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Signed by Aaron E. Henry on August 1, 1978

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ACCESSION NUMBER 78-108

INTERVIEW I

INTERVIEWEE: Aaron Henry

INTERVIEWER: T. H. Baker

DATE: September 12, 1970

Tape 1 of 3

B: This is the interview with Aaron Henry. Mr. Henry, let me just put a little background in here. You are a native Mississippian, born here in Coahoma County, served military service in the 1940's; went to Xavier University, got a degree in pharmacy and own the Fourth Street Drug Store here in Clarksdale, and have been state president of the NAACP through all the 1960's and still are.

H: That's true. You know more about me than I think I know about me myself.

B: That's not much of it. Let's start back in the beginning. When did you first get involved in the civil rights struggle? I know you joined the NAACP as a junior member when you were still in high school.

H: Yes.

B: But when did you first start getting really actively involved in it?

H: Well, following high school and going into the service after high school, being stationed in army camps that were near larger communities or cities that had NAACP units, I found that one of the things that I wanted to do was to identify with the NAACP unit, wherever I was. I found the branches in Anniston, Alabama, when I was in basic training at Fort McClellan; in Los Angeles, California, when we were down at Fort Ord; San Luis Obispo, Camp Roberts; overseas in Hawaii, there was Honolulu--all had chapters of NAACP.

There were many struggles that we had to confront even in these days in the Armed Services.

B: That would have been in the 1940's?

H: Yes, I'm talking now from 1943 to around 1946. After getting out of the service and going to Xavier University--there was a strong chapter of NAACP in New Orleans, there was a strong NAACP-type group activity that existed between the student bodies of Tulane, Loyola, and Xavier--it was Xavier's registration that I went to. Many of us were involved in the organization of National Students Association, which was in its time what the SDS is today, you know, radical type students groups in the nation.

Graduating in 1950, coming home and being plagued by many problems of police brutality, of rapes of black women by whites, and murders of blacks by whites, with no national organization to come to your rescue, we, together--R. L. Drew, H. Y. Hackett, and Mrs. Leola Guest, and several other persons--decided we would try to get an NAACP chapter organized in our area. Mrs. Ruby Hurley and the Reverend Amos Holmes--who was at that time, Holmes was, president of the NAACP for the state of Mississippi--came into Clarksdale in 1952 and we were organized into a branch here, and we've functioned ever since.

B: And when did you become state president?

H: I became state president, it must have been 1959. I've been state president now eleven years.

B: During these years of the 1950's, did you form an opinion of Lyndon Johnson?

H: Well, yes. Lyndon, as senator, was just another southerner in the legislature as far as I could detect and observe. The civil rights bills that were coming up at this time, as you know, were anti-lynch, and Lyndon voted against them just like all other southerners every time they came up. I put him in no special category, because he was pretty much galloping with the crowd.

B: Did his activity in the passage of the Civil Rights Bill of 1957 mean anything to you as a civil rights leader in Mississippi?

H: Yes. I think that when some men are given an opportunity to do a job or do a good job that they really want to do, and that opportunity is afforded, then many times they come through. The mere pedestal on which he sat in 1957 as an important man within our nation's government and his support of the 1957 civil rights bill--certainly when you look at the ADA records of who voted which way, on this particular vote they would give Lyndon a plus, yes.

B: Were you unhappy at his being nominated for the vice presidency in 1960?

H: Well, no. I was not extremely jubilant. But I was so pro-John Fitzgerald that what he wanted was all right with me.

B: Why were you so much in favor of Mr. Kennedy in 1960?

H: John Fitzgerald's record as a senator was not outstanding in civil rights. But he too was a man who was turning the corner and was putting racial prejudice behind him. He was everybody's president, he was everybody's head of country. And most of us could identify in some way with John Fitzgerald, and we later found that same kind of identification with Lyndon Johnson.

B: I ask because there are some who say that the intensity of the civil rights movement in the early 1960's caught the new Kennedy Administration by surprise; that neither John Kennedy nor his brother Robert had really been aware of just how serious the problem was and just how short the patience of black people were.

H: I don't really buy that. Of course, each man to his own opinion. I think not only John and Robert, but I think that millions of other Americans, white and black, knew the wrongs; knew what was going on that was not right. And I just don't grant them the sanctuary of ignorance here. They just took a position that "we'll say nothing," realizing, I think, in clear and strong terms that the only way for evil to triumph is for good men to do nothing. And they did nothing for a long time.

B: By "they," do you mean the new Kennedy Administration?

H: Yes.

B: Then almost immediately there began things like the freedom rides which came into Mississippi here, and which, I assume, you got involved with then in 1961.

H: Yes.

B: Did the administration try to talk you out of doing that?

H: Not really talk us out of it. The administration was very much concerned that we did not retaliate with violence; that this would weaken our cause, this would weaken the support that all America was willing to give to what we were striving for. But they never said that blacks having to sit in separate waiting rooms or on backs of buses was a condition that they would want you to wait a little longer to correct. They never did do that.

B: What was the NAACP's attitude toward those freedom rides, which were not primarily NAACP activities?

H: Well, it was not primarily NAACP activity but many people who were involved in the rides were NAACP people. The NAACP supported the freedom riders all the way, it was the only civil rights organization of any consequence in the state at that time. And it was the NAACP that provided holy sustenance to the persons on Sunday, visitation, food, clothing, and these kinds of things. It was a CORE practice, Jim Farmer was head of it. Jim came out of the NAACP as program director. But that has never really affected the affinity of Jim Farmer with those of us who have been in NAACP a long time.

B: What I was getting at was, again, there are some who say that in those years the NAACP might have been being pushed a little toward a more militant position than they otherwise would have taken.

H: I don't think so. I think the NAACP has always been a militant organization, but it has been determined that its militancy would be within the framework of the laws of the nation that permits confrontation, that permits dissent. And there's plenty room to get involved, as I see it, to do all these things.

B: At that time whom did you deal with in the administration? Did you talk in those years, beginning in 1961, directly with the attorney general, Robert Kennedy?

H: No, we were dealing more with John Doar. John Doar was the director of civil rights within the Department of Justice. John and Bob Owens really came down to Mississippi and paid us a visit. We complained to them about the years of these kinds of visits we'd had, and most of us considered that this was just one more. John and Bob promised us at that time that they were not coming just to talk, and that they would appreciate it if we would take them seriously and judge them by the results of what they were able to do, or what they got the Justice department to do. And if they didn't do any more than anybody else had done, they didn't blame us for telling them that we didn't have our time to waste with them.

B: Did they ask you for advice on what needed to be done and how to go about it?

H: Not necessarily advice, but we talked about the strategy, with everybody putting in their two cents. As you know, there is no panacea to the end of freedom road, and none of us know exactly how any of us are going to come out in any activities we take. But you have to be prepared to take the chances and prepared to take the punishment. You don't get involved in it unless you are psychologically and mentally, physically, prepared to withstand the possibility of adversity. These are the kinds of things that we talked about with John and Bob Owens, and then a whole host of civil rights people from the Justice department came to the state.

B: Since you've mentioned that, I guess this is as good a place as any to ask about the considerable harassment you've been under beginning about that time.

H: We've had our share of it.

B: There are those who would say you've had more than your share.

H: I knew when I took the position of presidency of the NAACP for the state that there was--it's simply a philosophy of no progress without pain. You deal every day with the Fred Douglass quote that I'm talking now somewhere around in 1897 or 1899, when he said that "Those of us who expect progress and yet deprecate agitation are the same as the people who expect fields without plowing the ground, they expect rain without the thunder and the lightning, they expect the roar of the ocean without its many waters. That power concedes nothing without a demand, and it never will." Although we don't get all we pay for in this life, we certainly are not going to get anything if we don't pay. I've just sort of lived by this credo. Whenever there is a bomb thrown in the house or the

window is shot out in the house or the window is shot out in the drugstore or a bomb thrown in the drugstore, sugar put in the gas tank of the car, these kinds of constant harassment, I just know it's all in the game.

B: That's a remarkable philosophy. Did the harassment start in the 1960's about the time of the freedom rides, or did it go back before then?

H: Before. Our first major harassment came in 1955, one year after Brown vs. The Supreme Court. Some 455 or 460 heads of families signed the petition asking the school board here to abide by Brown. These parents were intimidated in many ways. Many were fired, many were abused, many were denied credit. This gave birth to the local credit union that we have here in town today, because many farmers who signed this petition could no longer borrow money from the banks to carry out their farming enterprises. And of course this is the time of Reverend George W. Lee's murder, the time that Gus Coats was shot; this is the time of Dippy Smith being killed on the courthouse lawn at Brookhaven.

From Brown vs. School Board on, I would say it would be pretty much included in this era of history, if I had to stake out a date or a landmark at which to begin.

B: Then the new Kennedy Administration just really didn't make that much difference as far as the intensity of the reaction went?

H: No. I don't think that the reaction of the bigots of the South was an activity carried on because of hostility toward Kennedy, and I don't think that the activity of blacks in resisting the reaction of the bigots in the South was predicated on a Kennedy being in the White House. Whoever had been in the White House at that time, either they would have dealt with those of us who were trying to resolve the problems in a lawful, peaceful way, or they would have dealt with elements that would have tried to solve them outside the law. It's just a simple question of how do you want to deal with it.

B: How militant was the general black population in the late 1950's and early 1960's? More so than the leadership like yourself?

H: Militant is such a relative term.

B: Let me phrase it another way. Did people like yourself in positions of responsible leadership find yourselves having to control and calm down the general black population, or did you find yourself having to try to stir them up?

H: We found ourselves most often, say, if we were going to have a march to protest a particular situation, there were hundreds of blacks who would say, "I'm not going to tool with no marches, because I'm not going to let nobody hit me. Because if they hit me, I'm going to cut them, I'm going to shoot them," "I'm going to do this, do that." And our opposition to them was, "If you can't abide by the nonviolence philosophy, then don't get

in it."

This has been evident ever since the protest movements really began--to encourage people who could not abide by the nonviolence tenets of the movement not to become involved in a mass group action because you'd jeopardize everybody else that was in it.

B: Did the nonviolent idea just kind of arise spontaneously, or is it specifically taught by Dr. King?

H: I think that Martin King was a very strong exponent of the idea of non-violence. But at the same time the NAACP was born in 1909, and it had carried on many activities, many demonstrations, many confrontations, nonviolently, with the power structure of this nation. Of course, King was very articulate, he was one of the best friends I've got. The bed we share tonight here is a bed he slept in many a night when he was in town. He never went to a hotel when he came through this part. He knew he'd come home. This was home for him.

And it's also the room that Andy Goodman spent his only night alive in in Mississippi. I brought Andy home from his mother's house with me, after having spoken at Queen's College, and had encouraged him to come in 1964 to the state. The next morning I found out where the dispatcher wanted him sent, put him on a bus and sent him to Meridian. Sometimes during that night he was murdered.

I go all the way with Martin, and I find no [lack of] ambidextrousness in working with the NAACP, working with SCLC. It's somewhat a phenomenon, as far as I'm concerned, that I'm the only guy in the nation that serves on the board of directors of SCLC and the NAACP--I serve on both. I don't find them incompatible.

B: In these days of the early 1960's in the Kennedy Administration, did you have any direct or indirect dealings with Lyndon Johnson while he was vice president?

H: In communications, in responding to letters, yes. But our first real involvement with Lyndon came in 1964.

B: Before we get to that, in 1962 there was a crisis at Ole Miss about the enrollment there of James Meredith. I assume you were right in the middle of that.

H: Yes. But here you're dealing with a subject, at least that the news media credits Bobby Kennedy with, being the force on the Washington level, rather than the President. The scenario between Bobby and Governor Barnett is what is being utilized nationwide. As far as the citizens of the state were concerned, it was a Barnett-Bobby Kennedy showdown rather than a Lyndon Johnson-Barnett showdown.

B: Of course, Johnson was vice president then. But you mean that from your view President

Kennedy was more closely involved in it?

H: From my view, yes, because Bobby as attorney general had a great deal of honor and respect, or whatever you want to call it, for John Fitzgerald. And he would not, in most of our opinions, become involved in it the way he did had he not had the complete backing of the President.

B: Did that whole thing kind of catch the NAACP by surprise? Let me phrase that another way. Did the local NAACP, your leadership structure, have any plans for integrating Old Miss before Meredith showed up?

H: We had general plans--this is how Jim came into the picture. You'll probably remember that Medgar Evers was field secretary at that time. We had in many of our meetings talked about the necessity of integrating everything that's public. One day Jim showed up in the office and had a conversation with Medgar about sponsoring him, getting him into Old Miss. Then Medgar called me, as state conference president, to talk about it so that we would both be knowledgeable and involved in what was going on.

We asked Thurgood and Constance Baker Motley, who were the top lawyers for the Legal Defense Fund.

B: Let me insert here, that is Thurgood Marshall, who was then head of the Legal Defense Fund.

H: The Legal Defense Fund, right, and is now judge on the U.S. Supreme Court bench. And they, after several days of conversation, were willing to take the case.

B: Why did it take several days of conversation?

H: We had not tried it before. The laws of Mississippi had not been researched. How does Brown vs. the United States apply to the college level if Brown vs. the United States was a grammar school-high school decision. It was a question of developing a tactic to do it.

This is one thing that's peculiar, I guess, in a lot of people's minds about the NAACP, and that is, it doesn't move until it's sure it can win.

B: At that stage was there any coordination with the administration? Did you tell the Justice Department what you were talking about?

H: We told John Doar, yes.

B: What was his reaction?

H: He was simply alerted, that's all, and knew it. He didn't try to give us advice one way or the other.

B: Would you have picked Jim Meredith for that if you'd had your choice?

H: We didn't pick Jim, now. Jim--

B: I know. He just presented himself.

H: We were not really in the business of selecting a model. We were really in a position of assisting those who wanted help. If other Jim Merediths had come along wanting help, we would have helped them too.

B: What kind of fellow is he?

H: Jim is largely individualistic. He has a great soul in terms of being compassionate about the cares and concerns of other people, but Jim feels that his answer is the answer to the problem. He sometimes takes a position of, "Don't bother me with facts, my mind's made up." But Jim and I've been good friends a long time, and I understand him. Both of us think that each of us runs the world, you know. I'm just as guilty of this kind of hornedness as he is sometimes. But we understand that frailty in each other, and we are able to compensate for it because of the great respect we have for each other.

B: Where were you when his entrance into Old Miss erupted into rioting?

H: I was here where we're sitting right now. I knew Jim had gone to the University because we had had some trouble with the radio station down in Jackson calling on all able-bodied white men to surround the capital to prevent the governor from being arrested, and actually using the airwaves to cause the riot that took place at the University of Mississippi. But somehow we felt that the state would have been able to contain the situation since we were dealing with white National Guards, white highway patrolmen, controlling the violence of white people. And until then, many blacks had a feeling that whites will cooperate with themselves when there is a problem, but now we've found out that white people act just like anybody else. Do things. Do good. Do bad. No big thing.

B: Clarksdale here is not all that far from Oxford where the University of Mississippi is. Was there any unrest here that night?

H: No, there was no unrest here. We listened on TV and radio to what was going on over there, as we have many friends over there. Jim Silver, who later wrote Mississippi, The Closed Society, and often a visitor here--he would come over late at night and leave before day the next morning to get back in time for class.

B: Yes, he credits you in that book, Mississippi, The Closed Society, with helping him write it.

H: Well, we sat down around the table, just like you and I are now, and banged around ideas.

B: On after that, was there ever a time when Jim Meredith was considering quitting Old Miss?

H: I don't think there was a time when he actually was going to quit. There was a time when he leaked the information that if conditions were not corrected he was going to quit, and this was based on what he considered improper protection by the marshals on the campus. For Jim to have quit the cause and charge that the federal government was lying down on its duties would have been something that the federal government would have had a difficult time explaining. So this was pretty much a strategy. This is just Jim.

B: Did that put you in an awkward position between him and the federal government?

H: Oh, no. I knew Jim wasn't going to quit, but I was somewhat amused at the jumpiness that the Justice Department took when he said he was going to quit. I know it almost broke Jim Silver's heart to hear Jim Meredith say he was going to quit. But most of us who knew Jim knew that he was the kind of guy who'd stick it out.

B: Did you pass that word on to the Justice Department, that they didn't have to worry?

H: No. Let them sweat. Let them sweat.

B: Did it have an effect on them?

H: Yes, sir. Where Jim had one guard ten feet away not seeing him half the day, he was almost immediately surrounded with four or five.

B: Going on in the chronology, I think we ought to mention in here, about the next thing that happened in Mississippi was the assassination of Medgar Evers about a year after that.

H: Medgar was killed June 13, 1963.

B: And immediately replaced as field secretary by his brother Charles?

H: Right.

B: Was there ever a time, incidentally, when you considered becoming field secretary instead of state president?

H: No. Frankly, Medgar became field secretary around 1955, and I served Medgar as his president until he was assassinated for some five or six years, and I served Charles as long as he was there. I was president of NAACP for eleven years, as far as state is concerned. I feel that my role as a volunteer gives me much more freedom or levity to do those things that Aaron wants to do, without causing the organization any difficulty as such. You see, nobody can fire me 'cause there ain't nobody hired me. I'm strictly a

volunteer. Nobody pays me nothing for any of the work that I'm involved in. I earn my living at Fourth Street Drug Store, and that's the thing that pays the bills. I would rather not be in a position where I would not be at all times free to make the judgment that my conscience dictated. Like I say, I stayed on the board of the Southern Regional Conference, SCLC, NAACP, involved in organizing the CDGM, Friends of Children, and all of it. When you are so closely tied in terms of earning a living with a particular organization, there are times when you're turned off.

Once Charles became mayor of Fayette, the rules of the NAACP with regard to the Internal Revenue Service was that he could not draw a salary from the NAACP and hold a partisan political office. To lose much of the effectiveness of Charles directly over the field, as far as the national figure is concerned, and given clergymen and such--but when we had Charlie out here helping us knock on doors and do the voter registration work and helping organize and protesting, the campaigns at the various branch levels, it was much easier than now.

B: When Medgar Evers was killed, did you consider using that as an occasion for a full-scale demonstration? Did you think of bringing in people like Dr. King and trying to apply some pressure to the state?

H: No. Most of us were so saddened by the death of Medgar that it was simply preparing for the funeral. I had been with Medgar Monday night and had gone on to Houston, Texas, to address the Texas Pharmaceutical Association. I was president of the National Pharmaceutical Association that year.

On that Wednesday Medgar and I were to testify before the House Judiciary Committee in support of the 1964 Civil Rights Bill. We had been given twenty minutes. We didn't want to be duplicating in the twenty minutes we had. We simply touched base to determine which points each of us would take. Medgar drove me to the airport and I went on to Houston and went to bed, got up the next morning to look at Lena Horne because Lena had been down here working with us, and she was going to be on the Today show. I turned the TV on when I got up, and I saw Lena sitting there, and Roy Wilkins sitting beside her, and a little picture of Medgar up in the corner. I at first rejoiced to see my folks, you know. And then to hear the announcer say, "Ladies and gentlemen, we had already scheduled Miss Horne for the Today program, but due to the tragic assassination last night of Medgar Evers in Jackson, we've asked Roy Wilkins on also."

The position I'm in now is that my best buddy--I've just learned he's been killed, I'm scheduled to address a convention in less than an hour, and I just know I'm messed up over--

B: Did you go ahead and address the meeting?

H: Yes, I did what I could. They understood what was going on. And I went on from there

to Washington and read Medgar's testimony--I had a copy of his and he had a copy of mine--and mine also. And, of course, Clarence Mitchell, who is our Washington Bureau director, sat with me in the testimony, and we all explained why Medgar wasn't there.

B: At Medgar Evers' funeral in Jackson, there apparently was almost some violence that John Doar's credited with stopping.

H: Yes. You see, this had nothing to do, though, with the earlier questions raised about bringing in outsiders to dramatize this fight. Certainly, the civil rights cadre of the nation was here. I'm talking about Martin King, Ralph Abernathy, Whitney Young, Joseph Rauh. I can think of about fifty or sixty outstanding, nationally known civil rights leaders who were here, Roy Wilkins and all that gang.

But the problem with the police came about after we had had the funeral, carried the body back to the funeral home, and people were still passing by, viewing the body.

There is, in my mind, a respectful attitude that you or me or anybody who is involved in a situation dealing with the dead has to conform to. People would pass by slowly, and the police would say, "Come on. Move, move, move, move, move! Let's go! Let's go!" We just couldn't stand that kind of treatment with people wanting to pay their last respects to Medgar. So there, was a standoff in the middle of the street, and bricks and bottles were thrown--white versus black and black versus white.

John Doar was there. John had established a reputation of fairness on both sides which a lot of people have not done. But John stood in the middle. He said, "Look. You know I'm your friend, and I'm your friend. This is no way to settle this. I'd like to ask you, if you will, please abandon this kind of activity, and let's bring whatever our differences are in the courthouse."

Well, we mumbled and bumbled awhile, and they mumbled and bumbled awhile. And with the respect we had for John Doar, people just drifted away.

B: I gather it probably wasn't any surprise to you that as of this date, September 1970, nobody has been convicted of Medgar Evers' assassination.

H: No, it's really no surprise that nobody has been convicted, particularly when I think of the sad but truthful history of our nation, where since 1776 when the country was founded there has never been a white man who has faced capital punishment for a crime against a black anywhere in the nation--New York, California, Chicago, Mississippi, Arkansas, any place else. The South is no mutation in condoning racial violence by whites against blacks.

B: Then, where it's a really dismal part of this, shortly after Medgar Evers' assassination there was the assassination of John Kennedy. What was your immediate reaction to that?

H: Well, really, just as stunning as was Medgar's. You might not remember, but John Fitzgerald permitted us to bury Medgar in Arlington Cemetery, and Charles and Nan and the children and I were guests of the White House for these three or four days.

B: Is "Nan" Mrs. Charles Evers?

H: Nan is Mrs. Charles Evers; Myrlie, Mrs. Medgar Evers. The kids and myself. We're still pretty much considered one family.

We there developed a rapport and association and acquaintance with Robert and Teddy and the President, with Sarge Shriver, with Janice, and it has remained a beautiful relationship.

B: Is that the first time you met them personally?

H: No, that was not the first time I had met the President personally. I was at the presidential inauguration. But that was the first time that we'd sat down and just talked as people without any script or without any particular thing to get over.

B: What did you talk about?

H: What life was like in Mississippi. What could the administration do to relieve the problems that we were faced with! Why don't some of the blacks leave the state if things are that bad! Why do you stay there, you can get a job anywhere! These are some of the things.

B: What were your answers for those?

H: Well, generally, that the reason that it was in the plight that it was was that too many of us who had had an opportunity and an academic career had already left the state. And the more of us who remained here, number one, who had some ability to deal with the educated white man, and, two, lost what fear you might have had of him in terms of the physical sense--that it was going to require these two characteristics of anybody that remained there to break the stranglehold that the bigoted white had on the black. For us, this was what we were going to do.

B: Did President Kennedy seem to understand that?

H: Very good, very good.

B: Then the assassination must have been a considerable personal blow to you.

H: Yes, we were up in Cleveland at a NARO conference.

B: NARO?

H: Yes, that's NARO. I've forgotten exactly what it stands for, but it's a biracial nationwide interracial group. I was in the office of a young fellow, it was a young white boy, whose father and my father were good friends. John Duddy, Jr., is the director of the IBM service in Cleveland today. He was it then.

B: Cleveland, Ohio?

H: Ohio. We were sitting in his office. A girl came in crying, and saying the President had been shot. We stopped everything and turned the radio on, listened, and prayed, and were in mourning with the rest of the nation for the rest of the days.

B: When you had time to think about this kind of thing, was there any dismay that Lyndon Johnson of Texas was then president of the United States? Did you have any fear that the administrative pressure on civil rights might let up.

H: I thought so, yes. I thought so.

B: What convinced you otherwise?

H: As I saw Lyndon begin to take hold of the federal government and to proceed to pass the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the Voting Rights Act of 1965, and deal very forthrightly with the minimum wage situation. And finally, in one of his inaugural speeches, I believe it was, he went as far as to quote, "We shall overcome." And when we got there, I felt we'd made it.

B: The Howard College speech in 1965 closed with "We shall overcome?"

H: Yes.

B: Right after Mr. Johnson became president he is known to have contacted an awful lot of people, including some civil rights leaders. Did he talk to you?

H: Yes.

B: Did he call you on the phone?

H: Yes.

B: Do you recall what he said?

H: I don't recall exactly what he said, but it was to assure that the direction that the federal government was going under Mr. Kennedy, there would be no change in direction. This was pretty much what the gist of the conversation was about.

B: Was it a convincing phone call?

H: It was an interesting phone call, and one that we certainly hoped was real. And the, as I say, in terms of civil rights activities, we later found out was real.

I have some friends who are very pro-Lyndon and some who are very much anti-Lyndon. I find those who are very anti-Lyndon pretty much one-issue Democrats or one-issue Americans. I'd like to see us get out of Viet Nam yesterday, and this is what a lot of people condemn Lyndon for--his escalation of the war in Viet Nam. Probably they're right. In fact, it was during his time that the Viet Nam war was escalated, and they used the Gulf of Tonkin resolution to do this. But you take a guy like Al Lowenstein, a kid I knew in college who's one of the best friends I've got in this world today--and I consider Lyndon Johnson a real friend when we have something to talk about, and I love them both--I am sorry that Al and Lyndon are still split. Now, I just don't know how I'm going to get them back together, but I'm going to keep working at it until we find some basis that the two can agree on, because they're two beautiful people. They have strong wills, strong minds. Lyndon's hard-headed and Al's hard-headed too. But there has to be some issue on which the two agree that is strong enough in their repertoire of things they want to do to get back together and to work together.

B: Back to the time right after Mr. Johnson became president, did you actually see him or meet him any time there in the spring of 1964?

H: I don't recall whether it was the spring or the summer, but quite a few of us ended up out at the Johnson City Ranch.

B: Before the Democratic convention of that year?

H: Yes.

B: What was that occasion?

H: It was just an occasion to ride horses or to look at them being ridden, and to partake of the festivities that were going on. Nothing political.

B: Who were the other people with you? All civil rights leaders or just a mixed bag?

H: Just a mixed bag.

B: What's Lyndon Johnson on the Ranch like?

H: We really saw him so seldom that it's hard to say, but I understand he's a pretty fast rider like he's a pretty fast driver. The people that he had running the Ranch, if they were any kind of microcosm or reflection of what Lyndon was, they were truly great. I always remember the two or three days we spent out there.

B: That brings us up to the summer of 1964, which is the summer of the Mississippi project, the Democratic convention, the deaths in Neshoba County you've already mentioned. All those things went together, but I guess the starting place is the summer project. Who thought of the idea of the Mississippi Summer Project?

H: Well, it's really hard to say who thought of it. In the beginning there was Robert Moses of SNCC; there was Tom Gaither of CORE; there was Al Lowenstein with everybody. We had nobody from the Urban League. We were in constant touch with a fellow by the name of Wyatt T. Walker from SCLC. I was involved from the NAACP.

B: Who was applying the main pressure? I ask this from the standpoint of an outsider looking in. At the time it looked like people like Moses--that is, the more militant, the more radical groups--were those who were applying the pressure.

H: Well, Moses was the field director of the project. I think that each person who was in a position of activity played his role very well at that time. We were not able to get national SNCC, national CORE, national SCLC, nor national NAACP, to take this project on. What happened, the volunteer leadership in the state decided that we would do it. Again, nobody could fire us because nobody had hired us. And that was how we were able to actually get the program started. It was started without the permission of any national organization.

B: Was there any hint of the national organization's preferring that you not do it?

H: Yes. All of them were opposed to it.

B: Why Mississippi? Why not, say, Alabama or Georgia?

H: I say Mississippi because I live here.

B: Yes, but the other people you've named--Lowenstein, Moses, Wyatt Walker, they weren't particularly connected with Mississippi.

H: All of them had had experiences in Mississippi. Moses was here when the first SNCC movement was organized somewhere around 1962 or 1963 in McComb. And Wyatt Walker had been in and out with Martin King several times. So I would think in terms of more identity of most others, more of us knew more about Mississippi than any other area.

B: Did you notify the administration of these plans?

H: Well, yes. Not the administration, but if you are considering Bob Owens and John Doar administration, yes. But we did not communicate with the President of the United States.

B: What was their reaction to it?

H: "Be cautious and keep us informed on how you're doing."

B: Did you ask them in the planning stages for assistance or protection?

H: Yes. We'd asked for that so many times and we continued to ask for it, but it was no different then than in previous administrations where we were told that the federal government just couldn't provide baby sitters.

B: When the Mississippi project was in the planning stages, did you think about what its possible effect on the Democratic convention and the national election that year would be?

H: No. We really didn't come up with the Freedom Democratic Party until about the last month of the project when we were saying, "What else can we do."

B: There was a rumor at the time that the Mississippi project had been infiltrated by agents from the State of Mississippi; that your training school at Oxford, Ohio, and that some, if not all, of your local freedom centers had in them men who were really agents of the state.

H: That's great. You know, one of the things that happened to me early in my civil rights career was in 1950. I had communist examinations, check-out, because people in the community wanted to know where I'd been for the last few years and all of this and all of that. And they ran that G-2, and they found that I wasn't Fred Davis that had recently jumped bond in New York--it wasn't what they were thinking. So after having been checked out and found clean of the communist myth, I've never been bothered with that any more.

B: In other words, you didn't have anything to hide?

H: No. And we had nothing to hide in the freedom schools, in the training program, or in the total program we were running. I'd say, in terms of the long, hard struggle of 1964, which was called the COFO movement--The Council of Federated Organizations, we were the four--that with these thousand kids coming into Mississippi, living in the homes of poor blacks and whites all over this state, is more of the reason why you have less anti-white feeling among blacks in terms of "Get Whitey," in terms of "We don't want the white-folk in this, white folks ain't got no business in this club." You find that talk very, very seldom in the state. And it's to a large degree because you didn't learn it out of books, you didn't learn it over TV or you didn't hear it on radio, but you slept in a bed with whites, and you shared whatever food you had with them. The kids lived right there and they helped to try to improve living conditions of people who they were living with, or they fitted right into the pattern of what was going on. And many a black took heart from this movement and just learned for themselves by living with whites that there are

some dumb white folks and some smart white folks, just like there are some dumb black folks and some smart black folks, but that the color of the man's skin didn't make the difference.

B: Did you try to screen carefully the participants in that project--white and black?

H: Well, we did not go into their political aspirations, but we did go into a position of their being willing to follow directions, discipline, and order. And this was where the screening took place.

B: Your training school up at Oxford, Ohio, involved that kind of thing. Of course, I guess what most people remember out of that summer is the deaths of Goodman, Chaney, and Schwerner. You've already mentioned that Goodman spent the night with you before he went down to Neshoba County.

H: You know I'd never forget it.

B: Were you here in Clarksdale when you heard the news that they were missing?

H: No. Frankly, I'd left myself, after he had gone, to Washington for the NAACP national convention. And when I got there I had several phone calls that they were missing. I tried to touch base with the FBI back in the state--it was on a Sunday--to see if we couldn't get them to at least call the jails between Meridian and Philadelphia. Bob Moses was here, and he was trying to do the same thing.

I'm not saying the FBI didn't call, they might have. But they would not admit to us that they'd called. They told us, "Unless you can produce supportive evidence that they've been carried across state lines or have been missing more than twenty-four hours, we have no jurisdiction."

B: This is the Mississippi State FBI people you were talking to; that is, the FBI people here in Mississippi?

H: That's right.

B: Did you get in touch with the Justice Department or the President?

H: We got in touch with the Justice Department on Monday, the next day, but that was too late--they were already dead then. We didn't know it. But I believe with all my heart that if we could have gotten the FBI to call the various jails and the jailer would have had some idea that "Big Brother is watching you," that they wouldn't have dared to have killed them.

B: Sometime just shortly after that, apparently President Johnson sort of built a fire under J. Edgar Hoover and the FBI. J. Edgar Hoover came to Mississippi and talked to Governor

Johnson, opened a new FBI office in Jackson? Was that the way you saw it?

H: Yes. And he brought down--

(tape ran off)

INTERVIEWEE: Aaron Henry

INTERVIEWER: T. H. Baker

DATE: September 12, 1970

Tape 2 of 3

B: This is tape two of the interview with Aaron Henry. We were talking about President Johnson's reaction to what it turned out were the murders in Neshoba County. From your standpoint it was pretty clear that the FBI had been told to get on the job?

H: Well yes. You see we were in Washington at the National NAACP meeting following the day that the three young fellows were missing. And we were in constant bombardment to Bobby Kennedy, who was attorney general, about the problem. Frankly we picketed his office, because we didn't feel they were moving fast enough.

B: Did he understand why you were doing that? That, I gather, it was not aimed personally at Bobby Kennedy.

H: Yes, he came out and put on a picket sign and walked with us, he wasn't happy either on how the law was moving. But anyway, one of the Dulleses--Allen Dulles, I guess it was--was put in charge for awhile of organizing an office in Mississippi to handle this. The national office of NAACP flew me and Charles Evers back to the state from the convention to confer with Mr. Dulles, and I think we spent one or two days back here and then went back to the convention. In the meantime he was organizing searches and doing whatever the head men of task forces organized by the FBI does.

B: Did you confer with Governor Paul Johnson of Mississippi at any time?

H: No, we were never able to get a conference with Governor Paul Johnson as long as he was governor on anything. We wrote him, but we never got a reply. But in terms of asking for appointments to talk and see him, this we never got.

B: This is slightly outside the chronology, but roughly what we've been talking about--during these years did the FBI in Mississippi help what you were trying to do, or

get in the way, or just not have anything to do with it at all?

H: Well, I would say that the FBI was a negative force in that reports that we would make to them--I'm talking now pretty much prior to 1964--the reports that we would make to the FBI about the way a particular person had been brutalized in a jail, had been mistreated some other way, the sheriff of the county usually knew what it had been complained about as soon as the FBI agent knew it. And the FBI agents were constant companions of city policemen. It was really the local police where we had most of our trouble. To find the FBI just an extension of that organization gave us little hope or respect for them.

B: Did that change after 1964?

H: Yes, it changed after 1964. The associations seemed to have changed and the intimidation of blacks for reports they had made to the FBI seemed to have subsided, which gave us an indication that they were no longer being double agents.

B: You mean that they were no longer quite so close to the local law enforcement agents.

H: Well, they were no longer quite so close to the local law enforcement agents and that they were no longer poll-parroting to the local agent what the black or the civil rights worker had confided in the FBI guy about what was going on.

B: Another thing along the same line, during these years there were constantly rumors that the FBI was bugging Southern Christian Leadership Conference meetings and the rumor even included the fact that the FBI had a tape recording or recordings of sexual activities of Martin Luther King, and things like that.

H: Well, that didn't bother anybody, I'm sure I've got taps on my telephones.

B: In those years you just assumed that the telephones were tapped?

H: Yes.

B: Were they?

H: Well, you can't tell, I don't know. I don't know how to find a tap. They do the tapping in the office of the telephone company, that's where you've got to sit and listen to what's going on. I've been involved in many a conversation with people and the cord would be pulled out or disconnected in some way. This could be accidental, could be purposeful.

B: If you suspected that kind of thing, did you ever complain to the Justice Department or the President?

H: No.

B: Was there anything to the story that there existed a tape of Dr. King's activities of the type I just described?

H: I don't know, I was never confronted with it. And I saw it on the cover of Time Magazine, I believe [Time Magazine, August 17, 1970, page 12.]

B: Well, recently there was an account of it but the rumors were spreading around even during those years.

H: If so, you know, with it being people who were highly involved in the movement we would take the position that the tactic was one to be objectionable because of their involvement in the movement.

B: Back to that summer, the next thing was the formation of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party and the events at the Democratic convention. You said earlier that you came to that idea later on in the summer when you were thinking about what else you could do. Again, where did that idea originate, the idea of forming a separate group?

H: I would say it was primarily the same people who had put the long, hot summer project together, the volunteer representatives of NAACP, SNCC, CORE, and SCLC.

B: I've seen a written account that there was a meeting in Jackson that July that included people like Martin Luther King and James Farmer and James Foreman and Bayard Rustin and Bob Moses and Ella Baker and presumably yourself, to plan the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party. Do you recall such a thing?

H: I know Ella very well and I know Bayard, but I do not remember being involved with them in a discussion of developing the Freedom Democratic Party. Really, the young people who were down here in the long, hot summer project in their return home, putting pressure to some degree on their parents etc., is really, in my mind, the cause of the overwhelming acceptance of the idea for it.

Of course, Ella and Bayard were all in and out of here during that time and probably there were discussions about what we were doing, but they did not bring the idea from New York to Mississippi to do that. What they found was a discussion of it when they got here and probably shared some ideas or loaned some advice along the line. But let nobody ever feel that the Freedom Democratic Party movement in the long hot summer of 1964 was an idea imposed upon us--it was us! It reminds me of 1956 when the NAACP in Biloxi at a place called Back Bay Mission. The whites stoned the building, tore it up, and we had to have a police escort to get out alive. And the next morning, Gilbert Mason, who was president of NAACP in Biloxi, was trying to be kind to the white community, I thought--when he was asked by the reporters what happened, he said "Some white hoodlums wrecked the building." One lady spoke up in very proud terms and asked what we were saying now about freedom summer and FDP. She said, "That wasn't hoodlums, that was us!"

B: When you were planning the Freedom Democratic Party, exactly what did you have in mind? For example, did you really think that you could be seated as the delegation from Mississippi, or did you just intend to bring up the issue, or what?

H: Yes. We went to win. You had the Democratic cause, you had the Democratic fair view, and you had minimum ground rules which a person who calls himself a Democrat has to meet. And it was clear to everybody concerned that our congress was not doing its job right.

B: But did it occur to you that you--surely whatever would happen you were going to raise a ruckus at the convention and that Lyndon Johnson, above all, didn't want any ruckus at his convention in 1964.

H: We weren't really thinking about Lyndon. We were thinking about the five or six congressmen from Mississippi and the two senators sitting on the Democratic side of the aisle voting against every project, every program that would have benefited the poor of this country. They voted against minimum wage, Medicare, food stamps, OEO, federal aid to education, you name it. All of these things they continuously voted against, it's not a question of ability or capacity to do them, it's a question of will. And we didn't think then, and we don't think now that they have the right to call themselves Democrats and help to organize the Democratic caucus in the Congress and not follow the philosophy and the policies of the party. We are challenging them again this year.

B: The way it actually worked out, your first challenge was at the convention for the seating of the delegates and then after that, early 1965, you challenged the legality of the congressmen.

H: We did both.

B: Was that intended from the very beginning?

H: Yes. You see, also in 1964, prior to then, the congressmen and senators had always been delegates to the National convention and we were anxious to meet the lion in his den there. But when they saw what they had to face, they sent up what we called a "Joe Dokes" delegation, nobody with any strong stature in it. And they were just left with what I call the weaklings that they sent up to take the beating that they got.

B: At the convention before the credentials committee, you and Edward King and Mrs. Fannie Lou Hamer all testified with considerable impact on the other delegates, as I recall.

H: We testified, yes.

B: When did the movement for a compromise get started?

H: Well, there were several things being thrown around. Of course Edith Green had a position that we felt we could live with, and then it got into a ball of wax about not being able to increase the delegates to the national convention, then they decided they could increase the delegates to the national convention by two. You see, what I think white America has learned since then, is that no longer can white America write the agenda for black America. No longer can white America say what is to be done and the blacks simply follow poll-parrott like in their tracks.

Now there were two things that were wrong with the compromise, and I'm just sorry that Hubert had the untenable job of trying to sell it--one was the two vote issue.

B: This was the business of allowing your delegation two votes-at-large?

H: Yes. If they had given us two votes and permitted our whole delegation the right to cast those two votes, I think maybe we could have swung it. But when they decide you are going to have two votes and one of them is going to Aaron Henry and the other one is going to Ed King--not only did they tell us we had two votes, they told us who they were going to. So it was just too heavy-handed a situation and none of us could buy it. Of course our objections to buying it varied. Frankly, Bob and I had a personal confrontation over this.

You see, in getting before the Democratic Party, any of us who are naive enough to believe that just because sixty-four country bumpkins from Mississippi go to Atlantic City and they let us in, that they open the door you know, you ain't with it. It took Whitney Young, Roy Wilkins and Martin Luther King and the church clergy and the power of this nation, to open that door. Once the door was open I felt, still feel, and hopefully I will always be of this opinion, that the people that helped us open the door had a right to at least have something to say about what the decision ought to be in terms of what do you accept and what do you not accept.

B: You mean you think that people like Wilkins, Young, and the others should have been listened to?

H: I think they should have had the opportunity to voice their opinion.

B: I gather that Bob Moses didn't feel that way.

H: That's right.

B: About how was the delegation split between you and Moses?

H: It was split about fifty-fifty down the middle, on this issue. We were all opposed to the compromise, you know, two votes--no question there. But in terms of using the influence of the people we had used, and then that they are no longer useful to you now--throw

them away to me it was burning your bridges behind you. You'll need those people again, and besides that, they're beautiful people to know and work with and have on your side.

B: There was some evidence that Dr. King at first was not inclined to accept the compromise and then he was talked into it by people like Wilkins and Young and Rustin.

H: Well, I really don't know what Martin's position would have been because they never got a chance to talk before the delegation.

B: How did it eventually get settled, or did it?

H: You mean the controversy between Bob and myself? It just ended up with two men having different opinions. Again, I told you in the beginning that me and Bob think we run the world.

B: Was that the origin of the walk-in that Bob and his group decided to have the walk-in on the floor, and you and your group resisted that?

H: We took a position that the seats on the floor were illegally occupied. And if that were true, then the illegal occupants might as well be us or them. And that there was no greater crime committed by either and consequently conscience did not bother me in this area, because it had been clearly defined that the Mississippi delegation had refused to compromise at all and had gone home; there weren't but about three of them left, and Mississippi had sixty chairs. Somebody needed to sit in them.

B: You mentioned Hubert Humphrey awhile back. Did you get the impression that Hubert Humphrey had kind of been ordered by Lyndon Johnson to settle that issue with a minimum of friction?

H: Yes.

B: Did you get the impression that maybe Humphrey's selection as the vice presidential nominee might be connected with whether or not he could avoid a real confrontation?

H: I don't think that. I don't think Hubert would have tried to sell it if he had not thought, himself, that it was right. But it just so happened that what he thought was right and what we thought was right was not the same thing.

B: Who else was involved in working toward a compromise? I've seen mentioned Walter Reuther and Clark Clifford and Walter Jenkins and Joseph Rauh--were they all active in that?

H: Joe Rauh was not at the Padgett Motel there in Atlantic City when we were called to come over. Bayard Rustin set up the conference.

B: What conference is this?

H: This is the conference with Hubert and Walter and a couple of guys from Lyndon Johnson's staff in the Padgett Motel.

B: Was this where the administration's proposal was first outlined to you?

H: Right. And of course we rejected it there and we continued to reject it and there never would have been a 1968 if we had not rejected it in 1964.

B: Of course one of the terms that it eventually settled on was that in the future for the 1968 convention, all delegations would have to be selected without regard to race.

H: No, that was not a part of the compromise. That was a part of a special Equal Rights Committee--that was a resolution passed at the convention after the delegate question had been settled, that Governor [David] Lawrence was made the chairman of the Special Equal Rights Committee, and he died and Governor Hughes of New Jersey later became the chairman, which did grow into what happened in 1968.

B: You didn't consider that a part of the compromise in that agreement?

H: No.

B: Did all that leave any hard feelings between you and President Johnson?

H: No, I still got along with Lyndon, you know, I understood how hard-headed he was. Frankly I took off the whole month of October of 1964 to travel this nation in support of Lyndon Johnson and Hubert Humphrey. I've never had any hard feelings with him about it, I just thought he was wrong.

B: When you did that in 1964, when you campaigned for Lyndon Johnson, was your activity coordinated with the whole campaign?

H: Yes.

B: Who was your contact man?

H: A young fellow who now works for Congressman John Conyers, he's Larry Herwitz,

B: Did they get in touch with you and ask you to campaign, or did you volunteer?

H: Well, what happened, Larry called down and wanted to know if I would take a trip out to California for the campaign, and I was glad to do it. After that trip then, calls continued to come from the PR division of the DNC, "will you go there," or "will you go here," or

"will you go there?" I'd just be getting back home!

B: They found a boy, huh?

H: Yeah, they found a boy.

B: Martin Luther King campaigned for Johnson too. Were you involved in the decision to do that? That was, as I recall, the first time he had actively campaigned for anybody.

H: No, I was not involved in the decision to do it. Fannie Hamer campaigned for him. The NAACP took for the first time a political position, largely because the opposite meant that Barry Goldwater won. Getting a tax exemption disturbed by going this route, I think that all the organizations were willing to do it if it meant helping to keep Goldwater out.

B: Actually though you did it in such a way that it didn't endanger your tax exemption, you campaigned as Aaron Henry, individual, rather than as state president I guess.

H: Yes.

B: And so at the national level, as I recall.

H: Yes.

B: Stop me if I'm leaving anything out, but I guess the next thing you got involved in would be the White House Conference on Civil Rights.

H: Well, probably so. You know, it's hard to keep up with the chronology.

B: It's hard to keep them all straight. But that spring of 1965, the spring after the election, they began planning the White House Conference of Civil Rights. Were you in on the planning stage?

H: Yes. I think there were about fifty of us in the planning stage.

B: At the time there seemed to be a good deal of division of opinion around about the Moynihan report on the black family. Did you share the controversy there?

H: Well, Moynihan was considered pretty much a strong intellectual, and there were people lined up on both sides with regard to Moynihan's interpretation of the distance the country should go in placating or making sure that the black family is treated or adequately provided for as any other. Certainly being black this has its concern, but I would rather go the opposite route that was finally taken, in terms of the total White House Conference, when it turned on the question of economic need rather than skin color as the fulcrum from which the movement would be pushed. And it included the white poor, it included whatever groups that were poor that wanted to be included. I

think you probably remember the Mexican-American group. The Chicanos were largely upset because it did not seem that the White House Conference was meant for them. Finally, I think another special session was set. But this is what we were getting away from in pinning it primarily to the black community, was because we wanted all people of whatever racial hue that had a difficulty finding its way into the mainstream of American life to be given a hand, to be given a lift. And this did include, in our thinking, the Chicanos, if they had told them to come to the convention.

B: There were rumors at the time that that White House Conference on Civil Rights almost ended up as being a disaster, arguments among the various groups, similar to the one you've just described. Is that true?

H: Not a disaster. See, whenever the people have different opinions, unless you come to a conference and sit there and swallow whatever is given, then the press of America interprets it as a humdinger, or whatever you want to call it, a bad situation. But to me they're very worthwhile situations because no one person has the answers to all the problems. There's no panacea. We've got no parallel in history with regard to the ethnic, racial, cultural background of the American population that has emerged as a one-society people as we're trying to do today. There are no guidelines, there are no rules, and anybody's idea might be right; so given a one-line argument--I don't care whether you came from more house or no house--that doesn't give them anymore of an opportunity to be right than any other person. Many people who live on the farms, who aren't educated and certainly those who have gone to college and are educated, have ideas about how we can get out of this box we're in. And I think it will do us well to listen to all of us and not get hung up on how many "these" you've got. The "these" and the no "these" will have to decide on that.

B: Was there also at that time within the movement itself already clearly the beginning of the Black Power movement, or black separatism movement?

H: I would say yes. I would say that black separatism was beginning to be a kind of novelty that got audiences, got people listening to another thing, and some people to find a place in the movement for themselves began to vituperate this separatism, blackness, and all this jazz.

B: You mean just self-serving out of expediency, just people who could not be leaders otherwise?

H: No, no, that's not what I'm saying. I'm saying that people who did not feel that going about it in a biracial way was the right way moved to get a place on the stage for themselves so that they could espouse that philosophy of difference.

B: How far back did that go? When did you first begin to see signs of that idea?

H: Somewhere around 1966, 1965, in there.

B: It first became public I guess in connection with the Meredith march.

H: Yes, and when Stokley cried "Black Power" in the North.

B: But it predated that among yourselves?

H: Well, yes. You probably would want to think about reading a book by Marcus Garvey which is around the turn of the century, something like 1895, where the first writing of a book by the title Black Power was produced. And there's really nothing new in the black power cry today that's different from Marcus Garvey.

B: Are you still an integrationist?

H: Oh yes, I don't think blacks are going to make it by themselves, and I don't think whites are going to make it by themselves. I just consider every man my brother or my friend until he proves he doesn't want to be.

B: You told me earlier before the tape was turned on one thing that struck you about that White House Conference, the meal you had in the White House.

H: Oh yes. Lady Bird served us spareribs. I had been to dinner in the White House before the White House Conference. And there was caviar, a bunch of stuff, I didn't know what it was. This time the brother was there, and Lady Bird likes to pull on those spareribs herself pretty good.

B: Did you know Mrs. Johnson very well? Did you get to meet her--

H: Yes. There were several times when we got to see her, yes.

B: What kind of person was she?

H: Well, very much concerned about the moral fiber of the country. She was terribly concerned that youngsters were not following the tradition of church going, of parent respect, you know, these kind of things. I don't think she foresaw the hippy movement, but maybe she did. Maybe she knew more about what she was talking about than we really thought. I considered Mrs. Johnson a real--I can't think of the word I want to use, but she was very strict in her own way of thinking about how people ought to support themselves, what's proper, what's proper to wear, what's proper to do. The right thing to do, to say, and to wear, and these kinds of things. She was full of pomp for circumstance.

B: Back to the chronology, we already mentioned the Meredith march. Is that another thing--did Jim Meredith really just think of that by himself and take out on it and carry all the rest of you with him?

H: As far as I know, yes. Jim did not communicate with me, and I don't know who else he did communicate with.

B: Was that a difficult thing to organize? The chronology was that Meredith started out by himself, was shot at, wounded, and then it became this huge march.

H: After he was shot, that was really what made the march. I think that white America might have learned a little lesson from that in that you let a black march until his feet get tired, let him alone, let him go. As sure as you mess with him, you're going to get many, many more out there doing the same thing.

B: Where was the shooting? I've forgotten, but it was not far from here.

H: He was shot on Highway 51, something like ten miles across the Tennessee border.

B: Ten miles into Mississippi?

H: Into Mississippi.

B: Which would be about fifty or sixty miles from here, I guess? Which brought Martin Luther King, and Stokley Carmichael and all the meetings--.

H: You name it, yes.

B: Somewhere along in there, Dr. King came out publicly against the Viet Nam war. You've already mentioned how that caused a good deal of division, you mentioned the case of now Congressman [Allard K.] Lowenstein. Was there any debate within the movement among the Southern Christian Leadership Conference Board about whether or not Dr. King should do that, whether it was tactically wise?

H: Yes, there was. And I was one who thought that it was not cohesive to tie Viet Nam to civil rights. But I see now how wrong I was and how right Martin was.

B: At the time what was your reasoning on that?

H: At the time my reasoning was that the State Department in its development of our relationship of world power, we of SCLC, had no input, no knowledge, no way of analyzing what good international relations would come about because of this act or because of that act. We were not at all schooled in the area of ambassadors or foreign service and we didn't have a single black at that time in any ambassadorial position anywhere. So it appeared to me that we were taking a position here that we had really no knowledge of exactly what we were doing. I would have rather not taken a position, than to take one and not know why or how come. I know that Bobby used to say that "The hottest place in hell is reserved for those who maintained their neutrality in time of crisis." I didn't know enough about what we should be doing. I didn't know what really

was involved in the Gulf of Tonkin. I didn't know what had been involved in the Geneva Conference that split a country that I studied in geography, and perhaps you did, as French Indo-China, Laos, Cambodia, North and South,Viet Nam, and the whys of the government that each unit decided to form was because of their protectorate within the four powers that set up the Geneva Conference.

Now when you go back and analyze and do some Monday morning quarterbacking, you know, you can fit the pieces together.

B: How did the argument go within the Southern Christian Leadership Conference? Did more agree with your stance?

H: Well the argument went, "If this is what Martin wants to do, it's all right for Martin to do it if he understands what he's doing. I don't understand it, and I'm not going out there with them."

B: Did you think Dr. King understood it?

H: Yes, I think he did.

B: You say you changed your mind later. What made you change your mind?

H: Well you see, Martin's objection to Viet Nam also was predicated on the extension of poverty, the extension of racism, the extension of ghettoism within the nation. And when we look at how much money we are spending in Viet Nam and how little we are spending in home improvement--by home, I mean American improvements--I think we can all see that this could make a difference. However, I remember that before Viet Nam there was no antipoverty program and since Viet Nam, in spite of Viet Nam we have more of an antipoverty program than we've ever had. But I also feel that if we can get out of Viet Nam, that the constant feeling of the power structure of the nation is of such now that it will aggressively do something about the poverty of this country if once we can get past the impasse of Viet Nam. I think that really this is what Martin was speaking to. I just didn't understand it.

B: Did Dr. King's stand against the war affect his relationship with President Johnson?

H: I just don't know, I would assume that it would, yes. Because here is Martin objecting vigorously to the one thing that Lyndon is involved in that is going to make or break him as president.

B: What kind of man was Dr. King? I gather you knew him pretty well.

H: He was a man that I wish I was half of.

B: That's a fine compliment. He apparently exercised some just almost mystical leadership

course. Like you said awhile back, if Martin wanted to do it, it ought to be done.

H: Yes. I found Martin to be one of the best men I've ever known, one of the truest friends I've ever had; his family was genuine and real, his widow Coretta and I are still good friends. We find it possible to be at the same places many times for different civil rights occasions and sort of get together. And I find Ralph Abernathy and Juanita Abernathy to be the same kind of folks. It's just sort of a fraternity kind of thing.

B: Soul brothers?

H: Soul brothers, yes.

B: Were you in Memphis that spring of 1968 when Dr. King was assassinated?

H: I was in Memphis in the spring, but I was not there the day he was assassinated. I think I was in Atlanta the day he was assassinated.

B: Was there any argument within the Southern Christian Leadership Conference about Rev. Abernathy taking over as leader?

H: Never, none.

B: It had just always been assumed that he would.

H: You see what the press has left out of its realms of information is the organization of the Montgomery Improvement Association, MIA. The night we organized the Montgomery Improvement Association after Rosa had been arrested--

B: Excuse me. We might as well make this clear on the tape. This is in 1955 when Mrs. Rosa Parks was arrested for refusing to give up her seat on the bus?

H: Right.

B: And you said, "We." You were in Montgomery involved in the movement?

H: Yes. Ed Nixon, the president of NAACP of Montgomery, and NAACP had been outlawed by the federal government in Alabama.

B: By the state government--

H: By the state government, right, in Alabama. And he was still trying to keep a force together. Consequently we were close enough to get over there occasionally, and because of the struggle that they were in we would lend them as much support as possible in terms of body presence. And [Ed] Nixon is not given nearly enough credit in my mind in the news media for he is the guy who organized Montgomery to be prepared to

conduct the boycott.

B: Even before Mrs. Parks was arrested?

H: Right. Nixon was a pullman porter covered by unionism and he was knocking on doors all the time saying that we ought not to take the kind of treatment we get. You see in Montgomery you got on a bus at the front, you paid your dime and you got off if you were black, and you walked around to the back of the bus to get on. And many times while you were making your circle the bus took off. Bus segregation in Montgomery was worse than it was in so many other places. Now I know you know what Martin and Rosa and Ralph and Ed Nixon asked for when they went down to the transportation station. They said "We want the blacks to load from the back forward, and the whites to load from the front backward, but nobody be required to get up in case the section is filled."

B: Which is what had happened to Mrs. Parks?

H: Yes.

B: She was asked to stand up and give a white man a seat.

H: Yes. But suppose they had given us that!

B: Yes, that seems like a long time ago, doesn't it? A demand that mild in militant minds! How did the Montgomery Improvement Association light on the then unknown Martin Luther King?

H: That's what I was getting to. When the House was trying to find a leader, the person that was most popular and had the confidence of the people was Ralph Abernathy, who had been at Hunter Creek Baptist Church [sic] [Hunter Street Baptist Church] for a long time. Martin had been at Dexter Avenue Baptist Church less than a year, but Ralph said "Let's pass some of the positions around." He said, "There's a young man in town who we need to give a chance, he's right here, Martin Luther King. If you guys will give him this chance I'll stand beside him all the way." And this is the break that gave Martin Luther a chance and an opportunity to move from the bud into the full flower that he became.

B: I don't believe that I have ever heard that before. Did Rev. Abernathy ever resent what amounted to being the number two man?

H: No, he never resented it. He was proud to stand behind Martin.

B: When did you first realize that you had there in Montgomery an exceptional leader of more than just city wide stature?

H: I would guess about two to three months after the boycott was underway, the charisma of Martin, the attraction that he was able to bring from so many people, he just began to

catch on.

B: You became a member of the board of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference very shortly thereafter, 1956 or so. Isn't that a little unusual, in that most of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference are church-oriented people, ministers and such, aren't they?

H: Well many of them are. The whole organization is, I would say to a large degree, made up of people who believe in the Christian or Judaic form of life, and I certainly subscribe to that.

B: Well, what I was getting at, was that in at least its early days for local support the Southern Christian Leadership Conference generally tapped the existing black leadership, which in most places was the ministers.

H: There are not more than three or four of us on the Board now who are not ministers.

B: Yes, that's what I meant.

H: I guess they have to have some sinners!

B: Keep them honest, huh!

H: Yes.

B: But again, like you said earlier, whatever Dr. King wanted to do was pretty much what the Southern Christian Leadership Conference did. One gets the impression that since Dr. King's death, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference doesn't exert nearly the influence it did. Is that fair enough?

H: I think it's a fair statement, in that anytime you lose a Martin Luther King you certainly don't have the strong leadership that you had when you had him. And when the NAACP loses Roy Wilkins, it's going to flounder for awhile.

B: You got the impression that the Southern Christian Leadership Conference was really mostly Martin Luther King, whereas the NAACP dates back to 1909 and has had more than one president and is more of an institution, granted that Roy Wilkins makes a difference.

H: But when the SCLC gets that old, it will have had that many presidents too.

B: I'd like to ask your opinion about some people.

H: Go ahead.

B: For example, did you notice any significant difference in the Justice Department between Robert Kennedy and Nicholas Katzenbach and Ramsey Clark, the three attorneys general in the 1960's?

H: I would say no. I would say that they were all equally committed to justice, and I knew all three of them very well.

B: Any kind of personal differences or difference in operation methods?

H: I would say Nick falls into the civil rights area more, this was when they invaded the air base down in Greenville, Nick Katzenbach was--when the poor people took over?

B: That's when the air base was abandoned and the blacks wanted to move in and take it over as a community center.

H: Before doing anything, Nick Katzenbach called many of us from all over the country for suggestions on how to deal with it. Bobby would do the same thing. Ramsey Clark, you know, followed pretty much the same method of attacking problems. Some of them certainly had some people, some blacks, just like you do and just like I do, whose opinions I respect more than others. I would say that although they didn't always all call the same guys, they followed the same kind of pattern.

You see, to this time the Justice Department was pretty much the center. This time the Justice Department was pretty much the center of the core around which the hope of black Americans was centered. Because for eight to twelve years now we had had somebody to go, really it goes all the way back to Brownell, we had somebody in the head of the Department of Justice that you felt was your friend and you felt was on your side.

B: You date that back to Brownell, Eisenhower's attorney general?

H: Yes. But come Brother John Mitchell, that's all down the drain now.

B: You and Ed Waites and Charles Evers have had a meeting with Richard Nixon or with John Mitchell, haven't you?

H: We've met with all of them, yes.

B: There's a distinct change in climate and atmosphere?

H: Yes. Frankly, we picketed Mr. Mitchell at Cleveland when he came down to speak for the Delta Council, which was an all white, farm-business group--

B: Kind of a Chamber of Commerce for the Delta, and I guess we'd better kick in here, that that Cleveland is Cleveland, Mississippi.

H: Okay. And I don't want my Attorney General addressing a racist group anywhere. He's just as much my Attorney General as yours or anybody else's. And we tried all we could to persuade him not to, but I understand that Mr. Eastland told him that he just had to have him.

B: That's Senator Eastland of Sunflower County, Mississippi?

H: Yes.

B: Was the Community Relations Service an effective organization under Roger Wilkins?

H: I don't think the Community Relations Service has been an effective instrument under anybody. It has done some bringing of people together. I don't know the scope of its authority, but if what they do is a reflection of the scope of their authority, they might as well not do it.

B: You mean here in Mississippi, for example, you just don't see them very often?

H: You don't see them, you don't get any suggestions or help about how to go about solving your problems, you get a phone call every month or so from whoever is the director of the Mississippi area, but I understand now they are putting on two people for Mississippi since the school crisis is popping up. Well you don't wait until school opens to put on somebody who never had anything to do with what they're supposed to be doing.

B: In the Johnson presidency, when you wanted to talk to the White House, who did you get in touch with? Cliff Alexander, Harry McPherson?

H: Under Lyndon I got in touch with Hubert.

B: With Vice President Humphrey?

H: Yes. You see, I became involved with Mr. Humphrey in 1948 I believe, whatever year it was that the Durham-Humphrey Act passed, and Hubert got involved with the working arrangement--who arranged it, I don't know. There was students from many colleges of pharmacy that were briefed by him in Washington as to what the Durham-Humphrey Bill was about and what he was trying to accomplish and all of this. This must have been 1949, because in 1948 he had just run Mississippi out of the Democratic Party at the Democratic national convention. I formed an affection for the guy right then!

B: It just occurs to me, I just made the connection--Hubert Humphrey of course is a druggist. The Durham-Humphrey Bill doesn't ring a bell at all, does that have something to do with pharmaceuticals?

H: Yes, it has to do with purity standards and really in the area of thalidomide, I guess you

remember that difficulty; the fact that the federal food drug and cosmetic standards as a result of Durham-Humphrey was of such a magnitude in America, thalidomide was never produced and sold legally in this country.

B: Though the thalidomide thing came later, the issue was in the early 1960's; it was in West Germany I believe where the stuff was sold. So you've known Humphrey for a long time back?

H: Yes. And ever since he had been in the White House he had assigned Bill Welch to us to deal with whatever problems that we had. And there never was a time when we called and asked for assistance that we didn't get it.

B: You got the impression that Humphrey had not only the will but the power to do something, that he had the President's ear and could get something done?

H: Yes.

B: Then you didn't have any contact with any of the people on the White House staff?

H: No.

B: Particularly toward the last there, toward the late 1960's, did you get the impression that Lyndon Johnson was just not really in contact with black people or the civil rights movement?

H: No, not at all. I think that toward the end the issue turned on the Viet Nam question and people became a one-issue oriented body. And regardless of how much good Lyndon could or would have done, as long as there was Viet Nam, that was the issue.

I'm not convinced in my mind yet, of course I might as well be because I'll never know, that if Lyndon had not pulled out of the race himself that he couldn't have won it.

B: You think he might have been able to win?

H: I think he might have.

B: Did you campaign for Humphrey?

H: Yes, indeed. This is one county out of five in the state that he carried.

B: The black vote responsible for that?

H: Yes.

B: Which I guess means dating back 'way earlier a voter registration campaign of the

NAACP was responsible for?

H: Yes, and of course we had quite a few members of the white community who were for Humphrey. Humphrey came and spoke here after the campaign and I would say out of around 1,000 people there was easily two or three hundred whites that were there.

B: He spoke in Clarksdale?

H: Yes.

B: What was the occasion for that?

H: Came down and say "Hey" to us.

B: To say thank you? This was after the campaign?

H: After the campaign, yes. He spoke here, Jackson and Meridian.

B: You were on the Advisory Committee for Civil Rights for the Agriculture department during those years, Secretary Freeman's department.

H: Yes, I learned to work with Orville very well. I found him a good man to work for. I felt that there were ways to develop legalities to make life easier for the poor that Orville was not himself convinced about. Of course I could very well be convinced about it because I wouldn't have to stand responsible for what happened if things went wrong, when he did, because he was secretary.

B: Were these things like the food stamp program?

H: Well yes. Food stamp program, food stamps to be made free to people who can't afford them. The law that created the food stamp program does not permit free food stamps, yet there are some eight or nine test counties now that Secretary Hardin has put in free food stamps--

INTERVIEWEE: Aaron Henry

INTERVIEWER: T. H. Baker

DATE: September 12, 1970

Tape 3 of 3

B: This is tape number three in the interview with Aaron Henry. You were talking that Secretary Hardin has made food stamps available free in some places.

H: Yes, I think they are in something like nine counties where they are testing the possibility of free food stamps. And this was something we tried to get Mr. Freeman to do, but he found in the legalisms of the agriculture politics called the Smith-Lever Act that this was not possible in his interpretation. But somehow Mr. Hardin is finding it possible with no change in the law, and apparently no difficulty for doing it.

B: Did you have any other differences of opinion with the Agriculture Department about any other aspects of their program?

H: Oh, yes. Their extension service is lousy. Of course, Orville agrees with that.

B: You mean in the sense that it's all white or just that it's not effective?

H: No, I mean that it's half white and half black. Whites will steal serving whites, blacks will steal serving blacks. There is the REA. I think in the Rural Electrification Association, there is one black in the whole nation that's on a board of directors. FHA--in most instances black farmers have a hell of a time trying to eke out a small loan to build a house. The Agriculture Department is the oldest unit within the federal government in terms of a cabinet position, and it is built in with the steep racism that so characterizes America in too many instances. The layers and layers and layers of racism that the department has picked up through the years, I feel, is the big reason why it's going to be so hard to undo it.

B: Have you ever been associated with the Mississippi Advisory Commission on Civil Rights?

H: Associated, yes. I've met with them on several occasions. I was never a member of it as such, but there was never any objection to my attending any of the sessions that I wanted to attend.

B: Through these years have there been any white Mississippians with you in the civil rights movement?

H: Oh, sure, there are several now.

B: I mean, are there getting to be more now?

H: Yes. More white guys are taking a stand for the dignity of mankind. Right.

B: Who do you consider to be some of the leading whites in Mississippi in the movement?

H: I think you'd have to work with the knowledge of Hodding Carter III; Bill Reedy in

Meridian; Claude Ramsey, AFL-CIO President, in Jackson; Father Philip McCloone in Pass Christian; Father William Morrissey in Natchez. I think you'd certainly have to deal with Andy and Oscar Carr in Komer [Coahoma?] County; Fred Grebb of Tupelo; Attorney Wes Watkins of Greenville; Attorney Flavius Hutchison of Starkville. I could name I'm sure twenty-five or thirty whites who are as interested in changing the image of Mississippi as any of the blacks are.

B: Is the NAACP having difficulty now with the question of how militant to be on the national level?

H: I don't see it. I think that the philosophy of the NAACP is pretty much set forth in its document of operation. And the NAACP will never take a position that to be anti-white is right, because we have been so much always on the other side that anti-black was wrong and we know that changing from a white supremacy to a black supremacy is not going to solve the problem.

B: Has the problem distinctly shifted from places like this, small town and rural South, into the urban area, particularly in the North?

H: Well, no, it hasn't shifted, because it's damned still here and it ain't gone nowhere.

B: I was thinking of things like the Southern Christian Leadership Conference and its Operation Bread Basket in Chicago.

H: That's just one aspect of SCLC's operation. After all, you know, Martin also went into Cicero, Illinois. But the base of SCLC is still Alabama.

B: There are those who say that by comparison, say, Clarksdale, Mississippi's problems are a lot easier and are going to be solved a lot quicker than, say, Chicago's.

H: I just say, God help us all.

B: I have just about run out of questions. Is there anything else you think we ought to have on a record like this? I'm going to ask you one last question. I'm going to ask you for an evaluation of Lyndon Johnson, but before we get there, is there anything else that you think ought to be included for future scholars?

H: I guess not. I think that somebody else will be doing a depth thing on Bobby and John and Tedd.

B: What do you mean?

H: I mean, this is largely the Lyndon Johnson Library situation.

B: Yes, but don't let that stop you because if you've got something to contribute about them,

this is the place to do it.

H: No, I'd rather not. Frankly, I have a strong affinity for Teddy. I like him a lot. I never was in line with the newpaper articles with regard to Mary Jo [Kopechne] that did nothing, really, to say that Joe Kopechne had lost his daughter. To me, that was the thing that was important. Their only concern was, what is this going to mean to Teddy's career, not that Joe had lost his daughter. Certainly, I was hurt and concerned for Teddy's future during this ordeal, but I think Teddy played it right. I think Teddy's every concern was for the welfare of the family. But the way that the press played it, I thought it was sordid, I thought it was miserable, and I just hope that we never come to a point again where the life of a human being becomes less important than what happens to a man's career.

B: What kind of man was Bobby Kennedy? You hear all kinds of reports, ranging from ruthless to sensitive and gentle.

H: Bobby was this kind of a fellow. Bobby believed in schooling you to what he wanted you to do. And once he felt that he had done his part of teaching you, then he expected you to carry through. And when you messed up, he was gone. That's all.

Now Teddy has a different philosophy altogether.

B: Let me ask you something before you go any further. Is there any condescension in that? For example, Bobby Kennedy is going to be telling you, Aaron Henry, what to do in Mississippi---

H: No.

B: Did I misunderstand your meaning?

H: I'm really speaking about people who were working for Bobby.

B: Oh, I see. You mean his immediate staff in the Justice Department.

H: Right. And his campaign team. He would try to train these people exactly in the role he wanted them to play, and if you wanted to stay on Bobby's team you played that role. If not, you got off.

Now, with Teddy, as I see the difference between the two, you're much more likely to get a second or a third chance with Teddy to mess up. Because Teddy's not the perfectionist, shall we say, and does not demand perfection of every man. I've always felt freer around Teddy in dealing with him than Bobby. This is one of the classics of the century. Charles Evers, who's the best friend I've got, ended up being Bobby's campaign manager in Mississippi, along with Oscar Carr. I ended up being Hubert Humphrey's campaign manager, along with Claude Ratherby. You know, the rumor began to spread that Charles and I were splitting up over the Kennedys, and all that jazz, but none of that

was true. Charles could deal with and swing with the Bobby philosophy, and I just felt more comfortable with Hubert. That's all.

B: You didn't have any words or debate about--?

H: No. Frankly, we discussed it before each of us decided to do it. We decided, okay, you take Bobby, and you take Hubert.

B: And may the best man win!

H: Yes.

B: After Senator Kennedy was assassinated, did Charles Evers come over to the Humphrey campaign?

H: Very much so.

B: You mentioned this earlier, but about at that same time, or earlier than that, Al Lowenstein was very active in the "dump Johnson" movement.

H: Yes.

B: Did I understand that you tried to talk him out of that?

H: No, I didn't really try to talk Al out of it, because I know Al is a strong-willed human being himself. But I was very sorry to see him engaged in this act of attempting to dump Johnson.

B: Were you surprised when Johnson announced that he was not going to run?

H: Very. I was sitting right here in this room where we are now, looking at TV and listening to his speech, and when he was about two-thirds through with it, I guess you heard the same speech that night where he said, "I want to announce that I am not a candidate for president."

B: It surprised me too. Most people, I think, were pretty much surprised. Anything else?

H: No.

B: Listen. You were talking about the Kennedys. Everybody talks about this. Did you see any signs of friction or antagonism between President Johnson and Robert Kennedy when Robert was still attorney general?

H: No, I didn't see any.

B: Or between the Johnsons and the Kennedys?

H: I didn't see them together.

B: Did you hear rumors of it?

H: You heard rumors, but I never saw any action by Lyndon or Bobby that would redound to the detriment of the other. There were many times when all of us were together while both were there.

B: And it didn't affect the workings of the Justice Department or anything like that?

H: No. I think under Bobby the Justice Department had a freer swinging-hand, perhaps, than it had had before and since.

B: Did the legislative acts of the Johnson Administration really help the Voting Rights Bill, the Public Accommodations, Voting Rights, Fair Housing?

H: Oh, sure. You're damned right it helped. We've gone in Mississippi from something like 10,000 blacks registered to now like 280,000 registered since the 1965 Voting Rights Act. There is hardly a hotel anywhere in this area that wouldn't accommodate both black and white. Prior to the Civil Rights Act of 1964 the modus operandi of the local police department was to harass whites that visited blacks. A year ago, if you had come and spent the night with me and would be leaving the next morning, you'd get a ticket before you left town for something. The law doesn't make you love me, but it stops you from lynching me. It makes you more palatable in terms of your treatment of other human beings, I feel, and I'd just as soon have the law, as opposed to those who say, "Don't worry about the law because it's not going to have any consequences anyway."

B: Incidentally, what happened to that whole long line of assorted lawsuits that have been filed on you? Are they still all on appeal?

H: No, we got most of it behind us. The last thing we had was this show cause for contempt of court when we blocked a federal judge's order that in order to arrive at desegregation, an aptitude test was the judge's order. Well, we put picket lines around every school, and of course the judge forbade us from picketing the homes of school board members, which I still don't think he was right in doing. But we did not do it simply because the judge said don't do it, because I think we could have won. I think Roberts vs. Milwaukee, Wisconsin, and his pictures of the judge with a number of--I've forgotten the organization, but it was an all-white organization , Father Groppi, in Milwaukee--established your right to picket a man when he is the cause of your misery. Our big problem here was the school board lived so far apart. And it was a question, really, of how do you protect the picketers when you have them this stranded. The Eagle, I believe, was the name of the organization that this judge belonged to. So we didn't do it because of the safety factor. But I don't think that the school board was legally free from

being picketed, because the judge said after a man gets off from work in the evening, he should be free from the cares of life. Well, as long as he's causing me misery, I feel that the First Amendment of the Constitution gives me the right to peacefully assemble in front of wherever he is and demonstrate against what he's done that I don't like.

B: What's the percentage of blacks and whites in Clarksdale and Coahoma County?

H: Well, the percentages of blacks and whites in Clarksdale is about 50-50. In the county it's something like 65-35, but you've got a large contingent of very young and very old. The twenty-one to forty group has just about gone.

B: The sixty-five percent is sixty-five percent black?

H: Yes. And I would say that of that sixty-five percent, maybe forty percent are children.

B: Is Mound Bayou in Coahoma County?

H: No. Mound Bayou is in Bolivar County, the adjacent county twenty-five miles south.

B: It might be interesting in the future if you would put on this record what you were telling me earlier about Mound Bayou, Mound Bayou being, as I guess most people will know, an all-black town, or used to be an all-black town. I guess it isn't anymore.

H: I told you that I felt that the racial attitude of Mound Bayou, its way of keeping whites out, was the same thing that whites have used for years in various communities to keep blacks out, and it really says unequivocably clearly that racism is no mutation in this country based on any color. It is not isolated in any one section of the country. I wish perhaps it were, then you could hem it in and find a way to divest the nation of it. I'm just sorry that the truth is that America is so embedded and steeped and trained, I guess, in the art of hating, in the art of racial prejudice, that this very well could be the Frankenstein that ends up destroying the country.

B: One last thing. Would you care to try an evaluation of Lyndon Johnson as a man and a president?

H: My experience with Lyndon certainly goes the full gamut. There are things that he has done that I appreciated tremendously; there have been things that he has done that I didn't appreciate at all.

B: What were some of those?

H: Some of those were his early days as a senator from the State of Texas. Lyndon voted against civil rights bills, anti-lynch bills, just like Bill Moore and everybody else. Of course, I understand Lyndon's position is, "In those days I was a senator from the State of Texas." Of course that was really saying, "There are things that I have to do to get

elected in Texas."

But the way he maneuvered with Hubert Humphrey, of course, to get the acts that John Fitzgerald had planned in terms of race improvement or race relations in this country passed, I feel that a man from Texas has done more in terms of securing legislation that gives the black community an opportunity of becoming truly a part of the American citizenry than any other person that the country has ever had.

And in spite of Viet Nam, certainly Lyndon used the Tonkin resolution and perhaps advice from John Foster Dulles and some more to expand the war. I'm sorry that--

B: Dean Rusk, you must mean.

H: Yes. Well, John Foster Dulles was an adviser in foreign affairs to Lyndon also before he finally got out of the State Department activity altogether. But once you get by the Viet Nam question, those people who see no good in Lyndon at all are those who only see the issue of Viet Nam. But I just refuse to be a one-issue Democrat. I refuse to be a one-issue man. I think that those things that a man does, those things that a man might do that you want to praise him for, you do it; and those things you want to damn him for, you do that too. And that's the way that Lyndon and I've always played the game. I told him what I didn't like, and I told him what I liked.

B: Do blacks generally share that view of Lyndon Johnson, outside of the leaders like yourself?

H: Yes, I would say southern blacks share it.

B: The ordinary man in the street type would share it?

H: Yes.

B: Is that one of the reasons you suspect he might have been able to win again in 1968?

H: Well, yes, a part of it. You see, you find many persons from the white communities parroting phrases and statements that keep them in good graces with their neighbors, but they don't really hate as much sometimes as they pretend to. I think you've got a peer worship situation that comes to fore more than real attitudes. I feel very strongly that if Lyndon had run the organizations that he had built up--you see, the organizations that he had built up actually is the organization that put Hubert Humphrey on the ticket for the presidency, and Hubert didn't lose by too much.

B: Actually by that time the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party had pretty much become the State Democratic Party of Mississippi.

H: Yes.

B: That was the group that was represented at the 1968 convention. It was your group that represented the state?

H: Yes. You see, in 1968, however, it was much more than the small group we'd put together in the Freedom Democratic Party. In 1968 we had coalesced with the Masonic grand lodges, the Mississippi Teachers Association, the AFL-CIO, and the NAACP and the FDP--I think this was pretty much the--

B: By the Masonic lodges, you mean the black Masonic lodges?

H: Yes.

B: And the Mississippi teachers organization is the black teachers organization in Mississippi.

H: Yes, but it happens to be the only one the NEA recognizes.

B: I've about run out of questions. Is there anything else you think ought to be, or should we call it quits?

H: I'm ready for ten more hours.

B: Ten more hours of what?

H: Whatever you want to ask.

B: I'm plumb out of questions.

H: Okay.

[End of Tape 3 of 3 and Interview I]