Interview with **John Conyers**
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Interviewers: Sheila C. Bernard and Judy Richardson
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Sound Rolls: 226-228
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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 #2056]
[sound roll #226]

00:00:12:00

Camera crew member #1:

Mark.

Camera crew member #2:

Mark one.

[slate]

00:00:15:00

Interviewer #1:

So, we're gonna start slow and build up. As a Detroit resident, how did you view the civil rights movement in the South?

00:00:22:00

John Conyers:

Well, I was always drawn to the struggle because my dad was a labor organizer for the UAW. Well, he had been in the labor movement at Chrysler in the auto plants, even before the UAW, where it was illegal to be in unions and you had to wear your button on your underwear under your shirt, and where you would get beat up and thrown out, you'd get beat up before you got fired [car passes] for trying to form a union. So, I came up in that kind of environment with these kind of friends of my father's who spent, he retired as an international representative for UAW, so I always had a political view, and the civil rights movement, of course, was electrifying. The first thing I remember about it was the forays that Martin, Abernathy, Andy Young and others used to make to raise money for the South. I think that was probably the first contact I had with him. Detroit, outside of Los Angeles, was the main supportive financial fund-raising unit in which the churches were used, and the labor movement. The UAW was always very sympathetic to that, the Reuther brothers were always pro-civil rights, and so it was out of that feeling that, and that contact that I began to follow this thing with a deep fascination. And then when I ended up going to the, I joined the National Guard unit that was activated, an engineer combat unit, then I went to Officer Candidate School in Fort Belvoir, right out of Washington. And I used to come and sit in the gallery and watch the, the members of Congress and—

00:02:43:00

Interviewer #1:

Do you remember, excuse me, the—

Camera crew member #1:

[coughs]

Interviewer #1:

—the big march in Detroit in '60—

John Conyers:

Oh, I was in it.

00:02:48:00

Interviewer #1:

Can you tell me about—

John Conyers:

Yeah.

Interviewer #1:

—what it was like?

00:02:49:00

John Conyers:

That, that was the march, that was the march before the march. As a matter of fact, much of Martin's speech was being formed, the "I Have a Dream" speech. There were parts of it coming together, but that was, that was the kind of spirit that was going on in Detroit. Reverend C.L. Franklin, who was very close to Martin King, was probably the moving force, the planning all came out of his church. There were others, Reuther again joined, the labor people joined in it. Came right down Woodward and we ended up at Cobo Hall. And it, it was the, it was the, the same kind of spirit of support for civil rights, for end of racism. And you have to really strain oneself to remember how segregated and, and how different things were then. Detroit now and then is like two different cities.

00:04:05:00

Interviewer #1:

Can you tell me about what Detroit was like as a Black resident in the early '60s?

00:04:09:00

John Conyers:

The segregation was profound. The stores as, at one time in New York City, in the Black communities the stores were all owned by Whites. Frequently there were Jewish merchants which lent a, a sort of particular vent of, of ill-will between these merchants and, and shop owners who always closed up every night and clearly went somewhere else. There was very little interaction among Black political leadership because there wasn't any. We, let's see, I was in law school when the first Black ran and won for the city council. It, it was a, a very unusual [car passes] kind of situation. Well, excuse me, it was a situation very different from now, but it was really the norm. And it was this straining at the bonds, the, the, there was no city government responsive. There was no national leadership. There was no Congressional Black Caucus. And the, the civil—

00:05:36:00

Interviewer #1:

Cut. Sorry, I need [unintelligible] your answer.

John Conyers:

The civil rights movement—

[beep]

[cut]

00:05:42:00

Camera crew member #1:

Mark.

Camera crew member #2:

Mark two.

[slate]

00:05:45:00

Interviewer #1:

So, if you could start again, tell me, telling me about reading about the Southern movement and knowing what the issues were in the North.

00:05:54:00

John Conyers:

Well, we, we watched with some interest the development of the civil rights movement in the South. And we had this connection between Martin King, Abernathy, Andy Young, and the top King people. SCLC, of course, was brought about because the existing civil rights organizations were reluctant to adopt a confrontational strategy about breaking de jure seg- segregation in the South.

00:06:32:00

Interviewer #1:

But in terms of watching the gains of the Southern movement but being up here in Detroit.

00:06:41:00

John Conyers:

It was sort of a nagging recognition of the fact that what was needed there wasn't too much different from what was needed up here. That there was a—we were looking over our shoulders at the South, knowing that up North wasn't really all that much different anyway. And you ha, you had a, you had some other things going on. There was a, there was a kind of a Black Power attitude that was, that was coming about in one part of the population that was rather challenging to, to, to the existing Black leadership. We were go, we were, we were going through periods of, of, of street indigenous Black leadership which were challenging the, the more, more or less accommodationist attitude of, of the existing middle class strata at that time. This also was being compounded by some, some class differences. The Vietnam War was also percolating right on the scene, and, and that was going to end up playing a very large role. As more Black bodies began to be returned from Vietnam, it was, it was begin, it was be, beginning to be perceived that, that, that Black soldiers were dying disproportionately in the Vietnam War. And, and the, the, so that question began to nag. The economic system was horrible, the political system was still nascent, it was literally nonexistent. There were just a few Blacks that were a state representative here and, and an office holder there.

00:09:02:00

Interviewer #1:

OK, cut.

[beep]

[cut]

00:09:06:00

Camera crew member #1:

Mark.

Camera crew member #2:

Mark three.

[slate]

00:09:08:00

Interviewer #1:

OK. In 1961, Mayor Cavanagh was elected primarily through the strength of the Black vote and primarily over issues of police brutality. Can you tell me about that election?

00:09:18:00

John Conyers:

Well, to understand the, the environment here in Detroit, it, it was really very anti-Black even though more than a third of the, the citizenry were Black citizens. We had a, a local government that was totally unresponsive, and then when Miriani sanctioned the stop and frisk activity in, in which—and of course it really ignited when doctors and lawyers and businessmen, the few that they were, were all stopped and, and pulled out and, of their cars, arrested, brutalized. It really was like throwing a, a match into oily rags. It, it, it really mobilized the Black community, and, and of course it, it politicized everybody to make sure that, that this young new lawyer had never ran for office. I remember him calling me. I was a, I was a lawyer representing, working with a, a labor organization, the Trade Union Leadership Council, and they said, Come on down here. We're interviewing Jerome Cavanagh and he wants to run for mayor. And, you know, we're, we're sick of this crap. So, I hopped on down there, and we met, and he was a young, energetic lawyer, articulate, willing to take on the establishment, joining with us about the racist tactics of the police.—

[rollout on camera roll]

[wild sound]

John Conyers:

—So, it was a, it was a, a, a timely intrusion without, without which, the, the, the deteriorating race relations, he could've never gotten elected. But that very definitely changed things in Detroit.

00:11:31:00

Interviewer #1:

OK. Rollout.

Camera crew member #1:

[inaudible]

Interviewer #1:

OK.

[beep]

[cut]

[camera roll #2057]

00:11:37:00

Camera crew member #1:

Marker.

Camera crew member #2:

Mark.

[slate]

00:11:40:00

Interviewer #1:

Let me just ask you a little more about what was happening before '67. And can you tell me just briefly what, what Mayor Cavanagh's election meant in terms of hoping to change some of what was happening with the police?

00:11:55:00

John Conyers:

Well, the election shook the political establishment and economic establishment to its roots. He was not supposed to have won, nobody thought he could win, and so it was hailed in the Black community. He integrated, he, he brought in an integrated cabinet and he was making inroads into the housing. And, of course, you had everything piled up. He appointed George Edwards a, a, now, he appointed George Edwards, a, a labor lawyer, as a police commissioner, and we were, we were going to really move forward from, from that point on. But, but the old problems were not that easily solved, and so the police force, like many, couldn't care less who was the mayor. I mean, they considered themselves to be the, the permanent law organization, and mayors came and went. Usually mayors were bent to the will of police establishment. So, things were, were moving forward, but they, they were, they were not being solved in a way that people could feel relief. In other words, the changes were, were much slower than, than the, than, than what was felt. Then the, by the people it, it, it wasn't coming down. We were, you can put somebody the head of an agency, you can make someone, you can change policy, but that really doesn't grab hold immediately and, and is, and is treated as some kind of accommodation. So that's the pr—that was the problem, that these things were behind the curve.

00:14:08:00

Interviewer #1:

What about new problems? What about what was happening in terms of the expressways and the, the splitting of the Black Bottom, the Black community, the crowding of 12th Street and the White businesses beginning to sort of just move out in the suburbs? What was happening? What was that doing to the Black community?

00:14:25:00

John Conyers:

Well, all that was part of the socioeconomic—

00:14:29:00

Interviewer #1:

Sorry. If you could just give me back what I just gave you—

John Conyers:

OK.

Interviewer #1:

—in terms of what was happening citywide.

00:14:33:00

John Conyers:

Right. Well, in terms of a, of a socioeconomic movement you, you, you must remember that there was a lot of, of other changes that was, that were going on that were much larger than the city could really control. As a matter of fact, when we started talking about urban renewal it was called Black removal. And the businessmen were relocating, some of the, the businesses already were, were taking off. There, there was a perceptible White flight problem going on. The, the segregated patterns, housing, residentially, job-wise were really very, very tight. There, there were, there were no af-affirmative action programs. You, you, you must remember we didn't even have a, a national civil rights law at this time. And all of it was creating a buildup of tensions that were going to ultimately lead to an explosion and the, and the, the mayor himself was powerless to deal with it just from a municipal point of view. They were, they were far more intractable than that.

00:16:04:00

Interviewer #1:

Watching other cities go, nearly a hundred cities since Harlem in '64 and being in Detroit and being one of the good things that was happening in Detroit, you were one of two Black congresspeople in Detroit, did you think a riot was gonna hit Detroit? Did you think the city would bypass it?

00:16:21:00

John Conyers:

No, I, as a matter of fact, that, that night I spoke to the Black Real Estate Association that Saturday night that the riot took off and, and I was talking about—people reminded me of what I had said. Little did I know that I would be called out of my sleep that night, awakened and brought out on 12th Street. But every, it, it, it was clear that this wasn't going to continue on because there, there was a, there was a, a nascent Black Power movement developing that was rebellious to both Black and White leadership, that was making it clear that this is not going to go on and, and it was a, it was a, it had its own leaders and, and it was really calling for a confrontational, if not, a, a, a, physical reaction to this segregation that was, was steeped in, in every part of, of life of a Black citizen in Detroit.

00:17:42:00

Interviewer #1:

So, what happened Saturday night? What was it you had said?

00:17:45:00

John Conyers:

Well, it was the, we, what we, I was speaking at the downtown, the Black Real Estate group wa-was meeting and I was predicting that something was going to happen, that, that this, it was intolerable. And I was, I was talking about housing patterns, which they of course were very sympathetic to. They, they wanted to integrate housing and it was, was, it was not being integrated at all.

00:18:16:00

Interviewer #1:

Can [car horn] you, I'm sorry, can you tell me, go, go to Sunday and tell me what it was like being on 12th Street? Can you paint a picture for me of that?

00:18:24:00

John Conyers:

Well, that night, the night that it started it was thought, we were hoping that it could still be turned off. It started off that we, we were saying, Well, you know, if everybody will go home and go to sleep and we clear the streets. There had been, up and down 12th Street the police had raided this after-hours place which had thought that they were paying money to the police for protection, and they ended up having these women thrown down the steps. And this is what really angered the crowd is that the, the, that the, the police captain on duty was not there that night and this lieutenant decided that they were going to raid this place. And it's just something as unforeseen, unpremeditated as this could kick it off, and that's how it started. That was the genesis. That's why it started on 12th Street. This place upstairs had been, been used and people knew about it. It, it was almost a semi-legitimate business as a matter of fact. So, it was just shock and outrage that this kind of, of violent police action could be brought to this, this after-hours place, and that's how it started. So, when, when we got out there, we, we, there was a hope that maybe we could head it off right now and everybody calm down and cool out and things would, would, would become stabilized, but that was not to be the case.

00:20:15:00

Interviewer #1:

So, tell me what you did, though. It sounds, it sounds frightening, what you do, you're on top of a car.

00:20:20:00

John Conyers:

Well, that was the next day. That was the next day, on Sunday, when it became on clear that that was, that was not going to be our luck. That crowds were gathering, you could see smoke off in the city's horizon, that other fires were being started in other places. I remember we had this incredible incident of, here were all these policemen dressed in black with helmets, weapons, and then they had bayonets on their rifles and they were, a, a, a platoon of them were standing there on 12th Street, at the top of 12th Street, and it was so provocative, everybody would come by and say, See that? Look it. They're, they're getting ready to attack us. So we, we, the civil rights leadership and indigenous leaders [car horn] immediately contacted, I remember Arthur Johnson and Hubert Locke and others, we contacted the, the mayor and said, you know, You have to take those bayonets off of those weapons. Are, are you outta your mind? Well, of course he didn't know that, but we finally got them to do that. They, they, they did that. But this was the kind of a provocative scene, and more and more people kept coming out. The streets were clogged. We couldn't get people to disperse. There, there was this mumbling going on and you could hear in the background sometimes windows being smashed and stores being looted, houses were being set fire to. And [clears throat] so I, I was thinking that maybe, I'm, I'm looking at people that I knew. I mean, these were not strangers. These were, these were my constituents. These were people that supported me that I knew and knew me.—

[rollout on camera]

[wild sound]

John Conyers:

—But they were angry, so angry, the hostility.

00:22:38:00

Interviewer #1:

Cut.

Camera crew member #1:

[inaudible]

Interviewer #1:

[unintelligible]

[beep]

Interviewer #1:

This is wonderful [inaudible].

[cut]

[camera roll #2058]

[sound roll #227]

00:22:45:00

Camera crew member #1:

Marker.

[slate]

00:22:47:00

Interviewer #1:

OK. So, who were the people in the street?

00:22:52:00

John Conyers:

The people that, that were milling around angry and, and, and belligerent were my constituents, were people I knew, were friends of mine, were acquaintances. And it was a, it was a, a mean-spirited kind of mood that hung over this. And I don't know, I don't know what, what, impelled me. There was, someone had a bullhorn and here was a car out in the middle of the street and I jumped up, I jumped up on it to make an appeal that we should all disperse, that we're, we're going to get to the bottom of this, that we're on the case and that nothing can be gained from us just continuing this kind of random attacks on, on our own community. And, you know, it was after I got off I realized that that was a pretty dangerous situation. I mean, people, no, nobody said anything to me directly. There were, there was mumbling and grumbling, Ah, go ahead on, and, It's too late for that, and, but I didn't get stoned or drug off there, but you could see that there was a, there was a, a, a murderous tone about this whole thing. It was, it was really, people were letting feelings out that had never been let out before, that had been bottled up. It really wasn't that they were that mad about an after-hours place being raided and some people being beat up in, in, as a result of the, the closing down of that place. It was the whole desperate situation of being Black in Detroit and now, all of a sudden, there was, there was no supervening force. There was nobody on top of you. Everybody looked out in the street and it, and it was us. It was just us and they were, then, and, and, and so this was the kinda mood that accompanied the looting. The looting was a, was a compensatory act. We're, we're making up for all this crap. And so, as we found out, occasionally there would be a Black looters and White looters who would go in and they would all, all be just helping themselves. And, and, and then of course the whole thing deteriorated to just plain looting and burning.

00:25:58:00

Interviewer #1:

What was the message to you as a civil rights leader out there trying to stop people but they were no longer listening to you? Were they listening to, to Black Power ideologies at that point? What, what were people gonna listen to?

00:26:10:00

John Conyers:

Well, it's, it's too hard to sort it out neatly in, in that kind of a situation because some were listening to each. I mean, some people were, were listening a new drummer, that they wanted new leadership. Some were not listening to anything. Some, it was perceived by some as an opportunity. People who had no particular political orientation, although, as you know, a, a person is making a political statement when they do anything out in the streets. In terms of

taking somebody else's property and looting and burning, that, that's a, that's a statement regardless of whether you have a leader in front of it or not. And, and that, that ge-generally was what, was how one could characterize the riots, that they were, they were not organized. We, we had the, the federal presence in trying to find an organized, subversive leadership, which was pretty insulting, in a way, that, that you'd have to have communists or radicals come in from somewhere to, to get, to have this kind of activity result. And we were trying to tell them that thi-this isn't any sinister left-wing political ideology manifesting itself through covert leadership. These people had had it up to here. But it was a, a, a, a dimension of the misunderstanding that they couldn't see that. That we were busy trying to convince the city leaders, the, the, the local police, the federal people. I got a call from President Johnson right in my house in the middle of the, of the rioting to let me know that they were sending in the, the leadership council and, and, all the Washington people to really stabilize and coordinate and investigate. But the fact still remained is that—

00:28:35:00

Interviewer #1:

I'm sorry. What, what did President Johnson say?

00:28:38:00

John Conyers:

Well, the, the president, first of all, he wanted me to tell him what was happening and to describe how serious it was, was it serious enough for him to, to send in a federal presence. I assured him immediately that it was. And he was telling me who to be in touch with and [clears throat] it, but it was clear that they came in thinking that, that there, there must be, there must be more to it than this just rioting. I mean, there had to be a political—somebody was subversive, had put people up to this. And they were searching for, for political evidence of a, of a left wing. This was the anti-Communist mentality that has never really gone away, that, that always comes up in, in full bloom. I mean, if Blacks are being disruptive, they have to be being put up to it. I mean, they, they couldn't just go out and do this on them, on their own. They were behaving themselves pretty nicely up until now.

00:29:50:00

Interviewer #1:

Can you tell me, your office was getting calls throughout, increasingly throughout the week about police, according to Leon Atchison, about police brutality? Can you tell me about a growing awareness that the police were losing control during this week?

00:30:05:00

John Conyers:

Well, the police were actually engaging in a riot. They, the, what really went on was a police riot because, as a matter of fact, if anything, the addition of a state and particularly federal law enforcement agents restrained the Detroit police, because they saw this as a, as absolutely intolerable conduct that had to be stopped by any means necessary.

00:30:37:00

Interviewer #1:

Can you give me an example?

00:30:38:00

John Conyers:

Well, they were shooting at, they were, they would, they would shoot at a person on a rooftop. I mean, they, they figured that that person might, might have a gun and would shoot them, so they would shoot at them first. They were using the, they, they were misusing physical force and lethal force because they were, they were angry and they were also frightened.

00:31:08:00

Interviewer #1:

What kind of brutality did you witness at the police station when you were waiting, you were there kind of—

John Conyers:

Well—

Interviewer #1:

—[unintelligible].

John Conyers:

—they were dragging people around.

Interviewer #1:

I'm sorry, I was talking over your answer.

00:31:17:00

John Conyers:

OK. The, at the police stations, particularly at the Livernois station, they were mopping up blood on the floor. I mean, it was, it was, this was a, this was like a, it was like a war zone. Tanks, you have U.S. tanks going down neighborhood streets. You had all different kinds of your National Guardsmen, police, army all trying to, to coordinate itself. But the, the Detroit Police were unbelievable in their determination to visit excessive violence upon the population. And they were, they were just mopping blood up. This was obviously blood of Black people that were being detained at the, the station. The, the violence was insane. John Hershey captured it in one of his books, *Algiers Motel-tel Case*. But the whole thing made it so that what they did—

00:32:30:00

Interviewer #1:

I'm sorry, cut one second, cut. I wanted to see if you have—

[beep]

Interviewer #1:

—coming from—

[cut]

00:32:34:00

Camera crew member #1:

Mark.

[slate]

00:32:36:00

John Conyers:

OK, during the, during the, the, the riots our office became a sort of a, a, a mini station in which people were calling in for help, assistance, family members missing, somebody's been arrested, someone is locked up at Belle. They turned Belle Isle into just a holding action. They just put up barbed wire fence and said, This is it. We're—the, ***the police stations were all overrun and the jails were filled, so they, they just created detention centers.*** And, ***so people were calling up, reporting what the police were doing or did, reporting missing people. People wanting to file complaints. Fear, anger. This, it was this, could this be***

happening in America, I mean, that you look [car passes] out your, your window and you see tanks going down the street? And so, so, the thing was an absolute—

[rollout on camera]

[wild sound]

John Conyers:

—madhouse of all kinds of conduct and activity going on, and people calling us frequently. They were probably calling everywhere else, too, but they were calling us trying to get us coordinated. In the meantime, we were meeting, the leadership groups were meeting with the, the law officers and with the, with the federal presence that was here, trying to coordinate and, and see how we could head this thing off.

00:34:19:00

Interviewer #1:

All right [unintelligible]—

[beep]

Interviewer #1:

—question—

[cut]

[camera roll #2059]

00:34:26:00

Camera crew member #3:

Speed.

Camera crew member #1:

Mark.

Camera crew member #2:

Mark.

[slate]

00:34:29:00

Interviewer #1:

Can you, just because we ran out, repeat the last part of it? The mood of what—your constituency calling you, what the mood was in terms of the tanks in the streets and, and this couldn't be happening in America. What was the mood of the constituents?

00:34:45:00

John Conyers:

Well, you'd have to, to realize that for a people to whom this had not only never happened before but never expected anything like this to happen, where, where we'd become occupied by our own army, by our own law forces. People were angry, bewildered, frightened. They were looking for missing members of their family. They were calling up for help and assistance. We had emergency detention centers. People were trying to find out where to go. Many, much work was suspended in the city, obviously, and we were, we were trying to give off an, an impression [car passes] in the government that we were, things were in control and were getting better and if everybody would stay calm and cooperate. But the underlying problem was that, that the government was really opposed to the people. The law enforcement part of the government had gotten completely out of hand. Many of the, the activities were menacing. All the people killed were Black citizens, many under incredibly strange circumstances. The violence, the threats, the overreaction of the, of the law enforcement itself. The National Guardsmen were, of course, unique because they were youngsters who had never been in an urban setting and were, were just generally unprepared for this kind of duty or activity.

00:36:41:00

Interviewer #1:

OK. In, in terms of other, other views of the rioting and, and that it should've been allowed to take its course, and that what happened was, the more it was, the more that was tried to repress it, it became an occupied, an occupied community.

00:36:59:00

John Conyers:

Well, there were two views that generally dominated how, how this riot oughta be handled. One is that if you take it easy, it would run outta steam, it would run its course and we'd, we'd end up with everything, it might take a little bit longer but it would, it would be safer. The other point of view was that if, if we allowed it to run its course, more lives and property could be lost and that what we've got to do is reestablish the preeminence of, of government

and law and that we've got to clamp down on it, we've gotta snuff this thing out immediately. And of course it was the latter view that prevailed. And out of that determination came the view that, that we've got to show everybody that we mean business, that this is, this is, we're gonna have curfews, people we-were arrested going to the store and, and detained for days. The whole thing, the whole thing was a reflection of the attitudes of the government and, and the law enforcement agencies toward Black people which created the problem in the first place. Namely hostility and, of course, mixed with some fear.

00:38:35:00

Interviewer #1:

K. Let me ask you a question we asked before in terms of the new mood in the North, in terms of the mood, the Black Power mood versus—

Camera crew member #1:

[coughs]

Interviewer #1:

—the traditional civil rights. Can you talk about sensing this emerging, it's kind of a shift in gears, we're going back to before the riot, but sensing this emerging voice in Detroit?

00:38:55:00

John Conyers:

Well, it was, the, the mood can be seen, it was coming forward in a number of ways. First of all, there was a lot of impatience with the sort of plodding acceptability of the relationship between Blacks and Whites in the, in the factories, particularly within the unions. There were militant factions within the automobile plants, locals which were, which were determined that they were not going to wait to bargain and negotiate every two or three years about what they considered to be outrageous terms and conditions. Out in the streets there were new organizations being formed, with new leaders, indigenous leaders who were willing to march and picket and confront discriminatory housing, employers who would not hire Blacks, businesses that were considered to be unfair or overpricing and overcharging Blacks. And there was this, that, there was this new nascent leadership of a variety and it, it was all un-orchestrated but a, but a, va—from a variety of sources that were determined that things were going to change and that they weren't waiting for leadership on high in the Black community to give them some instructions from this point on. And these, these, these two different—

00:40:37:00

Interviewer #1:

I wanted to ask you another question 'cause we're running out of film. As,—

Camera crew member #1:

[coughs]

Interviewer #1:

—as the riots are ending, did you see any evidence or have, do you have any stories about congressional White backlash in terms of cutting back from, from giving aid to cities and cutting back from getting involved in Black communities? Did you see congressional White backlash as a result of the rioting?

00:41:01:00

John Conyers:

Well, many of the poverty programs in the Office of Economic Opportunity, the CETA programs, which had their built-in critics within the federal government and in the Congress particularly, many, ironically, were senators and congressmen from the South. They, they used the Detroit and Watts and Newark as examples of why these programs could not possibly work and, and why they were in some instances counterproductive. That, that they may have, they may have been the underlying reasons for some of the unrest that was, was, that was brought about, because people were expecting to get s-something for nothing. They were expecting to get government help and they were expressing a frustration that it was so little and so late or never came at all. So, there was a political, a negative political dimension to the riots, absolutely.

00:42:16:00

Interviewer #1:

OK, cut.

[cut]

00:42:18:00

Camera crew member #1:

Mark.

Camera crew member #2:

Mark.

[slate]

00:42:21:00

Interviewer #1:

So, the question is [unintelligible].

00:42:24:00

John Conyers:

The Detroit riots were inevitable in the sense that the building frustrations of the Black community, the powerlessness that left them without any way to redress and, and no way for them to see that they were ever going to get out of it really formed the, the incendiary base for something as trivial as breaking up a after-hours joint to create the, the, the most destructive civil disobedience riot in American history in terms of the life and damage that it caused, but it, it had to come out. And, and once this thing started, as we found out, it was unstoppable.

00:43:18:00

Interviewer #1:

Cut. Thanks.

Camera crew member #3:

Very good. Thank you.

[beep]

[cut]

00:43:21:00

Crewmember:
Mark.

Crewmember:

Mark.

[slate]

00:43:23:00

Interviewer #2:

OK. The Kennedy and Johnson administrations were generally seen as kind of allies of the movement. Can you talk about how that changed when Nixon came in, in terms of the movement?

00:43:35:00

John Conyers:

Well, Nixon, of course, was always frustrated because he didn't have a Democratic Congress, because he, excuse me, Nixon was always frustrated because he had a Democratic Congress to contend with, so he could never get off his entire strategy in terms of a anti-people, anti-Black, anti-programs. But a number of us had been talking. I was the ninth Black member of Congress when I arrived, and Adam Powell was still in the Cannon Building, which is the oldest building. All the other chairmen had moved to the new Rayburn Building except the Black chairman. [laughs] He was still, and not only was he in the Cannon Building, he was up on the fourth floor [laughs] with me. So, I got a chance to, to talk to Adam, voluntarily and involuntarily, very, very frequently. And I started saying, you know, We oughta really come together. And at—

00:44:41:00

Interviewer #2:

Cut just a second, I'm sorry. This is before we do the C.B.C. part.

[beep]

John Conyers:

Oh, OK.

Interviewer #2:

[unintelligible]

[cut]

00:44:47:00

Camera crew member #1:

Marker.

Camera crew member #2:

Mark.

[slate]

00:44:49:00

Interviewer #2:

OK, Kennedy and Johnson were generally seen as the allies of the civil rights movement. How did that change when Nixon came in?

John Conyers:

Well, you have to remember that when he came in—

Interviewer #2:

Sorry, if you could say, When Nixon came.

00:44:59:00

John Conyers:

OK. When, when Nixon came in, one must recall that we lost Martin Luther King, we lost John F. Kennedy, that assassinations, the, the despair, it was a narrowly won victory for Richard Nixon. He was clearly advocating an increased activity in Vietnam, and all of this—

[rollout on camera]

[wild sound]

John Conyers:

—fueled a lot of indigenous movement—

00:45:35:00

Interviewer #2:

We roll, rolled out. I'm sorry, that's—

John Conyers:

OK.

Interviewer #2:

—yeah.

[beep]

[cut]

[camera roll #2060]

00:45:40:00

Camera crew member #1:

Marker.

[slate]

00:45:44:00

Interviewer #2:

OK. The Kennedy and Johnson administrations were generally seen as allies of the civil rights movement. What changes when Nixon comes in?

00:45:52:00

John Conyers:

With Richard Nixon we, we had an ascendancy of the philosophy of, there's too much government, handouts are bad for character, welfare is not the way out. All of the, the Democratic programs, CETA, OEO, even some of the Medicare programs were all put under a new scrutiny, especially in view of the fact that the Vietnam War was escalating and the ferment was really out there. President Nixon developed, from, from the earliest part, a sort of a bunker mentality of them/us which was, was constrained somewhat because of the, the great number of Democrats that were in the Congress.

00:46:55:00

Interviewer #2:

Cut just a second. Tell you what I need to hear. A little bit more, a little—

[beep]

[cut]

00:46:58:00

Camera crew member #1:

Marker.

[slate]

Camera crew member #1:

Take four. We got four right here. [pause] Here we go.

00:47:03:00

Interviewer #2:

OK. The traditional relationship between the federal government and the civil rights leadership, how does that change when Richard Nixon comes in, specific to the civil rights leadership?

00:47:13:00

John Conyers:

Well, President Nixon never held himself as a friend of the civil rights movement, so that was part of what the campaign about his election was about, whether we were going to move it forward. It was narrowly won, but it's winner take all. And so, the civil rights movement, public affairs organizations, urban constituencies that had, that were beginning to look at housing and delivery systems for food and jobs, education programs, all of these things now were subject to being turned down, remodified. The, the Nixon people were then put in charge of these agencies and frequently it, it was a foxes watching hen houses sort of a thing, so that the civil rights leadership had no doubt about the nature of their problem. Martin King was planning a Poor People's March to Washington, which was to deal with this insensitivity that was being clearly manifested by the administration.

00:48:37:00

Interviewer #2:

So, did you find then that this was the right time to start the, the Congressional Black Caucus? If you could talk about the formation of the caucus.

00:48:46:00

John Conyers:

The, the, the, the Congressional Black Caucus, there was, there was conversations going on among the, the nine of us then that there oughta be some coming together in, in a, a loose affiliation. And, and I want to tell you that the, the Congress was far different from, from the way it is now. I mean, people without seniority, if you weren't a southern chairman of a committee, you didn't have that much to do in the congress in those days. But Adam Powell was, was actually the person that said, You, you don't need a Black caucus. He said, I represent all of you. [laughs] I mean, he used to tell me that every time we would, we would tiptoe the subject up to him, he'd say, What do you need it for? I mean, [laughs] what's the problem? And we, we said we were going to do this anyway.

00:49:43:00

Interviewer #2:

We rolled out. OK. [laughs]

[beep]

Interviewer #2:

Cut.

[cut]

00:49:45:00

Camera crew member #1:

Mark.

[slate]

Camera crew member #1:

Five fingers. There you go. All right, here we go.

00:49:50:00

Interviewer #2:

Why was 1969 the right time to start organizing the Congressional Black Caucus?

00:49:56:00

John Conyers:

Well, the, the Nixon administration had to give us some impetus because not only were they whacking back at the social programs—housing, education, job training, but they were, they were also, we, we have to remember that they had Attorney General John Mitchell plus J. Edgar Hoover in the FBI and they were looking upon civil disobedience not only in the, the Vietnamese—anti-war protests against Vietnam but also the rising activity of the civil rights movement. I mean, King was under active surveillance up until his death. They, they, it was very clear that they saw all of this as, as inimicable to law and order as they saw it. And so, this additional harassment, the, the, the COINTELPRO, the, the, the, the, the blatant discrimination that existed in terms of federal law enforcement, the non-enforcement of civil rights laws, all of this created a circumstance that I think augmented the necessity for us to pull together and finally create a, a caucus where we could more efficiently carry on the business of trying to represent all, all the Black people who were so grossly under-represented in the Congress to begin with.

00:51:44:00

Interviewer #2:

Cut.

Camera crew member #2:

[coughs]

[cut]

00:51:45:00

Camera crew member #1:

Marker.

[slate]

00:51:48:00

Interviewer #2:

OK. Can you kinda talk about what happens between the Congressional Black Caucus and, and Nixon in trying to get him to meet with you and his refusal, and then your going into a boycott of the State of the Union address?

00:52:00:00

John Conyers:

Well, [coughs] we, we determined that the first thing we should do is bring the plight, the issues of Black America to the President of the United States. And so, the negotiations that began to lead up to a meeting actually, after a while, it was clear there wasn't gonna be any meeting. He had no desire to meet with the Congressional Black Caucus then, which was still less than a dozen members. But still, that, that was something that he did not entertain as, as something that was feasible or necessary. So, our counter position was to boycott the State of the Union Address, all of us as a group. And the, the reaction was phenomenal. It, it was, it was very clear and we made it clear that the reason was our inability to meet with the president to air the de-demands that were, were growing in terms of the hostility that his administration was showing. The, the lack of enforcement of federal laws that would, would give us some protection to, to citizens. And so, the, the Congressional Black Caucus in a way was instantly put on the map because of the incredible reaction that came about from our refusal to, to, to attend the in, the inaugural, and at the same time his refusal to meet with us. We, we seemed to have created a stage in which we could at least have our presence felt. That they could no longer ignore us, that it, it wasn't just a request that you could throw in the wastebasket and say, That ends that. And so, it, it gave a heart politically to people from one end of the country to the other as we began this new assertion of ourselves within the congress, no matter how difficult and, and how, how, how outnumbered we were.

00:54:30:00

Interviewer #2:

And what happens when you finally meet with him? What do you get from him? I understand that you presented sixty some demands, and what do you get from him?

00:54:39:00

John Conyers:

Well, it, it was a nominal meeting that, that, that had no, no, no serious consequence. We finally got the meeting, and when we got the meeting, we had our demands pretty well drawn up. And, and, they were, they were, they were received but not acted upon. It did not create a new beginning of a relationship in which we argued that we oughta get these and, and they argued that we will maybe give you these instead of those. They were received and filed, and that was the end of it. [car passes] President Nixon was, could be a pretty hard-nosed executive officer when he wanted to be, and to him this was a, an unprecedented demand being made upon the chief executive that he would meet with the political leaders of Black Am, with the political leadership of Black America. The, the whole thing to him was a, an unjust demand that was being made upon him for, for purposes which he could not fathom.

00:55:59:00

Interviewer #2:

OK. Cut

[cut]

00:56:01:00

Camera crew member #1:

Mark.

Camera crew member #2:

Mark.

[slate]

00:56:03:00

Interviewer #2:

Why is 1972 so critical in terms of pulling together a Black political convention? What is happening in the country?

00:56:11:00

John Conyers:

Well, in 1972 we were, we were faced with probably the, the results of a, of four years of Nixon that had shown us that law and order was here to stay, J. Edgar Hoover was riding high. The, the themes of Richard Nixon had been really stamped on the federal government. The Fred Hampton incident in Chicago, the assassination in his sleep by FBI agents of a, of a very highly thought of young Black activist, and the whole era of repression, Nixon had finally come into his own, and we were sort of at the, the bottom. We were at, at the, at our wits end, and I think that fueled the desire of Black leadership that we're not just radical but progressive political people, labor people, street people, intellectuals. That there was a, a felt need that, that we come together, and Mayor Hatcher's city was seen as a, as a central spot, not only by it being Midwest but it, that it, it reflected a, a, a place where we could all come together and express ourselves.

00:57:51:00

Interviewer #2:

Can you remember any highlights of the Gary Convention?

00:57:55:00

John Conyers:

Well, I remember the Detroit delegation because it was, it consisted of people who were, who weren't all working in sync in Detroit. We had the labor movement, represented by Tom Turner. We had a state senator name Coleman Alexander Young, who had been on pretty un- unhappy terms with the labor movement. We had some NA—

00:58:28:00

Interviewer #2:

Cut just a second. I know this is important, but we probably won't be able [unintelligible].

[beep]

John Conyers:

Oh, the—

[cut]

00:58:33:00

Camera crew member #1:

Mark.

Camera crew member #2:

Mark.

[slate]

00:58:35:00

Interviewer #2:

What is happening in the country in terms of repression and law and order that makes it important that the Black political convention be called together?

00:58:44:00

John Conyers:

Well, in '68, in the beginning President Nixon had really found his strength and resources. He was—

00:58:52:00

Interviewer #2:

I'm sorry. If you could actually begin with 1972 and what's happening in the country in 1972.

John Conyers:

Oh, OK.

Interviewer #2:

Yeah.

00:58:57:00

John Conyers:

All right. All right. [pause] By 1972, President Nixon had really hit his stride. He, he had the FBI with J. Edgar Hoover into their repression mode. We don't, we don't know how many strategies were, were going on, that would come out later. He was attacking, very effectively, many of the social and domestic programs that, that had been going on. He, he was rallying us around the, the Vietnam War, and so all the time the, the fortunes of the, the Congressional Black Caucus, Black leadership, and the fate of—

00:59:54:00

Interviewer #2:

Excuse me just a second. What's happening as you're looking down?

John Conyers:

Oh, OK.

Interviewer #2:

That's OK, though.

John Conyers:

All right.

Interviewer #2:

OK, cut.

[beep]

[cut]

[camera roll #2061]

01:00:00:00

Camera crew member #1:

Mark.

Camera crew member #2:

Mark.

[slate]

01:00:01:00

Interviewer #2:

OK—

John Conyers:

OK.

Interviewer #2:

—so what's happening in the mood of the country with repression in 1972?

01:00:06:00

John Conyers:

Well, in 1972 President Nixon had hit his stride. With J. Edgar Hoover and the repression mode, they were going full steam. Domestic programs had been cut back. Vietnam war protesters were being characterized as unpatriotic at best, subversive at worst. The civil rights movement was, was almost flat on its rear end. And the, the, there was a felt need among Black political leadership and those in the labor movement, intellectuals, mainstream and

radicals, that we come together. And so, for a lot of reasons, Gary was seen as the, the center point, the midpoint where we could all come together.

01:00:57:00

Interviewer #2:

Hallelujah! [claps] Cut. That's, that's even better than the first time.

[beep]

Interviewer #1:

That was great.

Interviewer #2:

That was wonderful.

[beep]

[cut]

[sound roll #228]

01:01:03:00

Camera crew member #1:

Marker.

Camera crew member #2:

Mark it.

[slate]

01:01:06:00

Interviewer #2:

OK. What, what are your high points from the Gary Convention?

01:01:09:00

John Conyers:

Well, the Gary Convention was something that has never been reproduced. It was the one and only convention of its kind in which the, the various different political forces in a, in Black America came together, not just to strategize but to let each other know what their positions were. There was, there was a, there was a lot of posturing, there were some incredibly fiery speeches. The rhetoric tore the ceiling off the place at least once or twice. Baraka, of course, was the, the lead radical intellectual, whose speech about the inevitable failure of capitalism is really one, one of the great Black political statements of all time. But there were, there were others there. Jesse Jackson put forward the case for an independent party. He was far less politically active than anyone ever thought that he would ultimately become. There were representatives of the labor movement that were present. There were, there were probably intellectual conservative forces. And so, this created a dynamic of its own, a tension that, that couldn't be reproduced in, in other ordinary kinds of conferences. And, and this, this tension drove everyone to put forward their case in, in the most descriptive, emotional, hair-raising, rhetorical style possible, so you, you had some of the, the, the real great speeches of our, our era that came forward.

01:03:16:00

Interviewer #2:

Do you remember any particular ones? I mean, aside from Baraka's speech, do you remember Jesse's speech, for example, the—

01:03:23:00

John Conyers:

Well, Baraka, Baraka and, and Jesse I think were probably, were probably the most notable. And it, it left us, actually it, it left us so far out that we didn't have any, any, any place to pragmatically work after we left the convention. It, it's like, it's like a group of people coming together saying, What if? and How do we plan this? It was, it was, good to know that there were so much dynamism and, and hope out there, but the, and that we promised to come back again, and there were resolutions of how we were going to, to direct ourselves, but they, they kinda faded away. What, what we saw happening was the civil rights movement began to continue to move its way forward, and the political activity began to catch on. More and more Blacks, the, the Civil Rights Act and the Voter [sic] Rights Act began to kick in, and actually the numbers of Black elected officials began to go up in, in the Congressional Black Caucus but at the local level, which in some ways was as equally as important.

01:04:57:00

Interviewer #2:

Did that relate to Gary in any way?

John Conyers:

I think so. I, I think, I think it maybe—

Interviewer #2:

If you can talk, mention Gary in your answer.

01:05:05:00

John Conyers:

Yeah. I, I think the, the slow and steady increase of Black elected officials at the national and local le-level did relate to the Gary conference because what we saw was that you had to be in a political mode. It, it politicized more people, and, and even those who did not buy Baraka's notion of building a new system based on, on the, the, the imminent burial of the present one, or Jackson's notion that there oughta be an independent party, it did give us the insight to see that there was a lot more that could be done between now and, and the time that our visionaries were painting in their speeches. And so, there was that relationship that, that got us on, on a political track.

01:06:05:00

Interviewer #2:

Cut.

Camera crew member #1:

Cutting?

Interviewer #2:

Cut, yeah.

[beep]

Interviewer #2:

OK.

[cut]

01:06:09:00

Camera crew member #1:

Marker.

[slate]

Camera crew member #2:

Speed.

01:06:13:00

Interviewer #2:

How did you first hear about the Fred Hampton, Mark Clark murders?

John Conyers:

Well, I think it came to me over the—

Interviewer #2:

Sorry. If you could mention their—

01:06:21:00

John Conyers:

OK. The, the murders of Fred Hampton and Mark Clark came over the airwaves. I was probably in Detroit. And it, it was, it was so shocking that at first you were hoping that maybe this wasn't really the way it went down. As you, as you remember, there was also this exotic cover up that the state's attorney engaged in, in, in trying not to reveal how they were actually executed by law enforcement agents. That the FBI had, had coordinated this, that it was, that it was murders that were totally unnecessary, totally unprovoked. I mean, here were are talking about killing people at night as they lay sleeping in their beds. This, so this was a, a totally unnecessary massacre of particularly well thought of young Black leaders. This was our leadership being cut down in a repressive way that, that really inflamed the rest of the country and left us very deeply saddened about it. When we recovered, of course, we, we had ad-hoc hearings in which Black leadership, the, the beginning, the nascent beginnings of a Congressional Black Caucus. Most of the members joined with other local officials to hold ad-hoc hearings, to have witnesses who testified about the circumstances of that day and evening and night.

01:08:18:00

Interviewer #2:

How many witnesses were there? Can you give me a sense of what the hearings were like?

01:08:22:00

John Conyers:

Well, first of all, we, we, we went actually to the, the residence in which they were killed and, and went there into the bedroom and, and made a physical examination of it, with lawyers and representatives of the families of the slain men so that they, they were pointed out to us the detail. We were talking, we were examining bullets and, and, and where, where they were fired at and the position that they were sleeping in, in bed when they were killed. We also had people testifying as to what kind of activities they were engaged in to make this so totally unnecessary. That, that this was actually a government execution that then had to go to the next step, as frequently develops in government crimes is that there has to be a cover-up. And so, the, there was this exotic description of, of how the, the, there was some kind of alleged shootout. As it turned out there wasn't any at all. And that—

01:09:44:00

Interviewer #2:

And what, what were the findings of, of your investigation? I mean, do you remember any of the findings?

John Conyers:

Well, we, we determined, of course—

Interviewer #2:

Sorry, if you can say that—

John Conyers:

OK.

Interviewer #2:

[unintelligible]

01:09:54:00

John Conyers:

In, in terms of the ad-hoc committees findings, we ultimately took the, the testimony of, of the witnesses which pointed out and, and made it, I think, conclusive beyond any doubt that

there was no basis for, for this execution, this government execution. That, that the, that none of the people in the homes, particularly those that were killed, were in, acting in any way offensive or threatening the lives of government agents in any way, and that, that the assassinations were completely uncalled for. There was absolutely no basis for this incredible misconduct and abuse of authority on the part of government officials.

01:10:55:00

Interviewer #2:

Cut.

[cut]

01:10:58:00

Camera crew member #2:

Speed.

Camera crew member #1:

Marker.

[slate]

01:11:00:00

Interviewer #2:

What did the, the Fred Hampton, Mark Clark murders say to you, particularly in terms of the repressive atmosphere going on?

01:11:09:00

John Conyers:

The, the murders of Hampton and Clark had a, a radicalizing impact upon me in, in this sense. First of all, it made clear that every Black American who was prepared to participate in the struggle could be summarily executed in the same fashion that happened to them. It was like the, the government holding up an object lesson. It, it was no longer another incident in the litany of police abuse cases that were coming out of Chicago which were many and numerous and never-ending, but this was a, this was an example that, that was supposed to inhibit, spread fear, and turn away those who thought that they could make America a democracy by their direct intervention. And what the government was saying is that, here's what will happen to anybody that, that tries to do what these two men were doing, that tries

to join organizations that are about political empowerment, who were determined that they were going to make a change in their country during their lifetime. And the government was, was retaliating at its most vicious and violent level by saying, well, you might try to do that, but you're going to be destroyed. And anybody that tries to do what they're doing is going to meet the same fate. And this, this hit me head on as a, a confrontation that was, that made life and death simple choices that had to be made in what you were doing. And I think, I think that it, it pulled me up from, from a rationalizing of a government position to realize that indeed we were facing the enemy and it was our government.

01:13:37:00

Interviewer #2:

Cut. Oh! [laughs] Bless you.

John Conyers:

Well, well—

Interviewer #2:

Yes. That's—

[cut]

[end of interview]

01:13:44:00