes sir. I understand those are two separate offices. When, in this career, did you first form any knowledge of Mr. Johnson.

F: Well I met Mr. Johnson for the first time when he was Vice President, and I met him in the course of his duties as head of the President's Commission on Equal Employment Opportunity.

B: Before then, did you have any contact with him at all, any indirect contact?

F: I had no personal contact, and really no indirect contact. I formed my own image of him by the press and by his voting record.

B: May I ask what that was sir?

F: Well, my image was not good of Mr. Johnson then. He had, at least up through 1957, been negative on civil rights and I felt that his voting record was very bad. And I was one of those who opposed his getting the vice presidential nomination.

B: I was going to ask you, sir, what was your reaction when he first ran for the presidential nomination, and then was offered and accepted the vice presidential nomination?

F: Frankly I considered it most unfortunate, probably be a disaster, because of his Southern background and his voting record on civil rights. This was my prime concern.

B: To whom did you communicate this attitude at the time, sir?

F: Oh, to audiences before which I spoke and personal conversations.

B: This was during the campaign itself?

F: This was during the campaign itself, yes, during the campaign itself. I did not speak with Mr. Johnson, nor do I recall speaking to any of the leading politicians of the Democratic party.

B: Did no one from the Democratic party get in touch with you to try to explain or ask you to moderate your stand?

F: No, no one did.

B: How about, did anyone within the civil rights community, because there were those who like yourself at first objected, but then at least were silent if not for the ticket in that campaign?

F: No, I do not think that anyone in the civil rights community spoke to me, asking me to moderate my views on that. I may say that at this point, 1960, my opinion of Mr. Johnson had improved, it had become more positive than it had been a few years earlier.

B: Is that a result of the '57 Civil Rights Act?

F: That was partly a result of the '57 Civil Rights Act, and also partly the result of my conversation with him--no, it was a result of the Civil Rights Act of '57.

B: Because I believe you said you had not yet met him--

F: I didn't meet him until he became Vice President.

B: During that campaign in 1960 you were with the NAACP. Did you discuss with Mr. Wilkins, Roy Wilkins, the ticket?

F: No we didn't. You see the NAACP is a nonpartisan organization, and does not--

B: I know as an organization it is, but as a group of individuals--

F: Oh privately we, Mr. Wilkins and I, discussed it, and I had the impression that we saw eye

to eye.

B: Let's see, you said--oh, may I ask incidentally, this is not precisely relative to Mr. Johnson except perhaps in an indirect way, but after the election of 1960, after the election of President Kennedy and Vice President Johnson, did the Civil Rights Movement more or less deliberately and consciously decide that now the time has come to press harder because a Democratic administration might be more susceptible to action? I ask specifically in reference to your leaving the NAACP, going with CORE, followed immediately by the freedom riots.

F: Oh, this had nothing to do with politics, no relationship to administration. I left the NAACP to go to CORE as National Director because CORE had been my child and at that point was undergoing a reorganization and experiencing some growth, and I was requested by the National Action Council of CORE, which was its Board of Directors, to come back as National Director. And I agreed to do so because this was my child and its methods and techniques were those which I had helped to formulate.

B: Was there at the time any serious difference within the civil rights movement over the need or the efficacy of direct action?

F: At that time there was, certainly. You recall that in 1960 there was this sit-in movement in the South, lunch counter struggle and so on. Well, this created considerable discussion within the NAACP. I was at the NAACP at the time, and I do recall drafting a memorandum which was sent to all the NAACP staff persons trying to interpret the sit-ins, and their motivation and their philosophy, what they hoped to accomplish.

B: I suppose those Southern sit-ins were spontaneous then, but back in the 40's the first sit-ins are associated with CORE.

F: That is right. We were sitting-in in 1942, '43, and throughout the early and middle 40's. and through the 50's. But without publicity. There were no televisions in the initial days.

B: Kind of a different climate generally.

F: Different climate, the technique of non-violent, direct action, received no notoriety, and we were merely considered a few nuts or crackpots sitting in at lunch counters.

B: What was the reaction within the NAACP to your memorandum?

F: I think it was favorable. I think that it helped to clarify some of the issues. The NAACP had concentrated upon legal action, though it had done other things too, and because of that orientation found it difficult to understand any tactic which involved violation even of the local law.

B: Did that apply to all levels of the NAACP, down at its local chapters too?

F: Oh yes, it did. It did not apply so much to the young, the youth in the NAACP , as it did to the older persons.

B: I've also a question, this is the kind of thing that isn't really covered adequately on the written record. Is Bayard Rustin active in all of this?

F: You mean, was he then? Or is he now?

B: Was he then?

F: No. at that time--his interests were the same. He was then a pacifist and working for the war resistance league, as I recall, so he was not involved in the discussions.

B: I was wondering from what source came the revival of CORE--perhaps revival isn't the right term--

F: Oh, I think it's very simple. The Montgomery bus boycott and Dr. King, which popularized the technique that CORE had been using and experimenting with on a smaller scale throughout. And there were those who had heard of CORE vaguely or more acutely, and identified this with CORE tactics, and became involved in CORE. And then when the sit-ins began spontaneously the three freshmen in North Carolina, Greensboro, North Carolina, who engaged in the first sit-in of this wave, had read a copy of a CORE pamphlet, entitled "Erasing the Color Line," which had documented some of the CORE sit-ins in the early days.

B: There is the direct connection between the early CORE sit-ins and Greensboro--

F: Well there is a connection, no organizational connection, because these young men were not members of CORE, but--

B: Intellectual connection.

F: Yes. CORE became involved in it because an NAACP official in Greensboro, to whom these three freshmen went for advice after their first sit-in, called CORE. Since he knew of CORE knew of its technique of sit-ins and urged them to give some help to these youngsters, and CORE then dispatched one of its two staff member--

B: It's <u>two</u> staff members? At this interval, one wonders at CORE having two staff members in 1960!

F: Well, two field staff members, that is. It had an executive secretary and it had

stenographers and clerks but only two persons in the field, one of whom at that time was immobiled because he was doing jury duty!

B: At any rate, then in '61, you moved over from NAACP to CORE and the freedom rides, of course, I think are pretty well documented--did you have any contact--somewhere about this time you must have met Mr. Johnson for the first time as Vice President.

F: It was after the freedom rides that I met him then as Vice President. It must have been in '62.

B: This was in connection with his work as chairman on the Commission on Equal Employment Opportunity.

F: That is correct, yes.

B: Can you describe the circumstances of that meeting?

F: Well I don't remember everybody who was there, there must have been two or three other persons there besides Vice President Johnson and myself. And he gave us a run-down on what this Commission was doing.

B: He had called the meeting? He selected--

F: He had called the meeting and asked us to come. He had one of his assistants in, I forget the young man's name, a black fellow, who is now with one of the banks I believe.

B: Alexander?

F: No, not Cliff Alexander, who had been a lawyer in Detroit--well, his name may come to me later on.

B: His name escapes me--Taylor, Hobart Taylor?

F: Taylor, yes, Hobart Taylor. And Hobart gave us facts and figures of what they were doing, and frankly, I was impressed. I was also impressed with the President's, what appeared to be, the President's commitment.

B: By the President in that sentence--

F: Vice President.

B: You mean Mr. Johnson.

F: Mr. Johnson's commitment.

B: Did he seem to you, I'm asking you for a really subjective judgment, did he seem sincere in this to you?

F: He was sincere, he was very interested, almost a passionate concern came through. My view of him changed as a result of that meeting.

B: What is there about the man that apparently makes him able to convince people who, in your case, must need some convincing? If it really happens--

F: Well, he talks a great deal, he always talks, it's hard to get in a word edgewise, and he dominated the conversations, no question about it. I guess it has come to be known as the "Johnson treatment," there was flattery, there was warmth, all of that was involved, and he came through as one who was not merely working on this because it was politically expedient but because he had a strong belief in it. And I was convinced of that.

B: What did he ask you to do?

F: Get the word around, as I recall, of what they were doing.

B: Within the black community or the civil rights movement?

F: I don't think he specified, but I'm sure that's what he had in mind, the civil rights and the black communities.

B: Did you?

F: Oh yes. Wherever the occasion arose, I spoke of the meeting I had had with Vice President Johnson, and the fact that I had been impressed with what they were doing and trying to do and planning to do.

B: Did he make--

F: This you remember was when he was pressing for affirmative action, not mere color blindness or elimination of discrimination but demanding that if there was an imbalance in the work force they show improvement year by year.

B: As that went on, were you satisfied with the work of that committee?

F: Satisfied, no, I was never satisfied with the work of any committee in the government. I didn't think anybody was doing enough, including ourselves, but I was impressed, they were trying.

B: There are some who say that although they tried, the actual results in the sense of jobs opened were fairly small.

F: They were small, yes, they were small, but the impression I got was one of progress.

B: During this time, did you get to know Mr. Johnson better, did you ever meet with him personally just the two of you?

F: No. I did not meet with him again until he became President.

B: You had no connection with him in regard to, oh, the rest of the events in the South, or the march on Washington, or this sort of activity?

F: No, I had no connection with him. I did meet with President Kennedy, along with heads of other civil rights organizations when the march on Washington was being planned.

B: In connection with the planning of it?

F: Yes, in connection with those plans.

B: Was Mr. Johnson involved in any of those meetings?

F: I don't think so, I don't recall his being there at the White House meetings.

B: Was there some fear on the part of the Administration about that march?

F: Oh, a great deal of fear. The impression I had was they would like--they wanted it called off. They did not say so in that many words, but they were very much afraid that there would be violence and it would turn into a riot and so forth, but it became clear to them that we were not going to call it off.

B: Were the leaders afraid of the same thing? We all know, of course, what--how it turned out to be, I guess, the classic type, but were the leaders beforehand worried about it?

F: Oh I think some of them were, some of the labor people were concerned about that. Walter Reuther was. And I think heads of some of the older and more established civil rights organizations shared that concern. Mr. Wilkins, NAACP, and to some extent Whitney Young.

B: Of the Urban League?

F: Of the Urban League.

B: But people like yourself associated with--

F: I was not concerned with it because I felt it was something that could easily be controlled.

B: And as it turned out you missed it.

F: Yes, I was in jail in Plaquemine, Louisiana.

B: Plaquemine Parish, Louisiana.

F: Well not Plaquemine Parish, it was the town of Plaquemine, which is in Iberville, Parish.

B: I suspect that's still pretty much Leander Perez's--

F: It's still Leander Perez's territory.

B: That is a story in itself. I really don't know if you have ever told that story in writing? The escape.

F: Yes, I have, as a matter of fact. I'm surprised that you know about it though, the escape.

B: Oh, the escape in the hearse, and all. Those of us who are doing these interviews are professional historians, and we're suppose to find out. It is in writing somewhere?

F: Yes it is. It's the first chapter of a book which I wrote and was published in February of 1966.

B: Oh.

F: Published by Random-House, entitled, Freedom When?

B: So we don't need to go into it here. Then, following chronologically, the next stage is the death of President Kennedy, late in '63, and the accession of Mr. Johnson. He is known to have called a number of civil rights leaders soon after he became President and met with them. Were you in that group?

F: Yes) he called me the Sunday after the assassination of President Kennedy, he called me at home. And I was astounded, I'd never been called by a President before! It was impressive.

B: I can imagine. What did he--

F: Well first the operator said, "Mr. Farmer," and I said, "Yes," and she said, "Long distance

call." And I said, "Who's calling operator," I was very tired, we'd just gotten back home. And she said, "The President," and I was about to say "The president of what," when Mr. Johnson came on the phone. And he said, "Mr. Farmer, I just wanted to touch base with you, and I remember very well when we had that long talk when you were down in my office when I was Vice President, and Chairman of the President's Commission on Equal Employment Opportunity. That we asked for your help then and we got it. And we're going to need your help in the months that lie ahead, and I want you to know that, and I hope that we can count on you to help us. And I'd like to talk with you, so next time you are in Washington drop by to see me."

Well, I had no idea what "drop by to see me" means when the President of the United States calls! So I asked a politician friend of mine "What does it mean when the President of the United States says 'drop by to see me'." He said, "The President of the United States doesn't say drop by and see me!" And I said, "Well, he just did!" "Well then he means," said this party, "get in touch with his appointment secretary as soon as possible and set up an early appointment," which I did. I saw him then in the White House on December 6 of 1963.

B: A private meeting with you and he?

F: Yes, just the two of us.

B: And what was discussed there, sir?

F: Oh, I was with him for an hour and a half or two hours I guess, and we discussed many things, including the Civil Rights Bill, and he made countless phone calls and received countless phone calls from the Hill in the course of our conversation.

B: Most of them pertaining to the Bill?

F: Pertaining to the Bill and he said he was running into great difficulty but he's got to get that bill through, he's got to get it through, it's of vital importance, and some of the Southern Southerners tell him that they'll buy the bill if he will take out the public accommodation section. But he can't do that because that's the heart of the bill as far as he is concerned.

I asked him how he got that way.

B: That's a good question, and the answer would be worth hearing.

F: He then gave me a little human interest story involving his maid, whose name I forget--

B: Mrs. Wright.

F: Mrs. Wright, yes. Who I believe, by the way, had attended Wiley College, which was my Alma Mater--

B: Where your father taught.

F: Yes, my father taught. He said that one day she was planning to go on a vacation with her husband and she came to them and told them where she was going on her vacation. And Mrs. Johnson, Lady Bird, asked Mrs. Wright to take the dog, the Johnson's dog, with them, because the Johnson's were going on a vacation too, and they didn't want to be bothered with the dog. And the maid, Mrs. Wright, said, "Mrs. Johnson, please don't ask me to take that dog with me, because we're going to be driving through the South and our vacation is going to be tough enough just being black without having a dog to worry about too." He said, "Well, that hurt me, that almost brought me to tears and I realized how important public accommodations were, and was determined that if ever I had the chance I was going to do something about it."

I thought the story was a little corny, but touching.

B: Again, is there any impression of insincerity in this kind of thing? Is it convincing?

F: No, no, I was convinced. When I say it was corny, I do not mean it was insincere-

B: Just the homey--

F: Homey, yes. I felt that he was sincere, and that he really meant it.

B: Had you for example had any doubts immediately after the assassination for example, had you had any fear that perhaps a President from Texas might change the Civil Rights Bill?

F: There were lingering fears but those fears were modified, moderated by the conversation with him while he was Vice President and the reaction then. Well, we discussed other things in that meeting. I suggested to the President that one of the things which was bugging me was the fact that we were opening up doors of opportunity, but that millions of people on whose behalf we were working might not be able to walk through those doors, because of inadequate education and everything else. He agreed, enthusiastically and asked what the solution was. I told him that I felt there was no one solution but one part of the solution was a massive campaign on adult illiteracy, that we ought to work on that, and there was sufficient technical knowledge to do it.

He expressed great interest, and as an old school teacher and former head of the NYA under Roosevelt, was very much interested in this, and asked me if I wouldn't submit a memorandum to him. He suggested a lengthy memorandum which would be gone over by his staff and a summary of that memorandum, which he personally would read. I

agreed to do that. And he said, "When you go out and the press asks you what we talked about you can tell them this, that we talked about it and that I was enthusiastic about it because of my background."

Then as I was going out the President asked me what part of Texas I was from, and I told him Marshall. And he said, "Is that right! Do you realize that's Mrs. Johnson's hometown?" And I told him, "No, I wasn't aware of that," and he told me her father had owned a garage or filling station--

B: Grocery store I believe--

F: Was it a grocery store, I thought he said a garage.

B: It may have been. I associated Mrs. Johnson's father with Karnack, which is also in that area but he may have--

F: Maybe he said a garage, I think he did, but maybe not. And he told me where it was located in Marshall, the streets, and asked if I knew where that was and I did not. It's so long since I've been in Marshall the streets are vague.

B: He knew you were from Texas, you didn't mention it.

F: No. he knew that I was from Texas. And after that meeting we had contact on a number of occasions. I called him several times, he told me to call at anytime, if we had a problem just to call him.

B: What kind of thing would you call him about, sir?

F: Problems in civil rights. If we had a problem in the South, people in jail, and a big campaign we thought the federal government wasn't backing us up as it should, we called him. He then would touch the proper buttons.

B: Can you give a specific example?

F: Well, it's hard to give a specific example on that, there were a number of cases.

B: I realize that there'd probably be a number of them.

F: It's hard to give a specific example, but there were several times that I called him and I sent him a wire once, I recall, about the fact that black people in Texas, Negroes, then we called them, were losing jobs because Mexican Americans--not Mexican-Americans, Mexicans, illegal entries were taking their jobs. And he got the wire and he called, called my home. I was not there and he called back again and then a third time. And the third

time my wife told the operator, when the operator told her it was the White House calling again, she said, "You may be able to reach my husband at the National airport in Washington right now. He has a plane leaving in about 20 minutes, and should be walking in the airport now." So he called the airport, the President called the airport; I was paged. I spoke to him and he thanked me for the wire and said "I want you to know I'm not ignoring it, we got to work right on it, and I called the President of Mexico about this problem and we discussed it at some length and we're going to work it out. I think you're absolutely right to say that our people must not have their jobs taken away from them by others, especially people who are not citizens." Well this was all very impressive and maybe it was a kind of brain washing--

B: I was going to ask if the actual concrete results came in the case of your people being jailed in the South.

F: Concrete results did come. I'd have to check my files in order to recollect the exact incidents.

B: But it did work, a call to the President would set the federal machinery in motion and would affect--

F: Set the federal machinery in motion, yes.

B: Did he ever ask you directly for help in say lobbying activities in Congress?

F: No. What he did, during this first meeting I had with him at the White House, he told me the difficulties he was having, he's got to get some Republicans to vote for the Bill, and he said, "There maybe you can help me, you and the other civil rights leaders. I think if you called the Republican Congressmen and Senators and told them if they vote for this bill you'll support them urge your people to support them for reelection," and he said, "I think you should."

B: Did he give you specific names?

F: He did, I don't remember the names, I don't remember the names, but we did call some. And he said to me, "If I can't get the Republicans, then I've got to get the Southern Democrats and that's going to be difficult and I don't know how I'll do it, but I'll have to break down their resistance some way." And he used some very colorful language, which I won't put on tape!

B: A good deal of that language I guess is not going to be recorded anywhere else! I don't suppose that he suggested that your group call the Southern Congressmen?

F: No, no, he did not suggest that at all! He said this he'll have to do. He'll have to break

down their resistance.

B: Sir, I think this is a stopping place, our half-hour is about up.

F: All right.