Interview with **John Nichols**
Date: October 31, 1988
Interviewer: Sheila C. Bernard
Camera Rolls: 2063-2066
Sound Rolls: 229-230
Team: C

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

**Preferred Citation**
Interview with John Nichols, conducted by Blackside, Inc. on October 31, 1988 for *Eyes on the Prize II: America at the Racial Crossroads, 1965-mid 1980s*. Washington University Libraries, Film and Media Archive, Henry Hampton Collection.

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

[camera roll #2063]
[sound roll #229]

[slate]

00:00:13:00

Camera crew member #1:

There we go, good.

00:00:15:00

Interviewer:

When did you first hear about the growing disturbance on 12th Street?

00:00:18:00

John Nichols:

My first recollection of the riot was a phone call about 5:45 from the duty officer who told me that there had been a raid on a place in, in the, then Tenth Precinct, and that the crowd had failed to disperse and it was growing and they had stoned a police vehicle, injured a police lieutenant, and they were starting to break some windows. I responded to police headquarters. I called the precinct commander, at that time Inspector Charlie Gentry, asked him what the situation was, advised him to sweep the 12th Street area and he said, With

what, six men? Because that's all he had on duty at the time. And from that point on I then issued a full mobilization of the department to begin the notification of the other senior officers.

00:01:06:00

Interviewer:

When we talked on the phone you told me this was the last thing you expected, was a riot on a Sunday morning with this routine raid on a blind pig that you'd done twenty times before, the same week.

00:01:15:00

John Nichols:

It did, because the, the Detroit riot of '67 didn't follow the classical pattern. Normally riots broke out on Saturday nights, on the afternoon shift, and usually it was some violent police action, usually as a result of a shooting or a fight or a arrest with, with complications. The raid on a blind pig was not an unusual thing in that particular area of the town. As, as I told you on the phone that had happened twenty times the, the month before and twenty times a day afterwards.

00:01:44:00

Interviewer:

OK. I need to stop. I just wanna—it was, it was a wonderful answer, but I need to, to do it without mentioning me.

00:01:50:00

John Nichols:

OK. All right.

00:01:51:00

Interviewer:

So, was raid on a blind pig unusual?

00:01:55:00

John Nichols:

The raid on a blind pig was not unusual at all. They were generally conducted without any, any particular problems. Many of the times, citizens who, knowing the, the area would go out and move among the, the crowds and help disperse 'em, but there had never been an instance where a major occurrence resulted as a result of a raid on a blind pig. ***This particular time there was more there than the, than the clue—crew expected. It required shuttling several times from the station to the scene, taking prisoners back and forth, and the crowd become restive and what was kind of a mood of hilarity grew into some derisive talk to the police and ultimately with stoning the cars.*** And the police commander then did what had worked in many, many instances before. He backed the police out of the area [coughs] which in some instances had, had served to enable the crowd to leave without any particular loss of face, and they would mill around for a while and then go back home. This particular instance the crowd just increased and increased and increased and the depredations began more heavily than before.

00:03:03:00

Interviewer:

What, what was the normal—?

Camera crew member #1:

[inaudible] I need to cut.

Interviewer:

OK.

00:03:07:00

John Nichols:

[coughs]

Interviewer:

Can I get you some water?

[beep]

Interviewer:

We have some right here.

00:03:09:00

John Nichols:

That's all right, no.

[cut]

00:03:11:00

Camera crew member #1:

Mark.

[slate]

Camera crew member #1:

Ooh. Again, second sticks.

Camera crew member #2:

Second sticks.

Camera crew member #1:

Again. Oh, again. Hit it.

[slate]

Camera crew member #1:

There we go.

[slate]

00:03:16:00

Interviewer:

OK. I just wanna ask you briefly what normally happened when you raided a blind pig.

00:03:21:00

John Nichols:

Well, to begin with, bling pigs, I guess, are a vernacular of the Midwest. A blind pig is an after-hour liquor spot. And the reason it was raided at three o'clock in the morning is they

don't start running until after the bars close at two o'clock. Generally it's a question of somebody going in, making an illegal buy or a buy of illegally sold whiskey, notifying the crew, arresting the people, taking 'em into the station, booking them. In most instances they're, they're immediately bonded out. So, it's a fairly routine thing and in that particular area of the city was not unusual at all. Anybody who wanted to could buy a few bottles of whiskey and open up an apartment, and they ranged from fairly exclusive after-hour spots to what we used to call lightning joints where people would just drop in for a quick, quick, double dip of rotgut whiskey. This was a fairly large one, bigger than they expected, and the number of people that they caught in the raid exceeded what they planned on taking. They figured about twenty and it was close to eighty-five or ninety, I think, so that there was a shuttle that had to run and that gave the, the, the crowd time to maneuver and time to, to excite themselves.

00:04:35:00

Interviewer:

You were telling me that at the time of the raid, that people in the city, including in the police department, were feeling pretty good about what was happening in terms of improving relations between the police and the community.

John Nichols:

Well, that's true. I guess couple of things influenced our, our belief that that was, that was the case to begin with. The—

Interviewer:

OK, I'm sorry. Can I just ask you, tell me, how did think the, what was the situation? Were things going well?

00:04:59:00

John Nichols:

Yes. Things were going well. We had had a visit just a couple of weeks before the riot from Dr. Martin Luther King who met with city officials and who indicated that he thought Detroit was, was a most progressive city. In the areas where they had mixed racial populations, we were heavily into a program of block clubs which put the police and the citizens into direct relationship with each other. We had had an experience the year before on the Kercheval incident which was the classical kind of a thing that a scout car made an arrest, there was a fight and people come charging out of the houses. But at that particular time it was an afternoon shift, the department was at maximum strength. We had just relieved fifty fully equipped police officers from a disturbance, or a demonstration in the First Precinct, so automatically we saturated the area with police. The neighborhood watch groups responded, they moved out, dispersed the crowds, and there was a minimal amount of damage and we

figured that, that the system that we had and the modifications that we had made would serve us well. What we didn't figure was that, what a young policeman told me on 12th Street the morning of the riot was true, that the rioters mobilized faster than the police did.

00:06:23:00

Interviewer:

Can you tell me what the early, the early orders to the police were on, on 12th Street that morning?

00:06:30:00

John Nichols:

There were no orders that went out other than the normal orders that a police officer—to go out. We've gotten a lot of questions about were they ordered to shoot or were they ordered not to shoot. I think that it goes without saying that that's a discretionary act with the part of a police officer. And to say tonight we go out and we shoot all burglars would be just as, as inane as to say that to-tonight we go out and we don't shoot anybody. It's a question of the circumstances and the judgement of the individual commanders on the, on the street. The only thing that I do say, that had the officers used fatal force in that situation, it probably would’ve been a, it would've been a blood bath because there were a minimal number of police, the area in which the initial involvement was, consisted of multiple high-rise apartment houses and the police would've been caught in a, literally in a valley from which they would have taken, I think, withering fire. At that time our experience was, in many of the houses, many of the, the people there were armed. We had raided houses and apartments and usually you got two or three firearms out of it. There's no doubt in my mind that if they did not ex—did not intend, or did not exercise their, their right to—or their, not their right, but their ability to use fatal force, then certainly it was not a bad decision to have made.

00:07:51:00

Interviewer:

Can you tell me again just briefly about, just briefly about the Kercheval incident and what worked in that case that didn't seem to be working in [inaudible]?

00:08:01:00

John Nichols:

Well, briefly, the Kercheval area, geographically, was different than the 12th Street area. The Kercheval area was an, an area primarily of single residence homes. It was spread over a lar-larger area, a larger geographical area. The time was right, the department was at full strength. We had ample manpower. We had both of our tactical units available. And almost

immediately, before I left home, I committed upwards of two hundred policemen into the area with one, with one order. I think the difference being that control of any kind of an unusual disorder depends upon getting a maximum amount of people into the area with, with a show of force. In the '67 disorder we did not have that. We played catch up. It's difficult to mobilize on Sunday morning for police. Many police were out with their families. Many of 'em got up at four o'clock in the morning and went fishing. There were a lotta people who were unaware that there was any difficulty because they were out in the parks and they come home to find calls on their, on their answering machines or their neighbors saying, My god, there's a big riot going on. And I think the difference being that, in the one, the area of control was much larger, the mobilization of the people who could be problems was much slower, the police mobilization was much, much faster in that incident, and the, the citizens who assisted us were present and were out and were ringing doorbells and moving in the crowds and doing what they could do to diffuse the instant. And I think those are the things that made the difference.

00:09:33:00

Interviewer:

Can you tell me about the numbers in terms of the numbers of people that were arrested and what, where would you put them?

00:09:39:00

John Nichols:

If my memory serves me right, and it's been twenty years, there were some eight thousand people arrested in a period of about seven to eight days. We housed them in almost every available cell. We rented space from county jails. The State Police moved 'em all over the state. About the third day, an individual came into my office and said he could convert the old bathing beach at Belle Isle into a, a stockade that he'd been a, a military engineer, and if I could get him the oh, the go ahead, he would do it. And I reluctantly gave him the go ahead, not because I didn't want the place, because I didn't think he could do it. But he did, and he built a, he built a stockade. And one of the problems we had with that was it was, occupied the old bath house, it was right on the river, it was nice and airy and it was cool, and when it came time to move those prisoners to the county jail they were not at all happy. They liked it better out at what they called Bellecatraz, but it didn't go over too big with the yacht club, I might add.

00:10:44:00

Interviewer:

OK, cut please.

[cut]

[camera roll #2064]

00:10:47:00

Camera crew member #1:

And marker.

[slate]

00:10:49:00

Interviewer:

I wanna go back a little bit 'cause there's a question I didn't ask you which is about the early '60s, sort of a continuation of what you were just telling me. But what effect did Mayor Cavanagh's election have on the police department?

00:11:01:00

John Nichols:

Well, I think Mayor Cavanagh, when he was elected, was elected by a very popular vote. He was a young man. I think he offered to the city a young, a fresh approach. That was his first venture into politics, he took hold. His first team that he put together in terms of city government was people composed of experts and outstanding examples of the, of the disciplines that needed to put the city together. So I think that, that what Jerry Cavanagh did was to sound a, a note that the city was on the move.

00:11:38:00

Interviewer:

Can you tell me, the police force was—had been recently integrated, right?

00:11:42:00

John Nichols:

The police force had been integrated a couple years before, so that was not an issue. There was one sociologist, a little bit out of touch with things, who said that the riot was created because the police returned to the ghetto, and I quote him, after the blue flu. Matter of fact, we had more police on the street during the blue flu than we ever had before because we reverted from a three-shift operation to a two-shift, so we had literally half again as many people on the street during the blue flu as we had before, so there was no return. I think a

lotta people at the time were looking for pat excuses and simplistic explanations of very complex problems.

00:12:28:00

Interviewer:

Can you tell me, I'm looking for war stories, what was it like to be a policeman in the middle of this incredible week? What was happening?

John Nichols:

Well.

Interviewer:

And if you could look at me a little more.

00:12:38:00

John Nichols:

Yeah. It's, as I recall, it was, it was a kaleidoscope of activities. Very difficult to put things in the proper perspective as what happened which day or which hour. It was a constant turmoil in headquarters. Commissioner Girardin directed that I stay in headquarters and directed that Superin—Deputy—then Chief Inspector Anthony Bertoni stay in headquarters because of the need to organize the, the support units there. We got on the street only rarely.

00:13:12:00

Interviewer:

How were you being fed? Where was food coming?

00:13:14:00

John Nichols:

If it had not been for the good graces of a great many citizens who responded by making sandwiches and sending boxcar loads of sandwiches into headquarters, both the police departments and the prisoners woulda starved. Food came in from Canada. Support of other departments, of outlying departments was magnificent. Canadian forces sent fingerprint experts in to help us classify fingerprints. Citizens fed, fed our people and fed the National Guard meals, lit-literally brought meals into the precinct stations. I think that was one of the most surprising things to me that, that came out of the riot because I didn't feel we'd get that

kind of citizen support, but it was, it was magnificent and without it we would have had big problems, very big problems.

00:14:03:00

Interviewer:

What about sniping? What kind of reports were coming in and how were the police affected?

00:14:08:00

John Nichols:

Well, sniping reports were coming in constantly. That was a, a new twist to the, to the disorder. We reacted by sending task forces usually composed of both military and police units out to the area. There was a lot of, of indiscriminate firing, a lot of gunfire. Some of it was attributed to the police, some of it was attributed to non-police areas.

00:14:35:00

Interviewer:

And you had told me about a couple of precincts being under siege.

00:14:38:00

John Nichols:

Well, the Six—the Fifth Precinct reported they were under siege one night, and the Tenth Precinct reported that there were sniping, sniping incidents in and around the station.

00:14:48:00

Interviewer:

Can you, can you give me a fuller answer in terms of what that means when a station's under siege, what's that?

00:14:54:00

John Nichols:

Well, I think the question, the, the verbiage under siege might be a little, a little over-dramatic. I think what, what had happened was that there was a consistent pattern at number five of shots being fired through the front windows of the, of the police station, apparently from apartment buildings across the street. They saddled up a couple of, of task forces and

went in and, and investigated, and apparently whoever had been in there, had they fired, they found no evidence, but if it had come from there, and undoubtedly it had, then that stopped the, that stopped the problems. But for an hour or so the, the officers were working below window level at the station. Below the desk level.

00:15:36:00

Interviewer:

With so much sniping and, or reporting of sniping going on, why were so few snipers actually arrested?

John Nichols:

Pardon?

Interviewer:

Why were so few snipers arrested?

00:15:46:00

John Nichols:

Well, I think you have to remember that if you got an apartment house with one hundred fifty families in it and you got a police department or a police patrol of twenty people, it's very difficult. By the time you get into position and begin your sweep, people come and go with relative ease. Unconventional warfare depends upon those kind of tactics. A few shots and you go. And by the time a conventional force mobilizes and gets deployed, you're long gone. I'm not suggesting that there was an enemy agent there, but what I am saying is the tactics are, are identical. So that you could fire a couple shots out of a window, put the gun in your pocket and walk out before anybody ever came to, to respond to it. And I think that's what happened in many instances.

00:16:31:00

Interviewer:

Did you think, at the time, that the rioting was organized?

00:16:35:00

John Nichols:

I don't think the initial riot was organized. I think that later on organization came into it. I think that once the, the situation had deteriorated to where fires were starting, then I think

people skilled and trained in that may have, may have added to, to the, fuel to the fire, but I don't think that the original people really planned to riot.

00:16:58:00

Interviewer:

Did you ever find any evidence of that?

00:17:01:00

John Nichols:

Well, there was a great talk that was one individual who was dubbed Mr. Greensleeves, I believe, who was wearing a green, green sport, sport coat or sport suit, was active in stirring up the crowd at the initial confrontation on, on, on Clairmount where they raided the blind pig. They never identified him. There were people who were active in, in splinter groups locally that begin to show up on the scene and make their, make their effects known. But I don't think it was part of a national plan at the time. I think that somebody may have seized on the, on the moment to exploit it.

00:17:43:00

Interviewer:

As someone whose job it was to keep the city calm during this period of long hot summers, when you watch people like Stokely Carmichael and Rap Brown on television, what did you think was going on?

00:17:55:00

John Nichols:

Well, I think you have to remember that that particular point in time there was a great aversion to impinging up—anybody's, on anybody's privacy, so that the ability to keep somebody in an uptight surveillance, the ability to infiltrate many of these people was, many of these areas was, was fairly, fairly slight. We did the best we could with the forces we had at hand. You can't put a, a person in everybody's living room. And I think you have to recognize, too, that the temper and the tenor of those times was one of, of revolution, of rebellion, of discontent. The social scene was, was a literal hotbed of, of anti-draft feelings, social progress feelings, anti-napalm-bomb feelings, anti-Americanism, anti-patriotism, anti-big business and the military complex, so almost every day there was a massive demonstration of some kind. It was a, [coughs] a period of great unrest. I guess as Dickens said, it was the best of times and the worst of times. But there was a constant accumulation of, of people with a, with a, with a bone to pick with society, and it was quite natural that those, those groups arose and they were, the fervor was, was, was, was heated.

00:19:16:00

Interviewer:

Why do you think the riot broke out, especially in Detroit when [inaudible]?

00:19:21:00

John Nichols:

Well, if I look at the riot from a sociological standpoint, I'd be ill-equipped to do it. I'm not a sociologist. I look at it in terms of a purely police response, and I think part of the problem was we could not get enough people into the area rapidly enough to establish the, the show of force that was necessary. By the time we got people mobilized, the area was too great to attempt to contain, and we attempted to contain it. We made some tactical changes in our dispositions the following year in the Martin Luther King assassination. We went into a more mobile type of, of operation and it worked much better. But at the time we followed the, what was then the school solution, and that was to isolate the area, to send troops in and to attempt to, to break the riot by segregating the small por—small pockets and, and dispersing them.

00:20:15:00

Interviewer:

Can you tell me about testifying before—you told me, one—

Camera crew member #1:

One second. Can I cut for a second?

Interviewer:

Cut, sure.

Camera crew member #1:

I'm sorry. Sure. If you could pivot a little bit more toward this way.

[beep]

[cut]

00:20:26:00

Camera crew member #1:

Marker.

[slate]

00:20:28:00

Interviewer:

So, if you could tell me a little bit about the visiting, the, the outside forces that came in to help.

00:20:34:00

John Nichols:

Well, I think one of the problems, aside from the political problems, was the problem of integrating the National Guard and the regular Army. The National Guard had been mobilized, they'd been mobilized piecemeal because they were in, in encampment. They were hauled out of their tents without their personal items, their razors or soaps, their, their ability—shoe shine kits and all the rest of the stuff that good soldiers carry, and they'd been put on a truck and driven into Detroit and told to get out and fight. The regular army sent in one of the, the most battle-seasoned units that they had. It was the 82nd Airborne, it had just come back from Vietnam, it was well-disciplined, well-trained, well-schooled, and functioned pretty much like a, like a well-disciplined unit should function. There had been some problems in Washington about, between National Guard and the Reserve, and there's little doubt in my mind that the, the reserves had weathered the storm and the Guard may have been selected as the next target for reduction by then Secretary McNamara, and I think those kind of political overtones had eff—had an effect on it. The Guard was heavily involved in the, in the Tenth Precinct and the western sector of the city. The regular Army—

[roll-out on camera roll]

[wild sound]

John Nichols:

—moved in in the eastern sector, which is what they should've done. Militarily you don't attempt to relieve an outfit that's, that's engaged, and the, the National Guard was engaged. They looked shabby, we all looked shabby. Many of us had been—

00:22:04:00

Interviewer:

We rolled out.

[cut]

[camera roll #2065]

00:22:07:00

Camera crew member #1:

Mark.

[slate]

00:22:08:00

Interviewer:

OK. If you could just pick up on the last part of it because of the roll-out. Comparing how prepared the federal troops were versus how not as prepared—

00:22:18:00

John Nichols:

Well, as I said, the, the federal troops were, were the cream of the crop. The National Guard had not been committed to any kind of, of action since the Korean War. Many of the officers and men had not been involved in anything that even looked like a combat situation. They were picked up outta their bivouac area and deposited. They were poorly fed, they were poorly taken care of from the standpoint of their personal needs, and they, as I said, they looked shabby, we all looked shabby. Most of us had been in the same clothes for three or four days and that does not lead to a smart military appearance, and I think that many of the regular Army people felt that they were, were substandard. I told some regular Army people there, if, if their people had had the same situation, they wouldn't have looked any better. I think a lot of that was generated by, by protagonists of both the regular Army and the National Guard. The National Guard people rose up in righteous indignation when they were criticized for improper appearance, for lack of control, and for many other things, and they in turn had their people storming on the nati- on the regular Army, that they took over the softest touch, and if they were up there where the action was they wouldn't look any better. A lot of it, I think, hinged upon purely political considerations. There was a great amount of question as to why the regular Army immediately federalized the National Guard. The political reason for that is quite simple. You don't need the National Guard under state control and the federal troops under presidential control with po—with the possibility of having two separate missions. And it also enabled the federal government to pick up the pay tab for the National Guard, which would have been part of the city's, or the, the state's responsibility had they not done so, but many of the things that crossed—

00:24:10:00

Camera crew member #1:

Oh, I'm sorry. I accidentally cut [inaudible]. I'm sorry.

[beep]

[cut]

00:24:17:00

Camera crew member #1:

Speed. Marker.

[slate]

00:24:19:00

Interviewer:

Can you talk about trying to control the riot in terms of, in terms of Detroit, that this is a city there isn't a single ghetto area? The rioting is all over and the guardsmen coming in, they've never, never seen active fire. They've also never seen the city.

00:24:31:00

John Nichols:

Many, many of the guardsmen were not, were not people from, from major metropolitan areas. Many of them were from, from outlying areas. The city at that particular time had to be a terrifying sight. ***There were fires going on, there was a great deal of excitement, streetlights were, were being shot out by the police, there was a great deal of noise, a great deal of confusion, nobody knew where their, where their parent organizations were.*** Military units function best as a unit, and unfortunately they could not function as a unit because they were brought into the, the armory and they were married up with Detroit police officers so that they would have a communication link and so they'd have a guide to know where to go and, and what to do. They were controlled from central dispatch areas. ***The entire situation was one of semi-controlled chaos.*** And I think that that had a, that had an effect on, on almost everybody concerned. ***Everybody was uptight, very uptight.***

00:25:35:00

Interviewer:

What was, what would a police action have been like if supposing you had heard a call that there was somebody sniping on [inaudible] or something?

00:25:41:00

John Nichols:

Well, there would be, the calls would come in as crowds gathering, stoning buildings, setting buildings on fire. And a task force, which was composed of very often all three elements, the Michigan State Police, Detroit Police, the Michigan National Guard would be dispatched. Sometimes they had military vehicles, sometimes they had only police vehicles. They would go and fan out and attempt to resolve the difficulty. The fire department put their fire, firefighters into command posts by consolidating many of the, of the smaller fire stations so that they could respond. Firefighters were shot at. Firefighters had to fight their way into, into the area to fight, to fight the fires.

00:26:27:00

Interviewer:

Did you see any problems with—

John Nichols:

[coughs]

Interviewer:

—in bringing people like the Guard who really had never, had never seen violent fire at them before?

00:26:37:00

John Nichols:

Well, I see a problem, but I can't see a solution for it. The same thing occurred during every war we've had. You take a unit that's—

Interviewer:

OK, well we can just go on then.

00:26:45:00

John Nichols:

—that's well trained and the first time they get shot at, it's a, it's a novel experience.

00:26:49:00

Interviewer:

Can you tell me about testifying before these commissions that were called?

00:26:53:00

John Nichols:

[coughs] I had enough experience in testifying. I testified before several committees. One of the, one of the things that I found out was that the term blind pig is unique, apparently, to the Midwest, because I testified in front of one committee and I talked about a blind pig and finally one of the senators said, What do you mean by, by raiding? Why did you raid the, that blind pig at three o'clock in the morning? And it became apparent to me that he didn't really understand what it was because bling pigs or speakeasies or after-hour spots don't start operating until after the normal licensed places close. So if they close at two or two thirty, three or three thirty is about the time that you begin to raid the, quote-unquote, blind pigs.

00:27:37:00

Interviewer:

Can you tell me what, how you felt when the Kerner Commission came out with its findings? Did you agree with it? Did you think it was—

00:27:43:00

John Nichols:

Well, I didn't agree with all of it. I think that any commission that attempts to deal with a, with a, with a problem that broad is bound to get some bias on both sides of the fence. I think that many people tend to recognize that investigations that take place immediately after a traumatic action like that are going to elicit comments from both sides of the fence that may be more emotional than they are factual. What I'm saying is, that a year after the riot, when people stopped and sorted things out, they may have had a different feeling about some of the root causes or a different feeling about what actually occurred than, than they did under the heat and, and temper and tenor of, of the moment.

00:28:33:00

Interviewer:

What about the sense that there was a lot of people from very far away—

Camera crew member #2:

I think we should probably cut.

00:28:36:00

Interviewer:

OK, cut.

[cut]

00:28:38:00

Camera crew member #1:

Marker.

[slate]

00:28:41:00

Interviewer:

When we talked on the phone about the Kerner Commission you had expressed some dissatisfaction with a bunch of people far away talking about social uprising, and you had a different opinion. Can you tell me what your sense was of how you felt about the Kerner Commission's finding?

00:28:55:00

John Nichols:

Well, as I said before, I didn't agree with, with, with much of what they found. I think that they, they attempted to do in good faith what was done, but I think that there was a lotta simplistic solutions that were, were offered as cures for very, very complex problems. For example, the—they made the point, as I recall, that unemployment and underemployment was a factor. Most of the people that we arrested were, were people who had jobs. Most of them had factory jobs that were fairly well-paying. Many other things seemed to differ from their findings as to what we knew being on the street scene. They cited a lack of, of contact with the people. I don't think that was true. I think that Detroit's block club system probably was one of the most sophisticated and most active ones in, in the United States at that time. It didn't work on that day, but that is not to say that we were oblivious of the need. The department was moving toward integration, it was mo—the city was moving toward integration. So I think that all too often those committees find a format and they put the

format down and sweep all the little parts into it until it matches up with what they believe the situation should be, not necessarily always the way. And this is not to say that they did it deliberately. I think that they did what they considered an excellent job.

00:30:25:00

Interviewer:

But was this, was this a social up-rise or was it criminal activity?

John Nichols:

It all depends on the point of view. To me it's criminal activity. To me—

Interviewer:

Can you talk more about—?

00:30:35:00

John Nichols:

Sure. I don't think that social uprisings include damaging people's property, I don't think that burning buildings, and certainly it doesn't include stealing. We've had major revolutions in the United States, or a major revolution in the United States, I don't think it ever took that, that kind of a thing. It was an upheaval, a, a revolution against a sociopolitical status. It certainly didn't include burning everything that they ran into. It certainly didn't include stealing. It certainly didn't include the unnecessary taking of life. This is where I differ from, from many people. I think that when social problems get to the point where it results in criminality then it's a criminal matter and not a social matter. It may be a social, there may be a social solution to it, but the act in and of itself is certainly criminal. A thief is a thief whether it's in a riot or, or on a day-to-day basis.

00:31:28:00

Interviewer:

And you had talked about this not as a race riot but as a property riot.

00:31:31:00

John Nichols:

I think that that's a fairly safe observation to make.

00:31:35:00

Interviewer:

Can you tell me that?

John Nichols:

Sure, I can tell you that because ninety percent of the efforts that were being made was—

Interviewer:

No, I mean if I, if I say, Was this a race riot?

00:31:45:00

John Nichols:

No, it wasn't a race, race riot as I see it. It was more of a riot designed to gain people's attention as a secondary thing, and I think, as a first thing, to gain property. We wound up with, with gymnasiums and garages full of stolen property, everything from 16th century broadswords to modern-day washing machines. Some of the items that were stolen were, would stagger the imagination. Can you believe a guy stealing a two-story circular steel stairway? They caught a guy dragging that down the street. Or an individual with four or five television sets in the back of his car that he didn't know how got, how they got there. Or an individual with a roll of carpeting that must have weighed two ton, that crushed the roof of his car, didn't know how it got there. Certainly these are not the, the acts of people who are interested in social reform, they're interested in gettin' something.

00:32:45:00

Interviewer:

OK, cut. How we doing?

[cut]

00:32:46:00

Camera crew member #1:

Marker.

[slate]

00:32:49:00

Interviewer:

OK. I have a couple tough questions. One is that fourteen people were killed by police bullets.

00:32:54:00

John Nichols:

Mm-hmm.

00:32:54:00

Interviewer:

And there has been charges that the police used excessive force.

00:32:58:00

John Nichols:

Mm-hmm.

00:32:58:00

Interviewer:

How would you respond to that?

00:32:59:00

John Nichols:

I think the only response I can make is they were all examined by competent people—

00:33:03:00

Interviewer:

OK, I need—

00:33:04:00

John Nichols:

—other than Detroit Police. They were—

00:33:06:00

Interviewer:

I'm sorry, I need you to incorporate my question. Did the police use excessive force?

00:33:11:00

John Nichols:

There was one instance where several Detroit police officers were tried, they were not convicted of, of murder. There were other instances where excess force was charged and not proven. I think that in any of those kind of situations you'd find that those charges are always rampant, and generally when you get down into the investigatory aspects of it, there's some reason that the force was used. I think that the same is true on both sides. Police in many instances felt that they were, were being treated unfairly when they get shot at, and probably they responded in kind.

00:33:50:00

Interviewer:

Can you talk about the sense of being on the street and knowing that whatever you did somebody was gonna claim that you were doing it wrong?

00:33:56:00

John Nichols:

Well, I think that's a foregone conclusion. When you pin on your first badge as a policeman, if you don't learn that in the first fifteen minutes, you're wasting a career.

00:34:03:00

Interviewer:

Can you, I need the whole, the whole thought.

00:34:05:00

John Nichols:

Yeah.

00:34:06:00

Interviewer:

Tell me again about pinning on your first badge.

Camera crew member #2:

Lean forward on, on the chair.

00:34:10:00

John Nichols:

Well, you, you asked about whether or not a police officer knows that no matter what he does, he's going to be criticized. And to that I would respond that a policeman should know that the minute he puts on his first badge, that there is always a series of alternate solutions to any given problem, and once you've tried one and it has not apparently worked, then everybody says you should've used something else. I think if you applied that same line of reasoning, any one of us here could've won the war for the German general staff knowing what the mistakes that were made and going over and, and correcting those certainly woulda, would've had an effect on it. That's not what you get when you're on the street. You deal with, with quick decisions, instantaneous decisions in a minimum amount of, of time. And those are the things you have to be charitable enough to recognize. That an officer makes a decision and it's done, he doesn't have the, the latitude of sitting down in a cool room and evaluating this and getting opinions and trying a test run on this and seeing if this, this will fly or doesn't fly. It's a question of one, two, three and it's over.

00:35:16:00

Interviewer:

And if you had the chance to respond, we, we did talk to a member of the, the Black community who said that he would call this a police riot. The police were the people out of control.

00:35:24:00

John Nichols:

Well, I think that's, that, that's a foregone conclusion. There are always those charges made and every major city that's had a riot, it's always been the fault of the police. I maintain that, I can't speak for other cities, I do know what the temper and the tenor of Detroit was, and it's not just my opinion, it was opinion that was shared by people who were far more astute than I in the area of social progress and social gains and human and race relations. I think that my own experience would lead me to believe that there was an honest effort and a very good fulfillment of an, of an attempt to make the department more responsive to the needs of its

citizens, and I don't think that anybody can deny that. The fact that it happened here did not necessarily mean that, that we were remiss, it just means we might not have been doing enough or that somebody else seized upon an opportunity, exploited a weakness that we had.

00:36:24:00

Interviewer:

OK. Can you give me the same answer a little, I need a little more of the, the question? I guess the question is to begin by telling that people are always going to charge that it's the police's fault when a riot happens. So, the question is, when a riot happens who gets blamed?

00:36:39:00

John Nichols:

Well, in, in, in almost inevitably, if a riot happens, generally somewhere down the line it will be the police's fault. The police overreacted, there were too many of 'em, there weren't enough of 'em, they took too, too stri-strict a status, they didn't take a strict enough stand. And I think that's a foregone conclusion, that eventually, since the police are on the cutting edge of everything, that we're gonna get the blame for about seventy-five percent of what goes on, but we rarely get any credit.

00:37:08:00

Interviewer:

Is there anything I haven't asked you about this week, if you had twenty-five minutes to tell the story of what happened in Detroit?

00:37:14:00

John Nichols:

I can't think of anything. Can't think of a thing.

00:37:17:00

Interviewer:

OK, cut.

[beep]

00:37:20:00

Interviewer:

No other stories that—

[cut]

[camera roll #2066]

00:37:21:00

Camera crew member #1:

And up again. And mark.

[slate]

00:37:24:00

Interviewer:

So, were the police aware of the existence of any paramilitary-type organizations or any pattern in the riot?

00:37:30:00

John Nichols:

Well, I think that at the time, there were a great many paramilitary organizations were active in society. There also was a pattern in, in urban riots. There was a pattern in the manner in which the looting too-took place, a pattern in what got looted first: generally liquor stores, firearms places, furniture stores. Records were destroyed quite regularly. In furniture stores the credit records were, were among the first things that were burned, so there was this pattern. I don't think it was a part of a national effort on the part of subversive elements to say, This is the way we'll do it. But there has been, there had been some indication that the same patterns followed in most of the cities.

00:38:12:00

Interviewer:

Can you tell me again about Watts, when you investigated Watts?

00:38:15:00

John Nichols:

I didn't investigate Watts. I went to Watts as a, as an observer in the, during their, during their disorder. And what I said was that the same situation arose there in terms of criticism of the police. That there, that—

00:38:30:00

Interviewer:

What about burning, like, furniture stores? What was the pattern that you observed?

John Nichols:

Pretty much the same. Pretty much the same.

Interviewer:

So that they would what? They would, they, can you tell me again they—?

00:38:39:00

John Nichols:

Well, I think what we found was that they would loot stores that had credit, and after they had taken out what they wanted in terms of value, then they were ready to burn, and the first things got burned were the credit records. So that individuals who had bills there would find it difficult to figure out how much they had.

00:38:58:00

Interviewer:

And in terms of the, the type of, of materials you were finding in doing the cleanup after the riot, in terms of manuals and things like that, what were you finding?

00:39:06:00

John Nichols:

Well, that wasn't, that wasn't particularly after the riot. It was, it was a continuing type of thing that occurred before the riot and after the riot. And there was no doubt in any of our minds who'd been active in the, in the police circles that many of the splinter groups were receiving information comparable to the type of information that would be given to irregular military units on how to disassemble and assemble weapons, principles of booby trapping, principles of small unit tactics and a great many other things that were combi—combinations of our own military forces and many foreign military forces. I think you have to remember that the United States at that time was involved in a, in a guerilla-type warfare, and many of

our soldiers may have come back with a great deal of knowledge that was applicable to, to the urban battle, too.

00:39:58:00

Interviewer:

I would think that being a policeman aware of this, going into, going blind into a neighborhood would've heightened just this sense of what the danger was.

00:40:07:00

John Nichols:

It does and that was a point that I attempted to make, that when an individual's on the street, he as a police officer or she, as a police officer is subject to all those stimuli, so the decision he makes may be highly colored. It may not be as he thinks it was. In the cold gray light of the dawn it may be something else, but can you criticize an individual when he's reacting to that kind of an environment?

00:40:32:00

Interviewer:

Can you give me a more full answer in terms of what kind of environment does he walk into the police officer on the street?

00:40:35:00

John Nichols:

Well, I think, I think what you're, what you're seeing is you've got an environment that you know that you're not well-liked, you know that there's been sniping, you know that there's fires going on all along, all, all, all around you, and suddenly you see something that you think is, is, is, is a discharge blast of a firearm. You might very well open up. And you might very well hit a nine-year-old kid who flicked his dad's cigarette lighter, too. I mean, those are the kinda things that, when they're taken out of context, looks hideous. Police shoot nine-year-old. Police shoot unarmed citizen. That's not the way it appeared at the time. And what I'm saying and what I said before is that you have to recognize that what an individual perceives at the time may not be actually what somebody else under the cold scrutiny of, of easy and relaxed in—inspection actually finds. He's reacting to an environment. He's reacting in a, in a sense of fear just as well as, as the citizens are. It's not a nice situation to go into those sit—those things on the street. If you shoot too soon, you're crucified. If you shoot too late, you're buried. It's a w—it's a no-win, no-win situation.

00:41:44:00

Interviewer:

Great, thank you. OK, cut. Thank you.

00:41:47:00

John Nichols:

OK.

[cut]

[end of interview]

00:41:50:00