



Interview with **Dr. Kenneth Clark**

Date: September 7, 1989

Interviewers: Sam Pollard (Interviewer #1) and Judy Richardson (Interviewer #2)

Camera Rolls: 2155-2157

Sound Rolls: 272-273

Team: B

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 #1001]

[sound roll #114]

00:00:13:00

Camera Crew Member #1:

Mark it, please.

[slate]

Camera Crew Member #2:

Take one.

Interviewer #1:

Ready?

Camera Crew Member #1:

Mm-hmm.

00:00:19:00

Interviewer #1:

Dr. Clark, we're going back to 1968. The students have taken over the administration building. How did you hear about the students taking over the administration building?

00:00:28:00

Dr. Kenneth Clark:

I was on the Board of Directors of the University at the time. And I think I heard before our meeting, but we certainly heard at the meeting, 'cause that dominated the, the whole concern of the Board of Directors that the students had taken over and were doing a number of things in terms of seeking to obtain their objectives.

00:01:01:00

Interviewer #1:

What were some of your concerns and reactions in the board meeting at the time? I mean, what was some of the discussion like?

00:01:06:00

Dr. Kenneth Clark:

Well, the thing that I remember most was that some of us were very much concerned about preventing violence and keeping the conflict and confrontation to a minimum between the, the board and the students or the administration and the students. And if I remember correctly, and 1968 is a long time back, [laughs] there were some, a few members of the board who were sort of hardliners and who wanted to make the students understand that they had no power or control. That the power and control would be, was to be found in the board and not in the students. And they seemed as if they were going to dominate, but a few of us said, Look, we don't want to give any demonstration of who has power. We just want to prevent violence. And we eventually got them to agree that a few of us would go and talk with the students, student leaders.

00:02:23:00

Interviewer #1:

Now, some of the people on the board you said were, were hardline. I mean, I, I imagine they were hardliners because some of the students' demands were very strong. For example, they wanted President, they wanted the resignation of President Nabrit.

Dr. Kenneth Clark:

That's right.

Interviewer #1:

I mean, and he had contributed a lot to, contributed a lot to the civil rights struggle. I mean, what was your reaction to the students demanding his resignation, President Nabrit's resignation? If you could, include President Nabrit's name in your answer.

00:02:48:00

Dr. Kenneth Clark:

Well, President Nabrit was out of, out of the country at the time, and some of us were trying to get hold of him. And if I remember correctly, had a difficult time finding him. And yes, I, I think this was, no question, that the students wanted his resignation. To be quite honest with you, I don't know what their specific reasons were for wanting his resignation. But that was a very high level of concern for them.

00:03:26:00

Interviewer #1:

What was your reaction to the students? I mean, here's a man who was, who had been involved in the civil rights struggle for many years and could contribute a great deal. What was your reaction, your personal reaction to the—

00:03:36:00

Dr. Kenneth Clark:

Well, I had worked with President Nabrit very closely during the Brown decision cases. You know, he was one of the lawyers, in fact, he was the chief lawyer for the Dis—the case that involved the District of Columbia. And in the meetings that Thurgood had up here in New York, Nabrit was a very active participant. And I felt close and friendly and I had a high degree of respect for him. And I certainly respected him during the period when he was President of the University. I don't know what happened in that latter part of his tenure when the students became negative toward him, and I must confess that I, if I were to say to you that I know what was happening at the time I would not be telling you the truth, I mean.

00:04:40:00

Interviewer #1:

So did you think the students had a valid reason, I mean—

00:04:42:00

Dr. Kenneth Clark:

I don't know. All I know is that *I was primarily concerned with protecting the students and the University from* [train passes] *chaos and violence*. I can't tell you whether they had a valid object, valid series of objectives or not. I mean, *they were organized, and they had taken over a couple of the buildings, and they seemed quite persistent and insistent. And a few of us on the board felt that if we didn't establish some communication with them, that things would get worse and worse and worse*.

00:05:37:00

Interviewer #1:

Well, one of the other concerns was that they didn't feel like Howard, Howard should have a stronger commitment to the Black community, the larger Black community outside of Howard University. What was your reaction to that?

Dr. Kenneth Clark:

I have to repeat to you that my priority was getting the students out of danger.

Interviewer #1:

I understand that, Dr. Clark.

00:05:59:00

Dr. Kenneth Clark:

And I cannot tell you that I have any remembrance of what their agenda, what their agenda was. I, I just can't tell you that, and I—

00:06:15:00

Interviewer #1:

You don't remember it? I mean, you, you must have had some sort of an opinion about some of these students demands.

Dr. Kenneth Clark:

You keep asking me that, and I'm telling you that I was more concerned with preventing violence and preventing the—

Interviewer #1:

I don't disagree with you on that.

00:06:28:00

Dr. Kenneth Clark:

—preventing the police from coming up on that campus and carting these students off to jail or something. I did not put priority on the issues that they were striking about. I really didn't. I, my priority was, how do we get these students, how do we keep them from being hurt, how do we keep the University from being hurt, how do we keep the hardliners on the board from demonstrating that they had power by bringing in the police, you see?

00:07:03:00

Interviewer #1:

Mm-hm. Mm-hm. At what point did you go up to see the students at night to talk to them, you know?

00:07:11:00

Dr. Kenneth Clark:

It was evening. At a point where we got the board to agree, and by we, I meant a few of us including the distinguished chemist, Percy Julian, who, fortunately, was not a hardliner, because he did have [pause] the board had respect for Percy Julian. A few of us had the [truck passes] board agree that we should go and talk with the students and show them that there were ways of dealing with their issues other than through violence. And if I remember correctly, maybe the majority of the board didn't think that we were going to succeed.

Interviewer:

Mm-hmm.

Dr. Kenneth Clark:

And they said, All right. Go. But I think they gave us about twenty-four hours or so to accomplish our mission, and if we did not succeed, then they would bring in the police.

00:08:25:00

Interviewer #1:

That's great. Can we cut?

Interviewer #2:

Mm-hmm.

Interviewer #1:

That was very good. Very good.

[beep]

[cut]

Camera Crew Member #2:

Two.

Camera Crew Member #1:

Mark it, please.

[slate]

00:08:34:00

Dr. Kenneth Clark:

All right.

00:08:37:00

Interviewer #1:

Dr. Clark, I know you don't remember the demands of the students.

00:08:41:00

Dr. Kenneth Clark:

Yes. You're quite right. [laughs]

Interviewer #2:

[laughs]

00:08:43:00

Interviewer #1:

[laughs] And even though, and one of the demands was that they felt that Howard should have a stronger commitment to the Black community. I mean, but they—

Dr. Kenneth Clark:

To have a what?

Interviewer #1:

That Howard should have a stronger commitment to the Black community outside of the campus. My question to you is, did you feel that Howard had already—were they doing that? Was, was the school doing that? Was the school involved in the community as far as you were concerned?

00:09:06:00

Dr. Kenneth Clark:

My personal feeling is I don't see how it would be possible for the school not to be related or involved or concerned with the Black community. The purpose of Howard University was to communicate and educate the students and the community and the nation. And if I remember, as an undergraduate, that I would listen to the lawyers in the law school talk about legal approaches to obtaining racial justice. Well, this to me was a commitment to the Black community and, of course, the whole Brown decision cases came out of Howard University's law school. I certainly learned a great deal about American injustices, the racial problems, and an intelligent approach to trying to deal with them from people like Ralph Bunche and Frank Frazier and a group of good, solid, intelligent faculty people in the University. [truck passes] And to me, this was commitment. I remember as a senior at Howard being arrested with a group of my classmates when we went down to the Capitol building and protested against their not permitting Blacks to eat in the restaurants there.—

[rollout on camera roll]

[wild sound]

Dr. Kenneth Clark:

—Though, Ralph Bunche and others on the faculty fought very hard to keep us from being expelled. [laughs]

00:11:29:00

Interviewer #1:

OK. Thank you. We're going to have to take a break. Camera ran out. That was good. Thank you.

Camera Crew Member #2:

Camera roll out. Going to camera roll two, one, five, six.

Dr. Kenneth Clark:

[inaudible] going on—

[cut]

[camera roll #2156]

00:11:40:00

Camera Crew Member #1:

Mark it.

[slate]

00:11:47:00

Interviewer #1:

Dr. Clark, many of the students on the campus, I mean, I'm not sure if you remember this, but many of the students felt they were, that the school should have a curriculum that was more Black oriented. I mean, you were just talking about that you felt, you know, you went to Howard, that the school had a commitment that you had went downtown with and been active and stuff like that. What was your, what would your reaction be to the students in '68 wanting Howard to have a more Black oriented curriculum? Didn't you think Howard already had that?

Dr. Kenneth Clark:

Well, I certainly did. I had a great deal of respect for—

Interviewer #1:

Can I just ask you to include, "I thought Howard already had a curriculum that was oriented toward, you know, Black people..."

Interviewer #2:

They won't hear his questions.

00:12:26:00

Dr. Kenneth Clark:

I see. I felt that Howard had a very strong commitment, and by Howard, I mean faculty members at Howard, certainly those whom I respected and talked with had a strong commitment for racial justice. And the commitment term, I thought, was sort of a fashionable term when Howard was really being concerned with, how do we use intelligence and law to remove the more flagrant and eventually, I suppose, subtle examples of racial injustice? And to me, a university is a place where ideas are made to be dynamic and to be places where—at universities you have concern with basic human values, and my feeling was that Howard University could be a institution that would bring this dimension of primary concern for justice as an important part of higher education. And I felt that, certainly my five or six years at the University, I felt this very strongly. I felt that the University was doing this. I also feel that the Black Power movement wanted something else. I don't know that I quite understood what they wanted a university to do in terms of Black Power demonstrations. It seemed to me that what went on in the seminars, in the classrooms, in the conferences, in the legal...the discussions of the law school, these were the kinds of things that a university could contribute.

00:15:18:00

Interviewer #1:

So did you think that the students, I mean, that what they were doing would disrupt the kind of progress that, that had been happening at Howard for so many years?

00:15:29:00

Dr. Kenneth Clark:

Well, I will tell you very honestly, I felt that what the students were doing then was fashionable. And they were apparently [pause] there was a great deal of enthusiasm about that approach. Now, my feeling was, look, let's look at this approach, let's see what the University could contribute and what the University has contributed and what it could contribute even more so. But again, this had nothing to do with my concern with not having violence. It had nothing to do with if I disagreed with the students, I still did not want police coming in there using clubs and handcuffing them and taking them away. What I would prefer was for us to find some way of having a dialogue with the students and listening to what they wanted and letting them understand what the few of us felt the University should contribute and could contribute.

00:16:50:00

Interviewer #1:

What did you think the, the takeover accomplished after it was over? After the—

00:16:55:00

Dr. Kenneth Clark:

Frankly, I don't know. I know what it prevented. It...I know what was prevented, that, if I remember correctly, the students were not handcuffed and taken off to prison. What their objectives and goals were, I don't know whether they accomplished them or not. I really don't.

00:17:29:00

Interviewer #1:

When you mediated with the students, did you, did you really express strongly your concerns about them working out some solution so they could walk out of that administration building without having the police come in?

00:17:41:00

Dr. Kenneth Clark:

Our mediation with the students was concerned primarily with this problem of not having police come on that campus and take control and take students off to prison. I repeat, this was my primary concern.

Interviewer #1:

I understand.

Dr. Kenneth Clark:

And the attempt to get the students to understand that this was a very important priority concern and really having to do with, with justice, and having to do with the role of the University. The University is not a place in which difficulties and differences of opinion should be mediated by violence.

00:18:43:00

Interviewer #1:

OK. Let's cut.

[cut]

Interviewer #2:

Just one—

[beep]

Interviewer #1:

[unintelligible]

[beep]

[cut]

Camera Crew Member #2:

Take four.

00:18:50:00

Camera Crew Member #1:

Mark it, please.

[slate]

00:18:54:00

Interviewer #1:

Dr. Clark, I'm going to ask you again, what did you think would happen if the police came on campus? If you could, be explicit about what you thought would happen to the students if police walked into the administration building and tried to take them out of there.

Dr. Kenneth Clark:

I think there would be—

Interviewer #1:

I just need to say that—

00:19:12:00

Dr. Kenneth Clark:

I, I think that if the police had come on that campus during that period of controversy and confrontation in—with the students in [car horn] control of administration building, that there would be physical violence. There would be [bus passes] arrests, obviously. The student leaders would be taken off to jail and then we'd have to start all over again getting them out, [laughs] you know. I, I—it is clear that this was not the thing to happen, and that the students had to understand that. Although, some of them might have considered it more exciting if that happened. But for some of us [bus passes] on the, on the board, this would have been increasing the turbulence.

00:20:18:00

Interviewer #1:

But for some others on the board, wasn't it a way to show that who was in control and who had power?

Dr. Kenneth Clark:

Oh, sure. I mean, in, in a way, they might have had something positive on their side that you can—

Interviewer #1:

Who? My, I mean, if you could say—

00:20:31:00

Dr. Kenneth Clark:

No, the students—the board members who felt that no concessions whatsoever should be made to the, to the students and a few board members who felt that we shouldn't even engage in communication with them or that the members of the board should not take the initiative in communicating with the students. They believed that authority had to be demonstrated and that one could not submit to the irrationalities of the students without regard to the consequences. Now, I—that's too, saying that too harshly. I'm sure that even the, the more hardline members of the board would not want to see any blood. But they certainly wouldn't mind seeing some of the students being arrested.

00:21:43:00

Interviewer #1:

Was there a concern that since Howard had a very strong relationship to the federal government that, that that relationship might be threatened by the student takeover?

00:21:52:00

Dr. Kenneth Clark:

I don't recall anyone saying that. And certainly that was not anything that we would communicate to the students when we were talking with them.

00:22:02:00

Interviewer #1:

You said earlier, in a question before, that you said Black Power was fashionable at the time.

Dr. Kenneth Clark:

Yes.

Interviewer #1:

What do you mean?

Dr. Kenneth Clark:

Either it was fashionable or be—

Interviewer #1:

Could you include Black Power?

Dr. Kenneth Clark:

Black Power was—

Interviewer #2:

I'm sorry could you start that again.

Interviewer #1:

I'm sorry. [unintelligible].

00:22:16:00

Dr. Kenneth Clark:

Black Power at that time was either quite fashionable among young people or it was beginning to get fashionable. And the, the students and the student leaders wanted to

demonstrate that they were in tune with the ideology and the activities of the students at that time.

00:22:42:00

Interviewer #1:

Did you feel rel—

[rollout on camera roll]

[wild sound]

Interviewer #1:

—the relevant, did you feel it was relevant? I'm sorry, the cam—

Dr. Kenneth Clark:

Did I feel that Black Power was relevant?

Interviewer #1:

Let me stop for a second, Dr. Clark.

Dr. Kenneth Clark:

Oh, no. [laughs]

Interviewer #2:

[unintelligible]

[beep]

Dr. Kenneth Clark:

Grew up in Tarry—

Interviewer #2:

Grew up in Tarrytown. Born and raised there.

Dr. Kenneth Clark:

Well, Kate feels that she was born and raised here, but that's not true.

Interviewer #2:

[laughs]

Dr. Kenneth Clark:

We came up here when she was in sixth grade.

Interviewer #2:

[unintelligible]

Camera Crew Member #1:

Tell me when you've got speed.

Dr. Kenneth Clark:

And my son was in third grade.

Camera Crew Member #2:

[inaudible]

[cut]

[camera roll #2157]

[sound roll #273]

00:23:11:00

Camera Crew Member #1:

Thank you. Mark it.

[slate]

00:23:14:00

Interviewer #2:

Just, if you could answer to, to Sam, but just so people understand why you were so concerned about police not coming on campus, what did you envision would happen if they came on campus?

00:23:27:00

Dr. Kenneth Clark:

I felt strongly that we should do everything within our power to keep police from [siren] coming into this conflict or coming on campus, because I had images of police using their nightsticks and their bludgeons and worse, really. Now, this may have been just my imagination, but this was my imagination. I just did not want to be on a board or to be associated with a University in which students were being bludgeoned. And that's what I was saying to my colleagues on the board, and this was [car horn] the main point that I was communicating to the students and the student leaders.

00:24:28:00

Interviewer #1:

Great. You, you had said earlier that we thought Black Power was fashionable. I mean, did you find it relevant in terms of what the stu—in terms with the students' needs on the campus?

00:24:38:00

Dr. Kenneth Clark:

I wasn't involved in any discussion of the ideology or the rhetoric of Black Power or, you know, putting Blackness as a major issue in terms of the responsibilities and goals of the University. As far as I was concerned, a university was a place where you consider all kinds of problems and conflicts and sought to have intelligent and rational discussions. At that time, if I remember correctly, Black Power was a marching slogan. And I don't recall anything about that slogan that was leading to a increase in justice and decency and racial, racial justice, I guess. To be quite honest with you, I was not particularly popular with some of the Black Power advocates at the time because I thought that it was really the negative side of White supremacy. And I had no...I, I thought White supremacy was sort of stupid, [plane flies over] and I think that Black Power rhetoric was not particularly rational or intelligent, either.

00:26:21:00

Interviewer #1:

Thank you. Let's cut.

Dr. Kenneth Clark:

That's it?

Interviewer #2:

Let me just ask one other thing. If—

[beep]

[cut]

[wild sound]

Camera Crew Member #1:

Thirty seconds.

Camera Crew Member #2:

Thirty seconds. [laughs] OK, coming up is room tone.

[beep]

Dr. Kenneth Clark:

That was a long thirty seconds.

Interviewer #2:

Yeah [laughs]

Camera Crew Member #2:

[laughs]

Interviewer #1:

[laughs]

[cut]

[end of interview]

00:30:35:00

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