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By A. Philip Randolph

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ORAL HISTORY COLLECTION

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INTERVIEWEE: A. PHILIP RANDOLPH

INTERVIEWER: THOMAS H. BAKER

Mr. Randolph's office, 217 West 125 Street, New York, October 29, 1968

B: This is the interview with A. Philip Randolph, International President of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters.

Do you recall when you first met Mr. Johnson?

R: Yes, I first met President Johnson in the White House. We were then engaged in discussing the forthcoming march on Washington.

B: This would have been while Mr. Johnson was still Vice President?

R: That's right. A number of civil rights leaders were in his office at the time, and we were discussing this question with him. The next time I met him was in a conference with President Kennedy. A number of the civil rights leaders were involved in a conference with President Kennedy and Vice President Johnson. That, too, was concerning the tactics and strategy with respect to the staging of the march on Washington in 1963.

B: These were before the march began?

R: That's right.

B: Who all was at these conferences, sir?

R: We had Mr. Roy Wilkins [of the NAACP]; Mr. Whitney Young, Jr., National Director of the National Urban League; Walter Reuther, President of the UAW;--

B: Would Dr. King have been there?

R: Dr. [Martin Luther] King, Jr., was there, and a number of others--I don't recall.

B: Who was there from the federal government's side? Was Mr. Kennedy?

- R: President Kennedy was there and President Kennedy's brother, Robert Kennedy, who was then, I think--
- B: Attorney General.
- R: That's right, Justice. And who else--I think Secretary [W. Willard] Wirtz.
- B: The Secretary of Labor?
- R: The Secretary of Labor.
- B: Did Mr. Johnson take an active part in the planning or did he just listen to what everybody else was saying?
- R: He made comments now and then. The whole question involved there was the correctness of the strategy of staging a march as big as this in Washington. And how could it be controlled, so that it would not get out of hand. That really was the big issue, and President Kennedy was a bit worried about that aspect of it.
- B: About the aspect of control?
- R: About the aspect of control. And Vice President Johnson discussed this question, too, in this conference we had with him before we--
- B: Did Mr. Kennedy and Mr. Johnson ask you as the leaders of the march what plans you had for control?
- R: That's right. We discussed that at length as a matter of fact. One of the problems was the matter of spilling over into the streets and becoming involved with violence. Now, our position was that we could not guarantee what would happen, but we had taken the precautions to plan the march rather detailedly with a view to avoiding violence. So I think that on the whole we were able to--probably if we didn't satisfy them, at least we discussed the matter at length and finally we agreed that we would go ahead with it.
- B: I was wondering--of course, we all know that it turned out to be a superbly disciplined march--
- R: President Kennedy nor Vice-President Johnson agreed or disagreed. They did express the hope it would be peaceful.

Oh, yes, it was the most disciplined of any public demonstration we have ever had, because it was fully a quarter of a million people there in the march.

B: At those preliminary conferences, was there also discussion about the possible effect of the march on the then pending civil rights legislation in Congress?

R: No, we didn't discuss that. I remember though that I was invited to address a caucus of Senators and Congressmen in the caucus room that they provided. They wanted me to state to them what methods we were going to be able to adopt to avoid violence. The Senators and Congressmen were worried about it.

B: This was also before the march?

R: This was before the march, yes. And they expressed their concern, and so forth, and wondered about whether the march really should be staged because of its magnitude. So I talked with them about an hour or more, and we didn't come to any definitive conclusion, but I told them that we had to go ahead with the march and this was the conclusion of a number of organizations—church, Catholic, Protestant, Jewish; labor; business—these groups were committed to it. We had to go forward with it, and we wanted to go forward with it because we believe it was necessary in order to develop a consensus of opinion in this country on the question of civil rights. We believed that in order to develop this consensus opinion, we needed something that was of great magnitude; something that would attract the attention of the people in all walks of life. And so this had some effect, I think, on them, and we went ahead. I invited them to come to the march. We had, you know, the Lincoln Memorial and many of them did attend. As a matter of fact, we set aside some seats for them.

B: Sir, these Congressmen to whom you talked before the march, were they

Congressmen who were generally favorable toward civil rights, or antagonistic, or a mixed group?

R: Some of them were not committed, I don't suppose. They wanted to hear and to know what we were going to say, but Senator [Paul] Douglas, Senator [Jacob] Javits--they were the ones who arranged this caucus meeting for me to talk to the Senators and Congressmen.

B: Were there Senators there like, oh, just names that pop into my head, [James O.] Eastland, [John] Stennis--

R: I don't know who they were because when I finished talking, some of them came by and extended their hands. I didn't know who they were, but we had quite a few. I was immensely pleased with the showing, the fact that they showed the interest to come out to listen to my talk on it.

B: Sir, in that preliminary planning did you also meet with, say, the Department of Justice group--Robert Kennedy and his Justice Department?

R: No, we didn't, not separately, but Robert Kennedy was in this other conference [with President Kennedy and Vice-President Johnson]. He was friendly to the idea of the march. He didn't express himself with respect to the methods of the proposed march, and so forth. There was quite some uncertainty about this proposed march because of its magnitude, and so forth, and nobody was very definite as to whether it was possible to stage anything as big as this without trouble. And of course we were concerned, but we developed quite a bit of machinery. We'd brought from New York a number of guardsmen and so forth; we worked on the youth, to get the youth cognizant of the fact that this was something of no passing and ordinary interest but it was vital to them, vital to the country. And we also were concerned about keeping out the extremists.

B: Sir, I was going to ask if at that time in 1963 there was any particular group or individual extremists whom you were concerned about.

- R: Yes, we were concerned about the Communists who were coming in, you know, with their tactics and so forth. But they never showed any disposition to interfere with the plans that we had developed. It worked out very well.
- B: It did indeed. As I recall after the march you and the rest of the leaders went back to the White House.
- R: Went back to the White House. And the President was all smiles.
- B: I was going to ask what the reaction was then.
- R: That's right. All of them were very, very satisfied. Very happy.
- B: Do you recall what Mr. Kennedy said to you on that occasion?
- R: Let's see. He said that he was very happy that the march turned out as it did, without any trouble or difficulties. I don't recall the exact words but something to that effect.
- B: Was Mr. Johnson there, too?
- R: Yes, he was there, and the Cabinet officers and so forth, so that it was a great day for us. And I think that perhaps it was the biggest single demonstration the country had ever seen on an issue, a great moral issue which is a political, economic, and social issue, as civil rights.
- B: To back up a little in time, actually you're sort of the father of the idea of a march--the episode in 1941 in which you proposed a march--.
- R: President Roosevelt, exactly. At that time there was great concern especially with President Roosevelt. In fact he told me definitely that he didn't want a march on Washington because it would end up in violence and bloodshed and no doubt some people might get killed. And he said if a precedent such as that were to be established, it would simply stimulate other groups to plan marches on Washington and there would be no end to it. And he wouldn't be able to control it. So that I told him,

I said, "Well, Mr. President, we are not here because we just simply want to march. We're here because the great masses of Negro workers are going to the various munitions plants and they're being turned away. They can't get jobs. Others are getting jobs and unless something isn't done, you're not going to be able to avoid trouble anyway." So he says, "Well, what do you want done, Phil?" "Well, we believe that if you issue an executive order requiring that all workers have a right to jobs in the munition plants and in other industries, and even in the government, because the government is the worst offender." And he says, "You mean the federal government?" I said, "Yes, the federal government is--"

B: You mean he was not aware of that? Or pretended not to be?

R: That's right; and so he said, "Well, you in my opinion are embarking upon a dangerous course. You can't manage a hundred thousand people. Nobody can." I said, "Well, Mr. President, we had in mind to invite you to address them." He said, "Oh, no. I would never think about addressing them, because I would not be using my best judgment to permit it to take place in the first place. What are you going to do with these people?" I said, "Well, we wanted to get some tents from the War Department, and housing in available areas." He said, "That's impractical. It's impossible. I wouldn't agree to that."

B: Did he not also get Mrs. Roosevelt and Mayor [Fiorello] LaGuardia [of New York City] to talk to you?

R: That's right. I knew Mrs. Roosevelt very well. At various meetings we had met and talked about various questions, and I knew Mayor LaGuardia very well. And so they talked with Walter White. Walter White was secretary then of the NAACP. And we said, "Well, we can understand how the President doesn't want a march such as this in Washington," and Mrs. Roosevelt

said, "No, he doesn't want a march, and I'm fearful of a march. I'm sure you know that I am in favor of what you want. You want jobs for Negroes; you're entitled to have them; and something ought to be done. But now, is this the only remedy, the only method you can develop?"

I said, "This is the only method whereby, I believe, that we will be able to make it clear to the President that something has got to be done. Various representations have been made before, but we've gotten nowhere."

And so she said, "Well, I wish, Mr. Randolph, that you would think twice about this matter, and I wish you would call it off. The President wants it called off."

Mayor LaGuardia said, "Yes,"--he knew me very well--he says, "Phil, this is dynamite. You can't do anything to control these people. I know something about masses of people and you can't control them. You don't have the machinery to control anything as big as this."

So I said, "But, what is the alternative?"

He said, "Well, the alternative is going to the President and asking him to do something about this thing."

I said, "But we've already talked to the people about this thing and they're committed to it." I had gone around the country quite a bit, and had spoken to various groups.

So he says, "Well, I think the President's going to call you up on this thing, and he isn't going to agree to it."

So I said, "Well, I'll be glad to talk with the President."

So that famous conference took place. Finally they created a small committee of about five and Mayor LaGuardia was named as the chairman. They worked on this matter--and they didn't have but about five days--and so they weren't able to come to any conclusion. And they asked me to come

in to talk to them. They wanted me--they said, "Well, now the only alternative is to call this off. Then we'll begin to work on the problem."

I said, "Well, I cannot call this off, the people are ready to come to this march from all over the country: California and Chicago; Jacksonville, Florida; Atlanta, Georgia; all around the country."

They said, "Well, you oughtn't to have gotten this thing this far before you reached the President."

And I said, "Well, the people are without jobs; they're without bread. Somebody has got to do something. They've been coming into my office and talking about this thing and what they were going to do."

And so Mayor LaGuardia told them, "Well, I'll break off from my former position and say to you that something has got to be done as Phil Randolph says. Now, I happen to know him and you're not going to change him. We're not going to change him. You're not going to be able to change him, and he's not going to change for me or Mrs. Roosevelt or the President."

And so they said, "Well, what are we going to do?"

He said, "Well, we want an executive order. Now the President--they say that they haven't issued executive orders before, but you've got to do something."

And so then they began to write up this Executive Order. And they did. They wrote it out and called me back, and I went in the next day, you know. I listened to the Executive Order and I said, "There's only one thing wrong with it."

They said, "What is that?"

"It doesn't apply to the federal government."

They said, "Well, you can't apply this to the federal government. The federal government is above everything."

I said, "But the federal government is guilty, too, of discrimination against Negroes as far as jobs are concerned."

And he said, "Well, now you're going to throw this whole thing into the fire. We thought that we had gotten this matter written up, and the President has agreed to it--"

I said, "Well, we can't take it unless you include the federal government."

B: This must have been getting fairly close to the day set for the march--

R: That's right. Well, about two more days, you know.

So they said, "Well!--they went back to the President and told the President that I wasn't agreeable to accepting it unless the--so the President was angry and so forth, and he said,

"Well, what do they want in it?"

And they said, "Well, he wants the federal government included."

So he said, "Put it in." So this Executive Order 8802 was responsible for the establishment of fair employment practices for Negroes all over this country, states and cities and so forth.

B: And the Federal Fair Employment Practice Committee--

R: That is right. You're right--the Federal Fair Employment Practice Committee. So that we were able to accomplish something.

B: Incidentally, sir, did you then have any difficulty with your followers in calling off the march?

R: We did, because some of them came anyway, you know, and we had an open-air meeting in Washington and Mayor LaGuardia was there as the chairman of the committee and he spoke; I spoke; and we had quite a meeting. Some of the people, you see, came from places they couldn't--they couldn't get the word to them. So I suppose about a thousand people came.

- B: Did you have any dealings with Congressmen in the preliminaries of that march?
- R: No, we didn't.
- B: Sir, to move forward in time a little, in 1960 when Mr. Kennedy, as a presidential nominee, picked Mr. Johnson for his vice presidential nominee, was there any dismay at that among the ranks of the Negro leaders?
- R: Yes, there was. As a matter of fact in Los Angeles, we developed a picket line.
- B: You were at the convention in Los Angeles?
- R: I was at the convention, that's right, but not a delegate. I was against the nomination of President Johnson at that time as the vice president. In the Executive Council meeting of the AFL-CIO, when they went on record to support President Kennedy, I voted against it.
- B: Because of Mr. Johnson's nomination?
- R: No, not because of Mr. Johnson, but I did not see that there was any record on the part of President Kennedy on civil rights and other questions of social, economic and labor interests. I was the only member of the Council that voted against him. But the Congressman from Chicago--colored Congressman; what was his name--Congressman Dawson--got among the Negro groups and told them that he knew Vice President--Senator Johnson and that he had a good record on civil rights, because he was responsible for the two measures, you know--
- B: 1957 and 1960?
- R: Yes, 1957 and 1960, and so that was a fact that you couldn't get away from.
- B: I was going to ask how those--
- R: The [picket] line, I think, disappeared--we called off the march.
And President Johnson was the first candidate for office of the Presidency that I ever voted for--ever spoke for--at the Madison Square Garden rally.

- B: That was in the 1960 campaign?
- R: No, this was in the 1964 campaign.
- B: Did Mr. Johnson campaign in New York or in Harlem here in 1960? When he was running with Mr. Kennedy, did he campaign in this area?
- R: I don't recall that he did. I don't recall that President Kennedy came into this area.
- B: I don't remember specifically either.
- R: No, I don't remember. But when President Johnson ran, you know, for election--
- B: In 1964?
- R: In 1964, he was the first President I had ever spoken for, that I was supporting, that is, a Democrat or a Republican. I was a Socialist, you know; and I spoke at the Madison Square Garden for the President. I was convinced of his strength and his commitment to civil rights and labor's rights. I remember President Johnson called me up. I was, I think, in Houston, Texas, when he assumed office following the death of President Kennedy.
- B: Soon after the assassination?
- R: That's right. He called me up, and he called all the civil rights leaders and asked them to come to the White House and talk with him. We did. We went.
- B: When was that, sir?
- R: That was--I don't recall the exact date.
- B: Was it within a few weeks after the assassination?
- R: A few weeks after he was--
- B: . . . acceded to the Presidency.
- R: That's right, acceded to the Presidency.
- B: What did he say at the meeting?
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R: Well, we talked at length. He told us about his plans and so forth and said that he wanted us to know that he was committed to principles of civil rights and so forth. And he believed in them.

B: Before that, was there on the part of yourself or any of the other civil rights leaders any doubt, or a lack of knowledge, about Mr. Johnson's point of view?

R: Well, we had knowledge of this legislation, you know. And we also knew about the conferences we had on this march, and his friendly attitude toward the march. So there was no hostility in the group toward the President whatever. We had a very fine, splendid conference, and he opened the door of the White House and told us that we were welcome to come to talk with him about any matter that we thought was important; to the cause of civil rights, or any other question, and so forth. He was ready and willing to sit down with us and talk.

And I told those civil rights leaders then, "We must help the President, cooperate with him to our fullest extent, and help him to work out these problems."

And they were friendly. I don't know any of them who were unkindly disposed to--

B: Did you or any of the others fairly regularly visit and counsel with Mr. Johnson?

R: Yes, many of them did. I didn't go to as many White House conferences as some of the others. I had this Union, you know, and so forth, had plenty of problems. But I was always kept informed about the matter, about the program, his position and so forth.

B: Did you have any participation there in 1964, right after Mr. Johnson became President, in the preparations for getting the civil rights legislation through Congress?

R: Oh, yes, we had conferences with him and talked at length about strategy and tactics in the interest of getting this legislation through. I might say that President Johnson has done more to advance the cause of civil rights than any other president in the history of the country, including Abraham Lincoln. I've made that statement all over the country, and I've found no vigorous opposition to it. His struggle and fight for the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the Civil Rights Act of 1965, and of the Voting Rights Act of 1967, then the Open House Occupancy Act of 1968, are landmarks in the long fight of Negroes for civil rights.

Then the President has shown greater respect and recognition for the capability and sense of responsibility of Negroes to hold high offices in this country than any other president in the history of the nation. The appointment of the Honorable Thurgood Marshall as Associate Justice of the Supreme Court, was epoch making; and his placing Dr. Robert C. Weaver in the Cabinet; and his appointment of one young Negro economist, Brimmer, to the Federal Reserve Board. This is one of the great departures from the method of appointing Negroes to offices.

B: Sir, have you ever been called in to give your advice and suggestions on people for appointments?

R: No, I don't recall that I was called in to discuss that question. But he has been very friendly with me in discussing various racial and social questions and so forth. I went to conferences with him on civil rights, and I went to conferences with him on labor questions, because I was vice president of the AFL-CIO. I was a part of labor delegations called by the President. But I knew him and saw him from these two angles.

B: What do you feel his attitude and service toward labor has been?

R: Oh, I think he will go on in history as the president who gave his whole

strength and force behind constructive and progressive labor legislation. He will go down in history as a president of the War on Poverty; as the president of elementary, secondary and higher education. And he will be recorded in history as the president who refused to stand for reelection in order that he might use his great talents in the statesmanship of the cause of peace in Viet Nam and the world. President Johnson is a great leader, a great statesman, he's a great American, he's a great man, a great human being. I have the highest respect and affection for him. Of course, I didn't start out on that angle.

B: Sir, to mention another thing a little further back: while Mr. Johnson was vice president he was chairman of the President's Council on Equal Employment. Did you have any dealings with him then?

R: No, I didn't. And, by the way, too, he appointed young Clifford Alexander to head the Fair Employment Commission [Equal Employment Opportunity Commission].

B: OEO, I think. Office of Economic Opportunity. [The EEOC, an independent agency, is not a part of OEO.]

R: That's right. I was very glad that he appointed him because I have a high affection for young Alexander; he has a great future. As a matter of fact, he has already risen to high levels of responsibility in government and it's due to the fact that the President like him, respects him, believes he has ability, and a sense of integrity and honor.

B: Sir, one of our regrets is that we will not be able, in this interview program, to interview Dr. King.

R: Oh, yes, you're quite right.

B: Do you have any knowledge of the relationship between Dr. King and Mr. Johnson?

- B: Well, in the various conferences that we held with the President in which Dr. King participated, I observed no evidence of dislike on the part of Dr. King for the President or any conflict with respect to ideas and so forth. Dr. King, Roy Wilkins, Whitney Young, Jr., and myself, and a number of others were always undecided to visit in these conferences, and we of course always made it clear to him that we wanted to see action taken.
- B: You said no conflict with regard to ideas; was there ever any discussion about the speed of events?
- R: Yes, that's right, on the housing question. Open occupancy of housing. We thought that the movement was slow by way of achieving this objective and of course the President recognized that, too. Of course, he wasn't only responsible for that. The Congress was the main block. But he pushed that himself.
- B: In that kind of meeting would he explain his point of view--that is--
- R: Yes, he would.
- B: --why he could not go as fast as you wished?
- R: He would go into the tactics, the strategy and let you know what it involved and what could be done to deal effectively with the people on the Hill in order to get action. He's a master--a master strategist.
- B: His explanations were convincing?
- R: His explanations were acceptable and convincing because we knew the Congress just like he did. We had gone on the Hill talking to these Congressmen from time to time, and we knew that there was this block to the legislation of that sort. There was that Southern wing and the Republican wing that formed a sort of unity in force that you couldn't appeal to on a basis of principle. You only could deal with them on the basis of power to override their position. And the President knew that,
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and he is a person of vast wisdom, political wisdom, in meeting these questions. And, too, he feels that the position was right. When you're right, morally right, you have much more behind you than even correct procedure.

B: Do you feel that Mr. Johnson really understands the problems and the needs of the Negro community?

R: I think he does, yes. He's probably more knowledgeable of this problem than any other president we have had. President Roosevelt didn't have the contact with the Negro leaders that President Johnson has had. President Roosevelt was not as accessible as President Johnson, or President Kennedy-- President Kennedy was accessible, too. He sought conferences with the Negro leaders. I recall President Truman, for instance, was a man committed to civil rights, but he was not as accessible as President Johnson.

B: Sir, this accessibility, is this just a mechanical thing, or is it an attitude on their part?

R: Well, I think President Johnson's accessibility is largely the result of his convictions about the justification for the struggle for civil rights. I wouldn't suggest that the President doesn't have that, too, because President Truman was a man committed to civil rights. I had a struggle with him because of discrimination in the Armed Forces, and I organized a movement for the abolition of Jim Crow in the army. We had a tremendous conference with President Truman.

B: I wasn't aware of that. What went on at that one?

R: In that conference I told President Truman that I'd just come from a long trip around the country talking to Negroes about various problems--

B: About when was this, sir--do you remember?

R: This was around 1947 or 1948. I told him that the Negroes were

greatly disturbed and troubled about the status of Negroes in the Armed Forces. Charlie Houston, who was then the attorney for the NAACP, was in the conference. We had about twenty people. And so I told him--I said, "Mr. President, the Negroes are in the mood not to bear arms for the country unless Jim Crow in the Armed Forces is abolished."

He became quite excited about the statement. So he said, "Mr. Randolph--"

B: Incidentally, sir, was that an exaggeration or was that a real feeling at the time?

R: No, this was a real feeling. I went around the country and talked to Negroes, and we had developed a movement--quite an extensive movement for the abolition of Jim Crow in the Armed Forces. And he said, "I wish you hadn't made that statement."

And so Charles Houston said, "Well, Mr. President, you ought to be willing to listen to Mr. Randolph tell you what the objective mood is of the Negroes throughout the country in order that you may be able to deal with them."

He says, "Well, go right ahead, Mr. Randolph."

And so I continued discussing the problem. I said, "The Negroes, Mr. President, have never had a fair break in the Armed Forces. This isn't anything new. Not only have they not had a fair break, but they have been the objects of affront and insult all over this country; and we have fought and bled in every war, but they have not gotten adequate recognition and consideration."

He says, "Well, what do you want done?"

I said, "Well, some action ought to be taken in the form of an Executive Order barring and banning Jim Crow in the Armed Forces, eliminating discrimination and segregation."

He says, "I agree with you." That's right; he changed his tune, and he says, "I agree with you, but this is something I have to think about-- how we are going to do it."

So Charles Houston said, "Well, Mr. President, we are very happy to hear you say that. Do you know that this is one of the most sensitive questions that exists among Negroes in this country today? This position, this status, of young Negroes in the Armed Forces. When Negroes came back from the first World War and they marched down Fifth Avenue behind the James Reese Europe Band, singing 'Over There, Over There,' and so forth, the Negroes applauded them to the highest heaven, but it wasn't long before these very men were being lynched and abused by their own fellow white countrymen. And this is a deep sore in the heart of the Negro, and something has got to be done about it."

And so President Truman said, "Well, that's right, our boys who fight for our country are entitled to just treatment. I will do something about it."

And so I said, "Well, Mr. President, if you will indicate about when you plan to do something, some of the plans and measures that we are now engaged in and developing could be eliminated."

B: Was this an implication of another proposed march?

R: Oh, yes, we were going to have another march. And we had a series of public street meetings from coast to coast planned. And we had what is known as public commissions where we discussed this matter of Jim Crow and the Armed Forces. We had some notable people in the country serving as the prosecuting attorneys; this was sort of an educational process.

So he said, "Well, I can't give you an indication of the time, Mr. Randolph; but if I tell you that I'm going to do something about it, I'm going to do something about it."

... the great conferences we had in the White House; it was perhaps the most explosive of any that we had had. We had all the arrangements for having the President's picture taken with us, you know-- there were about twenty people altogether. But he was a bit disturbed and of course the arrangements were all cast aside.

B: Was he disturbed by the--

R: By the statement I made, you know, that Negroes were not in the mood to bear arms for the country because of Jim Crow and the Armed Forces. However, he recovered from his sort of a traumatic shock. He had never heard anything like that before. He is a person with strong attitudes on definite things. He, too, is to be considered as one of the great presidents on civil rights. He set up a commission on civil rights.

B: And the eventual result of his conference you've just been describing, I assume, was the Executive Order prohibiting--

R: That's right.

B: --discrimination in the Armed Forces.

R: That's right. The Executive Order--he issued it. I was in Colorado-- Denver, Colorado--when he issued it.

B: How long was that after your conference with him?

R: Oh, it was, I imagine a month or so. We had a rather militant group carrying on the struggle to abolish Jim Crow in the Armed Forces. And following the issuance of that Executive Order, there were definite changes that took place in the Armed Forces. Negroes began moving into everything, various areas, and so forth. The young Negroes began going into the army, in larger numbers because there was some security involved and there was opportunity for promotion.

Of course, then President Kennedy, too--on his inauguration he saw

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one section of the army pass by [in the inaugural parade] with no Negroes in it. And he commented on it. It was--I think it was--I don't know; a section of the army, anyway, he said he wanted to see Negroes in all sections. I had some contact, too, with President Eisenhower. President Eisenhower was friendly to the plight of the Negro, but he was not dynamic with respect to doing anything about it.

B: Did you ever present President Eisenhower with a specific case, as you described with Roosevelt and Truman?

R: No, I never presented him with a specific case except to get him involved with the question of civil rights. We were never able to get from him any strong and definitive statement with respect to the struggle for civil rights, but in the Little Rock situation, you know, he sent the Armed Forces there to protect those youngsters in their right to go to school with white children.

B: Did you ask him more or less directly to use the moral power of the Presidency?

R: Well, we did, and so forth. He was a friendly--he was very agreeable in his manner and so forth, but you couldn't get him involved in the discussion of the question so that you could bring out various--after you make a statement, you know, you ought to have some comments so that you can clear it up. But we never could get President Eisenhower involved in any discussion. He'd sit and listen to you or make a comment; he was never antagonistic; but he didn't discuss the matter like, for instance, President Kennedy, President Johnson, and President Truman, or President Roosevelt. President Roosevelt was--oh, I had many conferences with President Roosevelt, especially on lynching--with Walter White of the NAACP. We went to talk with him from time to time, but we never could move him. President

Roosevelt was a strong man, but on this issue of civil rights we were never able to get him to take a basic position on it.

B: Sir, to move into some general areas, is it fair to say that virtually all your life you've been an advocate of integration of black and white?

R: Yes, I have. I've always taken the position that that was the only sound principle of social action which Negroes could take, because they've been the victims of segregation 300 years, slaves. And following that they were still segregated so that their only hope is to become a part of the American community as citizens.

B: Well, I was going to ask you really a question that, generally, where is the civil rights movement now and specifically what about those who are advocating separatism?

R: Well, the civil rights movement is undergoing great frustration and fragmentation at the present time. There is a multiplication of groups espousing various ideas and policies about civil rights, strategy and tactics, and so forth, so that you have some groups who are for isolationism--separatism; this is not new.

B: I was going to ask you if you had ever had any dealings with Mr. [Marcus] Garvey.

R: Oh, yes, I knew Mr. Garvey very well and I opposed his program of back-to-Africa, and also his program of separatism on the grounds that it was impossible to get Negroes to move back to Africa in the first place and was unsound for them to go back to Africa in the second place, even if they could. I pointed out to him that existing world imperialism made it utterly nonsensical for Negroes to think about going back to Africa and expelling the imperialists who have been in control of the continent for centuries. But of course he was a very determined sort of a person. I also opposed

his idea of separatism, pointing out to him that we are living in a country which is advancing in terms of technology and science; and in our world of advancing technology and science separatism is impossible anyway, for anybody. So that the Negroes have got to be a part of the ongoing institutions of the country. They have the obligation and the responsibility to fight for this.

B: Do the same arguments apply today to the current crop of separatists?

R: That's right. Same arguments apply today.

B: Sir, related to this, not too long ago, say 1963 at the time of the march, a fairly small group of men pretty well spoke for the American Negro; you've mentioned them in this interview--you, Mr. Wilkins, Mr. Young, that group. Is that still true now in 1968?

R: With respect to the masses of Negroes it's still true. In other words, the militants, the black militants, the black nationalists--they speak for a large number of Negroes, also. But you take the great masses of Negroes--they are committed to the broad basic questions of civil rights; the abolition of segregation and discrimination; and the integration of Negroes in industry, educational institutions, and so forth. You have developing among Negroes the idea, that inasmuch as ghettos are not going to be abolished tomorrow, that the program for quality education should be stressed as against waiting for the integration of Negroes in the various educational institutions of the country. But they should fight for both at the same time. There is the idea, too, of Negroes developing their businesses in their own communities--well, this isn't anything new. Booker T. Washington advocated that; and Dr. [W.E.B.] DuBois, following Booker T. Washington, began to advocate it, too. So this isn't anything new. Dr. DuBois and myself, I suppose, were the only Negroes who opposed

- ...many of them didn't agree with him, but they didn't publicly state their position against the adoption of the "Back to Africa" idea.
- B: Sir, another question comes up in regard to the civil rights movement generally, and I know it's one that you've had some experience with starting long ago. How do you answer the charge of the critics of the civil rights movement that there is Communist involvement or even Communist inspiration in it?
- R: Well, I don't think that there is any appreciable Communist involvement or inspiration in the civil rights movement today, and I doubt that there ever was to any considerable extent. I knew the Communists; I knew the various leaders--Negro leaders and so forth--very well; and they only had a handful of Negroes--
- B: Did that reach some kind of peak in the 1930's?
- R: In the 1930's--that's right. Especially during the fight for the organization of the CIO. I was the head of an organization then known as the "National Negro Congress," and it was committed to the idea of helping Negroes to become involved in the organization of trade unions, especially the steel workers and automobile workers--trying to help them. I was then in the middle of organizing the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, and we made some headway in getting Negroes into the CIO and Negroes became quite a factor, especially in steel and automobiles and rubber and so forth. But that movement was impregnated by Communists. And I withdrew from it. At the one great convention we had, I denounced them at the convention. Of course, there was an uproar that one would have to see in order to appreciate its drama, don't you know. They prayed with me, you know, not to leave them and pointed out that the Communists were exercising too great an influence on the movement; and whereas I didn't want an all-Negro movement,

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I definitely opposed the Communists' control of the movement. Then the Communists began to level their guns against me, so that I, of course, knew that I couldn't keep Communists from controlling it because I didn't have the time to give to the movement. I had the Brotherhood to organize; we hadn't gotten our recognition then. I thought that I could keep the Communists from controlling if I had the time to give to it. But I didn't have the time to give to it, so I felt the best thing for me to do was to get out of it in order that I wouldn't be held responsible for the impregnation of the movement by Communists.

B: What happened to Dr. DuBois?

R: Dr. DuBois--

B: An outsider gets the impression that he got disenchanted.

R: Well, he did become disenchanted and as a matter of fact, Dr. DuBois went through a period of great anxiety and despair in a sense. He was a great scholar, a man with a great mind, and so forth; and he finally went off to Ghana.

B: In 1961, I believe.

R: That's right. And he projected there what is known as Encyclopedia Africana. He was assembling a group of scholars to develop that project; he was getting African scholars; American scholars, and whites, and so forth. But he died and the project now is at a standstill. I don't know whether it can be revived or not.

B: It sounds like a valuable project.

R: Oh, it was a tremendous thing. Furthermore, it would have been done with great ability had he continued to be in control of it, don't you know. I

talked to some of the young Negro scholars about it and so some of them have said, "Well, a project such as that needs leadership." And of course I can only talk about it, but I don't have the energy and the time to bother with anything as big as that and to handle all the trouble that's involved in it.

Then, too, Dr. DuBois began to lean to the Communists. I was not in accord with that position.

B: Sir, in your long experience do you feel as much, as anyone can predict it, that the nation is now on the right path in race relations—that is, the legislation since the mid-1960's?

R: I think the legislation is certainly sound. What is needed now is implementation and that of course always is a big problem. The implementation of the legislation will be increasingly difficult because of the fragmentation of the civil rights movement. You don't have a unified force striking at any essential or particular and difficult objective. Now the NAACP and Urban League on the stable institutions committed to support the legislation; as a result of this legislation you have over a million Negroes registered to vote in the South. So no one can raise the question of its lack of utility, its value to the Negro.

B: And presumably just the possession and use of that vote will give Negroes a new vision?

R: And Negroes are being elected to various offices in the South now, even in Mississippi. So that the value is obvious, very definite and clear. But we have this fragmentation; we have people with some queer and unsound concepts of a revolution.

B: Do you ever talk to these people, sir; just to mention a few names, Mr.

[H. Rap] Brown, Mr. [Stokely] Carmichael--I know them because they're in the public prints.

- R: I haven't talked with them recently. I don't know Mr. Brown at all; I did talk with Carmichael one time. I was going to call the Negro leaders together, and Carmichael wanted to participate in it. He was interested in the conference being called rather quickly. But something happened that got me involved in something else, and I never got around to it. Then the Black Power conference was called, and we became involved with that. So I then just decided that perhaps it was not the time to call the conference, because there was no centralized mechanism of control and so forth.
- B: Sir, this question doesn't necessarily have anything to do with race. It's about the human condition. Do you find a generation gap between yourself and men like Brown and Carmichael, the younger militants?
- R: Yes, there is undoubtedly a generation gap, or at least from the point of view of racial and social dynamism and seeking instant action and so forth. Immediate action on various problems.
- B: There is some irony here. If I may point out, it hasn't been all that long when A. Philip Randolph was known as a radical.
- R: Yes, you're right. I was really more militant than these fellows are. Now, you take these militants--their militancy consists largely in their idea of achieving an objective by any means necessary. That's what they're for. Now that involves violence and so forth, and I am definitely opposed to calculated organized violence in order to achieve our civil rights objective. In the first place, after you have had violence you still have the problem. Violence doesn't solve the problem. It may attract attention to it but then you still have the problem, because the problem is involved

in relationships between forces and groups with respect to an idea. Now you have developed among Negroes the concept of violence based upon what is known as Franz Fannon's book, The Wretched of the Earth. He was a psychiatrist in Algeria. He was a Negro. He wrote this book, and he expressed the doctrine of the employment of any means necessary to achieve racial justice; it was sort of Fidel Castro philosophy and Ernesto Che Guevara and many of the young militants have been swept away with this doctrine. Many of them have no concept of the history of revolution. They haven't given time to try to find out what the mechanism, the structure, and so forth of revolutionary developments are. But they've grasped this, and some of them misconstrue riots for revolution. But as you say the generational gap is there, and it's something that you can't get away from in the first place. I can't sit down and talk to a group of youngsters to give them my views and so forth to any great extent, because it's just too exhausting.

B: They just don't listen?

R: No, they just don't--well, some of them would listen if I could call them in, but you never get rid of them. So it's a continuous affair, and I don't have the time to--

B: Dialogue, they call it, I think.

R: Dialogue, that's right. I am greatly interested in the young Negro. As a matter of fact, I love them, their energy and dynamism are necessary. The problem is getting them to sit down and discuss the relation of strategy and tactics to existing social and economic and political realities. These realities change, and as they change your tactics and strategy must change.

B: Is one of the things that they're just too impatient to wait for racial change?

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- R: Well, that's true. They're quite impatient and they perhaps are making a contribution, because the older Negro leaders are not disposed to enter upon new adventures and things of that sort, you know; and you need this new force to come in and through dialogues if you can have them, why, ideas are changed, points of view are modified, tactics and strategy will undergo transformation. But you've got to have somebody who has the time to spend with these youngsters. Then, too, they've got to respect you to sit and listen. I've had many of them come in here who talked about various questions. But I think that time will change the general atmosphere; it always does and the radicals of today are the moderates of tomorrow-- the conservatives of tomorrow. In every movement you have the right, you have the center, and the left. The center is supposed to keep the right from becoming too right and the left from becoming too left. And the left of course is to prevent the moderates from becoming too conservative and too reactionary. So these various areas of a mass movement have existed in every movement throughout the world. You've got a right to expect it in the civil rights movement, and it is here. But, of course, you have also the sociology of change in each one of these groups; the radicals are becoming more moderate; the moderates are becoming more conservative; the conservatives are tending to become still more conservative.
- B: You're referring now to those people who oppose civil rights?
- R: That's right. So--
- B: What you've described is a process that tends toward polarization.
- R: Yes, it does. It tends toward polarization even within the civil rights movement. And there is a polarization; there's a strong conflict between the militants and the moderates; and the conservatives. Militants don't consider them at all and so forth. And so-called conservatives--I don't know that

we have any very strongly organized group of conservatives; of course, the leaders in the [Negro] church, they are a lot conservative. My father was a preacher, but I wouldn't consider him strongly conservative on the matter of race--civil rights. He was quite a moderate, I think, let's say militant moderate. But all of these things we have got to recognize because racism in America is really responsible for this. And the militancy of the blacks today is a response to this white racism, just as the President's Committee, you know, the Kerner report points out.

B: Kerner Commission.

R: And you have that fact that white America has got to recognize; that is, that you have the evolution of black militancy stemming from the days of the uprising of the slaves 300 years ago to the present time. And in the nature of things the evolution of the struggle of people for liberty and justice is something that can't be stopped. It will express itself either through organized action or it will express itself explosively. But it's going to express itself, and it's going to express itself against any form of continued suppression, repression, oppression, or whatever you may have that stands between them and justice and liberty. That is the reason for this situation today. You take an egg. After it is exposed to the heat of the hen's body for some 21 days or more, that egg internally is transformed into a living chick; and it pecks a hole in the shell where a spot of blood obtains. And the egg begins to crack up, the shell cracks up, and the chick steps out as a living force--a new force in the world. This is what we are seeing today. The Negro is becoming entirely a new force in the life of America. They are struggling for justice, freedom and so forth. The change is bound to come. The young groups, the young militants, want to bring it on immediately and get on

right away. But you can't have basic change in that form. You take, for instance, the history of change is slow. You have the beginning of a movement, and then that changes because of external forces acting upon this movement. You have leaders who change as a result of belief that there is no hope to change the program in the interest of progress. But that does not mean that you have to give up, because you're not going to have instant progress regardless of what you do. I am glad to see the young groups today at work, trying to do their bit, for the cause of freedom and for the cause of America. Because the Negroes are as American as any group of people in America. They have their contribution to make to America. America needs that contribution. Negroes can make and must make and will make.

Well, it's good to have this chat with you.

B: Sir, I was going to ask; I have taken more than enough of your time. Is there anything else you wanted to put into this record?

R: Well, I think that's about all. We've talked about many things. I've got it down

B: That's what I asked. I noticed you have some notes there. Have we covered everything you think we should have?

R: I think so. Let's see. I think probably we have covered everything.

B: Fine, sir. We certainly appreciate your time.

R: Well, it was a pleasure to have this chat with you.