

Interview with **Walter "Slim" Coleman**

Date: April 13, 1989

Interviewer: James A. DeVinney

Camera Rolls: 1086-1087

Sound Rolls: 139

Team: A

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.

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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 #1086]

[sound roll #139]

00:00:12:00

Camera crew member #1:

Marker.

00:00:12:00

Camera crew member #2:

Mark two.

[slate]

00:00:18:00

Interviewer:

OK, tell me about Cabrini-Green and why you demonstrated against it.

00:00:23:00

Walter "Slim" Coleman:

About five hundred, mostly poor Whites, some Blacks and Hispanics but mostly poor Whites, joined about five hundred Black Cabrini-Green residents to demonstrate against Jane Byrne. We had something in common. Jane Byrne had moved into Cabrini-Green, and the Black community that lived there was saying that was a charade, that she really intended to turn Cabrini-Green, Cabrini-Green into condominiums, and in the meantime was just ripping them off. The—and in uptown, she had gone back on a series of agreements that would've built about five thousand units of low-income housing at a time when the gentrifiers were moving on uptown. The, the issue was really for Blacks, Hispanics, and Whites, that Jane Byrne represented a group of people that wanted to gentrify the inner cities and run us out. And in the meantime, we were losing affordable housing through fires, and arson, and burnings, [phone rings] through rent increases, or through abandonment, and no new affordable housing was being built. So, that was, that was why we went down there, got a lot of press at the time, because she was trying to show that she was a good person, gonna go live in Cabrini-Green, and people used to say that, Well, Jane Byrne living in Cabrini-Green, that's the first condominium in Cabrini-Green. That we're gonna have all Jane Byrnes, and we're not gonna be here. That's what that was about.

00:01:47:00

Interviewer:

OK, tell me about POWER. What was it, and why did it come up?

Walter "Slim" Coleman:

People Organized for Welfare and Employment Rights. It really started with—

Camera crew member #1:

Sorry, could I have that again, I was out of the loop there.

Camera crew member #3:

[inaudible]

Interviewer:

Just start again.

Camera crew member #1:

Start—

00:02:00:00

Walter "Slim" Coleman:

POWER was People Organized for Welfare and Employment Rights, and it started really with a group of welfare rights groups in different communities. One out of the heart of uptown coalition, and I was the president of that group at that time, that said, We want the general assistance payments to go up to something that you could live on. General assistance was a kind of a state public aid payment for people that were disabled or unemployed. And, we wanted, they, they wanted to drop the general assistance payments down to about 115 dollars a month. You couldn't find a place to rent anywhere in the city of Chicago for 115 dollars a month, even a little room. So, they fought through the spring of 1982 and went to the legislature. They really just got no respect. They couldn't get a legislature to talk to them. So, after the final resolution of it, which actually we got to, we got a compromise at 144 dollars a month, which again, was not enough to pay rent much less anything else. We had a meeting and said, ***We're gonna have to get some respect out of these politicians. The only thing that they respect is votes, and we're gonna have to get our own folks registered. We formed a group, the group then called POWER, with about twenty-three different community-based organizations around the city, and determined to go register people at the public aid and unemployment offices.***

00:03:26:00

Interviewer:

Tell me a little bit about that. I mean, you had a very unusual voter registration program. Tell me a little about that.

00:03:32:00

Walter "Slim" Coleman:

Well, we had to fight to get registrars from the Board of Elections to come out, so we had to file a lawsuit that said that the Board of Elections could and would send deputy registrars. They let us do a little pilot program in the middle of the negotiations about the lawsuit for ten days. They said, You can, we will send you out registrars, but you have to have a van that they can sit in, in front of the public aid office. We won't let you go inside. You have to have a van outside. I think that they, there were about thirty-eight public aid and unemployment offices. And I, I really believe that they don't, didn't think we could come up with a van to put outside each one. And we got on the radio and asked people to please donate their van for the day each day, and we ran it five days a week. We'd go around with leaflets, and inside the public aid office, and get people to register. The, through the whole program, which was really just about thirty days long, we registered forty-three thousand people at those two, at public aid and unemployment sites, those thirty-eight sites around the city. That, I think, showed people that it [clears throat] could be done. That large numbers of people really were unregistered in the city of Chicago, and that they would register. When you were at the public aid office, or unemployment office, you say, Well, we, we want you to register to vote. We wanna get rid of Byrne, Thompson, and Reagan. We got three evil people, here, and we gotta get rid of them. If you don't think it's a problem, look at your welfare check.

Somebody would come out having just been cut off of public aid by their case worker for some ridiculous situation, and they'd be mad, and they'd say, All right. Now, I'm gonna register to vote. I'm gonna get rid of them. We really didn't have to argue very much. People would come out angry and say, Give me that thing! I'mma register to vote! It, it, you know, it expanded to other special sites where we did voter registration, and in about a two and a half months, two-month period really, we registered ninety-seven thousand people to vote, all told, before the regular in-precinct voter registration, where with the help of Ed Gardner from SoftSheen and some commercials that he put on the radio, we registered one hundred fifty thousand, so that the total was two hundred fifty thousand that were registered, really, within a two and a half months period.

00:05:47:00

Interviewer:

Now, tell me. What was all this POWER gonna be for? What, what were you moving toward eventually with the right to vote?

00:05:53:00

Walter "Slim" Coleman:

Well, I, I, I think when we really started, we wanted to get rid of Byrne, Thompson, and Reagan [laughs]. We wanted to get some respect on the issues of housing, of whether we're gonna be able to stay in the inner city. You know, whether we were gonna be gentrified out. On the issues of education, whether it was gonna be a dual track education, one for ten percent that were gonna get decent jobs and the other ninety percent that were either gonna get McDonald's jobs or be moved out. On the issue of healthcare, where our hospitals were closing, and we were being denied, all those kind of issues. General assistance, employment, all those questions that we've been fighting with, I don't think it really had consolidated so much around a political plan. But, we wanted some power behind those issues. And I think that's why the word POWER came from the first coalition. At the same time, we had been urging Harold Washington to run since the spring of 1982. And the, the, in the back of everybody's minds, even through the summer, was if we can register enough folks, and in fact Harold said when we asked him to run, said, he said, Well, go out and get me fifty thousand people, and I'll run for mayor. So, in August, we brought him [clears throat] the first, in September, on September the 1st, we brought him copies to his desk, a big stack of copies like this, said, Here, Congressman. Here are ninety-two thousand new registered voters [laughs]. Now will you run? And he said, Well, I got to think pretty hard about it, now [laughs]. But, so, we were moving, definitely, towards the mayor's race. I think probably because Byrne had raised expectations, and people were so angry that she had really gone back into the machine, and right away, some of them just very racist things that she had done in terms of the school board and in terms of the Chicago Housing Authority. The general disrespect to the neighborhoods in the city of Chicago and this, we used to say Reagan had a trickle-down theory, and that Byrne had a trickle-out theory. That Reagan would kinda trickle down on us, and then Byrne would trickle out on us. That meant that, build up

development in the Loop, and then in the neighborhoods, you'll benefit somehow from this, just like Reagan said, Let the corporations make a lot of money. Somehow you guys that are unemployed, after, will benefit. [clears throat] So, there had been, there must've been three hundred fifteen demonstrations a year against Jane Byrne at City Hall, right in front of her office. Everybody was focused right on the fifth floor.

00:08:20:00

Interviewer:

OK. Let's step down. Just wanting to see where we are on this roll.

00:08:24:00

Camera crew member #1:

Got three minutes on this roll.

Interviewer:

OK—

[cut]

00:08:26:00

Camera crew member #1:

Marker.

Camera crew member #2:

Mark three.

[slate]

00:08:33:00

Interviewer:

OK, tell me your story of the dinner.

00:08:36:00

Walter "Slim" Coleman:

Let me start it this way. For really almost twenty years, Chicago was unique in the sense that in poor White neighborhoods, and Puerto Rican neighborhoods, and Mexican neighborhoods, and Black neighborhoods, both on the South and the West side, grassroots community organizations had found ways to work together on different issues. It was a unity that, I think, that the machine and the power structure in general didn't understand. It wasn't based on cutting up their piece of the pie. It was based on, we had something in common, and we'd work together on those particular issues that we had in common. We'd come to a, a pretty good common analysis of what was going on in the city, that the city was not being planned—we were not in the future plans of the planners of the city of Chicago. The, a lot of those different issue coalitions we brought together in a, what we called the All-Chicago City News Dinner in 1982, where Harold Washington was the keynote speaker. And it, you could see that in every, in the room, there were about a hundred fifty tables, and at each table what you'd have, the, the 27th ward group against higher utility rates. And at this table, you'd have the 3rd ward group for better education. And there was all these different grassroots organizations. We had found enough in every ward in the city that we could cover forty-two wards, that we had the organizations to go out there and do the work in forty-two wards. This was before the voter registration drive, and in fact one of the goals that we set at that dinner was we're gonna register like crazy this summer. The, I think, Harold, Harold was kinda surprised. He came, and he was the Congressman then, somebody that we really thought a lot about anyway, and had worked with on other issues. He came to the dinner, and he listened to the speeches, and he listened to the different people that was in the crowd. Enthusiasm, that he talked about, he saw in the crowd, and he, you know, Harold was a politician, and he looked all the signs that say, Oh, 3rd ward, 4th ward, 5th ward, 32nd ward, 46th ward, you, we really got this. We kinda got it covered here. We got the wards covered. And it was a [phone rings] lot of people, lot of enthusiasm. So, we were in, I was introducing him, and I, I said, Well now, I want you all just to think about this. Suppose that you had a, a problem where [phone rings] the, the police had busted into, into your office. [phone rings] And, you got so mad, you couldn't get any, any, any redress for it, [phone rings] so you went down to the fifth floor, and you walked up, and you know that little guard that sits there? The sergeant? And, you say, Sergeant, I wanna see the mayor. And the sergeant went back.—

[rollout on camera roll]

[wild sound]

00:11:14:00

Camera crew member #1:

Hold up just a second.

Walter "Slim" Coleman:

OK.

00:11:15:00

Interviewer:

We gotta, can do a pickup right in the middle of that story.

Camera crew member #2:

Are you kidding?

[cut]

[camera roll #1087]

00:11:18:00

Camera crew member #1:

[inaudible]

Camera crew member #2:

Mark four.

[slate]

00:11:27:00

Interviewer:

And, introduce the mayor.

00:11:29:00

Walter "Slim" Coleman:

We talked about all the issues, and it was my job to introduce Harold Washington, then the Congressman. So, I said, Well, I want you to imagine, and I used a sister who had actually spoken. I said, Marion, if, if the police had just broken into your office, you know, like they do? And they just knock down a door, and come in like they're looking for somebody, and tear everything up, and you're so angry, you went down to the mayor's office, and you walked up to the mayor's office, and that little desk there where the sergeant sits, and said, Sergeant, I wanna see the mayor. And the sergeant says, All right, and he went back, and you were waiting for somebody else to come out, and tell you to go away, and that they really didn't wanna hear your problem, and instead, out came the Mayor. And you looked him in the face, and you said, Harold, I got a problem. Well, Harold put his head down on the desk, and he couldn't stop, couldn't stop laughing at everybody. He started yelling and cheering. It

was actually about five minutes' worth of ovation. And then finally, Harold got up to speak, and he said, Well, my mama always taught me to come when I was called, and then, he gave a speech which he called "The Tale of Two Cities," which really was a keynote for what the campaign was to be for the next nine months. He said that we had Reagan in Washington, DC, and we had a Reaganite posing as a Democrat on the fifth floor of City Hall, and that really was the issue, that the machine was, instead of the cities coming together, and saying we were gonna say no to Ronald Reagan and what Ronald Reagan is doing to the cities, that we had, under the name of being Democrats, that the machine, and Jane Byrne actually said it, Let's give Reagan's policies a chance. Well, we said, Well, who's gonna, when's Reagan's policies give us a chance? And he said that was "The Tale of Two Cities," and we began really, in some ways, began to campaign right there, in April of 1982. [phone rings]

00:13:15:00

Interviewer:

Tell me about how the, the POWER registration snuck up on people. They didn't see it coming.

00:13:21:00

Walter "Slim" Coleman:

I, I think that it, you know, the machine had such total control over the vote in, in Chicago for so many years. Except, with exception of 1972 when Hanrahan was defeated here. I think they never took us seriously. They thought we were just some ragtag protesters, and probably weren't more than a few hundred us, of us in the whole city. [phone rings] And, I think they never thought we could get together city-wide in any kind of way. So, when we started registering people to vote, they said, Well, you'll never get people to register. Well, when we'd registered a quarter of a million people to vote, then they said, Well, you'll never get them to vote. So then, we in the November gubernatorial election, when they all voted, then they said, Well, you'll never get them to vote for Harold. It was like, they really just could not believe it. I remember one of the reporters, saying, Slim, yesterday you were a nutball, and today you're a civic leader. Based on the fact that a hundred fifty thousand people had gotten registered in a few weeks. I think they really were shocked. They didn't believe that they would register. They didn't believe that people would vote, and they certainly didn't believe that they would organize for a successful campaign in 1983.

00:14:23:00

Interviewer:

You finally got all the way through the primary, and then the results come in, and Harold Washington has defeated Byrne and Daley. What did you feel at that point?

00:14:34:00

Walter "Slim" Coleman:

Well, you know, that night, we were real tired. [laughs] I think just to be honest, you know, it had been so much emotional all the way through the year. We never doubted that we were gonna win. I, I know that it wouldn't have seemed that from reading the press accounts, where it said that Harold was ten and fifteen percentage points from having a chance at winning, and so forth, but we really were fully confident all the way, you know, since the August before, since the voter registration, really. We knew we would, we would win. We had the votes, it was just a question of turning them out. There was a, a little bit of a tough time when the first results came in, because they brought in the Northwest and Southwestern side results first, and then when the far, when the South side results started coming in, we'd seen that Harold had ninety percent margins, and there were eight-five and eight-seven to eighty-eight percent turnouts. It was clear that we were gonna win, and we kinda said, Well, now we gotta roll up our sleeves and go to work. We knew we, it really, it wasn't a big surprise to us that night. I know some people think it was. Everybody was very excited and very enthusiastic, but we were not surprised. The media was surprised and kept running stories about how surprised everybody were that they won. We weren't surprised. We were already thinking, Well, what are we gonna have to do now? We got a tough general election, and then how are we gonna run this government? When we didn't even know what City Hall looked like on the inside.

00:15:59:00

Interviewer:

Let me stop down.

Camera crew member #2:

[coughs]

Interviewer:

Step down for just a moment here.

[cut]

00:16:02:00

Camera crew member #2:

Mark five.

[slate]

00:16:08:00

Interviewer:

Tell me about getting people to register.

00:16:12:00

Walter "Slim" Coleman:

In looking back and being real honest, I think that the most successful voter registration was done when people did it to defend themselves, not necessarily to elect a candidate. Whether it was, they were trying to defend their rights to get public aid, they were trying to defend their housing, defend their education, and all for those kinda issue campaigns, where people were really defending, basically, their economic rights or their rights to self-determination in the face of that kinda racial insults and discrimination that they faced under the Byrne administration. When they wanted to, when they wanted to defend themselves, then they registered to vote. And the, really, that's really what's talked about on the street. It wasn't so much, We can win the seat. That came about really after Harold was elected, people started talking like that, but the first and most massive voter registration was, if we don't get registered to vote, they're gonna continue to disrespect us. They're going to continue to walk over our basic economic rights and rights to self-determination. So, we gotta register. I guess people got, people, registration was a way not to be invisible. And in that sense, large numbers of people responded. More people responded to that point of view of registering, registering to vote really as a method of self-defense, to become visible, to get respect, than ever registered to elect a particular candidate.

00:17:41:00

Interviewer:

Were people ever afraid?

00:17:44:00

Walter "Slim" Coleman:

To register to vote? Oh, yeah. A lot of people were afraid to register to vote. Once you get registered to vote, then they know where to find you. And, everybody's got a problem. Anybody that makes less than fifteen thousand dollars a year, and some people that make a lot more, have a problem with some bill not being paid, or some traffic ticket, or some whatever it is. And then I think, people were generally, this is, was a very intimidating political machinery here for years, and years, and years. And, if you didn't vote right, you got cut off from public aid. And they came and threatened you. If you didn't vote right, then the building inspector came buy, you know, into your house or to your business, you know, or to

where you worked. You could lose your job. Not just with the city, but in the private sector, because they had tentacles in there if you didn't vote right. If you weren't registered, you didn't have any problem with that. If you just stayed out of that system all together, it's like the mafia. If you didn't get involved with them, then you couldn't get hurt by them. A lot of people got hurt by the political machine. So, if I just stay out of that mess, don't register to vote, [phone rings] I'm not on the list, I'm not involved with the mafia or the machine. And, I can just go ahead and try to live my life. So, there was a lot of fear. It really was a lot of fear. And then, it's embarrassment. You know, people that had not been part of that process, which is supposed to be the basic American citizenship right, they don't like to go in and say, I don't really know what this is all about. They think I'm gonna go in, and it's probably more complicated, and I'm gonna have to give some information that I don't have, or show that I really don't know what this form looks like, you know, so people, when there was an, an embarrassment, and—

00:19:18:00

Interviewer:

What do you say to them to turn them around?

Walter "Slim" Coleman:

Show them the form. This is all you gotta do.

Interviewer:

No, I mean even on the bigger things, the fear and all those things.

00:19:28:00

Walter "Slim" Coleman:

They're not gonna leave you alone. That's what we had to tell people. They're not gonna leave you alone. You think that you can just stay uninvolved? But, look at the building next to you, where arson for profit burned them people out, and those babies died. They're not gonna leave you alone. Look at when, the next time you wanna go and go to the hospital, and they turn you down, and your wife is dead, because she couldn't get into the hospital. You left them alone, but they don't leave you alone. They want this land back. They want this city, now, that they abandoned for so many years, that they de-industrialize it, they sent the jet, the jobs all over the world, too, they want it back, this land is gold. And they want you off of it. They're gonna run you out of here. If you, you can't leave them alone and think they'll leave you alone. They're coming after you. You'd better get ready. You'd better do something. You don't really have a choice. Your back's against the wall this time, and people knew it. They felt it, and they said, Well, this is one thing I can do, so I'mma try it.

00:20:29:00

Interviewer:

Anything you, I haven't asked you that you'd like to tell me about this?

00:20:33:00

Walter "Slim" Coleman:

No, I think you know everything I know. [laughs]

00:20:37:00

Interviewer:

[laughs] Thank you very much, I doubt that very much, but thank you anyway.

Camera crew member #1:

Cut.

Interviewer:

OK, that's a cut.

Walter "Slim" Coleman:

Good.

Camera crew member #1:

Great.

[cut]

[end of interview]

00:20:45:00

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