Interview with **Richard Valeriani**
December 10, 1985
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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.*

00:00:02:00

[camera roll 587]

[sound roll 1538]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 2: GOING NOW. FLAGS. AND MARK.

[sync tone]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 1: ACTUALLY, CAN YOU GIVE ME SECOND STICKS, PLEASE?

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 2: THIS'LL BE SECOND STICKS.

[sync tone]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 1: GOT IT. THANK YOU. IT'S ALL YOURS, CAL.

INTERVIEWER: OK. HOW DID THE SELMA CAMPAIGN COMPARE TO OTHER CAMPAIGNS IN TERMS OF LEADERSHIP AND THE SOPHISTICATION THAT, IF AT ALL, OF THE LEADERS OF THAT MOVEMENT?

Valeriani: I think the Selma campaign was, kind of, a culmination of the movement. They had gone through the exercise in Albany, Georgia, where it was not too successful, they had the experience of Birmingham, where it was quite successful, so they had refined a lot of their techniques, and so I think Selma was carried out with that experience.

00:00:38:00

INTERVIEWER: DID LEADERS OFTEN DESIGN CERTAIN THINGS TO GET MEDIA ATTENTION?

Valeriani: I think that a lot of what was done was designed to get media attention. But, of course, in those days, we didn't call it media, it was press attention. And television really wasn't as important or as, didn't have as much impact, I think, as it does today. I think that, obviously, the movement leaders decided to go to Birmingham because Bull Connor was there, and they decided to go to Selma because Jim Clark was there. And they knew how Bull Connor would react, and they knew how Jim Clark would react, and they knew how that would affect the rest of the nation. So in that sense, yes, I think there was an overall strategy. Within that overall strategy, obviously, there were certain tactics: the nonviolence, the confrontations, and all of that. But as far as how the day-to-day coverage would play, I don't think they were quite that sophisticated.

00:01:31:00

INTERVIEWER: SOME OF THE, PEOPLE WHO WERE INVOLVED SAY THAT THE PRESENCE OF CAMERAS ACTUALLY HELPED SHAPE EVENTS. MAYOR SMITHERMAN OF SELMA SAID TO US THAT JUST STANDING THERE, HE'S A YOUNG KID, AND JUST HAVING THE CAMERA ROLLING JUST, YOU, YOU FELT YOU HAD TO SAY SOMETHING, YOU JUST COULDN'T SAY ANYTHING. DO YOU, WOULD YOU AGREE WITH THAT?

Valeriani: I would agree, to some extent, that cameras helped shaped events. The standard answer, however, to the question of how much of a role did the camera play in shaping events is, there were no cameras at the Boston Tea Party. I think that television helped accelerate the progress of a movement whose time had come. When you think back that blacks could not vote in this country a mere generation ago, that had to change. And that would have changed whether there were tele—, there had been television or no television. And the, the press, the wires, newspapers, magazines would eventually have had a similar impact. But it would not have been nearly so immediate. The other thing that television did, and I think is overlooked, it forced the print media to be more honest than it had ever been in covering these events. In the old days, the wire service guy would sit there in Birmingham and something happened in Gadsden and he'd call up the local sheriff and the sheriff would say, oh, these bunch of, bunch of niggers ran around and they ran right into our clubs. Well, you know, and he would write the sheriff's point of view entirely. Television forced them to go there and watch and see what was happening, and then they couldn't distort it.

00:02:55:00

INTERVIEWER: YOU TOLD ME THAT YOU WERE ON—

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 1: WAIT, CAN I MAKE ONE LITTLE ADJUSTMENT.

TAKE ME TWO SECONDS. BLANK.

[cut]

INTERVIEWER: YOU TRYING TO HIT ME BEFORE, AND I THOUGHT YOU WERE JUST BREATHING, SO I DIDN'T—

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 1: NO, NO I WOULD'T—

INTERVIEWER: WELL, YOU [laughs]—

[sync tone]

INTERVIEWER: —CAN'T BE BREATHING AROUND HIM. [laughs]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 1: YEAH, I, YOU WERE ABOUT TO CREATE BATTLES IN THE SOUTH, AND IT JUST MAKES ME GET ALL FIRED UP. OK. IT'S ALL YOURS, CALLIE.

INTERVIEWER: [laughs] OK. YOU TOLD ME ON THE PHONE THAT YOU WERE OFTEN THREATENED VERBALLY, AND I'M WONDERING IF YOU CAN REMEMBER AN INCIDENT IN SELMA, YOU KNOW, WHERE THAT WAS TRUE, AN ANECDOTE OF SOME SORT.

Valeriani: In Selma. You mean the whole Selma campaign?

00:03:28:00

INTERVIEWER: WELL, ANY, ANY, AT ANY POINT, YOU KNOW, IN SELMA THAT—

Valeriani: Well, I could talk about the, talk about Marion. One night, Chuck Quinn and I were covering the Selma events together and there was to be a nighttime march in Marion, Alabama. Nighttime marches were always dangerous, more dangerous than daytime marches, and we were sending a, a film crew, and Quinn said, there's a duplicate bridges tournament in Montgomery, why don't we go play? And I said, well, if we have a film crew, I really, somebody ought to go, I'll go, I don't mind going. And so I went to Marion. And the crowd was particularly nasty that night, and, a lot of townspeople had gathered around, and we knew we were in for trouble right away because people came up and started spraying the cameras with paint. And then they'd insist, put the cameras down. Luckily, there were Alabama Highway Patrolmen there—I say 'luckily' because if there had been no semblance of, of outside, security, we would have been at the mercy of the townspeople, I think. But we knew it was tough, so it was very tense and we were all very frightened. And, there was a nighttime march and the, the, cops went in and broke it up, and it was the night that Jimmie Lee Jackson was shot. And I guess in the excitement ***somebody walked up behind me and hit me with an axe handle, hit me in the head with an axe handle.*** Now, very luckily, he hit

me with a roundhouse swing instead of an overhead swing, and he caught me on the bone here, instead of crushing the top of my skull, he hit me here, ***drew blood, which required stitches, and I was taken to the hospital. But before I left,*** a state trooper walked up, took the ax handle away from the guy who hit me, threw it on the steps of city hall, and said, I guess you've done enough damage with this tonight, but did not arrest him. And then somebody walked up to me, ***a white man walked up to me, and he, he said, are you hurt? Do you need a doctor? And I was stunned, and I put my hand on the back of my head and I pulled it back, and it was full of blood. And I said to him, yeah, I think I do, I'm bleeding. And then he thrust his face right up against mine and he said, well, we don't have doctors for people like you.*** And then my camera crew then arranged to get a car to take me off to the hospital, and I spent the night there. And the mayor came the next morning and apologized, and the police chief and—they finally did arrest the guy after there had been sort of a national uproar.

00:05:40:00

INTERVIEWER: YOU DIDN'T LEAVE, COVERING THAT, AFTER THAT INCIDENT AND, IN FACT, YOU WERE UP, AND ABOUT, COVERING THE MARCH, ON THE 7TH—

Valeriani: That's right.

INTERVIEWER: OF MARCH, AND—

Valeriani: Couple of days later.

INTERVIEWER: I MEAN—

Valeriani: Well, I say, luckily he hit me in the, in the part of, on the, thick bone part of the back of the head, so I had some stitches and after a, a night in the hospital and a day of rest, I felt okay to go back. I was a lot younger then. However, you know, I, it really hit me, the impact of what had happened hit me two weeks later when a Presbyterian minister by the name of Reeb, James Reeb, got hit by a guy with an ax handle, in Selma, but he was hit by someone with an overhead swing, and it fractured his skull and he died.

00:06:22:00

INTERVIEWER: I WANT TO KNOW, OR PEOPLE, ANYBODY WOULD BE CURIOUS TO KNOW THAT AFTER WHAT HAD HAPPENED TO YOU, AND YOU'RE BACK OUT ON THE FRONT LINE, SO TO SPEAK, COVERING AGAIN THE SAME CAMPAIGN, I MEAN, WHAT DREW YOU BACK? I MEAN, JUST, WHAT, WHY DID YOU FEEL YOU HAD TO GET BACK INTO IT?

Valeriani: It was my job to cover it, I was assigned to that. I had been there in the beginning, I wanted to be there at the end. It was a very exciting story. I mean I, I, looking back on it, I think it was a great chapter in American history. And I, I just wanted to be there. As a matter

of fact, as I said, Chuck Quinn, who was then with NBC, was covering with me a lot of those events, and he was off the night of the Selma march across the Edmund Pettus Bridge, thinking that nothing would happen. And, I talked to him the next day and when he saw it on television, he called me up, and he swore, you know, that he had missed that. He had wanted to be there for those things—I mean, it was a very exciting time. And I wanted to be there to cover from the beginning to the end. And as a young reporter, even though something like that has happened, even though you've been injured, covering something, you still approach the story almost with a sense of the village idiot, you know? That you can walk in and no harm will befall you, despite what—you're there independently, you try to convince yourself, and hope that the others will understand that, and therefore leave you alone, and let you do your job. That was seldom the case covering the civil rights movement.

00:07:43:00

INTERVIEWER: WHAT DID YOU FEEL LIKE WHEN YOU SAW THE VIOLENCE VISITED ON THOSE PROTESTERS ON MARCH 7TH AFTER WHAT HAD HAPPENED TO YOU?

Valeriani: [pause] I tended to try to keep, and this sounds a little callous, but I tried to stay detached. And I think that I did, and that was my job, I, you felt very tense and very excited in a way, and a very, with a lot of nervous energy, but, my job was there to report what happened, and so you try to stay as calm as possible and to look at it as objectively as possible, in as detached a way as possible, so that you could then report it. But I raced from there to a telephone. I think I was probably the first person on the air, on, this was on radio. Radio, for us was, was very important in those days. I was the first person on the air with a report of what happened, and you can't go on in a, some hysterical fashion, you have to make your notes carefully, and so, that, I sort of looked at it almost clinically, analytically, feeling all the while very pumped up. I mean, I knew that there was that nervous energy, tension, and I have to admit, some fear, because you didn't know—in that kind of, when the passions were aroused, you know, and then suddenly explodes, whether they're going to turn on you, too; whether the police and the bystanders are going to turn on you, because they tended to identify us with the movement.

00:09:05:00

INTERVIEWER: I WONDER, HOW MUCH MORE—

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 1: YOU'VE GOT TO BE ABOUT, SIXTY FEET.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 2: THREE MINUTES.

INTERVIEWER: OH, GOOD.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 1: ABOUT FOUR MINUTES.

INTERVIEWER: SPEAKING ABOUT VIOLENCE ON, ON PRESS PEOPLE, I'M

WONDERING ABOUT HOW PEOPLE IN THE MEDIA POOL, LIKE YOURSELF, IF THEY DID, DEVISED STRATEGIES TO SORT OF PROTECT YOURSELF AGAINST THIS VIOLENCE?

Valeriani: It was a cardinal rule never to travel alone. Generally, we traveled with two or three cars, you would never get caught by yourself, you would never be out in a lonely area, by yourself. You, really kind of, exercised pack journalism where possible. Some cameramen packed guns, in their glove compartments, figured they weren't going, they were never going to be caught in a helpless situation. But even off duty, sometimes you'd go into a restaurant or something—I mean, we knew, we used to go to a place under, where you could get a drink in Selma. It was an after-hours, not an after-hours club, but a private club which had good food and you could get some, get drinks there. And, a photographer from _Life_ magazine, I think his name was Norris McNamara, went in the men's room one night and came out with a bloody nose and a black eye. Some guy had seen that he was a, a reporter from out of town, a photographer from out of town, just start beating him up. So you had to be careful all the time. And generally, you tried to stay, pretty close to people like the police. Even though they didn't like you, they had to protect you. I remember going to Philadelphia, Mississippi, once, and being really scared there because the, the hostility was almost palpable in a place like that. You could almost feel it, grab it. And, I remember thinking, watching some of the, the blacks go up and, or, Martin Luther King and a couple of northern labor leaders, confront the whites in Philadelphia and thinking—I was terrified for myself—thinking, how do they do that? And, I once asked, Martin Luther King about that, and he said you—

00:10:52:00

[cut]

[wild audio]

Valeriani: —just sort of—once you realize what the worst is that can happen to you, you kind of excise the fear. But I was afraid for him.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 1: WE HAVE JUST RUN OUT.

INTERVIEWER: OH. OK.

[cut]

[slate]

[change to camera roll 588]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 2: AND ROLLING, MARKER.

Valeriani: Well, you'd be interested in—

[sync tone]

Valeriani: —seeing, I think, because of—

INTERVIEWER: I WANT, I WANT YOU TO PICK UP ON YOUR THOUGHT THERE—

Valeriani: Alright. What was—

INTERVIEWER: YOU WERE TALKING ABOUT, WE WERE TALKING ABOUT, JUST BEING FRIGHTENED AND, AND, AND, YOU KNOW, WHAT THE SITUATION WAS AND, IN FACT, TO ENGENDER FEAR. SO IF YOU WANT TO JUST PICK UP FROM WHERE YOU WERE IN THE MIDDLE OF IT, ACTALLY. I DON'T WANT YOU TO LEAVE IT.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 2: WHAT'S THAT CLICKING?

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 1: HEATER.

INTERVIEWER: RADIATOR.

Valeriani: The heater. Let me think where I was. What was the, what was your original question?

INTERVIEWER: THE ORIGINAL QUESTION WAS… WHAT WAS MY ORIGINAL QUESTION?

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 2: YOU WANT ME TO PLAY IT BACK?

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 1: LET'S—

INTERVIEWER: [laughs]

Valeriani: No, I—

00:11:37:00

[cut]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 1: FLAGS, AND, MARK.

[sync tone]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 1: WE'RE SET.

INTERVIEWER: OK, YOU WERE, I WANT YOU TO PICK UP FROM THAT MARTIN LUTHER KING STORY.

Valeriani: I remember being always afraid in Philadelphia, Mississippi. The hostility there was almost palpable, you could almost feel it in the air. We used to go to Meridian for relief—that was not a, really, [laughs] the kind of place to look for relief. But I remember watching Martin Luther King and a couple of northern black labor leaders go up and confront the local townspeople, local officials, and being terribly afraid myself, just watching, and wondering how they could not have been terrified. And I once asked Martin Luther King how he wasn't so afraid, and he said, well, once you realize what's the worst that can happen to you, then you get past the threshold of fear. I never got across that threshold, because I was always concerned about my personal safety in those circumstances, worrying that if they turned on the demonstrators, they would turn on me, us, as well.

00:12:35:00

INTERVIEWER: NOW, CHARLES QUINN SAID SOMETHING TO ME INTERESTING ON THE PHONE. HE SAID AT SOME POINT YOU HAD BODYGUARDS. WAS THIS NBC'S IDEA, YOUR IDEA? AND, AND WHAT, WAS THERE A SPECIFIC INCIDENT THAT PROMPTED THIS?

Valeriani: I don't remember if there was a specific incident that prompted the use of bodyguards for NBC people, but we, it was dangerous, and we knew it was dangerous, and in circumstances where we had to do some traveling, if you had to go from the, from a place like Camden to, to, Montgomery to feed, had to go a long, along a long stretch of, of lonely road, and for a while they sent down, former cops, from the Chicago police force, always very large, [pause] and they acted, they, acted as couriers, in effect, as well as bodyguards, so they were there for a dual, dual use. But that was not, a permanent fixture. It was just in circumstances where passions were running high. I guess it must have been after there had been some incident, but frankly, I don't remember what the incident was that triggered it.

00:13:35:00

INTERVIEWER: NOW, MAKE IT CLEAR FOR ME, DID YOU, WHY DIDN'T YOU HAVE BODYGUARDS WITH YOU ON FEBRUARY 18TH, THE NIGHT 0F JIMMIE LEE JACKSON'S DEATH?

Valeriani: We did not have bodyguards as a rule, as if—we did not automatically go to the South with bodyguards. And during the Selma march we had been threatened and, you know, we had been harassed, but none of us, that is, none of us working for NBC, had been physically harmed and we realized, I realized, that a nighttime march would be dangerous, but we just really didn't think about having protection, or our own protection, that much. There was assumption, obviously, not well-founded all the time, that the local, or the state, law enforcement officers would protect us. You didn't trust local policemen. But if the state troopers were there, either in Alabama or Mississippi, you figured that they would intervene and, and protect you if, if it came to that. You certainly didn't rely on the FBI, because you knew they would not intervene. But I remember once sitting in a restaurant in Meridian with a public relations, officer for the, Mississippi highway patrol, and some white woman came

over to our table, and just read him the riot act for just sitting there with three of us reporters from the North. And that was his job, to kind of schmooze us, but, she was outraged that he would even have coffee with us.

00:14:57:00

INTERVIEWER: SO THEY HATED YOU ALMOST AS MUCH AS THE MOVEMENT PEOPLE? THE PRESS, I MEAN.

Valeriani: Yeah, I think a lot of people identified us with the movement. We were in the middle. I used to get complaints all the time. Get complaints from the, from the local whites that, that we were the out, we were helping the outside agitators; if we went away, they would go away; that, in effect, we were part of the movement, or promoting the movement, or certainly, instigating the movement, encouraging them to do these things. And on the other hand, we'd get the complaints from the blacks that we weren't encouraging the movement, that we weren't doing enough to, to, propagandize their cause. And I'd have to explain, we're not here to propagandize the cause, we're here to, to cover the story. If you wanted to do something—well, you couldn't do anything anyway, you couldn't write an editorial as a reporter. The best you could do, and you did it as much for the news value of the, or the, the, the drama of the situation, I mean you would juxtapose something that Bull Connor said and something that Martin Luther King said; or something that, that Jim Clark said and, another movement leader said, or something Hoss Manucy said in St. Augustine, and Martin Luther King or Andy Young would say, and, just to show the contrast. But, we were constantly called and we were getting complaints from both sides all the time.

00:16:15:00

INTERVIEWER: I'M GOING TO SKIP TO THE END OF THE SELMA MOVEMENT. YOU KNOW, THE MARCH IS DONE AND, THERE THEY ARE AT THE STEPS TO THE CAPITOL, AND I'M WONDERING, AS A REPORTER, WHO HAD SORT OF GONE ALL THE WAY, COVERING ALL OF THE, THE MOVEMENTS. AT THAT POINT, DID YOU HAVE A SENSE, I MEAN, WERE YOU HEARING RUMBLINGS THAT THE MOVEMENT WOULD, SORT OF, NEVER BE THE SAME AGAIN AFTER SELMA?

Valeriani: No. I never—at the end of the Selma march, nobody knew what direction it would take after that. When I had gone through—as I say, I had gone through Albany, Georgia, and gone through Birmingham then seen it go, move on to Selma. I figured that once you got the Voting Rights Act they would move into, another area, because Martin Luther King kept saying, in effect, we have dealt with desegregation, now we have to move on to the more difficult aspects, that is, integration and the economic aspect of all of this. But at the same time, he was becoming preoccupied with Vietnam, which I, at the time, thought was a mistake for him. [pause] The first time that I had a sense that things were really changing dramatically, and that the movement had changed for all time, was on the Meredith march to Mississippi, when suddenly we heard "Black Power", and we saw Stokely Carmichael and the SNCC kids changing, and wanting something differing—and starting to think and call,

really, openly, call Dr. King a Tom and those, those kinds of names. At that point, it seemed, to me, certainly, that the movement had changed irrevocably and that it was going to be different from then on.

00:17:47:00

INTERVIEWER: DID YOU HEAR STRANDS OF THAT IN SELMA, THOUGH? THAT'S WHAT WE READ, THAT'S WHAT I'M TRYING TO GET AT, IF YOU WERE HEARING THAT, WITH THE TENSIONS WITH, BETWEEN SNCC AND SCLC, IF YOU HEARD, SAW THAT, OBSERVED THAT.

Valeriani: There were tensions throughout Selma, between SNCC and, SCLC, over the tactics, whether or not you should turn back, and allow yourself to be turned back, whether you should work out the deals with the justice department behind the scenes. But I think that also happened in Birmingham to a degree, whether or not to use the kids in the marches. They were all, there was, there were always tensions with a movement like that, because there was no single leader. I mean, this was a coalition, after all, so, I guess, looking back you could have seen hints of Black Power in Selma, but at the time it was not evident. You just knew that SNCC was a lot more militant, and you let it go at that. I mean, that was true throughout, but I knew Stokely Carmichael when he was in Haneyville, Alabama, and places like that, and he certainly was not the same Stokely Carmichael that he was on the Meredith march.

00:18:46:00

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 1: CAN I INTERRUPT FOR A MINUTE?

INTERVIEWER: YES.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 1: THERE WAS ONE THING—

INTERVIEWER: I'M DONE. [laughs]

[cut]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 1: ROLL, AND MARK, PLEASE.

[sync tone]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 1: THANK YOU, SIR. HANG ON ONE SECOND, LET ME FIND THIS FAMOUS FOCAL LENGTH I'VE BEEN TALKING ABOUT.

INTERVIEWER: [laughs]

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 1: THERE WE GO. OK, FOLKS, IT'S ALL YOURS.

INTERVIEWER: OK.

Valeriani: ***The march in Marion, Alabama was a nighttime march, and a nighttime march was always dangerous, and there was always discussion within the movement whether or not to have nighttime marches, because they knew they were dangerous. We went up there this night and we knew there was going to be trouble right away, because local folks came up to us and threatened us, sprayed our cameras with black paint so we couldn't shoot, ordered us to put the cameras down, and harassed us. And it was a very tense situation.*** When the march started the cops went in, broke it up. It was very violent. They killed Jimmie Lee Jackson that night, and during the passions, or the passions were aroused, there led somebody to walk up behind me and hit me in the back of the head with an ax handle. Now luckily for me, he hit me with a roundhouse swing instead of coming overhead and not hitting me on the top of the skull. I staggered and was stunned. And a state trooper came up and, to this guy who hit me, took the ax handle away, threw it up on the steps of city hall and said, I guess you've done enough damage with that tonight, but did not arrest him. [pause] My cameraman was holding me up, and then another white man walked up to me and he said, are you hurt? Do you need a doctor? And I put my hand to the back of my head and then looked at it, and it was full of blood, and I said, in my stunned way, yeah, I think I do, I'm bleeding. And then he thrust his face right up against mine and he said, well, we don't—

[cut]

[wild audio]

Valeriani: —have doctors for people like you. But then my crew got me off to the hospital and, the next day the mayor came round to visit me at the hospital bed and apologized, and the guy eventually was arrested.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 1: GOOD. RAN OUT, JUST IN—

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 2: QUITE A BIT.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 1: —TIME.

CAMERA CREW MEMBER 2: OK.

INTERVIEWER: THANK YOU.

[cut]

[end interview]

00:20:42:00