

Interview with **Tom Turnipseed**

Date: October 22, 1988

Interviewer: Paul Stekler

Camera Rolls: 4014-4015

Sound Rolls: 404

Team: D

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**

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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 #4014]

[sound roll #404]

00:00:13.00

Camera Crew Member #1:

Mark it.

[slate]

00:00:17:00

Interviewer:

Tom, going back into '66, '67 when you first got involved with George Wallace, you were telling me that you really believed. When you saw George Wallace back then, what did you believe in?

00:00:28:00

Tom Turnipseed:

Well, I was an unreconstructed Southerner, born in Mobile, Alabama. And to just put it to you succinctly, in our fourth, I never will forget our little fourth grade book about Alabama history. It, it showed a chapter about slavery, and it had pictures of little Black children

dancing and singing. And it said the slaves were very happy. The children danced and sang all day. And then their parents would dance and sing at night and so forth. And that's the kind of culture I was brought up in. But, George Wallace was a defender of all this, for the average person of the South at the time. And that's the way I looked at him as a leader at that time.

00:01:09:00

Interviewer:

Did Wallace represent an anti-establishment point of view?

Tom Turnipseed:

Yeah, he was anti-establishment to a large degree. He was—

Interviewer:

Can you, can you start for one second? When I, when I said that, you need to start off with "George Wallace was." So, was Wallace an anti-establishment?

00:01:22:00

Tom Turnipseed:

George Wallace was an anti-establishment person. And that appealed to me. I've always had a lot of rebel in me, which was part of the, "the Lost Cause" [laughs] I guess of the Confederacy, so to speak. And here was George Wallace takin' on the Yankees again, takin' on the liberals, takin' on the civil rights movement and so forth. And, and doing it in a way that, you know, appealed to the, to the average person in the South. The little guy.

00:01:49:00

Interviewer:

Let's stop for a second.

Camera Crew Member #2:

OK.

[cut]

00:01:51:00

Camera Crew Member #1:

Mark it.

[slate]

00:01:53:00

Interviewer:

You were telling me that, you know, as this campaign started and even beforehand, Wallace was spreading out and talking to a lot of people up North, getting really large crowds. How was he reacting to these crowds, and what would he tell you about it?

00:02:08:00

Tom Turnipseed:

Well, he liked the crowds. In fact, Governor Wallace would show crowds in the northern cities, we would always book him into some large auditorium or coliseum. And we'd get a big turnout, particularly after the riots occurred in, in early in '68. And he, he liked the crowds a lot. The crowds were kind of frightening in a lot of ways though. They, like I say, it was in the context of a lot of civil unrest, and, and the crowds were really racially inspired. They, they were, they were racist. And, but anyway, they turned out in just droves and all. And I think it, it kinda had the, the political establishment of the country very concerned at the time because of the turnout.

00:02:51:00

Interviewer:

What, what happened with the campaign after King's death?

00:02:57:00

Tom Turnipseed:

Well, it, I think it probably picked up a little steam, the campaign did, when, when Dr. King was shot. And then of course I think Bobby Kennedy was assassinated too along at that time. There was a lot of apprehension about whether or not there would be an attempt on Governor Wallace's life. He had a lot of threats, too. But I, it seemed like that that type of unrest, you know, and, and what happened just after Dr. King was, was assassinated in Memphis with the riots in the Northern cities had helped the momentum of our campaign a lot. You know, it brought out all the anti-civil rights feelings and particularly the ethnic groups in the North, and it benefited Wallace's candidacy a great deal.

00:03:41:00

Interviewer:

Did you find that ironic?

00:03:44:00

Tom Turnipseed:

Not really. It's, you know, I think in, in retrospect, it's, it's, it was a campaign built on racism, the Wallace campaign. And, and that's what it really was. I mean, we can, at the time, we didn't wanna admit it, and, and we didn't even think it. But it, it, that's what it was. That was the hard core of that campaign was, was anti-civil rights. And then to a sm— smaller degree anti, the, the war protesters, too, the Vietnam War protesters.

00:04:13:00

Interviewer:

You were at a lot of these, these rallies and things. How did you personally feel about the reaction that Wallace was getting?

00:04:20:00

Tom Turnipseed:

Well, I got a little afraid of it. You know, I was more of a genteel Southern segregationist. You know, we were taught, you know, a paternalistic attitude about Black people that, you know, they were, were really good people, but they just didn't quite, they weren't quite up to the level of, of White people in, in any respect. That's what we—was imbued in us through our culture, so to speak. And, and it just, to, to see people that would just vehemently wanna, you know, kill Black people and so forth—and that's what, then, some of the northern ethnic groups exhibited at some of the rallies. In fact, I never will forget one up in Milwaukee at the arena up there. Father Groppi, who was a, a civil rights leader, had a group of people there with signs and so forth protesting the Vietnam War and, and protesting the anti-civil rights, and protesting Governor Wallace, too, for that matter. And some of the local ethnic blue-collar workers, I don't know what their derivation was, Polish, German, whatever in Milwaukee, started an encounter with 'em. And it got into, into violence, right, within the arena. And, and us good old boys from down South were trying to, to save the Groppi people is what it ended up being. But it got real frightening. It sure did. Particularly in, in some of those large metropolitan areas in the North.

00:05:40:00

Interviewer:

You were telling me specifically you were surprised by the reaction, and try to incorporate this in the question, by the reaction of Northern ethnics.

00:05:48:00

Tom Turnipseed:

Yes. Well, I, for instance in Massachusetts, the reaction of Northern ethnics was brought home to me profoundly. It's one of the reasons I started opening my eyes a little bit and changing my views a great deal. But in Massachusetts, we had a monumental task achieving ballot position. We had a deadline by which you had to have so many registered electors to sign petitions to get on the ballot.

00:06:11:00

Interviewer:

Let, let me cut you for one second because that's—can you stop camera for one second?

Camera Crew Member #2:

Sure.

[cut]

00:06:17:00

Camera Crew Member #1:

Mark it.

[slate]

00:06:21:00

Interviewer:

Tell me about Webster, Massachusetts.

00:06:23:00

Tom Turnipseed:

Well, we were putting on a rally in Webster, Massachusetts, working in the ballot position campaign for Governor Wallace. And Webster is a small town in south central Massachusetts. It has a strong Polish American population, so I felt like maybe if you go to

the Polish American club and see could we use their hall for a rally. And I walked in the hall, and, and told them who I was with, and they said, Great. We like George Wallace. Gosh, you know. And I said, Well, let me look at your hall. And, and I looked at it, and it was perfect for what we wanted. And we made a deal on the time and so forth, and I offered to pay them for it. They said, Look, we'll just let you have it free. We like George Wallace that much. And they said, Well, just stay here and have a—they had a little bar, too, and it was getting late in the afternoon—they said, have a drink with us, and we'll talk to you a little bit more about Governor Wallace. And I did that. And just before I left, the head guy there, the, the manager and the head bartender, looked me right in the eye, and he said, Now, Mr. Turnipseed. He says, Now, when George Wallace is elected president, he's gonna line up all the niggers and kill them, isn't he? And all of the sudden I realized the man was serious. I said, Hell no. I mean, you know, he's, he's worried about this, and that, and the other thing, but nothing like that. I mean, he just, you know. And it kinda got to me. And, a lot. And to know that these people really felt that way. That they wanted to kill Black people. You know? And it got me startin' to think and changin' my views from that point on, I guess. I mean, subconsciously at least.

00:07:55:00

Interviewer:

In a typical Wallace rally, what would happen?

00:07:58:00

Tom Turnipseed:

Well, usually we had a lot of entertainment from Nashville. We had country and western music. Governor Wallace always liked to think that, you know, Southerners who had moved up North were kind of a core group he had, like in Detroit and, you know, moving up and working in the automobile industry, etc. I remember a, a rally we had at Cobo Hall, and we had a country singer sing this big hit song at the time about Detroit City, [sings] "Last night I took a drink in Detroit City." It's the plight of the, the working man that goes up North to get him a job. And the crowd, there was a riot that night, too, between s—anti-Wallace, pro-Wallace supporters. But the, the rallies went generally, singers, we'd have bands and songs, and, and usually some headline star that would be advertised, you know, in the media previously. And, just, come hear George Wallace at Cobo Hall and, and, and hear Jeannie C. Riley or Kitty Wells, whoever was the singer. We had a lot of 'em. I remember Jerry Lee Lewis. We always worried whether or not he was gonna tear up the piano. He didn't like the piano, he'd just kick it and tear it up. You know? But—

00:09:08:00

Interviewer:

And then what would happen after the music?

00:09:10:00

Tom Turnipseed:

Well, they would, then we'd had a, we always passed the collection plate around. This is almost like a, in a way a, a semblance of a religious thing almost. A cert—certain fervor about it, and people get all excited it and we'd always pass the hat. You know, and, and take up money from the audience too, you know, for the campaign. And Wallace would, would make a speech. And they, it would always be very, very loudly received and so forth. And, and like I say, when asked a previous question, we would get pictures of the crowd. And he would like to show people the pictures of those crowds. I think it kinda, he emotionally got a, a charge out of the big crowds and the reaction of the crowds to what he was saying, like politicians do.

00:09:58:00

Interviewer:

Would he play off the protesters? Would there be protesters?

Tom Turnipseed:

Oh, yes, he was adroit at that. If, if there was—

Interviewer:

He was adroit. Sorry, could you start, adroit at what?

00:10:05:00

Tom Turnipseed:

Yeah, he was very, he was very good, Governor Wallace was, in, when somebody would, protesters would be in the audience, to have a little back and forth, and, and be able to get the crowd going against the protester so to speak. He did that very, very well. He also did it very well with the media, the press. I remember him at a, at a rally we were having in Alabama, in, down in the textile area, and this particular rally was an outdoor rally. It was on a flatbed truck. We had country music, and then Governor Wallace got up and made his standard talk. And one of the things he'd always say in Alabama when he talked to a group, he'd say, and particularly working people, he says, You know, they look down their nose at us and call us pea pickers, and peckerwoods, and wool hats and lintheads, and rednecks. He said, They're being facetious, they lookin' down their nose at us and putting us down 'cause we might not have as much as they do. He said, But if, if they wanna call us rednecks, let them call us rednecks. He says, If they mean that we have our necks red from a good honest day's toil in the summer sun, let 'em call us rednecks. He says, There's two things about them, though. He

said, Number one, they won't get out and work in the summer sun. And number two, their hair is so long, their necks wouldn't get red anyway. And the crowd'd go crazy. You know, Go, governor. And—

[rollout on camera roll]

[wild sound]

Tom Turnipseed:

—he would point out the reporters for, like, *The New York Times* and papers up north that had long hair. And just, he was very adroit at doing that, you know. At playing one against the other that way in a, in a, in a talk.

00:11:40:00

Interviewer:

OK. Why don't, why don't we put another roll?

Camera Crew Member #2:

OK, we have a—

Camera Crew Member #3:

End of roll forty fourteen.

Camera Crew Member #2:

We have a, a roll that has—

[cut]

[camera roll 4015]

Camera Crew Member #1:

Speed.

Camera Crew Member #3:

Camera roll forty, I'm sorry, here, forty fifteen.

00:11:55:00

Camera Crew Member #1:

Hit, hit it please.

[slate]

00:11:58:00

Interviewer:

OK. Tom, you were working on, on getting Wallace on the ballot in all fifty states. Why was it so hard to get Wallace on the ballot?

00:12:06:00

Tom Turnipseed:

Well, it was very hard to get Governor Wallace on the ballot because, you know, we have a traditional two-party system in the state, and the Republican, Democratic parties have ballot position. But the various state laws on qualifying a new party are all different. Some require a certain amount of registered voters to sign petitions. Some required having a nominating convention with a certain number of people coming there. About three states had no way to get on the ballot. We had to go to court, went all the way to the US Supreme Court on a case from Ohio and won that. And then I think Idaho, and I forget the other state. But there were three states with no way to get on. We finally got on the ballot in all the states, which spent a lot of our time, energy, and effort, and so forth. And by that time, the Republicans with their southern strategy got involved. And with Strom Thurmond and so forth, and they were just about as racist as the Democrats, I mean, as, as Wallace. So, they said, Why waste your vote? Just vote, we gonna look out for you, too. You know, the people that had these same feelings. And so that's why our vote went up and then went down towards the end. You know, why waste your vote. Plus we spent our energy on ballot position, and it kind of burned us out so to speak.

00:13:15:00

Interviewer:

Now, you had told me that Wallace used to talk amongst, amongst his campaign people about how he felt if he really thought he was gonna win the presidency or what he thought he was gonna accomplish. What did he think he was going to accomplish?

00:13:27:00

Tom Turnipseed:

Well, you know, he always, I guess you feel you got an outside chance to win. And he would, he felt like that, you know, it got down, I think in '72, he adopted the tactic of let's send them a message or—And we did it in '68, too, as well as I can remember.

00:13:42:00

Interviewer:

But in '68, what was he saying?

00:13:44:00

Tom Turnipseed:

Well, you know, we, we, we're, they're listening to us. For the first time, they're gonna listen to us guys. You know? Us every day working class people, you know, who go to work and so forth and so on, and all the codewords about the other people that don't work who really do work. But [laughs] you know, the, the, the codewords that have a racial connotation to them, so many of them. And, and he, he was kind of a forerunner in a lot of ways, it, it appears, of, of the, of this present situation we have in politics the last eight years or so of the Republicans. They're more sophisticated with it, but he was able to kinda set that anti-civil rights, anti-Vietnam protest agenda at that time that's been incorporated more sophisticatedly into the Republican politics of today. And he was more open. He was much more open with it. You know? What he stood for. Now it's more subtle. But he was, he, he would, his message got across. The only thing is, I think nowadays, from what I know in talking with George Wallace, I talk with him on the phone and, and with his family and so forth, and read about him. His views have changed demonstrably from then to now.

00:14:50:00

Interviewer:

Did he think he could win?

00:14:53:00

Tom Turnipseed:

I think maybe for, for a while maybe he thought he had a chance. I think he, he thought he had a chance to win. You know, in particularly in '72 when I, I was working for him in a couple of states, North Carolina and South Carolina, he got very, very strong. And I think that at that time he felt like he could win. In '68, I think up until the middle of the campaign he thought he had a chance to win.

00:15:17:00

Interviewer:

Early on, but, I mean, we have to stay with '68.

Tom Turnipseed:

Sure.

00Interviewer:

There was a strategy in terms of deadlocking everything that he, that picking up—

00:15:25:00

Tom Turnipseed:

Oh, sure. Oh, yeah. That's, I'm, I'm sorry. The, one of the big tactics of Governor Wallace, and he expressed it among, to us and did it in his talks. He was very open with, with his, what he wanted to do, was that the whole electoral college that we have in this country is kind of an anachronistic situation where each state has so many electoral votes. And then if you don't get a majority of the electoral votes, the election goes to the US House of Representatives. And that had been the dream and the hope of, of the Southern, of conservatives in, in the Southern racist situation since 1948 with the old state's rights party that Strom Thurmond headed up, and Fielding Wright was his running mate from Mississippi. Is to tie up the electoral college with a third force. You don't have a majority of the electoral college, the election goes into the House of Representatives. That gives you more bargaining power for what you believe in. and that, that was openly expressed at not just with his aides, but I mean, he, he talked about it in, in news interviews, and, and maybe some in speeches, too. As I recollect.

00:16:28:00

Interviewer:

What, what was a typical rally like, very briefly?

00:16:32:00

Tom Turnipseed:

It was, a typical George Wallace rally, particularly in a big city in the North or South, was, was really a, an event. That, we had good country music and bands and so forth. Then we had a preacher that would get up and give a message on fund-raising. How we all had to dig a little deeper, and we'd pass the hat, just kinda almost like a church type thing. Then bring Governor Wallace on. And he'd make a rip-roaring speech and so forth. And it was quite an event. The crowd would be very, very excited usually, and he was quite an orator.

00:17:06:00

Interviewer:

What about class appeal? You were telling me about how he would, he would make that class appeal.

00:17:10:00

Tom Turnipseed:

He was very strong with the class appeal, particularly in Alabama. He was a, he was opposed by the, the, the, the big corporate elements in Alabama because he was very progressive on social issues. Issues like worker's comp, unemployment compensation, etc. And I remember talking, when he was talking to the textile workers, you know, speaking on a flatbed truck. He would talk about Mountain Brook, this is what he would say. Mountain Brook happened to be, and still is I think, an exclusive suburb of Birmingham, Alabama where the wealthier people live. And, and Governor Wallace would say, You know, it's easy for these people up in Mountain Brook to be for this, and that, and the other thing because they leave their air conditioned offices down at the Tennessee Coal and Iron Company where the working man works there in the steel mill, and they drive up in their limousines back up to the Mountain Brook Country Club. And they sit up at the Mountain Brook Country Club, slipping their martinis with their little fingers in the air like this. And they say, Oh, we've got to have integration for the poor working man down in the valley. And they take your children, and they bus your children from here to there, to kingdom come. And guess where the rich man's children go to? Where they go to school? They go to the all-White private school. And he would point out that class hypocrisy. It was racism with a class twist to it.

00:18:32:00

Interviewer:

How we doin' on time?

Camera Crew Member #2:

We're about ready to roll out.

Camera Crew Member #4:

I think we got it.

Interviewer:

That's pretty much everything I wanted to ask. That was great.

Tom Turnipseed:

Thank you.

Camera Crew Member #2:

OK. Let's check the gate before we—

[cut]

[end of interview]

00:18:48:00

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