

Interview with **Bobby Rush**

Date: October 20, 1988

Interviewer: Terry Rockefeller

Camera Rolls: 3032-3037

Sound Rolls: 315-317

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 Bobby Rush, conducted by Blackside, Inc. on October 20, 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 #3032]

[sound roll #315]

[slate]

00:00:11:00

Interviewer:

And if you just incorporate an answer — as you answer me, if you sort of incorporate the idea. If you don't say "it" but you say "the Panther party."

Bobby Rush:

Of course.

Camera Crew Member #1:

Three-fifty.

Interviewer:

Right. OK. All right?

Camera Crew Member #1:

Any time. Mark.

00:00:26:00

Camera Crew Member #2:

Marker.

[slate]

00:00:29:00

Interviewer:

What, what did it mean for you personally? Where were you coming from when, when you worked to found the Black Panther party here?

00:00:35:00

Bobby Rush:

Well, basically, it, the Panther party's founding in Chicago was a result of some political chicanery on the part of Stokely Carmichael, who at the time was beginning to become a part of the central committee of the, of the Panther party. And I was a member of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, the Chicago chapter, along with Bob Brown, and we were very close to Stokely at the time and Stokely wanted to, to get a base of, of power on the central committee. And he asked us to come out and to form a chapter of the Panthers here in Chicago. Actually, to evolve the SNCC chapter into the party apparatus here in Chicago. And I was asked to go out to Oakland and to get the authority to actually form a chapter here. I did go out, I think it was about October of '68, about twenty years ago, boy. [laughs] And I met with Bobby Seale, I, I met with David Hilliard, Eldridge Cleaver, and I was, and a guy by the name of D.C. And I asked, told them that we wanted to form a chapter of the Panther party in Chicago.

00:02:23:00

Interviewer:

Now, how did you first meet Fred Hampton and how did he become part of that mix?

00:02:27:00

Bobby Rush:

Well, I met Fred in ab—ab—about a year or two before then, about sixt—well, actually about '67. Again, Stokely was in Chicago speaking and he had a speaking engagement in Maywood, which is a suburb. So we went out to Maywood and the speaking engagement was

organized by Fred Hampton and the youth division of the NAACP, OK, at that time Fred was head of the youth division of NAACP. And [clears throat] that's where I met Fred Hampton at, my—our first meeting. But getting back to the, to the actual formation, because it's quite, it's kind of interesting. There was a—when I talked with Bobby and David, they indicated that [clears throat] there was already a chapter existing here in Chicago and they didn't need another chapter. And, but I knew what was going on, I was from Chicago and I just thought that was kind of arrogant of them to say that there was always a chapter, already a chapter here because of the fact of it is I knew that the people who were claiming to be Panthers weren't really doing anything. They weren't organizing the community, they had no following, they had no office, no one that was able to reach them or anything like that. So, when I got back to Chicago, I said you can, after they had turned me down out there, I said, well, we're gonna continue to organize because we know what's going on. And plus, Stokely was supporting us. So, the first thing we did was to try to locate an office and I was, I remember in about early p—the, the same time, '68, early part of November, I was on the bus, on the Madison Street bus, and I saw this big building that was vacant and it's a For Rent sign, so imm—I immediately jumped off, went to a liquor store next door and asked them, inquired about the building, and they said that it would, that it, it was for rent and I asked, I went back to one of our supporters, Alderman Sammy Rayner, who was a member of the city council and also a prominent businessman, I asked him to rent the, the building for us. And he did, in fact, signed his name to the lease and also got the gas and thing turned on. So we had a, a functioning office with a functioning telephone. Around December of '68, there were two Panthers traveling from, members of the central committee from Oakland, California, and they were traveling from New York back to Oakland. And they asked, I guess they were having some discussion on the plane and they were, they asked the, the stewardess whether or not the distance from Oakland, I mean from New York to Oakland, was the same as the distance between, from, New York to Cuba, or some, some question similar to that. And this stewardess got hysterical, ran to the captain, the captain called in and they landed here in Chicago, landed the plane here in Chicago, and swept these guys off the plane because they thought these guys was getting ready to hijack the plane, OK? And they put 'em in a county jail and we got a call from Oakland, California, saying that, Well, look, we got two Panthers there in jail, and you're the only telephone number that we have in, in the city of Chicago, so would you see what's goin' on and take care of those guys that's in, in jail? And so that's how we officially became the official chapter of the Black Panther party in, in the, in the state of Illinois, we, because of that incident and, that's, that's just one of the [unintelligible].

00:05:53:00

Interviewer:

That's wonderful, that's great, that's great. Can you talk a little bit about wha—what the Panther party was trying to achieve in terms of, you, you, you called yourself a revolutionary party. What kind of revolution were you hoping to bring about?

00:06:11:00

Bobby Rush:

Well, I think that when you look at in essence we were, we were, we wanted to bring about a change, we wanted to bring about empowerment, we wanted to bring about changing conditions. Now, the rhetoric might have gone a number of different ways. I think the Panther party evolved to, to many different things in the short time that, that it was alive and thriving here. It was cultural nationalist at one time, it was, then it evolved into a revolutionary nationalist, and then it evolved into internationalist, and then it began—evolved into, had components of socialist philosophy involved in it, and then it ultimately evolved into what we call revolutionary intercommunalist, you know, which was another component of a number of different philosophies and ideologies and things like that.

00:07:06:00

Interviewer:

What did empowerment mean to you? Like, what were your goals, what were you working for with the programs and the various alliances you formed?

00:07:13:00

Bobby Rush:

Well, I think that power, very succinctly, and this is a quote directly from Bobby Seale's, was, is "the ability to define phenomena and make it act in the desired manner." And what we were trying to do was trying to organize Blacks, particularly in the Panther party, and we were trying to coalesce with other organization that was trying to organize natural allies of the Panther party and the Black community, and to, a, a, a, a community and a, and a political vehicle and a political force that would be able to bring about fundamental changes in the lives of, and the quality of lives in, in, in, in the overall Black community. When that's what's really the, the engine, that was the burn, that was the, the, the motivation that most Panthers had, was to bring about social and economic and political justice for people who had been denied that since the exist—since the beginning of their existence in this country.

00:08:21:00

Interviewer:

Can you share something with me about your impressions of Fred Hampton as a leader and why it, it made sense to pull him into the Panther party, how, how it was that he moved people?

00:08:31:00

Bobby Rush:

I think that Fred moved people because most people felt as though he had a sense of conviction that was the height of, of, of, of effective, of effectiveness. That he was a person who, if he said something, then you'd better watch out, within a few seconds he's gonna be doing exactly what he said he's gonna do, OK? And he was, he was not a person who used his skill, to influence and to move people and to motivate people, he did not use them in any kind of selfish manner. He used them strictly to, and, and, and to get people to move from one point to another point in their own self-interest. Fred was so courageous, so extraordinary as a speaker, so powerful because of the fact that he was a simple, young man, although he was a leader of men much older than him, he was a simple, young man that, and whose simplicity and his approach to, to life and the enthusiasm and excitement and the, and the conviction that it, that it, that, that this all beca—was a part of. I just think that, that there are a ha—there are only a few people ever who have the same kind of qualities, and charisma, and, and leadership abilities that Fred Hampton had. And he on—he, and he was murdered at, at age 21 and if he had been allowed to, to live, he, if he had lived longer, he would certainly have been a force on this face of, on this Earth.

00:10:29:00

Interviewer:

You were speaking before about some of the alliances, tell me what, that the Panthers did seek alliances with, with other groups. What were some of the alliances you were seeking?

00:10:41:00

Bobby Rush:

Well, we had, we, the Panthers were always involved in coalition building. Always involved in coalition building, and, and that's how, one of the—

[rollout on camera roll]

[wild sound]

Bobby Rush:

—ways that we rejected certain cultural nationalist or nationalist streams because we viewed—

00:10:58:00

Interviewer:

Oh, I'm sorry, the, we just, we, we've just gone through the first roll of film, and so the change will just take up again with that question.

Bobby Rush:

OK. All right. Tea time, huh?

Interviewer:

Right. And you get to have tea.

[cut]

[camera roll #3033]

[sound roll #316]

00:11:07:00

Camera Crew Member #1:

Marker.

Camera Crew Member #2:

Mark.

[slate]

00:11:10:00

Interviewer:

Who were the Panthers seeking to build alliances, coalitions with? What was the idea behind that?

00:11:16:00

Bobby Rush:

Well, as a, you know, the Panthers, we wanted alliances with all progressive groups that we could work with toward a common goal. And we certainly and specifically with, here in Chicago, we, early on in the history of the Panthers, we developed a very, very close relationship with the Young Lords who were a Hispanic group of actually ex-gang members, and not only ex-gang members but there were also middle class students and things like that too. They were, they were, they were a organization we decided to work closely with under Cha Cha Jiménez. And, and then we also developed a close alliance with the Young Patriots

which was a young White organization that was involved in uptown. They were young, Appalachian Whites. And [clears throat] Bob Lee, who was the, or one of the, field lieutenants within the Panther party actually came from the North Side and he was familiar with some of these groups and he actually worked very hard to pull us closer together. And we, we developed what we called the Rainbow Coalition. It was the first indication that, I mean, first time that "The Rainbow Coalition" was used and we actually had buttons, little small buttons with different colors on it, that would symbolize that we were promoting the Rainbow Coalition. And this was back in si—early part of '69. So, we also worked very closely with SDS and, and other organizations throughout the city of Chicago and, and, and I'm just speaking sp—specifically here in Chicago now, because we thought that there was a role that, that needed to be played by all those groups, especially in their own neighborhoods, in their own communities. We had—

00:13:18:00

Interviewer:

But you had a particular difference with some faction of SDS and the Days of Rage. How, can you, can you tell me, tell me how that came about and, and where your differences lay with them.

00:13:28:00

Bobby Rush:

Well, we, first of all, we never were advocate, advocates of spontaneity. We thought that in, the need in the back community was not so much to confront arbitrarily and, and spontaneously the, the police agencies but that we wanted to develop a programmatic, a programmatic thrust. As you know, the Panthers even split over a similar issue. That's when Eldridge Cleaver broke with the Panther party, primarily over the issue of whether or not the party was gonna take a, on a ultra-militaristic point of view or whether it was gonna actually go in and do some real organizin' in the community. And we saw the, the Days of Rage and the Weathermen as not being relevant in that they were only talking about the confronting on a, in a, in a, in a quasi-military manner, the agencies, the police agencies, whereas we wanted to really organize people into a force.

00:14:37:00

Interviewer:

What were your other fears about Days of Rage? What, what the, what the response would be.

00:14:40:00

Bobby Rush:

Well, we knew that, that the Days of Rage, just like the, the Democratic Convention, that the Black community would, would, would, would receive the brunt of it. I mean, and I mean, historically, that's been the situation. I mean, if you look at Patty Hearst, I mean, Cinque, Cinque, Cinque is dead, Patty Hearst is, you know, living her life. And the Black community always gets the brunt of the action. And, and that's one of the things that prevent coalition, some serious coalition buildings, because of the, and present—prevented it then because if you, if you [pause] if Black, the, if Blacks get involved in, in rousing the police agencies and enforcers, then they're gonna get the brunt whereas Whites always got the op—the option of forgetting about their involvement, or the system is always gonna be manipulated in their behalf and things like that. So, I mean, all of those things came into play and we totally rejected the, the, the, the Days of Rage. We knew that we did not want to see the police launch a, a open attack on the Black community and they would have done it if Black folks had tried to do the same things that, that the Whites did within the Days of Rage.

00:16:10:00

Interviewer:

You, you've brought up this issue of police repression. How, as you, as the Panther party was growing and, and, and becoming more active and, and, and more involved in the community, what were some of your personal experiences with the way the police were responding to the Panthers?

00:16:32:00

Bobby Rush:

Well, I think that, that the police, they made a concentrated effort, and I'm not just, when I say, I'm not just talkin' about your local cop, OK? I'm talking about those guys who provide the foundation and the, and the, and the theoretical basis for police actions, OK? I mean, in the hierarchy of the, of the Justice Department and, and various other police agencies, they concentrated on the Panther party because I think the Panther party, for two reasons; one is that the Panther party developed a rationale that was acceptable by a lot of, of, of Black and progressive White folks in regards to what needed to be done, OK? And two, the second reason, rather, is that I think that the Panther party allowed itself, because of the rhetoric that we were espousing, allowed itself to become a victim of, of, of police attacks and things like that.

00:17:58:00

Interviewer:

How did those attacks, what, what were some concrete examples of, of things that you were having to face from the police?

00:18:07:00

Bobby Rush:

Well, say for instance, I mean, it was on a lotta different levels.

Interviewer:

OK.

Bobby Rush:

OK? You know, we certainly believed that all our phones were wiretapped at all times. And, and, and a lot of that has come out that they were. We were harassed by having Panthers who were, say, selling newspapers on the corner arrested and bond money had to be paid for them. They were charged with a number of different type of charges. We, again Panthers were actually murdered, OK? Panthers were charged with a number of, of, of, of, of crimes, thus increasing the need for bond money and that type of thing. There were occasions when, I mean, the police attacks here in Chicago, I think the first attack that we had was in June of '69, OK? Where they actually attacked our office, supposedly lookin' for a, a runaway individual who was, in fact, as it came out in the, later on, in fact it was a, a, a, a informant for the, for the police forces, OK?

00:19:32:00

Interviewer:

What, what did the police do when they attacked the headquarters?

Bobby Rush:

Well, they, they attacked—

Interviewer:

Please just say the police, instead of "they" because we—

00:19:37:00

Bobby Rush:

Yeah. The police, at the time in, I think it was about June of six—1969, earl-early one morning they came and this is the F—the FBI led this raid, and they were embarrassed about this, they led the raid. *They shot up the door at the office there, arrested some Panthers, and just to show you the, the nature of, of the raiding officers there, they burned boxes of cereal that we had on the third floor.* And this, this cereal was for our breakfast for children,

I mean, the, all the breakfast food that we had collected and stored upstairs was when *they deliberately set fire to that. They didn't set fire to the second floor. They set fire to the third floor where all the, you know, and was, that was kind of indicative of, of, of, of the, of what they were thinkin' and how they, how they were moving.* But we, of, of course probably the most, again, the most poignant, poignant ex—example of, of, of police repression was the murder of Fred Hampton and it was very, it was very, it was well-thought-out, well-planned. It didn't have to ha—if they wanted to get Fred off the streets, he was supposed to have gone back to prison on the 13th of December, which was nine days prior to them actually murderin' him. So, they did not want him to survive. They wanted him to, they wanted him dead. And that's the reason why they, and so that's, that's the most, one of the most extreme examples.

00:21:13:00

Interviewer:

I, I'd like to move now to talk about December 4th. How did you first hear about what had happened at Monroe Street? Where were you when you learned?

Bobby Rush:

Well, I was at home—

Interviewer:

We, we're gonna run out of film, so that's great. You can have some tea and we'll start the, start the, start fresh.

[cut]

[camera roll #3034]

Camera Crew Member #1:

Mark.

00:21:31:00

Camera Crew Member #2:

Mark.

[slate]

00:21:35:00

Interviewer:

How did you learn about the murders at Monroe Street?

00:21:38:00

Bobby Rush:

Well, I learned, I was told about the murders early on the morning of December 4th. I was at my apartment [coughs] and I got a call about 2:30 AM and a, a member of the Panthers told me that there was, police had cordoned off the entire area around Fred's house and that they thought it was a shootout and they didn't know what had happened. So, I immediately got dressed and had someone to come by and pick me up and I went over to a f—a member of the Panthers' apartment who was, lived down the street about a block away from Fred, from where Fred was staying. And we were listening to the news accounts. We didn't know what was going on, no one could penetrate the area. We didn't know what was going on. And I guess it must have been about 6:00 or 6:15, the report on the radio came over and said that Fred Hampton had been taken to Cook County Hospital, there was a shootout, and I think at the time they said all of the individuals in the apartment had been killed. And there were some police wounded and things like that and the, but that Fred Hampton had been taken to Cook County and they thought that he was, that he had been killed. And I guess maybe about a half an hour, forty-five minutes later they—later they indicated Fred had indeed been, been, been killed in the, in the raid and that's how I foun—that's how I found out about it.

00:23:28:00

Interviewer:

What did you do for the rest of that day? What, what, how did you try to organize the community or cope with the situation or respond to the situation?

00:23:37:00

Bobby Rush:

Well, we stayed in this apartment, this basement apartment for a, a little while. I guess it must have been about ten or ten-thirty, eleven o'clock. We finally, after the police had left the area, we finally came out and we went into the apartment and we saw what had took, taken place there. And by that time, the news media was desperately seeking our positions and what we were, you know, our responses and things like that. And I recall a, a gentleman who was a producer of the twelve o'clock news on the local station, Channel Five, asked us all to appear, or asked me to appear alon—at the, on, live on the, on the twelve o'clock news with, with the state's attorney, Edward Hanrahan. And we did appear. Hanrahan didn't—Hanrahan didn't show up. And we told them that from our evidence it looked like it had been a clear case of murder. From the responses that we got from our attorneys and other individuals who

viewed the evidence, the physical evidence in that apartment, that it could not have been a shootout. And we proceeded to accuse the state's attorney and the state's attorney's police of murdering Fred Hampton. And it [sighs] that led to a number of charges and counter charges and lies being told and, by, by State's Attorney Hanrahan at the time and led, it led to the police enactment and reenactment of the, of the, of the, I mean, of the murder and the police assault. It, it led to lies that were being told and they say the *Chicago Tribune* at the time painted, I mean they ran a picture of, of the supposedly what was the back door of the apartment leading into the, into the, into the apartment. Wha—and there was some large around, well not large, small round configurations and the police were—

00:26:05:00

Interviewer:

Can you start this over again, say the *Chicago Tribune* ran?

00:26:08:00

Bobby Rush:

Yeah. The *Chicago Tribune* ran a, a, a photo, I think it was on the front page, that showed small, round circles and they indicated these circles were supposed to have been evidence of gunfire, that these were actually holes that were cre—was caused by a Panther shoot out at the police and upon study on it and upon just lookin' at the back door, we saw that those were nothing but nail heads, and we were really able to nail the Tribune for, for printing that picture and, but they had bought Hanrahan's story lock, stock, and barrel and their only purpose was to try to rally public opinion around his story which was totally a falsehood. So, we were able to, to marshal the facts and we were able to present the facts in a, in a way that really proved beyond a shadow of a doubt that Fred Hampton was murdered in his bed while he slee—slept and we were able to also establish the fact that there was a strong, extremely strong possibility that he had been drugged. We had, independent pathologist who indicated that Fred Hampton had enough Seconal in his body at the time he was killed that it would have really just im—immobilized an elephant, OK? And—

00:27:32:00

Interviewer:

Now, one of the characters who is part of this whole story—

Camera Crew Member #1:

Can we cut for a second?

Interviewer:

Sure.

Camera Crew Member #1:

Sorry, I'm sorry.

[cut]

00:27:39:00

Camera Crew Member #2:

OK, marker.

[slate]

00:27:45:00

Interviewer:

How, how did you think about William O'Neal at the time? How, how had he gotten involved and, and, and what were the feelings around the party about him?

Bobby Rush:

Well, there was mixed feelings around the party about him.

Interviewer:

Can, can you use, just use his name?

00:28:03:00

Bobby Rush:

About, yeah about O'Neal, William O'Neal. There was, you know, we had, had mixed feelings about William O'Neal. He was able to get close to the leadership of the party because of the fact that you have to understand that the party was a group of young individuals who had very little resources and, and in a lot of cases very little skills. He came in, had some skills, had some resources, including a car, OK? And because of sometimes when we needed to go places we'd just tell O'Neal, well, you know, take us over here or take us there and that kind of thing. So, he was able to get close to the leadership. He had some carpentry skills and so at the time, you know, we basically allowed him to, to get, to get close because he could do certain things and—

00:28:57:00

Interviewer:

Were there suspicions about him?

Bobby Rush:

Yeah, Fred had suspicions about him. It's very ironic, Fred had some strong suspicions about him because of the fact that he would disappear for days without anyone ever seeing—

Interviewer:

You know what I need you to do is to, is to always use names.

00:29:18:00

Bobby Rush:

OK. Because O'Neal, because O'Neal would—

00:29:20:00

Interviewer:

Could you start, start over again maybe, "Fred had—"

00:29:23:00

Bobby Rush:

Yeah, yeah. Fred had strong suspicions about him because O'Neal would disappear for, for days without anybody knowin' exactly where he was at. He wa—he had al—he, there was a side of him that was never revealed and Fred was always suspicious of that side. I, however the liberal attitude that we took on O'Neal at the time allowed him to get away with a lot of things that probably, in hindsight, we should not have allowed him to get away with, we should not allowed him to get as close. But it was human frailties that allowed him to, to, to, to get to that point. He even emerged or was able to become the chief of security for the Illinois chapter of the Black Panther party and he was, he had access to sensitive—or people with authority, people in positions of power. As a matter of fact the, on the day that Fred was, was murdered, on the, the night before Fred was murdered, he was in fact in the apartment at 2337 West Monroe. And O'Neal certainly, certainly was one who was not ideologically or, or programmatically in tune with us. He accepted the, the philosophy of the Panther party in, in, in, in, in words but he was always, he always acted different than the, say, rank and file Panther or the, the leadership of the Panther party of the Illinois chapter here. He was always trying to get Panthers to involve, get, involve themselves in petty crimes like robbing gas stations and, and doin' that kind of stuff, OK? Which we, which we, most of us rejected, OK?

There might have been one or two who went along with him. But he was always advocatin' moves that would put us into direct conflict with law enforcement agencies in a, in an immediate way.

00:31:49:00

Interviewer:

Now—

Bobby Rush:

And he rejected the other aspect, he rejected the discipline and I think this is what really—

Interviewer:

You should stay that, start, start that with, with O'Neal, using again the name.

00:31:57:00

Bobby Rush:

Yeah. O'Neal, I mean, and, and, he, he, he would advocate all these in—in—ins—insane excursions but he rejected the discipline of the Panthers. He did not like to sell newspapers or would not sell newspapers, he would not attend the breakfast for children programs and become a part—

[rollout on camera roll]

[wild sound]

Bobby Rush:

—of that, that program. He just, programmatically he was not involved and, with the Panthers, he always wanted to, to—

00:32:26:00

Interviewer:

Now, now we can stop. OK. Let me just, again, change and then we can pick up. And then I want to ask you about how those—

[cut]

[camera roll #3035]

Camera Crew Member #1:

OK. Speed.

00:32:35:00

Camera Crew Member #2:

Marker.

[slate]

00:32:45:00

Interviewer:

Yeah, I wanted to ask you about after the murder of Fred Hampton, the fears you had for your own safety and, and perhaps life, and kind of what you did.

00:32:56:00

Bobby Rush:

Well, you know, after they, they killed Fred, what our normal response in any time, even when we expected there was gonna be a raid was for the leadership of, of the chapter to go underground, OK? And after they killed Fred and the, the day following those activities, it was determined that I should not return to my apartment, that I should go underground. And in fact, that's exactly what I did. I, that evening I was protected, hid out in Father Clements' home, OK? He hid me out over that evening, right on 39th Street, and I always have the utmost of respect for Father Clements, not si—that was just one ser—one in a series of things that he's, he's done for the Black community and, and, and, I certainly would su—support him because of that. But they, police did come to my apartment the next morning. They shot the door down and this is verified by my neighbors and also verified by the evidence. They didn't, they came in and just kicked the door in, they opened a, a unprecedented—unpre—unprecedented chase or, and they were just tryin' to find me all over the place, and they had my picture on all the local news channels that I was wanted, and, but we had allies and people who were concerned and people who would support us throughout the city and I was able to move from place to place until I ultimately turned myself in on the stage of Operation Breadbasket on that following Saturday after, after December 4th.

00:34:59:00

Interviewer:

Yeah, could you describe that event for me? You know, what you had decided to do and who was there and who was supporting you.

00:35:05:00

Bobby Rush:

Well, we had been in contact with, through my lawyer, Kermit Coleman, we had been in contact with the police, the Afro-American Patrolmen's League, and we had been in contact with Operation Push, and I knew that if the police had arrested me on the street or if they, that I would be dead, OK? And so therefore we arranged to—for me to be turned in publicly so that the entire city could see that I had no broken arms, that I was in good condition and that I had no bullet holes, well I wasn't walkin' around with any bullet holes in me. So, that's why we made the, the, my, my, to turn myself in, we made that public, and before a, a national or at least, well, a national audience, really. And subsequent to that, the police, they actually charged me with, I think, possession of, of marijuana, something like that, they, they accused me of having marijuana in my house. And upon further evidence, I mean, this didn't take no long period of time, they saw that the bag of what they thought was marijuana was nothin' but birdseeds. I had a, a, a bird in my house and that was bird, those were birdseeds so they didn't, they didn't have any charges to hold me on and that, that's exactly what happened.

00:36:36:00

Interviewer:

I wanted to go back to something that we kind of skipped over which was the Panthers' relationship with the gangs, especially, especially the Black, Black P. Stone Nation. What, what, what were some of the events that happened around trying to—

00:36:50:00

Bobby Rush:

Well, you know, I think early on, the Panthers re-re-remember now, we organized a, we opened our office on November the 17th of '68, OK? And earlier on, in that period of 30 days, I mean, we, we had created a, quite a furor within the city of Chicago. We, the press was hounding us, I mean, we were gettin', you know, so we were really a, a newsworthy event. The Stones had become aware of us, OK? And Jeff wanted to meet with us and we decided that we would meet with Jeff because we wanted to try to influence the gangs in Chicago to stop killing each other and stop perpetuating crimes in the community but in or—and to join and try to do, do some programmatic thrusts that would benefit the community from our point of view. And so Jeff wanted to meet with us and we wanted to meet with him. Fred—

00:37:54:00

Interviewer:

Now, there was a meeting one night, who—

Bobby Rush:

Sure, yeah. Fred, Fred had a, a real keen ability to understand power relationships, OK? And he knew and had been told,

Interviewer:

We need to stop. You're doing great, we just need to change the battery.

[cut]

[sound roll #317]

00:38:14:00

Camera Crew Member #1:

Mark it.

[slate]

00:38:20:00

Interviewer:

All right, so you and Fred Hampton went to meet him.

00:38:22:00

Bobby Rush:

Yeah. Well, Fred Hampton definitely had a, a unique and strong sense of, of power relationships, and he knew that any meeting that was gonna be conducted between the Panthers and the Stones was gonna send out certain messages and he wanted to make sure that the messages that the Stones received from the Panthers was that the Panthers were, were not intimidated. As a matter of fact, they, not only were we not intimidated but we intended to represent strength and that we were, if there was gonna be any intimidation being done, then it was gonna be done by the Panthers, not by the Stones. He also had been told that the Stones' rival in the city of Chicago, a gang called the Disciples, that Jeff did not respect—Jeff Fort, the leader of the Stones, did not respect them because he did—didn't think that they had any discipline, that they were just a bunch of brutes with no discipline. And Fred wanted to

make sure that he knew that the Panther—that Jeff knew, knew and understood that the Panthers were a very disciplined organization. And as a result of that, we decided that what we would do was be very organized when we went over to the Stones' headquarters. Now, we were invited to come to their headquarters to talk with Jeff. The night before, we arranged on the third floor of our headquarters, we arranged chairs to simulate automobiles or getting chair, seats in automobiles. And we actually had Panthers to practice getting in and out of a automobile with military dis—dis—precision. I had been in the service so I knew about military precision and things like that and so we actually had Panthers getting out of automobiles at precisely the same time. We also taught them about formations and how to march and what happened was that on the morning of the meeting, I think we were supposed to meet about eleven-thirty, twelve o'clock, we left our office on the West Side, drove to the South Side—we had weapons, all of us had shotguns and, and, and rifles, and we pulled up on, on 67th and Blackstone and on the side of the Stones' headquarters we got out of our vehicles in military, with military position, precision, got into a military formation, and actually marched about a block to the Stones' headquarters, OK? Was where, and when we went in to the headquarters, we announced that we were Panthers from the West Side and that we wanted to, we came for the meeting with Jeff Fort. Well, all hell broke loose, I mean, when we walked, marched in there with shotguns and the rifles, they just, you know, went hysterical and Jeff wasn't there. So, we went back to the West Side. Well, what happened on the way back to the West Side, we didn't, we, we had organized ourselves to get in there, we hadn't organized ourselves as effectively in terms of getting out, OK? [laughs] And the police had been called and told that there was, you know, thirty or forty people walkin' down the street with guns and things like that, so they descended on us and waited until we actually disbanded and we went separate ways and they were able to arrest a number of Panthers. And, and the, the weapons were, were in the trunk of most of the cars and things like that, so what happened wa—after that, we were back over at our headquarters and an, a, an emissary from Jeff Fort came over and said that he wanted to meet with us later on that evening, OK? Well, at the time, most of our people were either they were away from the headquarters, we weren't able to get in contact with, and a lotta them were in jail at that point because of the fact they had been arrested by the police. So, we decided that we would take, we would meet with him and that we would take a contingency of Panthers with us. And so we went, actually went over to the Stones' headquarters, a—another one of their headquarters in the same area, this was a church and about ten o'clock one night, and we got out of the car and we wasn't, wasn't able to do the military precision bit anymore because of the fact that, you know, we just didn't have the people. But we, I remember getting outta the car and going into this building and it was pitch black and we were told to walk up the steps and there was about five of us and I think, out of the five, there were two women, OK? So, there was about three men and two women, OK? And we were all, we, of course, we all, had our, had our, our weapons with us, handguns and things like that. And we, as we went up these steps, these long, these long steps, I think we went up to about the fourth floor of this building, we would pass

[rollout on camera roll]

[wild sound]

Bobby Rush:

—someone standing on the we—

00:43:34:00

Interviewer:

OK, what I, OK, what I need is to have you just start describing—

[cut]

[camera roll #3036]

00:43:41:00

Camera Crew Member #1:

Mark.

[slate]

00:43:44:00

Interviewer:

OK, what happened as you walked up the stairs?

00:43:47:00

Bobby Rush:

Yeah, we were walkin' up the, up the steps and as we, I mean, I noticed as we were goin' up the steps, or, you could hear it really, guys standin' on the steps with walkie-talkies and they would say something like, They're on the second floor approaching the third floor, and, and, They're on the third floor approaching the fourth floor, and things. So, we finally reached the fourth floor and I mean, this was pitch dark, you couldn't even see the hand in front of your face, OK? We finally re—reached the fourth floor and we went into this big massive room which I think it was probably a gymnasium, OK, and Jeff Fort walked over to us and welcomed us to his, to his, his, his home, to his, his, his business or to his headquarters there and he asked us to come over. And they, they had this long table sittin' down the middle of the room, OK, and after ex—a few exchanges and he said, Well, you all came over to our headquarters and you showed us some of your, your artillery. We'd like to just show you, reciprocate by showing you some of ours. And he got on his walkie-talkie and started saying, Bring out the rocket launcher and bring out the machine guns, and, you know, and they, and,

and when he said this, a couple of people would come up and they would march in front of us and they would have these rocket launchers and then they would have a, a, a machine, you know, machine guns and the enforcers and things like that, and I said he, after, he impressed us, very much so, with his arti—artillery, we sat down and we started talkin' about things and I think, but because of the fact that we were organized and we were disciplined, there developed a respect between the Panthers and the Stones that even today we still have a, a certain sense of, of, of, of, of rapport based on respect. He, he respected our ability to be disciplined, he respected our ability to be organized, and he respected our courage, and I think that's, that, that, that's everlasting. In regards to, as a matter of fact on the, at Fred Hampton's funeral, there was a large contingency of Stones who marched in a military formation to come and pay the last respects to Fred Hampton. I think that, that all became, came about as a result of the, what we would have, the, the approach that we had in terms of defining our relationships with the Stones.

00:46:20:00

Interviewer:

OK. I would like you to tell me the story about how the chapter here got recognized by Oakland one more time.

00:46:27:00

Bobby Rush:

Well, basically, what happened was that when I went out to Oakland and talked with Bob, the leaders there: Bobby Seale, Huey Newton, well, not Huey, he was in jail, Bobby Seale, Eldridge Cleaver, David Hilliard. They said that they already had a chapter established. But I knew that they didn't have a chapter established, I know that some guys was out faking as family, as Panthers but they, they weren't really Panthers. So, we began to proceed to organize anyway, OK? We opened up a office, got a telephone and that type thing. And we quietly began to, to do some organizing. A couple of weeks later, after we opened the office up, we got this frantic phone call from Oakland, California. We were the only number that they had of, for anyone in Chicago. Even though they had said that they had a chapter here, they didn't have a telephone number for those guys and they didn't have an office. They called us and told us that two of their central committee members of the national organization had been arrested for attempting hi—attempting hijacking. What had happened was that they were on a, on a plane on the way from New York to California engaged in some innocent conversation and they asked the stewardess, I guess they was discussing the distance between Cuba and New York and Cuba and, and wherever, you know. And it, they were ask—they asked actually in fact asked the stewardess, Well, is, will it take the plane just as long to get from New York to Cuba as it would take from, the plane to get from New York to, to California? And the stew—the stewardess went hysterical because this was the era where they were doing a lot of hijacking at and she ran to the, to the, to the captain and they evidently called somewhere and they were told to land the plane in, in Chicago. And they actually landed in Chicago, snatched these guys off the plane, put 'em in jail. These guys

made their only phone call to Oakland, California, and Oakland didn't have anybody else in Chicago. They called us, told us, OK, you know, take care of these guys, and we became officially recognized as the official chapter of the Black Panther party in Chicago based on, on, on, on, on these guys' innocent conversation and their discussion about distance, OK?

00:48:42:00

Interviewer:

You were talking before about some of the benefits that, that you, your time working with the party gave you, you know, the, the sense of discipline and organization. What, what did—

00:48:51:00

Bobby Rush:

Yeah, well, I think that the '60s, one of the things that the '60s represented to a lotta people, and a lotta young people, was an opportunity to get actively involved in, in making, taking control of themselves and taking, and having some impact on the, on the environment that they were involved themselves on, that they were in. We, I think that the '60s, definitely for me and for a lot of others, gave us an opportunity to exercise leadership, to make decisions, to realize a sense of self-worth and self-accomplishment and you have individuals eighteen, nineteen, seventeen. I mean, Ronald Doc Satchel was about eighteen years old when he became a Panther and this guy created a free medical clinic, a thriving free medical clinic where, and he was able to interrelate, interact with physicians, older physicians, heads of hospitals, and things like that, I mean, and, you know, where else would he's gon—was he gonna get that type of experience? Fred Hampton was a, a leader of men. I mean, Fred Hampton would, could get men three times his age to follow him, OK, so we were able to create a sense of identity and a sense of self-worth and a sense of achievement. And we were able to get a bearing and, and that experience is, and that's experience that just can't be duplicated. I, I certainly feel as though I did not, as an elected official in the City of Chicago, I did not get to this position using a traditional approach, I was not a Young Democrat. As a matter of fact, I have a lot of fun ribbing other elected officials now and other members of the central committee because they, they, they all came up through the, through the Young Democrats and those kind of apparatuses. You know, my training was in the civil rights movement. My training was in the, was in the, was in the Black Panther party, and we've been beating the regular Democrats for a while now, so I think that my training was probably a little bit better than theirs, OK, [laughs] so.

00:51:00:00

Interviewer:

That's great. Can you tell me how you, how it came about that you went to the Gary convention?

00:51:05:00

Bobby Rush:

Yeah. I, I was at, in Gary as a part of the entourage of, of Bobby Seale whenever he would come or any of the leadership, the national leadership would come to the city of Chicago or come near the city of Chicago, I would always be responsible for taking care of all the, whatever the logistics and everything and making sure that everything went smoothly. And basically that was my purpose at, in, in Gary and I was a part of the leadership team there and I, I was not an active conference participant over the long haul of the conference. I was primarily there to, just during Bobby's brief episode there in, in, in, in Gary.

00:51:49:00

Interviewer:

Can we cut for a second? OK.

[cut]

00:51:53:00

Camera Crew Member #1:

Speeding. Marker.

[slate]

00:52:00:00

Interviewer:

Again, going back to seeking out protection.

00:52:03:00

Bobby Rush:

Mm-hmm. Well, I think that one of the, the things that stands out most in my mind about that whole, the, the whole series of things that happened after Fred was murdered was how the community responded. I mean, we just had enormous outcr—expressions of support. I mean, we've had, we had White folks from the suburbs who would come in and, and stand guard at our office, OK, during that period of time. We, of course there was about 25,000 people who marched through that apartment to see what was going on. And this whole period, you know, was people were outraged that, that Fred, that Fred had been murdered in his sleep. And I, but there was also a, a feeling, a feeling of, of, of support and strength and protection that

surrounded the, the, the Panthers, including myself. And that certainly was evidenced on the morning that I turned myself in. I turned myself in to literally, to the police, but in front of, you know, thousands of people. At least two or three thousand people who were at Operation Breadbasket at the time. And there was no other place in the world that I could have, could have, could have done that except there. Of course, Operation Push and Op—Proj—Operation Breadbasket has always served as, as a forum for a number of different things in the Black community and this was not out of character with them. However, there was even, not even any discussion about it, we knew that we were gonna turn ourselves in to Jesse Jackson and in to Operation Push, Operation Breadbasket at the time.

00:53:45:00

Interviewer:

That's great. OK. Cut.

[cut]

[wild sound]

Interviewer:

Take that over? Think we should we do that again, if that's real—

00:53:54:00

Camera Crew Member #1:

Mark.

[slate]

00:53:57:00

Interviewer:

Who, what were the forces coming together at Gary, as you said?

00:54:00:00

Bobby Rush:

We had a, a wide array of, of political thought, Black political thought represented by, you know, Baraka to Bobby Seale to Richard Hatcher to religious leaders. I mean, you just had the whole array of people coming together and I think that for the first time, there was an acknowledgement and a consent from a broad spectrum of the Black leadership that electoral

politics represented an option that we [rollout] should certainly actively seek and investigate. And I think that—

[rollout on camera roll]

[wild sound]

Bobby Rush:

—it was historical in that it gave that kind of broad endorsement and consent.

Camera Crew Member #1:

[laughs]

Interviewer:

[laughs]

[cut]

[camera roll #3037]

00:54:52:00

Camera Crew Member #1:

Yeah. Marker.

[slate]

00:54:57:00

Interviewer:

One, one more time just, what was going on at Gary in terms of people coming together?

00:55:02:00

Bobby Rush:

Well, I, I think for the, one of the, it was probably the first time and one of the few times that you had a wide array of Black political thought and Black political leaders emerging or converging and to discuss a programmatic thrust. And I think that what was decided there was the fact that electoral politics did represent a, a, a, a, a legitimate option that we should all try to involve ourselves in. Certainly not everyone would be able to involve themselves in

it, but at least we could look at it and view it as, as, as an option. I mean, when I say "a wide array," you had everything from Imamu Baraka to Bobby Seale to Richard Hatcher, to religious leaders, to educational leaders. [plane flies over] I mean, a whole array of, of, of Black political leadership and thought came together.

00:55:56:00

Interviewer:

Sorry.

Camera Crew Member #1:

Cut.

[cut]

00:56:00:00

Camera Crew Member #1:

Marker.

[slate]

00:56:05:00

Interviewer:

What kind of array of people were at Gary and what was—

00:56:08:00

Bobby Rush:

Well, you had people from Imamu Baraka to Bobby Seale, to Richard Gordon Hatcher, to Mary Hatcher, to religious leaders, educational leaders. I mean, you had a broad spectrum of political leadership that I think to-together for the first time and consented, gave, gave their consent to the fact that pursuing electoral politics was a legitimate option that the Black community should, should investigate, and should involve themselves in. And it, it raised electoral politics to a level whereby you had activists from the '60s actually involve themselves in electoral politics. It certainly laid a broad philosophical foundation that I think that is still present today. I can't say that, that Gary, the, the convention in Gary directly effected anyone's election or non-election but I can say that it gave impetus to a number of Blacks looking at electoral politics as a legitimate way to involve themselves and contribute to the welfare of, of, of the Black community.

00:57:24:00

Interviewer:

What kind of reception did Bobby Seale get?

00:57:27:00

Bobby Rush:

Bobby Seale got a very good reception. He was a, a, a welcome speaker, he was highly appreciative in terms of his remarks. And I, after that, I think that Bobby made a decision to run for mayor of the city of Chicag—mayor of Oakland, California at the time, OK. And of course, you remember he got into a runoff there, it was a very effective campaign. So, Gary, you know, represented a bridging of, a coming together of a, of the different elements, the conservative elements with the more radical elements and all the elements in between. And again, I think it laid the philosophical foundation that said, OK, we don't have to all operate from what we, some of us would call operating out of the system. That we can get involved in the system, and that we can effect some changes within the system, or at least attempt to effect, effect some changes within the system and you're not gonna be viewed as someone who had, had sold out to that same system.

00:58:34:00

Interviewer:

Cut, great. That's terrific, that's nice, that's nice. [laughs]

Camera Crew Member #1:

[laughs]

Camera Crew Member #2:

[laughs]

[cut]

[end of interview]

00:58:41:00

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