Interview with **Kevin White**
Date: November 9, 1988
Interviewer: Jacqueline Shearer
Camera Rolls: 4048-4050
Sound Rolls: 420-421
Team: D

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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 #4048]
[sound roll #420]

00:00:12:00

Camera Crew Member #1:

Timecode fourteen, forty-eight. Team D. Mayor White.

Camera Crew Member #2:

Speak up, speak up.

[slate]

Camera Crew Member #2:

OK, Jackie.

00:00:22:00

Interviewer:

OK, I'm gonna give you a long question to warm you up.

Kevin White:

OK. [laughs]

Interviewer:

It's 1972. You've just beaten Louise Day Hicks, and you're mayor.

Kevin White:

1971.

Interviewer:

Oh, we're talking about 1972. Right? When—

Kevin White:

Yeah. OK, good. OK.

Interviewer:

Yeah. You're, you're ensconced. You're mayor.

00:00:37:00

Kevin White:

Yes.

00:00:39:00

Interviewer:

Black parents have just filed suit in federal court. So, they've been waging a fight for quality education. White parents have been vowing to resist forced busing, and you're mayor. What—do you think that there is any way that you can head off racial confrontation?

00:00:57:00

Kevin White:

I don't even see it coming, I suppose. And I'm as close to the scene or the center as you could be. Everything has a genesis, and, and, and ethnic tensions, neighborhood tensions have been a part of the fabric of Boston for thirty years. The Irish against the Yankees, that kind of tension between groups was not new. But as it revolved around the issue of busing or Black and White relationships, it really began for me walking up School Street one day when I was Secretary of State, a fairly young man, not even planning to run for mayor. And there

was a Black minister all by himself walking around with a sign about forced busing, about the School Committee. It seemed quaint, if not a little eccentric. And I, like most people, passed it by. But from that began the focus on the School Committee, its lack of quality education, and, and, and, and then I became a part of it, incidentally to my career, by running for mayor of the city of Boston. And, and the issue in the campaign became not my qualifications but Mrs. Hicks' leadership, exacerbation of—or however you define it—of the, escalating the tensions between the Blacks and Whites over the issue of the School Committee on which she was chairman. And, and, and the battle basically in the election came down to Mrs. Hicks saying, "You know where I stand," which was a codeword for saying, to the hearer, I'm anti-Black, and we will not let them dislodge us from, from our neighborhoods, or our schools, or out points of power in, in the city government. It was a codeword. I used to kid and say if Mrs. Hicks looks like Grace—looked like Grace Kelly she would have beaten me. She was not an attractive candidate. I don't mean that in a derogatory sense, but not an attractive candidate. Yet she came within 12,000 votes of winning. And the good government forces in the city lived outside of her. The city had been a place they had fled. Yet it was part of their living experience, where they worked, and they were without the right of vote. And they had to stand by and watch Mrs. Hicks almost win the election. To make a long story short, I won with ninety-eight percent of—or ninety-five to ninety-eight percent of the Black vote. Blacks did not know me. They were afraid of Mrs. Hicks. I was an unsecured refuge for them, for the moment. But once we got to that crest, and I began to govern the city and bring Blacks into city government, it appeared that the issue was beginning, or the tension was beginning to alleviate itself. Blacks were becoming prominent in the city in some small degree. I don't wanna exaggerate that. But the Black community felt protected and progressed. So, when the suit was filed in 1972, it was the insistence by White liberals, Blacks—concerned citizens in fairness, for quality education. So, the battle of, of racial hostility, I didn't see coming with the fervor and the emotion that was to culminate three years later. At that time, it was just another step in the legal arena. And so it was only tangential to what I was doin' as mayor in '72.

00:04:27:00

Interviewer:

OK. Now, give us a sense, people have described the Boston School Committee as, it's too political and as a preserve for Irish patronage. Could you describe, give us a flavor for, for politics in Boston.

00:04:45:00

Kevin White:

Well, politics in Boston is, is a, is a full-time occupation. It's why Boston and Massachusetts has invariably produced if I can say with some pride so many good politicians at the national level. It's a full-time business. And, and, and therefore it produces the very best and sometimes the very worst. There's such a preoccupation with it. So, the School Committee was for a long time the only state-wide—I'm sorry, the only city-wide position for which a

politician could launch a career to the mayor's job. And therefore, political aspirants for higher office sought that office as a large part of fulfilling their political ambitions. And hopefully in that process, depending upon the quality of the people elected, they got people who understood the education problem. But that was usually secondary as far as the com— people who, who, who served on the School Committee. My father served on the School Committee for twenty-three years. It was his ambition to move on. He did not. So, I'm intimately—

00:05:57:00

Interviewer:

Excuse me—

Kevin White:

Go ahead.

Interviewer:

What about the Irish business? [clears throat]

00:06:01:00

Kevin White:

The Irish? Well, the Irish dominated politics in Boston. The same the Germans do in the Midwest in some cities, or the Swedes do. Any minority group, and usually those in the cities, are left this almost hollow structure, particularly after the war, in which people fled to the suburbs. So, Boston was, the dominant minority group were the Irish. So, it was only a natural process. It could have been some other group. But for Boston, it was the Irish.

00:06:34:00

Interviewer:

OK.

Kevin White:

I didn't explain that well.

Interviewer:

Cut.

Kevin White:

OK, there's another point here that—I don't wanna get too far off. Remember, the Irish could go to Catholic schools.

Camera Crew Member #1:

Cut.

[cut]

[wild sound]

Kevin White:

If I gave you a sho—a short synopsis, if I was to try and give someone a quick snapshot—

[picture resumes]

Camera Crew Member #1:

Rolling to speed fourteen, five, five.

Camera Crew Member #2:

Mark it.

[slate]

00:06:53:00

Kevin White:

—it's coming from. If I gave you a short two-minute snapshot of Boston in all her history capsuled, she is a city that was dominated by one group of people who were comfortable with each other called the Yankees. Basically the English dominated the city from Plymouth Rock 'til about 1930. Blew it.

00:07:17:00

Interviewer:

That's OK. You can pick it up—

00:07:18:00

Kevin White:

From Plymouth Rock to about, to about the turn of the century, of nineteen, nineteen-hundred. And at that time, the Irish began to battle the Yankees, what we call the Yankee Brown, for control of the city. The turn of the century, Boston had the number one public school system in America. They had the number one teaching hospital in America. It had the number one symphony orchestra in America. It had the number one public library system in America. Thirty years later, merely because the Yankees and the Irish fought for political control of the city, we had lost primacy in all of those institutions. Business had fled the city, and it was as economically dead as some of the worst cities in America today. And so political infighting as a high priority to what we do in this city has been unfortunately our downfall on more than one occasion. And this was to portend that, again, this fight now was with the Irish who had won it in the 30's—but many other groups had left the city—fighting with the Blacks who wanted to share in quality education, the jobs the city provided. And at this moment in time, city government was for the Irish the company business in a town that had no other form of employment. So, it was not really politics. It was a source of livelihood that was threatened by the changes that were coming if we were going to move into quality education and an amalgamation of the Blacks and the minorities within the system. Is that a little better?

00:09:03:00

Interviewer:

Cut.

Camera Crew Member #2:

Yes, cut.

[cut]

Camera Crew Member #2:

Mark it.

[slate]

00:09:08:00

Camera Crew Member #2:

OK, Jackie.

00:09:08:00

Interviewer:

OK. June 21, 1974. Garrity hands down his decision. What do you do?

00:09:16:00

Kevin White:

Well, I'm the mayor, and the first recognition is that it's a, it's a court order that has to be enforced by the city. That it's a final decision, that it's irrevocable. And that I'm going to be responsible at a minimum for public safety and at a maximum for, for the, for the social health. In a way it's a little exaggerated, but the morals of the town. It's a moral question as well as a political question. What I did was respond politically. And, and that is, I brought my staff together, and I decided that the first thing I had to do was not—was to reach out to the Whites. They were the ones who were gonna feel threatened. And secondly, because I had beaten Mrs. Hicks, the Blacks had trust in me to a degree, with the normal skepticism reserved for all public officials. And it was the Whites that I had to reach out for. So, I asked them to arrange 100 coffee hours in the city, in the homes, hosted by only anti-White, anti-busing mothers in, in the White communities. And I wanted to take it head on. I wanted to reach out to talk to them, not to threaten them, to explain. And, and so I began on that course almost immediately after Garrity handed down his order.

00:10:46:00

Interviewer:

Were you apprehensive?

00:10:49:00

Kevin White:

Yes. This, the, the word you can come up, but apprehensive to, to say the least. I, I was apprehensive. I, I have enough political sensitivity and understanding my own town. I wasn't scared. I thought it was a problem that I could handle, that it was going to take my attention but that if I focused now, by September and opening day of school, this problem would be, would be containable and that I could effectuate the order peacefully, or it would be done while I was mayor. I was very wrong in my prediction, obviously.

00:11:29:00

Interviewer:

OK. Cut. Are we out?

[roll out on camera roll]

[wild sound]

Camera Crew Member #2:

Yeah, we just rolled out.

[cut]

[camera roll #4049]

Camera Crew Member #2:

Mark it.

[slate]

00:11:37:00

Camera Crew Member #2:

OK, Jackie.

00:11:38:00

Interviewer:

So, Mayor, I want you to talk to us about what those coffee hours were like.

00:11:43:00

Kevin White:

Well, they were usually held in a very small living room, sometimes in a basement. The group no more than twenty, sometimes as small as six. And they came to listen. They came hostile. They came suspicious. But they came hopeful that if they could only capture the mayor, if only the mayor could listen and, and, and, and see that they were right then, then their cause would not only be heard but would be w—would be won. And in a—Boston is a, is an international city with a, sort of a small-town mentality. And the mayor is the patriarch, and, and because it's so political it is a town in which the mayor is seen as all powerful. So, I was a little like capture the flag for both sides. With the Blacks, if we can have the mayor as our protector then, then we will, we will achieve. And the Whites, if we have the mayor, we will not lose. And my role had to be neither a partisan for either but a protector in an odd way of both. And I began to play that role in the summer. But there wasn't large crowds. It was the intimacy of connecting, hopefully, to those women, and it was primarily women on both sides. The amazing thing is that the leadership that was being instituted here was women.

And, and with all the other social forces swirling around this, I was beginning to deal with—and new leadership. So, there were many swirls of many emotions and, and many political currents. But the mayor was focal to all of it. And there was no chance to escape if I thought alone in my room at night that I could. The realization every morning was that, that there was no getting away from being the center of th—of this storm.

00:13:38:00

Interviewer:

And how do you feel about being the man in the middle?

00:13:41:00

Kevin White:

As I said, self-sympathetic on more, on more than one occasion. A little dramatic to say, Oh, why, why me, oh, Lord? But the fact of the matter is that I had wrestled with it. I had fought Mrs. Hicks over this. Even my personality had been subordinated when I ran for mayor. I was called the opposition candidate to Mrs. Hicks. I was seen as bland. I resented both of those pictures of me. Now, I've forgotten your question as I get off on that tangent.

00:14:18:00

Interviewer:

I asked how you felt about being the man in the middle.

00:14:21:00

Kevin White:

Well, one is self-sympathetic. But, but there is an exhilaration emotion that goes along with wrestling with a public question like that. In fact you get so emotionally involved yourself as you go to bed every night and get up every morning on this. And, and you had a sense as did the city in a corporate sense that this was building to a head. It wasn't something that was flattening out. It was, and, and so that pulled away from any real self-sympathy. I was too engaged. There would be times after busing when I would, you know, as a man it sounds ridiculous, but I would cry. I, I went away, not often, I didn't do it that often, but boy, I, I left the city, I'm jumping ahead, but in October, I just left. You can absorb so much of other peoples' emotions, and that was something, too. To be affective as a politician, you have to, as they say feel, but feel is another way of, texture of absorbing. And if it comes in such strong potent forces then, then it sometimes can be emotionally—and I'm very healthy mentally—then someone can take. Well, that becomes a worry, a worry.

00:15:43:00

Interviewer:

I wanna go to the first day of school, September 12th, 1974. You get up in the morning. What did you do?

00:15:52:00

Kevin White:

Well, I did what was least expected surprisingly enough. Because I had become so controversial over the years in this issue primarily, because the Whites thought I was so partisan to the Blacks, and because I had been all summer at the focal point, all of those involved with public safety and my staff felt that the last thing I should do is physically show up in the scene. So, ironically enough, the decision was in a way put the mayor aside. His role, for the day, was finished. And that I could only exacerbate it by my presence. So, when I got up that morning, it was the first morning I hadn't been met by my drivers and driven to whatever place my schedule dictated. I drove myself back, really, to where I grew up in a way. I went back to, I came from West Roxbury in Jamaica Plain, And I drove to a, a fairly secluded spot. It's called an arbor—arboretum on a, on a hill that could overlook Boston from a distance. I wasn't getting that dramatic, but it was a place where I could be quiet, be away. I was in my own car. And I turned on the radio, and that I could listen. All the radio stations were carrying the movement of the buses. And so in a way, I could follow it, early in the morning. And as I was sitting on, in the car with the door open really, I looked up, and two young boys were coming across the knoll. And that was unusual, it was school time. And they stopped. In the moment, they didn't recognize me, and then one of them did. And I said, Why aren't you in school? And one of them said to me, My mother, our mothers told us not to go to school. There was gonna be trouble. And I just looked at them, and they walked across. And I couldn't help reflect, I came from the same school they did or the same neighborhood. I had an idea they had no idea what was happening. It was just, it was adult problems, not theirs. And I stayed there for about two hours or three hours, and then began to head in town, back to City Hall. And then I knew that, that the day and the next week was gonna be longer than I thought and maybe more difficult. And so my apprehensions escalated.

00:18:15:00

Interviewer:

Go to that evening, the meeting at Freedom House.

Kevin White:

Was that that, that first, that evening?

Interviewer:

That's that first day. Ellen Jackson gave you a call. Didn't she? And asked you to, to come over there.

00:18:27:00

Kevin White:

No, yes. But, but actually the Blacks had gone to City Hall, or some of the Black leadership. Among them, a man that's just been reelected state senator, Bill Owens. And I think Ellen was one of the Black leaders whom I had the most faith. She was responsible, and she was tough, and she was experienced. And I think she did call and ask me to see the group. They came to City Hall about three o'clock. They were emotionally agitated to say the least. They were scared. And they were frightened. And they asked me to go out to Freedom House that night, and I was hesitant to do it. It should show partisanship overnight immediately. The one thing that I had tried to avoid in the summer without looking wishy washy. But I understood that it was, that, that, that I had to go. And Owens assured me that he could control the crowd and that we could conduct something that was a semblance of a meeting. I went to Freedom House. When I arrived, Ellen Jackson greeted me, told me that there were about 100 or 200 women, however, number, high the number was, in the hall. And that I had to go in and speak to them, but I couldn't bring anybody with me. I couldn't bring any bodyguards. I couldn't bring any assistants. I couldn't bring anybody but myself. And so I went downstairs into this large hall. I walked in. There were about a hundred, two hundred women. And Owens went to introduce me, but it was immediate to me—apparent immediately that he was not in control, nor were the women in control of themselves. There was a, a murmur of hysteria that you find when someone individually or collectively is scared. You don't hear it very often. It's like a buzz. It's, it's, it's, it's, it's, it's the perimeters of, of a seance. And this was terror. And so I began to communicate, but then all of a sudden there were, You promised us. And I think it's impossible for anybody to understand, but you have to be devoid of any emotion. Even if you're not even married and had no children, to realize that these were women, Black women who were sending their children on a bus and were watching on television while they're being stoned, escorted by police. I even had to—there isn't one of us that can understand what that is. You say, Well, they'll be alright. But it's your own child. Better you go yourself. And that's a risk. That's what they did in the, in a freedom march in Selma, but the adults went. The, the, the startling aspect to this was the adults were all at home, as I was on the hill. It was the children that were going. And so that terror was so expressed in them, and, and what I was trying to get out of them was only one thing, and get out of the hall was give me another day. And I, I, I almost in a form of pleading said, Give me another chance. I had very little evidence that I was successful on the first chance. The first day was, was a nightmare from every point of view. The image of Boston, internationally and nationally, our own sense of control, the passions on both sides, and it was an inauspicious—that's, that's a ridiculous description—but it, it was, I, I just wanted to gi—I had absorbed their fears without any sense of confidence as I left, almost in a mental frame of trying to escape the hall. I don't know. I left the hall. I get into my car. I didn't wanna talk. I was filled with the, with some of that emotion. Frustration, I think. The

word is frustration for me. Always that element of self-sympathy, but frustration. I didn't wanna speak. And I got a call, a call on the car phone that there was a similar—

[rollout on camera roll}

[wild sound]

Kevin White:

—crowd in South Boston and would I come. And I refused to do that.

00:22:40:00

Interviewer:

We just rolled out.

Kevin White:

I'm sorry?

Interviewer:

[unintelligible]

Kevin White:

Well, I'm way off here.

Interviewer:

No—

Kevin White:

You know what? I, I—

Camera Crew Member #1:

Roll out.

Interviewer:

No. No.

Camera Crew Member #2:

Hold that thought.

Kevin White:

I'm not—huh?

Camera Crew Member #1:

Forty forty-nine.

[cut]

[camera roll #4050]

[slate]

00:22:50:00

Camera Crew Member #2:

OK, Jackie.

00:22:56:00

Interviewer:

How come Southie?

Kevin White:

What do you mean how come Southie?

Interviewer:

Were you surprised that Southie was the, the place where, where there was so much violence?

00:23:06:00

Kevin White:

Well, let me define myself in that I was always seen as, quote "the man." But I was also fairly young and healthy. And I'm all Irish. I have nothing but Irish blood in me. So, Southie was a place that had been isolated from me because I had run against Mrs. Hicks. So, I was rejected by Southie. But when I went in there, when I used to argue with the mothers during

the summer months, even as I began to try and contain this from spreading any further than Southie, I began to develop, not an empathy or an understanding, all of this was for all of us in the end a process of education and change. And it, and it, and it was not that I was going to in any way diminish my efforts to enforce the law or my real sense that, that the Blacks had been cut out of the process. And, and, and that was repugnant to me. But Southie in fairness is a cohesive community, just prior to busing, one that a Black could walk with comfort. Much of, I had to realize, of South Boston was fright, and that was the same thing that was in the Black community, obviously misunderstanding. When you say why Southie, Southie had a spirit. I, I remember, I, I, I'm out of politics now, but South Boston is perceived today somewhat like, nationally, South Africa is to the world. On the wrong side. Southie was positioned wrong, but she was not in all points—oh, I'm not explaining this well—but what I'm trying to say is—I'll find it, wait a minute.

Interviewer:

We can—

Kevin White:

Oh, I get—well, let me, I'm sorry. I didn't mean, I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I didn't mean that way.

00:25:28:00

Interviewer:

[unintelligible] OK.

00:25:30:00

Kevin White:

I think that what made South Boston so pronounced, what, what, what positioned South Boston and Roxbury so clearly was that each reflected the fundament—fundamental, elemental problem; the Blacks wanted equality, even if that was poor education. And they represented a determination to fight for that, and the court order gave them a backing. And Southie, in the same pure sense, represented a cohesive community. The community meant more to them than equality or anything else. That, that sense of intimacy, of comfort in a cocoon wha—that pride in it, and when you're outside that you came from it, was so pure that those two concepts came, unadulterated, into conflict, equality or community and which was to prevail. And I think I didn't see it then, I see it now, neither prevails in the end. Each prevails at a different time and place depending upon the significance and the importance of the change. And so at that time, it was seen only that you were either for equality or community, and you were not allowed the latitude of playing it in the middle without being painted a coward. And so I began to understand that there was a cause in Southie that wasn't being articulated well, even that quality education was not synonymous with equality. The

codewords were different, but I began to understand that they both fought for two concepts. And for the moment, I was one who believed that, at some sacrifice for the moment, equality was the higher cause—

00:27:46:00

Interviewer:

OK. Cut.

Kevin White:

—for the moment.

[cut]

[slate]

00:27:50:00

Kevin White:

Well, just about the question of the election of 1977, I've grown up in politics all my life. It was talked in my family. I never missed an election. It was a civic and family cause, never to miss one. I knew who I voted for and very seldom did I not vote without knowledge from the time I was eighteen. And then I went into politics as my career. And yet by the time '77 rolled around, and there was a municipal election. I don't know whether I voted, I think I voted. But then I did a strange thing. I didn't look at a newspaper, and I didn't talk to anybody about the election for about two or three days. I was living in a townhouse, which was called the Parkman House, the mayor's mansion. And it was almost a, you can understand it, and it seems absurd at the same time, no one mentioned the election to me. It was a munici—it was an interim election. I knew Mrs. Hicks was running, but there wasn't anything there. We, the administration was not threatened by the election. And so no one mentioned it to me, and I don't think I mentioned it to anybody else. I don't know how it occurred. But certainly at least two or three days later, I was on the phone with somebody, and I, somebody said, Too bad about Mrs. Hicks. And I didn't know Mrs. Hicks had lost. I hadn't even known John O'Brian had won. Now, you'd say, Well, Mother of God, what kind of mayor is that, that, that, that that kinda change, it just was a—I didn't, I was fed up with politics. If it didn't affect me, I wasn't interested. [siren] And, and I didn't know about the change when it occurred. And I remember that well. It said something about myself, really, it began to show the signs that, that, oh, something. I, I can't express it. But in any case—

00:29:52:00

Interviewer:

When you did hear the results, did you think it meant anything?

00:29:57:00

Kevin White:

Not of great political import in the town as such. But if you put it in retrospect, it meant, the way it was over, that—not gone, didn't disappear, but the boil had broken. That we were on a road to recovery that, as I say, from 1974 to 1977 enormous changes had occurred. Some we didn't even see. And for the main participants, Black and White, things were never going to be the same again. And, and Mrs. Hicks was about to disappear as a strong political force in Boston. That for the first time, a native-born Black was about to assume positions of importance. But that didn't say that John O'Brian would change Boston politics or that we would never again have an issue that Mrs. Hicks represented that cut to the core of our emotional feelings. But it meant that that fight, that part of Boston's history, that reflected itself—

[rollout on sound roll]

[cut]

[sound roll #421]

00:31:29:00

Camera Crew Member #1:

—for timecode.

00:31:30:00

Camera Crew Member #2:

Mark it.

[slate]

00:31:32:00

Interviewer:

So, do you feel that your hopes for national political of-office was sacrificed?

00:31:42:00

Kevin White:

[laughs] Don't make me laugh. I don't mean it. I didn't even see it coming. That may be overly dramatic. They certainly weren't enhanced. I'm not doing this well. Paul? Were they sacrificed?

00:32:01:00

Interviewer:

Just give us a sentence beginning, you know, something about your hopes for national political office so we know what we're talking about.

00:32:07:00

Kevin White:

Well, I think it, I'd be less than candid or fair if, if I didn't put some of my action within the context of, of wanting like any other young politician to move up. And I had, as this all began, had been nurturing quietly in my own mind the possibility of it, that I might be able to sort of try my wings nationally. And, and so I had just began to develop in my own mind and, and with others a strategy to explore a chance for a mayor to reach out for, or search, or try for national office. And that went from a primary place in my mind to very much in the back of my head as the battle began. And then I knew that those hopes or ambitions were, were snuffed out. That I couldn't both do busing and retain any realistic hopes that, that I would be very much more than a mayor. But when I entered the battle, I had, like all young men, illusions of grandeur. I used to say that in the heart of every politician is the—

[rollout on camera roll]

[wild sound]

Kevin White:

—desire to be interplanetary leader. And anything less than that is, is, is a goal not secured. But for me, I'm, I'm getting a little self-conscious, so I don't wanna overly dramatize it.

00:33:56:00

Interviewer:

That's OK. We got it. We got a nice—

Camera Crew Member #1:

Roll out on forty-fifty. Roll out on forty-fifty.

[cut]

[end of interview]

00:34:05:00